

# ***New Haven Review***







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# **Poking the Bear**

*A son takes a stand*

**Michael Coughlin**

**Marco Ruas looked like a surfer. The dark specks of hair on** his chest and legs blended into skin that had been bronzed by years of running on the beach. He was lean but athletic. The tiny black speedo would've made him look even taller but for the towering giant standing only an arm's length away. Paul Varelans was every bit of his billed six feet, eight inches, a pale white Goliath in a wrestling singlet swinging his arms in windmills at Ruas's David. As Varelans lurched forward, Ruas calmly looked his foe up and down in a split second and danced a few feet to the left or right as needed. With one arm extended towards the big man, Ruas judged the distance between the two of them. Then he kicked. And kicked again. And again. In all, the Brazilian crippled the American with a dozen kicks. He kept at it until Varelans crumbled to the cage floor.

"Why do you watch the same fights over and over again?" asked my younger brother. He sat cross-legged next to me on the floor of my bedroom. He had thin hair, greasy to the touch, falling down past his eyes. The only light in the room came from the TV.

"That's how you take out a bigger man. Look at how he steps into the kick," I replied, consciously not taking my eyes off the TV, wanting him to see how focused I was. "He turns his hips but keeps the leg back as long as possible, like a—"

"Rubber band snapping. Yes, Mike, I know. And he's trying to kick through the leg too, I bet."

I punched him in the arm. He punched me back. We stared at one another, trying to figure out if we were going to fight or go back to watching UFC 7; teenagers having a pissing contest while posters of Batman watched. Then, with the click from a light, the rattle of chains catching, and the rumble beneath our feet, the garage door opened. They were home from dinner.

"Crap. Okay. I'm gonna go walk the dog," my brother said. He sprang to his feet. "You coming?"

“I’m coming.”

A slight crackle danced in the air, like the last few drops of rain after a storm, as the Zenith TV settled. I slapped the eject button on the VCR before heading downstairs.

Shuffling through the kitchen and forcing her half smile, my mother heralded his arrival. Dad threw the keys to his Lincoln Town Car on the table, barely missing the calculus notes I’d left out for him to review, before dropping his maroon-tinted Knights of Columbus jacket to the well-worn wooden floor. My brother grabbed it up before the dog—the dog Dad had fought for us to get over my mom’s objections—might sniff it or something, anything that could give him a reason.

“Where’s the fucking paper?”

Everyone froze, three prisoners of the same surname all wondering which of us the guard had addressed. My mom looked at my brother. My brother looked at me. I looked at Dad.

“Hey, asshole.” Dad’s words slurred into one another, his eyes half-closed but trained on me, his beer-battered voice still heavy with power. “You take my fucking paper?”

I backed up a few steps as my dad approached the gate that wouldn’t have kept any other dog in the kitchen except for our dumb Dalmatian. People simply stepped over the 16-inch high divider. Dad kicked it down, tearing the purple mesh netting with his right foot. My brother had to hug Lady for her dear life, lest she make an ill-advised run to freedom.

“You fucking moved it, didn’t you?” Dad growled at my mom, his stubble-speckled jowls flapping. “You always have to clean everything up. Nothing can remain in the same God damn place for more than an hour with you, can it?”

“Maybe you moved it somewhere?” my mom offered up as a shield for us three.

“I fucking did not. It was right there on the table and now it isn’t, is it, you dumb bitch?”

She shrank. All that remained was her short brown curly hair and oversized glasses. My mom is a tidier by nature, always making sure coats are hung on the proper hanger, dirty dishes don't sit for more than a few minutes. She even washes out her Diet Coke cans because, in her words, "that makes it easier for them to be recycled." If she moved the paper, she'd know when she did and where she put it.

My right calf muscle twitched.

"Don't say that to her!" I said. Dad was as tall as a chandelier and as wide as a keg of beer. I was thin like the stem of a wine glass. I took a half step forward.

"What the fuck did you say to me, boy?" Dad would sometimes revert to a kinda rural South Dakota dialect when he was particularly angry.

"You lost it and you know it."

"Fuck you, you little ungrateful shit. This is my fucking house."

As my lips stiffened, the words *my fucking house* lit up my memory. I dashed upstairs like I was Jackie Robinson stealing home in the 1947 World Series. Surrounded by framed oil paintings of naval battles and thank-yous sent by nuns from Catholic Charities, right next to a two-foot-tall gray computer—the first one on the block with a CD ROM drive—and underneath a blocky monitor that had a prayer to St. Rita taped to the side: the paper, sitting on a leather-topped cherry-mahogany desk in the middle of his office.

For all his faults, Dad wasn't stupid. A degree in chemical engineering coupled with twenty-five years of practicing law meant he knew almost everything, and what he didn't know, he was clever enough to argue around. I've had sex that wasn't as satisfying as that moment when I finally knew he'd have to admit: he was wrong.

"Here's your paper," I wailed, my voice unable to even crack. "You were the one reading it in your office and you left it there. Apologize."

"Don't you ever tell me what to do, you understand, you little turd?"

I flung the paper at his chest. His once half-opened eyes now

bulged from the sockets. I spotted his right hand clench into a fist, the gold high-school class ring he never removed jutting out.

“You. Were. Wrong,” I said.

The evidence said it didn’t matter how drunk he was, he had no case. I was right. He had to apologize, and more important, he would have to admit his mistake.

“Fuck you.”

He charged head first, like he was going to sprout a horn and gore me. With each step, the carpet muffled the cries of the straining floorboards. As my mother raised a hand to say *no* and my brother fought to control the dog, I planted a foot and whipped my right shin into the outside of his left knee.

It wasn’t the loud slap of flesh hitting flesh. It was the disturbing thud when bone meets muscle and ligament, like a butcher tenderizing a slab of beef with a baseball bat. The leg gave way and the rest of the gluttonous body followed. His head hit the edge of the couch, glasses crashing into his face, lenses shattering, and the frames cutting his cheek. Thick blood that no water would clean seeped into the off-white carpet.

Minutes later, as I was shaking uncontrollably and crying into my hands, desperate to vomit but unable to do it, my mom gently knocked on my bedroom door. She sat down on my strawberry-red blanketed bed and told me about Al Anon, a support group for spouses of those with drinking problems. She’d started meetings six months into their marriage. It was the first time I heard her call my dad an alcoholic.



# Three Poems

Hannah Allen

## **Pantoum Advertising the Sale of My Clay Mountain**

I am looking to sell this clay mountain.  
Any reasonable offers will be considered  
for this mountain which features a pond, pine  
forests, streams, turkeys, deer, eagles. I said that

any reasonable offers will be considered  
and that for no extra charge, you too can have  
woods, creeks, guineafowl, elk, buzzards. I said that  
once, atop this mountain, there was a war

and that for no extra charge, you too can have  
your own war. Then when you sell it, you too can say  
“once, atop this mountain, there was a war.”  
Once someone told me that “you too could have

your own war.” And when you sell it, you too can say  
“I am looking to sell this clay mountain.  
Once someone told me that ‘you too could have  
this pond, these forests, this mountain.’”

## **Unwrench Them Bone Broth**

Unbound bone, steamed gelatin and parted flesh vertebrae crumble between my fingers as I debone this grocery store bird. Her rib bones bellow rippled conjugation and tip off into the broth. Past lame jokes and soft cheeses, you are mine. Lately pounded in each step I take is death, death, death — on the interstate, the voracious maw of a Caterpillar marks into fire, brush and trees; deviled crows grieve the air, and a sterling silver hawk barks before the blue-white police.

The remaining nine Bovans tremble their claws, annoy the freezing earth, try to find life; their pinwheel hearts spin miles in one minute. And still. Even my fingernails waste away. Tonight, in the backyard we will try to wrangle our birds from their roosts send them flying down the banister, their digits caked with shit and dirt and shit will cling frozen to the wood.

## To Those Coming to Fayetteville, Arkansas

Close your eyes on a ship  
built to make you seem small,  
smaller still with closed eyes. See  
the catacombs of dark purple, holes  
that open into each other. Notice the texture  
of sweet dark, enough friction  
to propel you like a green June  
Beetle through caverns to figs. Hear  
the fish opera alight — you, living  
opal in the morning sea; and you, heavy  
as a winter's load of laundry. Eat the sea  
candies and macaroni. Seek fruit as do  
myriads of bulbuls, glossy starlings,  
green pigeons and fruit bats, two species  
of squirrel, too, and simiang white-handed gibbons  
who detect the mahogany-red golf ball  
sized figs by odor, select them with what  
appears to be care. But to consume is not  
to care. These animals do not eat  
for nutrients. They eat figs or fig parts. Those  
of potent digestion would, I have heard, eat bullets,  
gun flints. I've eaten your dog and I am sorry.  
I felt I was losing him, so I had to become him.  
I am good. I take care of myself. I raise spiders  
and green frogs. I stay outside, my paws  
harden like rocks. I wait for dinner.

# The Song of Songs

John Haggerty

**Word around town is that Marjorie will give you a blow job**

if you ask—she will just drop down on her knees and do it right there in the street. People have forgotten why they believe this, but everyone knows it to be true. They also know that she’s crazy, that she’s got a razor in her purse and she’ll cut you for absolutely no reason at all, so they give her a wide berth.

She works the graveyard shift at the Gas ‘n’ Go, a few miles past the edge of town. It’s a little outpost of progress on State Route 93, and it doesn’t do a lot of business. Every once in a while some thousand-yard-stare salesman will venture in to pick up enough coffee and mini-bottles of industrial Chardonnay to get himself the rest of the way to Mobile, but most of the hours of Marjorie’s shift are empty and quiet. She pushes the big floor broom around, adding one more small layer of sheen to it, or she makes sure that the candy bars, the Snickers and Baby Ruths and Butterfingers—sweets that she never allows herself lest the indulgence lead to sin—are tidy and straight. Things are spic and span when Marjorie is around.

In spite of the suffocating heat outside, the store is frigid—her skin is always goose-bumped by the chill of the air conditioner, and the fish-belly glare of the fluorescent lights adds no warmth. At eight second intervals, the security camera pans across the clerk’s station, and she is rendered in monochrome on the tiny monitor beneath the counter. When she looks down and sees herself captured there, she is always sitting completely still.

Outside, swarms of insects rise nightly from the forests and marshes. They converge on the minimart, driven to madness by the oasis of light in the bottomless dark. They flutter around every source of brightness and hurl themselves at the windows with a frenzied energy. When she closes her eyes she can feel them, thousands of tiny bodies crashing against the glass. She imagines the

minimart the way the bugs must see it, astonishing and brilliant and beautiful, and she wonders at the agony of their craving, always one invisible barrier away from the thing they want most.

At dawn, after nodding silently to Amir, the Pakistani man who takes the morning shift, she goes outside to sweep up the bodies. They are dusty and gray in the early morning light. She sifts them as gently as possible into the garbage and whispers a little prayer for the salvation of all of the creatures who have wasted their lives in the worship of false gods.

Sometimes, when the minimart feels its coldest, Marjorie takes out her Bible. She has had it since she was eight years old. She doesn't read it anymore—she finds it confusing—but the leather cover, worn after three decades from its original black to a mottled grayish brown, feels to her like living human skin. She lays it against her cheek and imagines that the loving hand of God is touching her there.

But God has two faces. He is love and wrath both. Jesus loves everyone except for maybe the moneylenders, but his Father says, “The end of all flesh is come before Me, and behold I will destroy them with the earth.” She learned these things in the group home where she grew up. It was supposed to be a secret, but Marjorie could see it everywhere, even in the nuns who ran the place. Sister Brenda was love, saying kind things to the girls, stroking their hair. When Marjorie became sad that her mother had given her up—she imagines herself abandoned on the steps of a church in a snowstorm, like in the movies—Sister Brenda would hug her and tell her that sometimes we have to let go even of the things we love very much.

Sister Nadine was different. Sister Nadine was wrath.

When Marjorie was thirteen, Barbara, the prettiest girl in the home, asked Marjorie to kiss her. She wanted to practice, she said, and of all the girls Marjorie looked the most like a boy. They hid in the pantry behind the kitchen after lunch. Marjorie tried to imagine someone looking at her the way men looked at women on TV but couldn't. Her heart was pounding as she closed her eyes and leaned

toward Barbara. Sister Nadine found them just before their lips touched, and though she couldn't prove that any crimes had been committed, she kept a hard eye on Marjorie after that.

A few weeks later, Sister Nadine caught her reading the Song of Solomon underneath her blanket after lights out. Marjorie had discovered the Song during Bible study, and read it over and over. By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth: I sought him, but I found him not, she whispered to herself under the rough sheets that always smelled of chlorine. Thou hast ravished my heart with one of thine eyes. The coarse blanket was pulled back and Sister Nadine stood above her, pale and angry, the spirit of death. The nun grabbed her arm and yanked her out of bed, dragging her through the dorm, past the mocking eyes of the other girls, into the nuns' office.

"Give me your Bible," Sister Nadine demanded after she had seated herself behind the desk. She took out a small wooden box, highly polished and inlaid with mother of pearl flowers. Inside it was a razor blade. Sister Nadine turned to the Song of Solomon and began to slice the pages out. "Not all of God's word is meant for everyone," she said. The blade moved smoothly through the paper, making a soft sighing sound. Sister Nadine put the pages into the lower right-hand desk drawer. "The world is waiting for girls like you," she said. "It's just waiting." A few days later, Marjorie crept into the sisters' office and stole the razor blade.

Pieces of the forbidden word of God still float through Marjorie's head, though she hasn't read any of it in many years. He will lay his head between my breasts, she thinks. His left hand should be under my head, and his right hand should embrace me. Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine.

When the minimart is very quiet, she fantasizes that she works at a gas station near a busy interstate off-ramp close to Disney World. Great recreational vehicles pull up and unleash swarms of chubby children who run amok in the air-conditioned freedom of the store, pulling fistfuls of candy from the display racks and scattering them

across the floor, screaming and tearing around, their arms flailing wildly overhead. She catches the eye of the parents and gives them a comforting smile. They look so tired. They are ashamed of their offspring. But she is here to help them.

She cleans up after the children and soothes them all with stories from the Bible, Jesus casting out demons and making lepers whole. Afterwards, the husband, a brown-haired man with kind eyes follows her into the stockroom. He is wearing a yellow polo shirt and brown khakis. He thanks her. He is overcome by gratitude. He puts his hand on the middle of her back, just beneath her shoulder blades. His palm is warm, and the pressure is firm. She thinks she would like that.

I sleep, but my heart waketh, she thinks. It is the voice of my beloved that knocketh, saying, Open to me, my love, my dove, my undefiled.

Outside the minimart, life has gotten away from God. It was perfect when it was penned up in the garden, but Eve, in her wickedness, let it all out. Now it's everywhere, and He can't do a thing about it. It is in the ants and mold that collect on a slice of bread left on the counter overnight. It is in the rats that rustle through the garbage in the vacant lot near Marjorie's bus stop. It is in the maggots squirming on the road-kill carcasses that dot the shoulders of the highway. It presses in on everybody from all sides, it is the heat and the humidity and the fetid odor of the swamp. It drives people to madness, and there will be no deliverance until Judgment Day, when Jesus will return to make things clean again.

The boys race around town in their muscle cars, making them roar like beasts. Girls ride next to them, lips a glossy pink, crosses hanging between their breasts. On Saturday nights sometimes a car will pull up to the curb next to her while she waits for her bus. "Blowjob," the boys will shout, and then they tear away, cackling like crows. The men from town come to the minimart for the dirty magazines. They arrive in the dead of night, looking furtively around, and then bring them to the counter, the *Hustlers* and *Gents* and *Juggs*.

Most of them won't look at her as she rings them up, her fingers quick on the greasy keys.

One day at the supermarket, Marjorie sees an old woman in the produce section, and the idea springs into her head that it is her mother, that she has come to reclaim Marjorie, her soul cleansed, her sins redeemed. Marjorie approaches her, and sees that the woman is running her hands aimlessly over the peaches. Sensing Marjorie's presence, she turns to her. "Honey," she says, and Marjorie's breath catches in her chest for an instant. "Could you help me? My cataracts have gotten so bad," she says. "I can't see them at all anymore. They're just going in a pie, but I still like them to be perfect."

Marjorie wants to throw herself at the woman's feet, to wrap her arms around the woman's legs, to bury her face in her dress. She looks over the peaches, pressing their firm flesh, rejecting any blemish, handing them over one by one. Their hands touch with each peach; the woman's skin is soft and warm. "You're a nice person," the woman says. "You're very nice."

A younger lady, someone in middle-age, comes bustling up. Seeing Marjorie there, her eyes narrow in disgust. She pulls the old woman away, whispering fiercely in her ear. Marjorie can only hear snippets of what she says, Marjorie, crazy, whore, the usual words. The old woman's mouth opens in alarm and she drops the bag of peaches. They are so ripe that they split as they hit the floor. After the two women leave, Marjorie picks up the fruit and buys them. They are heavily bruised and already going bad by the time she gets them home.

That night, she steals one copy of each of the pornographic magazines. She trembles all the way home on the bus, thinking that the police will sniff out her crime. In the small room she rents in the back of a large gray house that always smells of cat urine, she takes them out and examines them closely. She puts her body into the positions of the women. She studies the men's penises. But most of all, she looks at the faces. The men always look so angry, and the

women as if they are in terrible pain. Perhaps, she thinks, this is God's sacred plan. Perhaps this is the way that women are given to understand the suffering of Jesus.

A few weeks later, a stranger walks into the store. She looks up and he is standing just inside the door, a sarcastic smile on his face. He is dressed in a black velvet jacket and a black t-shirt. It looks as though his dark, curly hair hasn't been combed in days. A cigarette hangs from the corner of his mouth. He is sweating from the heat.

After watching her for a while, he walks slowly through the rows of merchandise. You can't smoke in here, Marjorie thinks, but says nothing. He drops the cigarette to the floor and grinds it out under the toe of his shoe, which is a gray suede and sharply pointed. She wants to take out her dust pan and sweep the butt up, but stays still behind the counter.

He picks up a bottle of salsa, examines the label for a moment and then throws it against the wall with startling force. It shatters, sending red salsa bleeds toward the floor and onto the white tile. Marjorie catches her breath. She thinks she should look away. She should call someone. She is afraid that things will get out of hand.

He walks to the wall of glass-doored coolers in the back of the store, reaches in and takes out a can of Budweiser. He opens it deliberately, watching her as he does. He drinks half of it and then slowly turns the can over, dumping the remaining contents on the floor. He walks toward her, pulling the stock, bags of chips, bottles of sunscreen, off the racks as he moves. Marjorie puts her hands in her lap so that he can't see them shaking.

When he reaches the checkout counter, he stands and looks at her for a few moments. Then he leans forward, reaches out and touches the nametag pinned above her right breast. She is having trouble breathing, and the spot where he touched her, even through the polyester and plastic, feels as if she has been burned.

"Marjorie," he says. She looks at his face for the first time. She realizes that she hasn't done this before, hasn't had the courage to look at him. He isn't handsome—his cheeks are acne-scarred and

furrowed. His eyes are too small and too close together. He holds her gaze. He doesn't care what she thinks of him. His skin is gray.

"This place is fucking disgusting," he says with a little smirk. "Doesn't anybody ever clean up around here?"

There's a long pause. Marjorie can't trust herself to speak. She feels hot. Where, she wonders, did all of this heat come from?

"You know, you're quite the topic of conversation in town," he says.

"Me?" She tries to dry her hands on her polyester slacks, but they come away still wet.

"I almost drove right through this little shithole burg. Almost drove right on by. But I stopped to knock a little dust off, wet my whistle. I'm having a few drinks and I ask if there's any possible way to have a good time in this town. Well, those barflies look at each other, and they kind of laugh. And then they mention you. Marjorie. Crazy fucking Marjorie." He reaches out and strokes his finger along her cheekbone. There is sweat on her forehead, prickling her hairline. "Why do they say those things about you?" he asks.

"What things? What do they say about me?" Her voice, even to her, sounds small and meek.

"Oh, they talk. They talk and talk."

"It's not true," she whispers.

"Why would they say it if it wasn't true?" he asks. He grabs her hair and roughly moves her face from side to side, squinting at her profile. He smells like whiskey and bitter cigarette smoke and sweat.

He releases her, and the back of her head burns where he grasped her. "Come here," he says, stepping back from the counter.

"I can't," she says.

"Come here."

She walks around the counter to where he is standing.

"Your friends in town, they say that all I have to do is ask. Is that true?"

Marjorie stands in front of him, eyes fixed on the floor.

"You want to make it hard on me?" he says. "Okay, let's do it

your way.” He pauses, staring at her. “Give me a blow job.”

She has performed oral sex once, decades before, on a man named Jack—Jack Burzinski—who owned an insurance office where she worked as a temp. Sister Brenda got her the job when she turned eighteen and had to leave the home.

“Anything for the sisters,” Jack said when she and Sister Brenda first showed up at his office.

Jack was a blustery, round-faced man in his late forties. She was the only person in his office. He was in the middle of a tight spell, he told her, but things had to get better eventually.

She loved her job, making neatness out of the chaos of Jack’s files, answering the few calls that came in. She saw the cycle of holiness in the insurance business, the acts of sacrifice and virtue in the premiums, the grace of the Lord in the claims paid out.

Her desk was brown and had one wide central drawer and two drawers each on the left and right of the knee well. It was the first thing she had ever felt was hers. She knew each place that the vinyl laminate was chipped or blistered. The wrath of God for the sins of the world had been visited even on the desk, and she sometimes caressed its lesions, the signs of perdition and redemption, the beginning and the end of pain. At the very back of the bottom right drawer, someone had carved the word “cock” with a ballpoint pen, going over and over the letters until they were embedded in the soft pine, black with ink like a tattoo, ridged like a tribal scar. She stared at it for minutes when she first found it, and she would sometimes, when Jack had left the office on an errand, sneak her hand back there to run her fingers along each letter in turn.

One night when she was working late, he came back to the office after what he had told her was a business dinner. He stood leaning against the wall, watching her work. His face was red, and his suit was wrinkled. “Hard worker, I’ll give you that,” he said. “But you’ve got to learn to relax. Too goddamned serious all the time.” She smiled at him, not knowing what to say. He watched her work for a few more moments. “Come here,” he said. “I’ve got

something to show you.” He put a firm hand on her back, a hand that she could feel outlined in fire. He was wearing some sort of cologne; she wished that she knew what it was called. Names whirled through her head. Frankincense. Sandalwood. Musk. It mixed together with the smell of alcohol in a way that made her dizzy.

He led her outside. Behind the office was a narrow alley. The cheap Chinese restaurant next door made the place smell like rancid meat and old grease. He pulled her close to him and moved her hand to his crotch. She had never touched a penis before, but guessed what it was from the whispered conversations with the other girls in the home. He pushed her to her knees in the slimy gravel. This is love, she thought over and over. This is love. Afterwards, she stood up, the strange taste of his semen still in her mouth, reaching out to him. He pushed her away and left her there, confused. She spent a few minutes picking grit out of the skin of her knees. When she got home she saw that her best skirt was ruined.

When she arrived at work the next morning, Jake took her into his office and told her that he was going to have to let her go. Tough times, he said. Nothing personal. Marjorie nodded and walked back to her desk. He followed her. “You can’t stay here, Marjorie,” he said. “You have to get out.”

When the police showed up, Jake told them that she was stalking him and that she had made inappropriate advances. I’m a married man, he said. Happily married. Everyone knows that. When the police searched her, they found the razor in her purse. Looking through her desk, they saw the word that had been carved there. She spent a long time in the back of the patrol car, which stank of urine and vomit. She would have liked to clean it, but her hands were cuffed behind her back.

“Bitch, I said I wanted a blow job.” The man is becoming agitated now, bouncing a little bit on his toes. Her eyes meet his and she sees what will happen if she refuses him. A vision of the mighty wrath of God is visited upon her. He will hit her. Tentatively at first, just a slap across the face, but then harder and harder, until his full

force, the sum of all of his muscles and weight, is behind each blow. She will move away from him, her hands covering her face, but he will hound her around the room, punching her again and again. She will give out little involuntary gasps as his fists land. She will hear a great crack in her head as her jaw breaks, she will feel the grate of her ribs moving, bone on bone, and bits of her teeth sharp on her tongue. She will lie sobbing amid the splatter of her own blood.

Her body shakes with fear. Her eyes dart frantically around the store, searching for some avenue of escape, lighting briefly on the racks of cookies and cupcakes, the display boxes of motor oil and antifreeze, the coolers of soda, the fluorescent lights above, the glossy tile below, until finally, exhausted, they land on his shoes. They are cheap and flimsy, the leather thin and stained. The shoelaces have broken and been knotted in several places. She feels a sudden pity for those shoes, pressed into such hard service. When she raises her gaze, she sees him with a startling new clarity. The nap of his jacket has worn through in spots, and the cuffs are frayed. His neck is dirty, and his eyes, when she meets them, look nervously away. Suddenly, she knows him, knows everything about him—that his life has taught him brutal lessons about dominance and violence and the consequences of weakness. That he is sad, and he is angry. He has failed and failed and failed again. His life is empty, desolate, dry. He has been damaged by the world, crushed and deformed into the tired, shabby man who stands before her now. She thinks again of the beating he would give her, of the secret horror that each blow would force him to carry for the rest of his life, that he would never be able to forget the feeling of his knuckles on her bones. Poor boy, she thinks. Poor boy. She realizes then that she alone can save him from this, and the knowledge fills her with an irresistible rush of joy. I am a wall, she thinks, and my breasts like towers. She is mighty, invincible, full of light. The minimart, its sterile floors and orderly rows of goods, looks to her now as the insects outside must see it—a miraculous ark, ineffably radiant. She falls to her knees before him, her body incandescent. My love is a river, she thinks. My love is the

**HAGGERTY**

ocean. My love is brighter than the sun. She is the word of God—immaculate, stunning, finally whole. For love is as strong as death, she thinks. Love is as strong as death. Love is as strong as death.

# **West Rock, Hamden**

*The geography of history*

**Peter Sagnella**

At dawn I cross a stone wall that marks the north end of my parents' property and the south end of a watershed. It's a divide of public and private land. Past the wall I hike a dam to face Farm Brook Reservoir, dark and placid. The morning is overcast. Due north is York Mountain. To the northwest, Warner Mountain folds between York and West Rock Ridge. On the water Canada geese float.

I could tarry here, enjoy the view, but I walk west on the matted trail that splits the dam. Clover and timothy snag my laces, soak my boots. When I come to the west end, the trail dips and joins briefly a service road, which slopes south, winds round a giant hickory, and returns to the ridge before veering south once more to Mountain Road. To the west and north and east of this confluence is a meadow, and in the heart of the meadow a hickory. Near a monument commemorating Farm Brook the trail begins again, fades northeast through the meadow, then bends at the meadow's northern corner up West Rock. Looking across the meadow I see the trail as always, disappearing into pine, disappearing up the ridge.

I follow the trail to the summit of the first rise, where it turns south ninety degrees. I pass maple, mountain laurel, low bush blueberry. I climb, sniff cedar. The trail switches back. To the brightening east, between hickory, ash, and oak, I see Totoket Ridge and the floodplain of the Quinnipiac Valley. After a short climb over trap rock and prickly pear, I come to a bald. Very easily now, without the screen of trees, my eyes sweep the overcast horizon. I see sky and water, land and landmarks: Laurel View Country Club, Vernon Gardens, Paradise Preserve, New Haven Harbor, a trail, a meadow, a service road, a reservoir, a stone wall.

For more than thirty years I've hiked to this bald. I'm always baffled by the view, by the slow, sudden change in perspective. On the bald land and sky expand. Those places that were proximate

recede. In their place I am confronted with an immense, physical world, a world beyond bones and flesh, a world in which time and space dislocate the familiar. It is on this cloudy, humid morning, for instance—ironically with little long range visibility—that I actually see, for what seems the first time in my life, six hills tipped with hard wood, six valleys mired in fog.

**At first glance Frederic Church's famed painting of this south-central Connecticut ridge magnifies the agrarian life of early America.** Two laborers are illuminated in the foreground by a brilliant pond of sunlight. While not in perfect symmetry, the laborers angle in similar positions—one on the ground, the other in a cart. Oxen are yoked in equipoise. In the distance, beyond the laborers, the white spire of a church eclipses lowland trees. The geometry of the spire, pointing to heaven, contrasts the verdure in color and shape: while the spire is white, angular, clambering with frank purity, the trees roll across the frame in a gentle, dark green line. In the background, the ruddy face of West Rock curves long and wide, a basaltic belly. The West River, tributary of the Farmington, widens in the foreground into a meadow.

This past winter at Whitlock's Book Barn in Bethany I happened upon and purchased a catalogue of "The New Haven Scene," which was an exhibition of paintings, watercolors, and drawings sponsored by the New Haven Colony Historical Society in the spring of 1970. Church's painting was part of the exhibition (a facsimile of the painting was also exhibited at The New Haven Museum in the winter and spring of 2012 in "New Haven's Sentinels: The Art and Science of East and West Rock") but it was exhibited with Church's original title—"Haying Near New Haven." According to Theodore Stebbins in "The Artists of New Haven," the catalogue's preface, it was not until Church exhibited the painting at the National Academy of Design in 1849 that he titled it "West Rock, New Haven."

While this shift in title may seem miniscule, it seems to shift the perspective Church's painting offers in significant ways. What was

initially pastoral becomes allegory. As my eye moves from foreground to background, from seasonal labor to the ruddy, basaltic rock arcing gracefully under a spacious sky, I no longer see a terrifically detailed backdrop. Instead the rock swells, comes into focus. The jutting white steeple is no longer a minor, juxtaposing detail but a directive. The mirror of light and land and sky harmonizes heaven and earth, and this synthesis of light and height invokes suddenly a city on a hill, a promised land.

**I grew up seven miles northeast of this ruddy, basaltic face.**

Topographically that face is the southern terminus of a trap rock ridge that bends through New Haven, Woodbridge, and Hamden. In 1973, a year after my parents built a house on the crest of a knoll on Dunbar Hill, the town of Hamden and the State of Connecticut, in the name of flood prevention, dredged Farm Brook, southeast of the ridge's northern terminus, due north of my parents' newly built house, and the first of three watersheds in the town's uplands. In 1939 President Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration funded the construction of a seven-mile road that split the summit of West Rock. The road was named Baldwin Drive, after Connecticut governor and Yale alum Simeon Baldwin. One hundred and eighty-eight years before Church exhibited his painting, English judges Edward Whalley and William Goffe, who had authorized the beheading of King Charles I, fled to the New Haven Colony. Directed by John Davenport, Puritan leader of the Colony, the outlaw judges hid atop the ridge under a glacial erratic a few hundred yards northwest of the ridge's face. Today a blue-blazed hiking trail, Regicides, stretches from Judges Cave in Westville to the Quinnipiac Trail in Hamden, memorializing the judges' asylum and resistance. Six thousand years before Whalley and Goffe retreated to their cave, Native Americans of the Middle and Late Archaic used the ridge to hunt and shape tools. Two hundred million years earlier Pangaea split. Millennia unfolded like leaves in a history book. Lava cooled, sills broke. Stone gave way to flesh.

**Look east from the bald, as I do this overcast July morning,** and you see first what immediately confronts you: the rounded lobes of white oak leaves, the tawny, peeling bark of red cedar. Look to earth and you see the old bitternut hickory, that lone tree in the center of what was once the dairy farmer Harold Hansen's pasture, then Farm Brook, which, from this vantage, resembles a horseshoe. Facing Hill Street, butting the east shore of Farm Brook you see a red brick ranch, built by the mason Peter Panaroni, and large contemporary homes, built by his sons. In 1971, on a cold spring afternoon, my parents looked to buy Panaroni's lot, which, at the time, belonged to a man named Frank Vernon. Continue east across Hill Street and your eyes catch fairways stretching north and south, and round, white traps. At the end of fairways hang yellow flags. Honing in, your eyes see holes terraced into hills: the third and fourth, the fifth and sixth, the seventh and eighth, the ninth. Beyond the ninth green, positioned rightly it seems, at the summit of these hills, is the club house.

It wasn't until I played this course that I heard the phrase *local knowledge*. Sometimes it was used wryly, to justify the fortuitous outcome of a poor shot: a shot that sailed out of bounds, struck a tree, then caromed in bounds. Such a shot could be attributed only to a player who was manifesting his knowledge of the local terrain. Other times the phrase described the awareness of a player who, because of experience, understood how to manipulate such terrain. In this way it was meant sincerely, appraising the wisdom of a player who knew the course as it was, and could negotiate it as such.

The thirteenth hole, for instance, is a short, uphill par four measuring 310 yards. For a long hitter, this distance may be traversed in a single shot. However, the tee rests thirty yards below the fairway, which means the hitter ultimately cannot see much of the fairway or the green, the latter of which sits left of the short hill's apex. All things being equal, a well-struck drive that splits that apex will likely land right of the green in one of three sand traps.

Behind the green, though, there is a house the color of black walnut. From the perspective presented by the tee, the house is fifteen to twenty yards left of the center of the crest. However, surmount the hill and you see that the house aligns with an alley to the green. A good drive adhering to the line established by this house will more than likely in favorable conditions run that alley and end up on the green.

**I know this about the thirteenth hole at Laurel View because I** played golf there as a boy almost every day. What began as a place unknown eventually became a place I knew very well.

Still, though I came to know how to traverse the lay of the land with a small white ball I did not know some of the land's history. I did not know that the same year my parents bought their lot on Dunbar Hill—1971—the clubhouse I see looking east from the bald was built on the foundation of a house, on land, that once belonged to toymaker A.C. Gilbert.

A municipal, Laurel View was constructed in 1968 by golf course architect Geoffrey Cornish. After touring the clubhouse, Francis O'Connor, longtime writer for the *Hamden Chronicle*, observed the following in "Champagne, Conn.," an essay from his collection *The Melting Pot: Nostalgic Essays from The Hamden Chronicle*. "The scenery on the former A.C. Gilbert Estate off West Shepard Ave. is beyond description, and provides a remarkable setting for the clubhouse." After praising the design of the clubhouse, O'Connor praised the way in which the clubhouse complemented the beauty of the land and its native and cultivated flora: "Place such an impressive building in the charm of the site, with its massive spreads of laurel and attractive plantings of dogwood, and you have a very remarkable public facility."

In the 1930s Gilbert purchased more than 700 acres of land in the town's northwestern hills, building first a game preserve where he could hunt and fish, then a hunting lodge and residence for he

and wife Mary. In his 1954 autobiography *The Man Who Lives in Paradise*, Gilbert describes why he moved from Maraldene (a compound of Gilbert's wife's name, Mary, and the English word *dene*, meaning "hill"), his palatial residence in the eastern part of town, to a part of the town's western uplands referred to simply as the Dunbar Hills. "The Dunbar Hills was an even lovelier spot, the choicest location anywhere near New Haven, under the shadow of West Rock, amid rolling hills, and with a view in places of the far-off sound."

As for the location of his house, assessed by O'Connor fourteen years later in the form of Laurel View's clubhouse, Gilbert said this: "I've built my own home here, too, of course. Mountain View, or as Mary would have it, Hilltop, is built at the northern end of the game preserve, on the highest spot anywhere around."

## II

My paternal grandfather, a carpenter, immigrated to Wallingford, Connecticut from the Italian village of Gioia San Ittica in 1901. He was fourteen. Prior to the Great Depression he was self-employed and built houses in Wallingford, Orange, and New Haven. He lived with his wife, also an Italian immigrant, and their three children in New Haven—cold-water flats on Stevens Street, Hamilton Street, Humphrey Street, Chestnut Street. Later my grandparents moved their family to a post-World War II Cape Cod on Woodin Street in Hamden, which is where they lived the rest of their lives. While he did not build a house and pass it on to his son or daughter, he did pass on wisdom distilled from his experience building homes for other people. When you build a home, he told my father once, build it on high ground.

**"Frank Vernon was a yankee," my father says. We're drinking coffee, sitting at a harvest table I built for the small Cape my wife and I bought a few years ago in Centerville. It's early spring. I've asked**

him to recount the story of how he built his home on Dunbar Hill. Listening, I hear how my parents' first home was on Mueller Drive, just off Woodin Street, where my grandparents lived. The house was a small ranch, halfway up one of Hamden's western hills, near Belden Brook. The house was not at the summit of Mueller Drive, which would have been the cul-de-sac my brothers and sisters started their sleds from in winter, but was slightly higher than my grandparents' house a half mile east in Hamden Plains. Still, when my parents—with five children aged eleven to two—went looking for a lot on which to build a home in April 1971, they continued by coincidence the line established by my grandparents a decade before and headed northwest to Hamden's uplands. My parents found themselves on Norman Road, then Hill Street, about a quarter mile south of West Shephard Avenue, on a lot owned by Frank Vernon.

For some reason my father's terse assessment of Frank Vernon's character ignites my memory. I see, or perhaps want to see, a New England archetype: hard chin, straight jaw, sun-burned cheeks, eyes dark and skeptical, eyes that perused angles and curves of fieldstone, beheld pale seeds in black furrows. I envision Frank's hair as a workman's pompadour, windblown and stressed, not unlike Robert Frost's. As my mind's eye revivifies the man I see a crooked, plodding gait, an icy stare that implies he may tire of the harvest he's desired.

"Frank was from Medford, Massachusetts," my father adds. "He lived on North Street and then bought land on Dunbar Hill. It was his retreat."

In the periphery of family photos from the 1970s and 1980s, I've seen evidence of this retreat—apple trees, pear trees, a Concord grape vineyard, a garage strewn with tools. East of a neatly constructed farmhouse Frank had a stone barn which was, with a flatly graded yet symmetrically pitched roof, at once Neolithic and Neoclassic. In the 1960s and 1970s, Frank began selling his twelve acres. One by one the lots were cleared and graded, the houses built.

By doing so he added ranches and raised ranches and Cape Cods to the land where Gilbert built cottages in the 1940s and 1950s. Vernon called his land Vernon Gardens. Gilbert called his Paradise.

**On a cold afternoon in April 1971, my father tells me, George** Revelis showed my parents for the final time one of Frank Vernon's lots, the lot where the mason Peter Panaroni would eventually build his home. Revelis, the selling agent, was anxious to close. He did not know, however, that my father had had a crisis of conscience that morning—waking early, staring at the wall in the bedroom of the house on Mueller Drive, turning over his father's advice about high ground.

Late that afternoon my parents went to the lot. My sister Monica, four, was sick and my brother John, one, was carried by my mother in a papoose. The lot was listed for \$11,000 and my parents were offering \$10,500. They had saved for a decade on a teacher's salary, my father's summer carpentry work, and here and there my mother's nighttime shifts at Yale-New Haven Hospital.

About halfway into the lot was a wall of briars that had, in earlier visits, prevented my father from seeing the rear. So, this time, he told Revelis he wanted to walk the whole lot. Revelis obliged, so my father ambled west toward the ridge, felt soft ground underfoot, eyed skunk cabbage and sink holes, and concluded the lot did not drain well. Winter and spring had been relatively dry, yet the land in the rear that afternoon was sodden. Bordered by thicket, the rear was clearly a basin for melt and runoff from West Rock, which, several hundred yards west, surged into gray sky. It was lowland, and my father did not want to build on it.

Revelis, agitated by my parents' reversal, subsequently claimed they could not make a decision. He asserted, truculently according to my father, that my parents thought their money was gold. Determined not to yield, or perhaps yielding opportunely, my father shook the check for \$10,500 and urged Revelis to show my mother

and father the best lot he had. Revelis swept his hand east and west, north and south.

“Take your pick,” he barked. “You can have any of these lots!”

Having spent Sunday afternoons the year prior perusing building lots, and therefore familiarizing themselves with the lay of the land in this part of town, my parents promptly drove south on Hill Street, west on Dunbar Hill, and stopped at the summit of a knoll two hundred yards southwest of Frank Vernon’s stone barn. Exiting the car, my father faced Revelis and pointed to the high, clear lot on the north side of the street.

“We’ll take this one,” they said.

“It’ll cost you more,” the agent said. “\$11,000.”

“You got it,” my father said.

**When we finish discussing what it was like building his house** on Dunbar Hill, my father describes a walk he took with my mother and six brothers and sisters. It was the summer after my parents built the house, and they, like I do still, crossed the stone wall at the north end of their property. It was before Farm Brook Reservoir, however, and lowland thicket extended from the wall to the south end of Harold Hansen’s dairy farm for roughly a half mile. There were paths in the thicket, likely deer runs or old hunting trails, and one such path veered northwest through bramble and red maple. Not knowing what was at the end of the path, my parents led my sisters and brothers through it.

“It was tough to see,” my father recalls. “But then we came to the end of the woods. All of a sudden the path exploded into light. There was the meadow and West Rock, right in front of us. Wide open. Your brothers and sisters were so excited they just ran off.”

I’ve heard this anecdote before but, having listened for an hour or so to my parents’ quest for a home, I’m struck this time by my father’s genuine pleasure in the story, a pleasure that includes, I believe, retrospective disbelief. Having moved a large family from

a small ranch on a cul-de-sac to an area described eighteen years earlier by Gilbert in *The Man Who Lives in Paradise* as “one of the loveliest residential communities anywhere around New Haven,” I imagine that that moment, surging into what seemed a boundless land, was, for my parents, a deep affirmation of the sacrifices they had made for a decade.

**And I, too, have fond memories of West Rock. When I was five,** my oldest sister Mary, fourteen years my elder, walked me through the meadow until we found a large rock—obscured now by decades of undergrowth—near the west shore of Farm Brook. It was August, and humid, and under the shade of cherry and ash and oak the rock warmed my thighs. There we ate lunch. Some winters my sisters and brothers and I tobogganed over and down the meadow’s rippling hills, plowing through snowdrifts that sprayed our red, cold cheeks. Once our family hiked to the bald to look out. Afterward, we tied a red rag on a cedar. Before passing over the stone wall into our yard, I turned to the ridge. I remember the ecstasy I felt—induced by that sudden shift in perspective—when I saw the rag, a mere red blot on a tree. One November my father and I hiked to the bald with hot dogs and sauerkraut and baked beans. We cooked the meat on a grill in a stone ring, and the beans and sauerkraut in a pot. It was autumn in New England—gray, brown, chilly—but the fire warmed us. Late September or October, after rain, we hunted mushrooms. Years later, my friend Scott and I hiked Regicides on a mild January morning. Early in the hike we crossed Baldwin Drive into Bethany. Before turning back to the road and descending outcroppings of trap rock, we came to a promontory facing south. It was the first time we traversed the ridge east-west, and the first time we saw Lake Watrous. Standing atop a massif, looking south over a long, narrow reservoir I could not then name, perusing clean stands of evergreen stretching across the valley below, I felt like I was witnessing new land.

**On April 13, 1638, roughly nine miles south and east of the** promontory we stood on that day, eight hundred Puritans assembled to bear witness in a new land, land that would, slowly, become home to hundreds of thousands of immigrants from all over the world, my paternal grandparents included. Sarah Day Woodward, in *Early New Haven*, describes the assembly this way: “On Sunday the colonists gathered under an oak tree standing near the corner of College and George Streets to listen to a sermon preached by the Rev. John Davenport, who was one of the leaders of the party. His text was ‘Then Jesus was led up into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil.’ (St. Matt. 6.1). He kept a diary at the time, in which he recorded that he ‘enjoyed a good day.’”

While we have no written record of the Native Americans who inhabited the valleys and hills thousands of years before Davenport and the New Haven Colony, no invocations of the anthropomorphized or the supernatural, evidence on West Rock has been uncovered to suggest the land was used by various cultures across the Late Archaic, roughly 6,000 B.P to 3,700 B.P. Cosimo Sgarlata, assistant professor of archaeology at Western Connecticut State University, led excavations ten years ago on four different sites on or near the ridge. His digs revealed that West Rock was one of several local residences for the indigenous people. Rather than settle exclusively at one site, they moved with the seasons. Having described the pressures of increasing population and decreasing resources, and thus a subsistence gleaned from smaller locales, Sgarlata describes in “The Archaeology of West Rock: The Importance of Trap-Rock Ridges in Connecticut Prehistory” the ways in which the ridge helped these native people subsist locally: “not only was West Rock important for Late Archaic cultures in south central Connecticut, but additionally they seem to have created a fairly specialized adaptation allowing for maximal exploitation of the available resources. This seems to be the case, [sic] because not only were a fairly wide range of site types present during the Late Archaic, but a fairly wide range of site types appears to have been utilized including: quarries, temporary or seasonal campsites adjacent to

upland streams, information gathering or ‘lookout’ sites, and intercept hunting sites.”

And, perhaps most humbling, beyond human culture, there is the land revealed by geology, the land as it is, land that is never new but simply undergoing slow, relentless change. Through this lens, West Rock is an eroded mass formed over a staggering range of time. That ruddy face captured by Church, the bald I return to every season, conveys not a verse in the history of a people but a stanza in the epic of our earth. Describing the origins of West Rock in *New Haven Sentinels: The Art and Science of East Rock and West Rock*, geologist Jelle Zelinga de Boer says, “[West Rock was] formed when huge volumes of magma—originated and accumulated at great depths—rose along the major faults and spread inside a long, relatively narrow tectonic trough stretching from New Haven to Deerfield in northwestern Massachusetts. That trough, a geological rift zone, developed when the Appalachian crust spread tectonically and was thinned during the embryonic phase in the breakup of the supercontinent Pangaea, a process that eventually led to the opening of the basin that holds the Atlantic Ocean.” When fissures broke on the western edge of this trough magma, nearly 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit, spewed through the rifts. Thus the ridge took shape, some 200 million years before Church’s painting.

**Church’s “West Rock, New Haven” is often described as a** prime example of Hudson River pastoral and, as such, viewed as an evocation of a simpler, nobler time. This perspective is plausible: the simplicity in subject and focal point, the subject matter, the color, the tone—the land that is today Westville and Woodbridge seems, with Church’s inspired brush, Arcadian. And while pastoral tends to romanticize the past to obscure the political and economic realities of the present—what lives do the laborers we see in Church’s fields *actually* lead and *why*—I can’t help but think the genre can nonetheless *induce* an understanding of the past, not simply an idealization of it. I’ve come to see my returns to West Rock as an exercise in pastoral: in using the present to see what

is past, the past to see what is present. But returning again and again to West Rock has forced me to see beyond the merely personal or familial, beyond what might be otherwise pure nostalgia or sentiment. Returning season after season after season has forced me to perceive the past as incredibly complex—a layering of perspective and narrative and ideology as stratified as the bald I stand upon to look out.

On that bald, I look out and see places that force me to inquire into geology and culture, local and natural history, time and space: the harbor that once stretched to New Haven's original nine squares, the land the Dutch called Rodeberg, the sentinels responsible for that name—the southern terminus of the trap rock ridge on which I stand, curving, cradling east, its igneous brethren overlooking the harbor into which Adrien Block sailed in 1614. In the southwestern foreground I see the white spire of Ascension Church where I attended mass Sundays with my brothers and sisters and parents, where I served masses as an altar boy, where my oldest sisters married. In the southeast I see the floodplains of the lower Central Valley, the land John Davenport and Theophilus Eaton purchased from the Quinnipiac in autumn 1638 for, as Woodward says in *Early New Haven*, “twelve coats of English trucking cloth, twelve alchemy spoons, twelve hatchets, twelve hoes, two dozen of knives, twelve porringers, and four cases of French knives and scissors.” I see due east the rolling, terraced hills of Laurel View Country Club where I spent ten summers practicing and playing, where A.C. Gilbert retired and lived. I see the red brick façade of North Haven High School, eight miles further east, where I teach. Roving west my eyes spot my parents' house, erected in 1972, and my brother's next door, a house my father and brothers and I framed a decade ago. And I see the sky, the magnanimous sky, and the meadow beyond the stone wall at the north end of my parents' property where my father and I long ago hauled a telescope on a warm summer night. There, against the amphitheater of West Rock, in stunned silence, we looked out to behold the rings of Saturn, 750 million miles away.

# Ponty Bayswater

JoAnneh Nagler

**Ponty Bayswater was ninety-one when he finally changed his name.** Christened “Pontius”—an old Alabama family name on his mother’s side—all his long life he had dodged the blows and taunts of playground bullies, dolled-up teenage girls who wouldn’t get near him, and business colleagues who assumed he had some “in” with a Christ-bashing mission. It didn’t help that he was half-Jewish.

Bayswater was the family name his father took instead of Brenowitz when he immigrated through New Orleans in 1898—the name had been printed on the side of a cracked and giant crate being dumped off on the harbor-side of an ocean liner, which was then left behind. His father claimed the name. It figured. His Alabama legacy was a cracked and abandoned crate.

At age seven he coined the nickname “Ponty” and would refuse to tell its origin until some little ape outed him for the Christ-hater he would inevitably be accused of being.

His teachers were of no help. Stuck deep in the belly of the Bible Belt, they most often looked at him askew and then shuttled away any mouthy children who were bellowing out the brainwashing of their small-minded parents.

“Jew-boy!” “Christ-killer!” “Pontius goes to hell!”

Never mind that Pontius Pilate was a Roman, Ponty thought; never mind that it was the Romans, not the Jews, who really pulled the trigger on that cross-hanging thing—a verdict as sinister as any he had ever heard. And what the hell did *he* have to do with it anyway, he wanted to know?

But in Alabama in 1929, accurate history was just a lot of side-chatter. Doctrine mattered, and where you fell on the line between Christ Jesus and the town’s loyalties to that martyr determined the treatment you’d receive from even the lowliest of the town residents.

Ponty learned to hate Alabamans for their “idiocy,” as he dubbed it, and became a precocious and prolific reader of history

books, a combatant of all manner of inaccurate attributing.

“Accuracy matters,” his mother would say to him after he had narrowly escaped another attack by the “trolls,” as he called them—bullies from his third grade class who regularly attempted to beat him up on the footbridge which led to his neighborhood.

“You are not a Christ-killer because your name is Pontius,” his mother intoned rather stiffly.

“I know that, Mama,” he would sigh, “but can’t we *please* change my name?”

“We do not give in to *ignorance*, Pontius,” she would retort.

By the time he was ten, he could refute any nastiness with a quick verbal jab that left his accusers stunned just long enough for him to run as fast as his asthmatic lungs would carry him.

“You’re parents are *Huguenots!!*” he would shout at his fifth-grade attackers, freezing them in their tracks with their ignorance of the word just long enough for him to backpedal and beat a path back off the footbridge, down into the riverbed under the heavy brush. He often came home wet.

For his entire twelfth year he refused to go outside after school, preferring instead the company of his loopy Aunt Violet, a former schoolteacher who lived with his family, never forgot a date, and could tell him the dirt on any historical character who ever lived.

“They’re all dead anyway,” she’d say squeezing out a steaming orange pekoe tea bag into her cup and swearing as she burned her fingers, “So who gives a good God-damn if I gossip about them?”

Ponty loved it that she swore, that she said “shit” and “piss” and even “fuck” from time to time.

She’d look down over her glasses and with a nicotine bark in her voice say, “Don’t tell your father, Ponty. He doesn’t like me anyway and profanity will not help my cause.” She was the only one in the family who called him by his chosen nickname.

Ponty loved her. He basked in her tales of King Henry’s affairs, Marie Antoinette’s sex life, and of some obscure nobleman whose wife had come to him and told him that she was in love with another

man, and they had all three lived together as lovers for the rest of their lives.

He hungered for her stories of outsiders, too; people who were ostracized in their home towns but who made good by leaving forever. He loved tales of people who invented things: engines, planes, the discovery that the earth was round and not flat. It was even better if the protagonist had suffered ridicule or had been put in prison for telling the truth. Galileo, the Wright brothers—Orville and Wilbur—and Leonardo di Vinci were some of his favorites.

His aunt told him that Leonardo was a homosexual. Ponty hadn't even known what that was, or that it existed.

"Men can have relations, Ponty," she insisted, looking unabashedly into his eyes.

Ponty was stunned. He asked how it worked.

"Think, boy!" she said. "What would feel good to you?"

She was the one who told him about sex—the actual mechanics of it. "We'll just get down to business, and talk the real truth of the thing, shall we? No *euphemisms*," she'd say. "I *hate* euphemisms."

She had explained to him the varieties of how women's bodies worked, how men and women worked together—not just the biology; but the how-to prowess of being a good lover, too—and then, also, the inner workings of homosexuality.

It was an education he appreciated—facts and tactics he was sure the sad little trolls in his school would never get, and it made him feel just superior enough to get through the blockhead-infested school day, then propelled him home, rushing to prod and query Aunt Violet some more.

**Ponty had his first love affair at the age of eighteen, just when the U.S. entered the Second World War and he was about to be shipped off to the Philippines. Five weeks before he was scheduled to board the *USS Alabama*, a WASP of a girl named Juliette Whitaker had planted her body between him and the men's room at Jasper's Supper Club, and then landed a big, sloppy, wet kiss on his lips.**

“I’m gonna marry you, Ponty Bayswater,” she drawled.

“No, you’re not, Juliette—you’re just drunk,” he said, throwing an arm under her collapsing frame. He had liked Juliette; had admired her, too. But he hadn’t thought much beyond that. Her parents were the high and mighty type—everybody knew that—and he was certain they thought well-enough of themselves and their bloodline that they wouldn’t want their only daughter gallivanting around with a half-Jewish young man.

Juliette stumbled towards him.

“Nope. Ponty. You’re—*uh-oh*,” she said, tripping over the heel of her shoe, “—you’re *myyyyyy*—man. *Always* wanted you.” Her head took an intoxicated roll towards his shoulder and then plopped there, with a rather hard thump. “Just had to get drunk enough to say it.”

It landed on him like a bag of coal to the head. She meant it.

Ponty did not think of himself as handsome. He was thick-built, on the short side, and masculine enough, certainly, with a warm-colored brown head of hair, and bulky forearms. Juliette was an inch taller than he was, even in the flats she wore, and the fact that she had never cut her chestnut hair into the overly swept-up, curling-ironed styles of the era charmed him. She wore her hair parted on the side and flowing to her shoulders, and she was shapely besides—small breasts, flat belly in cinched-waist cotton dresses, and lovely gams peeking out under her skirts.

Ponty walked her home, and waited on the sidewalk while she wobbled up the front stoop.

“Bye-bye, Ponty!” she drawled, not turning, but waving her fingers at him from the side of her curvaceous hip.

The next day he came to call, stood on her front porch while she faced him through the screen door—she was standing much too close; almost within kissing distance—and asked her to go for a walk with him on the green.

“I would love *nothing more*, Ponty,” she whispered through the tight metal grate of the screen. He could feel her breath on his cheek

as she spoke.

Her mother sat still and tight-lipped in the front room as Juliette walked out, and Ponty got a good glimpse of the woman's expression as he held the door and balanced the screened-in. Her mother didn't get up to say hello and Ponty didn't go in.

"You sure you want to do this?" he nodded his head toward her mother and then looked Juliette in the eye.

"Wanted to *forever*," she said, and then leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. Ponty let the screen door slam good and loud and turned to escort Juliette down the steps.

Two days later they were making love in the grass next to Siber's Creek, and Ponty was taking his time exploring her every crevice.

"Well, Ponty Bayswater!" she said, laughing into his armpit, "who would've thought that you'd be such a Casanova!"

He spent two hours delivering as much pleasure to Juliette as he could muster, never entering her. Her breath came hard again, and she panted into his ear, "Where did you learn to...?"

"My aunt..." he said as his tongue found her earlobe.

Juliette pushed him back and sat straight up, almost jumping. "You mean *she*—and *you*—"

Ponty laughed out loud—a big, hearty guffaw. "No, no, *no!* Juliette, she *told* me how to touch a woman..."

"Isn't that a little...inappropriate?" Juliette sniffed, trying to regain her composure.

Ponty smiled a sweet smile. "Do you like it, Juliette? You tell me the truth now..."

She smiled back, looked down at her naked body, and then blushed bright red.

Ponty began kissing her belly. "Then we'll just have to pay a visit to my Aunt Violet and tell her thank you, now won't we?"

**Ponty boarded the *USS Alabama* five weeks later without "jumping on the pre-combat matrimonial bandwagon," as he called**

it—much to the chagrin of Juliette.

“But what if you die?” she sniffed, her big eyes filling up watery and red-rimmed.

“All the more reason you shouldn’t sit around waiting for me,” Ponty said stoically.

“I know you love me Ponty Bayswater,” she pleaded. “I can see it in your eyes.”

He took her by the shoulders and pulled her whole, slim frame close to him, her face just inches from his. “Juliette Whitaker. I love you and if I come home whole and safe I will you marry you that same day. I promise.” He kissed her hard on the mouth, pulled her into his chest, and then swung his duffle over his left shoulder and didn’t look back.

A week later Juliette packed her bags and moved into Ponty’s parents’ house. She knocked at the front screen, and red-faced and sweating from the humid heat, said to Ponty’s mother, “I’m going to marry your son when he comes back, and I need a place to live.”

“Let her in Maxine!” Aunt Violet yelled to Ponty’s mother from the parlor.

Ponty’s mother cracked the screen door open, but Aunt Violet was suddenly right behind her and reached in and pulled it wide.

“Your mama threw you out? Over Ponty?” Aunt Violet said pointedly.

“Mmm-hmm,” Juliette sniffled. Her eyes were wet.

“People do the most *asinine* things, Maxine!” Violet said to Ponty’s mother. She placed both of her hands on Juliette’s shoulders and looked her straight in the eyes. “You’re *family* now. You stay here as long as you like, you hear me? ”

Juliette got a job at the peanut-processing factory, working part-time on the line, and volunteered for the Red Cross making bandages for the war effort. She thought about Ponty every day, wrote to him weekly, and though she got on fine with Ponty’s parents, her preference was the kind and bawdy company of Aunt Violet.

Aunt Violet told her stories of Ponty's childhood: how he used to carry a fish or two in his pockets after spending the afternoon at the river with his fishing rod; how his hair changed color from sandy to auburn to dark brown as he grew; how he ate fried egg sandwiches on white bread every day of his eleventh year.

She told Juliette how she had kept a post office box for Ponty when he was sixteen, so he could mail-order bawdy and Alabama-banned novels.

"Old Florence down at the post would get all huffy every time she'd see me pull one of those books outa Ponty's box. I'd rip open the brown paper, standing right there, lookin' dead-on at that scrunched up face of hers and ask her how her *Sunday School* teaching was shaping up. Laughed all the way home every time!"

Juliette adored Aunt Violet, and yearned to tell her all of the secrets of Ponty's sexual charms. One day she blurted out, "Thank you for teaching him the way to—" Juliette ducked her head and blushed, unable to choke out the rest.

"Look me in the eye, dearie," Violet said, pulling Juliette's chin up level. "No woman should ever have to apologize for taking pleasure from the man she loves."

"I *do* love him, Aunt Violet," Juliette said.

"Then that's just that," Violet said, grinning at her.

From then on, the two women sat upstairs each evening in the sticky heat of the screened-in porch or the chill of the winter rains, talking about all manner of intimacies.

"Practice on yourself, young lady," Violet would say in her pointed and gravelly voice, puffing on a cigarette, and Juliette would giggle, half-trying to hush her on the porch as neighbors strolled by on the street below.

But each day after work, Juliette would go upstairs into her small room and practice, as instructed by Aunt Violet, as best she could. She was delighted to discover that she was not at all rigid or reserved. No. She was hungry and curious for every variety of private pleasure that

her own mother would never, ever have given vent to, let alone have participated in or shared.

**One night, sitting on the porch after dinner, Juliette felt herself drifting off, staring at Aunt Violet with a sadness welling up in her chest.**

“At least three times a week then, honey,” Violet was saying. “Keeps the desire fresh and the libido in check.”

“Aunt Violet—” Juliette ventured tentatively. “Don’t you ever want to—*you* know—have a *man* again?”

Violet took a sharp breath in and quickly looked away.

“I mean,” Juliette stammered, “you of all people—of all *women*—should have a—”

“I’m too ol—”

“No, you’re not!” Juliette sat up straight in her chair and leaned in. “You tell me all the time to stay *interested* in my own desire—”

Violet turned and looked Juliette in the eye. Her face had gone soft, almost vulnerable. “Edward was my third and I loved him best. I had him for a good long time, and when he went, I knew I couldn’t stand to have a fourth one die on me. So now I tell tales and I don’t do the act.”

“You miss it though?” Juliette asked, angling her face in Aunt Violet’s direction.

Violet winked at her. “I know how to take care of myself, dearie. And don’t think I don’t.”

**By the time Ponty returned three-and-a-half years later, Juliette had had a thorough and unabashed sexual education.**

On the day his ship arrived home, Juliette waited on the pier with his mother, his father and Aunt Violet, standing just near the ropes of the gangplank. Ponty came down the ramp, shook his father’s hand, kissed and hugged his mother, lifted Aunt Violet in the air, and then placed both hands on Juliette’s shoulders, just as he had on the same day he had left. He kissed her tenderly on the

lips, and without a word, took her hand and walked her through the crowds until he found a justice of the peace. He married her that day, just as he had promised.

**Ponty and Juliette lived with his parents and Aunt Violet** for twelve months, and the whole house hummed and buzzed with the electricity of their loving. It was impossible not to feel it. Aunt Violet gloated, as proud as punch—and since it had been her instruction, after all, that created their sexual happiness, Ponty and Juliette felt she was entitled to it. When Juliette became pregnant, the young couple moved out into a little yellow bungalow apartment with a trimmed green lawn, just a few miles away.

Ponty was a good husband, and after a several years, an ample provider, and a doting but firm father. Juliette was an easygoing mother with a delighted and realistic approach to raising her children, an organized homemaker, and active in all manner of secular volunteerism. They were happy.

They had three children, two boys and one girl, and named them, at Ponty's insistence, "normal American names." Terence, Daniel and Ellen would never have to fight off the "trolls" in their third grade class because of their names.

Ponty became an insurance man, and though not a salesman by nature—it never ceased to amaze him how the introduction of his full name could bring a quick and sometimes fierce revulsion in people—his easy wit drew him many appreciative clients.

After the war, his Alabama neighbors were chagrined enough by the travesty of the holocaust—as was the nation, at least in the places where those horrors were admitted to—that the combination of Ponty's half-Jewishness and his Christ-killing first name were rather overlooked. Fewer neighbors balked at his and Juliette's "interracial" marriage, and they were even offered dinner invitations from regular church-goers.

When the subject of Christ, God or religion came up at one of these dinners—particularly when it became clear that Juliette and

Ponty had no intention of subjecting themselves or their children to doctrines of any stripe—he would say something pithy in a merry tone like, “Y’all go on ahead and brainwash those kids however you like. We’re stayin’ out of the pool,” or, “The only church or temple we need is the one in our bedroom.”

They were tolerated as the “funny” couple, the off-beats in a sea of the homogenized up-and-coming Alabama middle class, the “we-have-friends-who-are-Jewish-so-we-can’t-be-anti-semitic” token dinner guests.

Though Juliette’s parents, Mavis and Joseph, never got over the shock of her marriage and subsequent willingness to have children by Ponty—especially with regard to their lack of a Christian christening—they grudgingly came to enjoy Ponty’s witty company on holidays and family birthdays. Joe, Juliette’s father, could not form the sounds of Ponty’s name without wrinkling up his face in a distasteful and disgusted way, and took to calling him “Son,” much to Juliette’s delight.

**Aunt Violet began to falter the year Ponty turned forty-five—just five months after his father had died and his mother Maxine was recovering from long-term pneumonia. Ponty and Juliette moved Aunt Violet in with them without so much as a hiccup of hesitation.**

“Ponty, leave me be!” she hollered as he lifted her into his paneled station wagon the day he came to get her. “I’m a banged-up old wash-basin of a woman, and I’m gonna kick the bucket as soon as—”

“Hush now!” Ponty interrupted. “If it weren’t for you I wouldn’t have Juliette, or my kids either.”

“I’m not going to be of any use!” she protested, flailing her hands at him.

He dropped her in place on the red leather front seat. “You’ve already been all the use you need to be! Now you’re comin’ with me, you mouthy old broad, and that’s the end of it!”

He kissed her on the cheek and she smiled broadly, wrinkles crackling across her thin face.

When Terence, their oldest, asked, “How come Aunt Violet lives with us and not your mama?” Ponty answered, “Because Mama doesn’t want to, and Aunt Violet cared enough about me to teach me how to love.”

When Aunt Violet died two years later, Ponty and Juliette wept bitterly. At the gravesite, Ellie, age eleven, turned to Juliette and asked, “Did she teach you how to love too, Mama?”

Juliette’s eyes went wide, and hot tears fell down her cheeks. “She did, my love. She absolutely did.”

**Several days after Aunt Violet’s death, Juliette came upon Ponty** hunched over on the stairs of their front porch with his face in his hands. His hair was thinning, and his sides had become a bit fleshy. She touched him lightly on the neck, her fingers barely brushing the suntanned skin at his collar-line.

“You miss her, don’t you Pont?” She said, gently lowering herself onto the stair next to him.

He pulled her into his chest and kissed the top of her head. “Terribly, my love,” he whispered. “I miss her terribly.”

**Ponty and Juliette lived another thirty years together “without a hitch,”** Ponty liked to say. Their desire for each other never diminished, and their friends and children took to calling them “The Romantics.”

Even after their children had grown up and moved out, they still kissed in public. They held hands whenever they walked anywhere together, and always when they walked on the green. Juliette sat on his lap at picnics, and Ponty still asked her to dress up and took her out for cocktails each weekend, like a first date. In bed, they continued to explore and laugh and please each other.

As happy as he was, Ponty thought being called “The Romantics” was hogwash. Aunt Violet would have set them all straight, though, barking out some raspy-voiced remark, like, “‘Romantic’—ha! *Euphemism!* It’s *sex* between the two of them! They *please* each

other and they both like it—*that's* what you're seeing!"

Because of Aunt Violet, all of their long life their intimacy had come easily. Ponty could twinkle his eyes at Juliette from across a room, even in the middle of a party, and she would know that he wanted her. Juliette could slide her hands over her hips and lift her breasts ever so slightly at dinner, and he would feel her arousal. Age, wrinkles, spots on the skin—nothing diminished their wanting. They held tightly to each other for more than fifty years.

When Juliette died, Ponty was seventy-six. He grieved slowly and patiently, refusing the company of all except his children and grandchildren. He had had a full life with Juliette, and his gratefulness filled him. Each morning he got down on his knees and talked to her—speaking out loud the things he planned to do that day; the things he felt; how he missed her.

"Your daffodils are coming up again," he'd say, swaying just a bit as he spoke, "and you're going to have a lovely patch of strawberries this season."

He dreamed of her; he could feel her near him daily. He felt, now, in her death, that she was next to him always, in an invisible way, something he could not express or explain in words.

After she had been gone for a year, he cleaned out her clothes and personal objects, saving from the Goodwill pile several articles of her cocktail-wear and lingerie that had always aroused him, even after years of being together. He did it alone, and cried through the days until the task was done.

He found things she had hidden in small boxes—a note from 1945, just when he had returned from the war which read, "P.—My one and only. Love, J." in her handwriting, and his own answer, scrawled on the bottom, reading, "Dearest J.—I'll never, ever be away from you again. Your P."

He found a sock filled with trinkets he had bought for her—junk jewelry in chipping bright red plastic that, in a flush to his chest, brought back a hot, sticky night they had made love in the dark behind a lean-to at the county fair.

In her underwear drawer, he found something that caught his breath in his heart—a tiny journal of Juliette’s in small, almost illegible scrawl, with notes from Aunt Violet on how to pleasure herself, and then how to show him how to do the same for her. He sat with the journal for three days, and when he had finished reading, he went to the cemetery and covered his wife’s and his aunt’s grave-stones with pink lilies and yellow daffodils.

**One morning as he was cleaning out the back of their closet,** he found a wooden keepsake box full of old photos—his own from years ago, almost forgotten—then lifted them out and set them on the bed.

There was a black-and-white photograph of Juliette as a young woman in a smart, grey, 1940’s-style suit with dark piping, and another of her in a see-through black gown, well into her years. There was a snapshot of himself on his parent’s front porch in 1941 with broad white borders on the Kodak paper, one that he had given her when he left for the war, which she had covered with lipstick prints.

His eyes lighted on a small upside-down snapshot at the bottom of the box with writing on the back that he recognized. George Chesapeake, from his Navy war days, smiled broadly out from the black-and-white, his arms wrapped around Ponty’s shoulders from behind, leaning in. Ponty was laughing in the shot, holding a glass of beer and looking up at the camera with joy in his eyes. George’s writing on the back read: “Anything you ever need—I’ll be there. Love, George.”

**George had come from the Tennessee Valley and was a year** younger than Ponty. On their first day aboard ship, George came right up behind him and dumped a bucket of ice water over his head and said, “Welcome to the *USS Alabama*.” Ponty howled with laughter, and they quickly became inseparable friends.

Full of wit and both pranksters, their troublemaking was bombastically punished and hugely appreciated as an antidote to perilous

combat missions. Finding his chair glued to the floor, or his file cabinets filled with sand, or his desk flipped upside down, their Lt. Commander would scream, “Chesapeake-Bay! You two get in here!”

**It took two months to find George, looking through Tennessee** phone books at the library and calling long-distance. When Ponty finally got him on the phone, he said, “George? George Chesapeake?” The hopefulness in his voice surprised him.

“It’s me, Ponty.” George said warmly. “Long time. You’re feeling well?”

“Juliette died, George—year ago now.” Ponty was quiet for a long moment.

“So sorry, Ponty,” George said softly. And then, steadily, “Should I come?”

“You’re on your own now?” Ponty queried.

George sighed. “Yeah, I am.”

Ponty’s eyes went wet and watery. “Why don’t you come then?”

**That night Ponty went into his and Juliette’s walk-in closet and** stood still for a long time. It had been the right thing to do to clean out her things—surely it had been—but now it made him feel empty.

He had spent many lingering moments in their closet over the years, when he knew his wife was elsewhere, ensconced in the scent of her and surrounded by the femininity of her clothing. He loved fingering the fabrics of her cocktail dresses and the see-through things he had bought for her. He loved to pick up her high heels and even smell the sweet-and-sour scent of her sweat in them after a night out dancing.

He had had an intimate relationship with her things as well as her person: a dress, a blouse, a stocking, or a *negligée* recounted for a him a precious moment of intimacy, his kisses moving down her belly, her hand sliding up his inner thigh, places and positions and nights they had gone at it so hard they made the four-poster move across the floor.

“God, how I miss you,” he breathed into one of his now keepsake objects—a sheer red nightgown.

Later, he lay awake in his bed for a long time, closing his eyes and pretending that Juliette was lying next to him. For the entire year since she had died, he had filled her side of the bed with pillows, so that if he woke in the night he would not feel the emptiness of her missing body. On this night, though, he left the pillows on the arm chair, and reached out into the dark to feel the still-indented place where she used to lie. It filled him with longing to try to feel her, to remember his hands reaching around her hips in the darkness, to feel her open her body to him easily and automatically, ready for pleasure, even when she was half-asleep.

**The morning George was to arrive, Ponty sat upright in his** bedroom armchair staring at the bed. He tried to remember his time with George—not generally, but in detail. It had taken fifteen months of Navy shenanigans and side-by-side combat for Ponty and George to consummate what had begun as simple camaraderie, but what had grown into a genuine and pressing attraction.

“No.” Ponty said out loud. “*Euphemism*. It was more than ‘attraction.’ I loved the man.”

What had made them do it? Was it the daily shelling—the very real possibility of death banging on his heart at every single hour? Was it knowing that he could lose his life at any moment of the day or night and might never love Juliette or anyone else again? Was it Aunt Violet’s ability to make him feel that exploration was just fine, even between men?

He did not believe that his wife had suffered at his hands. He had given all of his love to her—warmly and with genuine affection. He had had a ferocious passion for her, had made her happy and been made happy in return. He had not held back and had not held a torch for anyone else—not even George.

He heard Aunt Violet in his head saying, “Ponty Bayswater, you are not a betrayer. *Screw* that namesake! You are honest and good

and true. And you love who you love.”

Could he now, at the age of seventy-seven, begin again—*all* over again—and live a completely different life?

When George’s cab arrived, he got out of it carrying two small suitcases. He took a long time walking up the path and set them down on one end of the wide porch. George had been stocky and well-built, with trimmed blond hair atop a wide-jawed face, punctuated by shimmering green eyes and a sly smile. Now his hair was white and thinned with a bare dome on top, and his once-thick thighs were spindly. But his eyes still shone.

Ponty stood in the doorway watching his old friend, and then propped the screen door and reached out for George’s hand. A palm-zapper toy which George had hidden in his hand gave Ponty a small shock, and they both bellowed with laughter.

“Chesapeake, you old son-of-a-gun! You’re still the same.” Ponty moved in to hug him. “Kept that smirk, I see.”

George’s eyes welled up. He breathed in hard. “Ain’t going to be easy now, Ponty,” he said seriously, moving back to get a look at his old friend’s face. “Both been married. Both have kids—and grand-kids.”

“Know that, George.” Ponty wiped his brow with the back of his hand. “Waddaya say we just do our level best from here on out?”

**Ponty moved George into Terence’s old room so he had a place** to set up his personal things, but they both slept in the master bedroom, in the bed that he had slept in with Juliette until she died. They set up house rather simply—retirement meant plenty of time for reading and making meals and taking in a movie.

The neighbors queried, but all Ponty would say was that an old war buddy had come to stay—joking that his house was a “bachelor pad” now and they would “live like slobs and be damn happy about it.” No one pressed him any further.

George was quick to laugh and had a relaxed demeanor, and Ponty found his company joyful and comforting. In bed, they joked

around at first to get comfortable—lots of wisecracks about not knowing where to put things, and body parts that seemed to have meandered off their usual path—but very quickly they settled into an easy intimacy, much like the first time they had been lovers on the ship, fifty years before.

Even more than sex, Ponty found it relaxing to his heart to wake up and find George in bed next to him.

After several months of living with George, Ponty decided to sit each one of his adult children down and tell them about him. He wanted to do it in person, not on the telephone, to help avoid misunderstandings. He drove across Alabama, and then all the way to Atlanta, visiting each of his kids in turn. Terence took it best; Daniel, not so well; and Ellie not well at all.

Daniel asked him if he had ever really loved his mother at all, and Ellie assumed he'd been a homosexual all his life and had just hidden it from his children and his wife.

"You're betraying her!" Ellie yelled over her kitchen table. "It's almost as if your name—"

"Easy, babe," Ellie's husband Bruce had put a firm hand on her arm to stop her. "It's his life."

He knew what had been coming next: Pontius-the-killer, Pontius-the-betrayer—the references he had long lived with, the prejudice and the recrimination—the association with a man of no principles that had sentenced the betrayed. And it had almost been uttered by his own daughter, whom he loved with all his heart. It hurt terribly.

"They'll come around," George said on the phone when Ponty called from the road. "Let 'em get over the shock and then we'll see."

"How'd it go with yours?" Ponty asked, exhausted.

"Same, same," George choked out a laugh. "My daughter wants to know if we'll be wearing leather at Thanksgiving."

"Ah, George," Ponty chuckled. "Always made me laugh. Even in combat."

"This is combat," George said. "A fight for our freedom, Ponty."

**At home, Ponty took George up to the cemetery to visit Juliette's** and Aunt Violet's gravesites. He walked across a bright green lawn with flat plaques in metal or stone placed equidistant, embedded into the uncut grass. Ponty moved from one marker to another orienting himself and searching for his loved ones. Grey clouds began to move in along the horizon line and the sun began to set in brightly pink hues behind them.

"Aha! There you are!" he stepped over several metal markers to Juliette's. The plaque read, "Juliette Bayswater, 1921 – 1997. Devoted Wife and Mother. May the Happiness You Gave Be With You Forever."

George stood back as Ponty bent down low to talk to her, hushed and quiet. After several minutes he got up slowly and began to walk again, searching the markers once more.

"How come you don't visit your folks' sites?" George asked, trailing behind.

"Do. Once a year—watch your feet," Ponty said, marching through the too-tall tufts of grass toward Aunt Violet's headstone. "Visit the two who loved me the most once a month, though."

When he found Aunt Violet's headstone, Ponty gingerly eased himself down on his knees onto the grass and began to whisper again.

"What you sayin', Ponty?" George asked him. "I'd very much like to know."

Ponty turned on his left hip and looked up at George. The wind was lightly blowing, and the sky had turned a beautiful grey-and-watery-blue with gold tinges just above the clouds at the sunset line. George's face was backlit from behind, his thin hair sparkling.

"George, I was just telling her that I love a man now, after I've fully loved a woman."

George tugged on his right ear lobe. He looked down at Ponty on the grass. "And what'd she say to that?"

Ponty smiled. "She said, 'No man should ever have to apologize

for taking pleasure from the man he loves—even if he’s already loved a woman.’ ”

George wrinkled his nose and turned up the corners of his mouth in a sly smile. “That sounds right to me,” he said.

**George had been right: his and Ponty’s children did come**

around, and by their second Thanksgiving the whole family gathered at their house for the holiday—George’s two children and five grandkids, and Ponty’s three and six grandchildren.

The morning after Thanksgiving Day, Ponty sat across the kitchen table from Ellie, his daughter, drinking herbal tea.

“Ow! Damn it!” Ellie squeezed the just-boiled bag, burning her fingers on it. Ponty laughed out loud.

“You’re laughing at my pain, Dad?” Ellie said.

He chuckled. “Just remembering how Aunt Violet used to burn her fingers on her orange pekoe and swear like a sailor. That was just before she told me how to sleep with a man.”

“So it’s her fault,” Ellie smiled and put her fingers on the back of her father’s hand.

“You could say that, Ellie. You truthfully could.” He stared down at his daughter’s fingertips touching his own veiny and purplish flesh.

“How did I get so old? Wasn’t it just yesterday I got off a ship and married your mother? And just a week ago you were a tiny little thing...”

Ellie looked into her father’s eyes. “I’m glad you have someone, Dad. I really am.”

Ponty flushed with warmth, and tears sprang up under his wrinkled eyelids. “I loved your mother with every ounce of breath I had, Ellie. I miss her every day. You know that, don’t you?” He turned his hand over and grabbed his daughter’s fingers tightly.

“I do, Dad.” She leaned over and kissed him on the forehead. “I honestly do.”

**Ponty turned ninety-one the month that he and George celebrated** their fourteenth anniversary. His grandson Jake stayed with them all summer long, and he and George sat up every night with him on Violet's favorite couch after dinner, available, in her old tradition, for questions about love and sex.

"Truth, Jake," Ponty would say, rocking his legs against a wooden chair propped in front of the couch, "That's what we're here to tell you about. No *euphemisms*—just say it like it is."

"Grandpa..." Jake would begin. "What if the girl wants to sleep with me and another guy too?"

"Hmmm. Well, let's see," Ponty would rock his feet back and forth against the chair, and say, "First off—do you love her? 'Cause if you do, then that's a whole can of worms by itself. I loved your grandmother and once she was gone I loved George. Never wanted to share her—or him."

"One at a time, son, I say." George said. "Key to happiness."

Their children and grandchildren threw them a small dinner for Ponty's birthday. After it was over and he and George had settled into bed for the night, George turned to him and said, "A full life, Mr. Bayswater. You're a lucky dog."

"There's still one thing..." Ponty said, pressing his lips together and rolling over gingerly on his forearm to squint at George.

"What's that, Pont? Skydiving? Twenty-mile marathon? Harem?" Ponty jabbed at George's side, upsetting his own balance on his arm, then falling onto his pillow.

"Easy there..." George chuckled.

"Nope, not a one of those things," Ponty said, staring at him with a steady gaze, righting himself. Then, in a determined tone, he said, "George, I want to change my name. I'm all through being that man's whipping post. I'm ninety-one and I want the name I chose on my gravestone."

**The next day Ponty and George called a cab and went down** to the county clerk's office, stood in line, and asked for the forms. When

he had filled out his name, address, and social security number, and when all of the other attendant lines and boxes were filled in, Ponty paused, looked at George, and said, “Here we go. Should’ve done this a long time ago.”

“Never too late—we’re still a-kickin’,” George said, adopting a John Wayne swagger and faking a gunslinger’s shots.

Ponty laughed, and then filled out the last two lines. Under “previous name” he scribbled in “Pontius;” and under “new name” he wrote, in delicate print, “Ponty.” George took out his old, leather-encased camera and took a picture of the page, even though the clerk said that they could have their own copy.

Ponty sent out announcement cards to all of his family members and several friends who were still living. They read: “Pontius no more. It’s legal. Love, Ponty.”

Three nights later Ponty awoke shortly after 3:00 am and opened his eyes. He could feel George’s heavy breath on his back, and he was sweating, overheated by the too-thick comforter. There, at the end of the bed, was Juliette. She stood, clear as day, in her smart 1940’s suit with the dark piping, and she was angry with him.

“Ponty,” she said. “I’m waiting, and I don’t *want* to wait.” She crossed her arms and her eyes went wide with irritation.

“Juliette—” he cried out, reaching a hand towards her apologetically. “I’m sorry—I—I...George is—”

“No, no—none of that Ponty Bayswater. George is a good man. But Aunt Violet and I are here—we’re *waiting* for you...”

“Juliette—I—I—” Tears ran quickly down his cheeks.

George sat up and put his open palm on Ponty’s back and calmed him, waiting.

“You saw her then?” George said steadily. He reached for Ponty’s left hand and held it tightly.

“Yes. She was right there.” Ponty pointed, looking confused.

“Then I guess it’s time, Pont,” George said solemnly. “If Juliette’s a-callin’.”

**Ponty lived another two weeks, began to lose his sight, and had** time to say his goodbyes. George helped him make phone calls and write short notes to his children and grandchildren, telling them how much he loved them. He died in George's arms on a spring morning on the same date that he had returned from the war, the same date he had married Juliette.

He had awakened just after six in the morning that day, turned to George and with a heavy rasp in his voice said, "No one should ever have to apologize for loving who they love, George, and I love you, just like I loved Juliette."

"Shall we say a little thank you to Aunt Violet?" George said, reaching an arm under Ponty's frail frame.

"You betcha, George—let's," he whispered, and then he closed his eyes.



# Confessions of a Comparatist

*A life and love(s) in letters*

**Rebecca Ruth Gould**

When I turned fourteen, I discovered Dostoevsky. Not just one story or novel, but the entire collected works, from *Poor Folk* and *White Nights* to *The Idiot* to *Brothers Karamazov* and *The Possessed*. I read Dostoevsky, not as a professional scholar or even as a casual reader, but as a lost soul, obsessed with mortality, searching for life's meaning. Psychedelic drugs had failed to yield the insight I was seeking, so I turned to literature. Dostoevsky posed questions in his characters' meandering monologues that no one else had posed for me. I read Dostoevsky, out of necessity, out of love, out of longing for the truth he was seeking.

I read Willa Cather, Gustave Flaubert, and Thomas Hardy—every single novel by each of these writers that I could get my hands on—yet none caused the same palpitations that Dostoevsky did. At first, I read Dostoevsky in English translation, mostly by Constance Garnett, but also in the more recent renderings of David McDuff and Jessie Coulson. The translations were sometimes stilted, concealing as much as they revealed, and leaving me with the longing to experience the texts in their original form. I kept that longing in reserve as a dream to be attained once I had extracted everything I could from Dostoevsky in English.

I was not the only adolescent soul-searcher to come under Dostoevsky's spell. Many such readers have moved on, their teenage passions supplanted by adult obsessions: bills, children, and the mortgage. Yet my encounter with Dostoevsky left a mark. His novels revealed to me how books could transform lives. Dostoevsky's crooked and erratic syntax, his broken clauses, and the sharp interjections of his characters sharpened my sense of myself as a writer, and even more intensely, as a human being. Dostoevsky's fictions revealed how far away dreams could generate new possibilities. Reading in public the books I loved invariably triggered the same

questions: Is your family Russian? Do you have Russian origins? The love of literature became conflated with the love of the self.

It was not by coincidence that, after arriving at the University of California Berkeley as a transfer student from a community college, and faced for the first time in my life with an embarrassment of riches in terms of the courses to choose from, I signed up for a course in the nineteenth-century Russian novel. Nor should my next step come as a surprise. On the recommendation of my professor of nineteenth century Russian literature, I applied to spend a summer in St. Petersburg, where I could explore the city under the cover of the white nights that provided a backdrop for much of Dostoevsky's early fiction, while reciting Russian poetry along the banks of the Neva. My decision to major in Russian alongside Comparative Literature was a direct outcome of these encounters.

Graduating from the university presented a dilemma. My love for Dostoevsky never faded, but my appetite for academic studies of Dostoevsky's oeuvre, given that all his work had been published and his texts fully edited, was rapidly diminishing. I came to doubt that anything was left to be accomplished. Specialists will always be able to find nooks and crannies of Dostoevsky's oeuvre that merit further exploration. They will cite unpublished notebooks, letters, and diaries. They will point to the need for further contextualisation, for finer-grained analysis, for placing every word Dostoevsky ever wrote under the scholarly microscope. We can never have too much of Dostoevsky, but life is short, and in the battle for significance few writers' marginalia can compete.

Gradually, I came to understand that I could never become an effective Dostoevsky scholar. Although Dostoevsky scholarship was the future that my professors envisioned for avid readers like me, my ambitions lay in a different direction. My Russian professor dreamed that I would write a dissertation on Dostoevsky, and then live out the remainder of my days as a Slavist. It seemed an insufficient justifica-

tion for my time on earth, but no alternative was within easy reach.

## II

This story begins in love and ends in an undefined territory that hovers between past and present, the memory of something once loved, now a lifetime away. While I have no map for this geography, I can trace the inchoate bundle of feelings that every language I have ever loved has generated for me. I can chronicle how I was formed by these languages, before I cast them aside and alighted on new medium for my passions, sorrows, and grief. This is a story about love, language, and their mutual relations. As with any love story, this story has no end, although it does have a beginning.

Sorting out a future took me far away from Russian literature, my first love. I found myself in Tbilisi, Georgia, a city I had chosen for its proximity to Chechnya, with an indeterminate plan of mastering Chechen. Instead, I mastered Georgian. I embarked on the study of Persian. I became captivated by Georgia's neighbours, most particularly Iran, a country that had been the major imperial power in the region until the rise of Russia that spanned the reigns of Peter the Great (1682-1721) and Catherine the Great (1762-1796).

In verse after verse of Hafez, Sa'di, and Rumi that I encountered at my Tbilisi dinner table with the help of a Georgian instructor of Persian, I compared their poetic utterances to my prosaic present. A verse from Rumi in particular haunted me:

یلسغ یروآرب تضایر بآ هب رگا  
درک یناوت افص ار لد ترو دک هم

If you bathe in the water of austerity,  
your opaque heart will gleam lucidly.

Deftly juxtaposing two opposing worlds, the water of austerity

with the opacity of the heart, this poem condenses the basic principles of Persian poetics. It is a distant world in any context, and deliberately so; in keeping with Sufi norms, Rumi conjures a way of being that is constitutively opposed to life in this world. The world of Persian poetics is many universes removed from the granular urban realism of the nineteenth century Russian novel.

We acquire new identities through new languages. New selves are born every time we speak in a foreign tongue. I became a stranger to myself. In Tbilisi, my first linguistically acquired identity was Georgian at first. After a year of living in the city and studying Persian at Tbilisi's Giorgi Tsereteli Institute of Oriental Studies, I began reading and speaking in Persian. I did everything I could to sever my ties to Russian, even as Dostoevsky's language continue to palpitate in me, like a beating heart torn from the body it used to sustain, or a tongue severed from its mouth, incanting, mechanically yet with passion, a forgotten code.

My Russian self is frozen in time, locked between a first love and a final parting. My other linguistic selves are marked many times over by the people I met (often in books) and wished to become. New languages grafted new beings onto me, new extensions, new limbs, new articulations of my inward consciousness that had eluded me so long as I was restricted to my native tongue. With every language, my self was made anew.

Not coincidentally, the acquisition of new selves was accompanied by love in the conventional sense as well: with another human being. I learned to speak, think, and breathe Georgian while falling in love with a government official working for an MP in the Georgian Parliament. He introduced me to Georgian modernist poetry, to the verses of Titsian Tabidze, Paolo Iashvili, and Galaktion Tabidze. Although the excitement of discovering Georgian poetry continues to palpitate, my relationship with this language was severed when the relationship that sustained it broke apart.

Persian has a different place in my life. Less dependent on other humans, my love for it did not originate in any single relationship.

Although it has been intertwined with various people, my love for Persian is autonomous of the people who have shaped my life. I first spoke this language on a daily basis with an Iranian I met in Damascus while he was in voluntary exile, just like me, although his turned out to be more permanent than mine. As we parsed the challenging verses of Khaqani from Shirvan (northern Azerbaijan, d. 1199) together, while I was working on my dissertation, the language we shared became the basis of our affection. That relationship faded, yet Persian remained. Persian has carried me from Dushanbe to Hyderabad and four times to Iran: Shiraz, Isfahan, Tehran, all the way to the shores of the Caspian.

Each of these journeys has been diverted from its course by geopolitics—leading to the imprisonment of Americans and Iranians, mutual bans on immigration, and hateful slogans on both sides—as a result of which the prospect of speaking Farsi everyday in Iran has remained a relatively distant dream. In some respects, my relationship to Persian is the diametrical opposite of the relationship to Russian that developed during my sojourn in St. Petersburg and Georgian during the two years I lived in Tbilisi. While living in Tbilisi, Georgian entered into the fabric of my life. I shopped, travelled, and bargained in Georgian. The avant-garde poetry of Titsian and Galaktion acquired the rhythms of an everyday request for a fresh loaf of bread from the *tone* (Georgian oven) beneath my window. Learning Persian called for a different kind of discipline, more akin to that of the classical pianist who seeks to master a well-known repertoire than that of the virtuoso who improvises at every stage.

As it does for any student of Persian or a Turkic literature, Arabic everywhere interweaves itself into the tapestry of my linguistic loves. This occurred most memorably during the months I spent in Damascus just prior to the war that began in 2011. Arabic has been a fleeting rather than constant presence, palpable during moments of heightened sublimity, such as while visiting a mosque, and then fading soon after. Only so much of a language in the sacralised register that Quranic Arabic presents itself to many non-Arab listeners can

be absorbed at one time.

The meanings of love are as various as language itself. It can mean the loss of control over one's self that follows from inspiration and the surrender of control that follows. This definition leaves many gaps, but it clarifies why love has happened to me so many times, and, equally, why this love has so rapidly disintegrated. The Platonic understanding of *eros* (as articulated by Socrates in the *Symposium*) envisions it as an ecstasy that passes, as all languages do. While they last, these loves are entirely subsumed, sustained, and consumed, by the verbal medium that gave them birth.

I did not fall in love with a Khakass from Siberia in order to gain fluency in Russian. Nor did I become enraptured with a connoisseur of Georgian poetry in order to improve my Georgian. Nor was my friendship with an Iranian poet consciously linked to the pursuit of Persian. Yet in each case my relationship with my interlocutors would have been different if the medium of our acquaintance had been my native language. Equally, the acquisition of my new linguistic identities would have been inconceivable in the absence of love.

Language was the medium of my affections, as well as of my grief. If the language of our love had been different, our relationships would not have been the same. When I began to develop a relationship with a Greek man, my first step towards a long-term relationship was to begin reading Cavafy and Seferis, mostly in English, but with interludes in Greek. I immersed myself in modern Greek in order to open myself to his ways of seeing his world. His indifference to my interest in the poets of his country signalled the beginning of the end of our short-lived relationship. Had he wished to read Cavafy with me, then a future with him might have been possible.

I dwell on the precarity of these passions—on their fleetingness *and* their fluidity—to underscore how our lives are structured by our relationships to the languages we speak. When the love fades, the memories remain enshrined in language: the trace of what it felt like to be with that person, wrapped in a unity of body and mind. Every

lover offers the beloved a new self to inhabit, a new identity to call one's own, new eyes through which to see. So with language: new words generate new sounds for every tangible thing, new phonemes between the lips and the tongue, new relationships among places and spaces, words and things.

Russian was the first foreign language that I came to love, viscerally, with my flesh and soul. Knowing Russian—speaking, thinking, and feeling its poetry—extended my sense of myself. At times my love has morphed into an enmity inversely proportionate to the intensity of my former affections. Russian grates against me when it silences other selves, within me, as well as geopolitically, and especially in the Caucasus, where I passed two years of my life. Russian is also a language of unmatched lyricism and shocking beauty. The only feeling to the languages I have learned and loved that is beyond my reach is indifference.

I have been burned by language many times: by war, bureaucracy, and corruption, and by the same language that has defined what it means to be alive. Russian is a wound that has healed while scarring my insides, in the part of my brain that feels before thinking and thinks before it speaks. This feeling—this visceral memory of a love that once was and which will never live again—is inscribed in every new relationship with every new language. The death of the languages I used to love is part of my mortality, of my own perpetual decay.

Russian introduced me to intimacy in a foreign tongue, the linguistic equivalent of falling in love for the first time. Even when the love itself has passed, traces remain: the memory of what it was like to form on my lips the sounds that became the odes of Mandelstam, the laments of Akhmatova, the prophecies of Pasternak, and the lyrics of Esenin. The ability to feel as these poets did during the height of the purges that killed their loved ones introduced a new intensity into my soul, from which I have not recovered since.

Two poems by Mandelstam recur to me in moments of despair. The first depicts the poet gazing on the Black Sea, merging the

poem's eternal present with Homeric time. His every word a complete thought, he intones:

Бессоница. Гомер. Тугие паруса.

Insomnia. Homer. Taut Sails.

In the second poem, composed just under a decade before his execution, Mandelstam anticipates his arrest in his St. Petersburg home in 1930, during the height of the Stalinist purge that was to culminate in his execution:

Я вернулся в мой город, знакомый до слез.

I returned to my city, known to tears.

The tone is nostalgic and lyrical, so much so that this second poem provided the lyrics to a song by the Russian pop star Alla Pugacheva. Two very different sets of images, yet evoking cognate emotions, transporting me to other worlds, calling on my imagination to forge links across time and space. The feelings that the recitation of these poems stir in me will outlast my ability to speak. Yet these memories are for a feeling that belongs to the past. In the same way that love remains even when a relationship has reached an end, so does Russian belong to the category of former love.

The Georgian poet who resonates most deeply is Titsian Tabidze, whom I have translated ever since I was able to speak and read the language. Titsian's poems are alternately lyrical, preoccupied with the past, and political, anticipating the future. The lyrical register, in which he is known best, is epitomised in Titsian's reflections on his childhood in western Georgia. These verses, which conclude "Poem Landslide" written in 1927 and set in his native village, use poetic creation as an analogy for life:

მე არ ვწერ რექსებს... რექსი თვითონ მწერს,  
ჩემი სიცოცხლე ამ რექსს თან ახდავს.  
რექსს მე ვუწოდებ მოვარდნილ მენწყვს,  
რომ გაგიტანს და ცოცხლად დაგმარხავს.

I don't write poems. Poetry writes me.  
This poem walks with my life.  
A poem is a landslide that carries me  
away and buries me alive.

The political register is one with which Titsian is rarely associated. Yet it permeates his verse in underappreciated ways, particularly the poems written during the last decade of his life which touch on the history of resistance to Russian colonial rule in the Caucasus. Here are the concluding verses from “Gunib” (1937), a poem that names the site of

არ მისწოდია მე არასდროს ჯერ კაჯის თოფი,  
არც გარესილი მრტყმია წვერზე რეკური ხმალი,  
მაგრამ უეცრად ვაუკაცობამ მეც შემაშფოთა,  
არ მინდა ვიყო მე პოეტი, სისხლით დამთვრადი,  
და ამ ღამიდან დაწყებული დღე რაც კი გადის,  
მე ვწერ პოემას: რომ წარეცხოს თქვენი ღაღატი.

I never pulled the fatal trigger.  
I never donned the fighter's armour.  
But suddenly I too am moved into manhood.  
I don't want to be a poet drunk on blood.  
Let this day be my penitence.  
Let my poems wash away your treachery.

These verses contrast the poet, who imagines himself as a Muslim warrior resisting the Russian conquest of the Caucasus, with his

fellow Georgian poets, whom he judges as complicit in the imperial project. Composed within a couple of years of Mandelstam's lyric appeal to a St. Petersburg that he would soon be forced to abandon forever, these verses—which were some of the last Titsian ever wrote—similarly combine the prophetic and incantatory with the lyrical. Like all the poets and writers discussed here, Titsian Tabidze was a firm believer in the ethical importance of his vocation. Poetry for him is king of all. Whereas Dostoevsky claimed that beauty would save the world, Titsian argues in these verses that poetry of itself redeems all kinds of treachery, including the brutality of colonial conquest by his fellow Georgians, who participated in the bloody conquest of the Caucasus.

The relationship of the Russian language to the literatures of the Caucasus is systematically misunderstood, and pigeonholed into a relatively simplistic discourse of empire. One well-meaning but misguided inquiry is: Is Georgian related to Russian? Every time it is posed to me, I cringe. It's like asking whether Spanish is related to English for the sole reason that many Spanish speakers live in the US, or whether Arabic is derived from French and German because many Arabic-speaking migrants end up in Germany and France, or whether Persian is a Semitic language because it uses the Arabic script.

Languages influence each other through their shared histories, not genetic affinities. The histories that have brought Georgian and other languages of the Caucasus into relation with Russian are political as much as they are cultural. There is no deep genetic link; like any relationship, some degree of difference is needed to make it meaningful.

It was partly because I was disturbed by the reduction of linguistic plurality to ethnic difference—one of colonialism's many legacies—that I undertook to dispel the myth of a nationalistic Caucasus by learning more than one of its languages. Russian is many things. It is a repository of some of the twentieth century's most dramatic and monumental poetry. It is the medium of my first literary love, Dostoevsky. But it is not and never will be an adequate basis from

which to engage with the literatures of the Caucasus. In the context of the Caucasus, the insistent turn to Russian frequently expresses a monolingual colonial point of view, and embodies a relation structured by inequality. Of course, has also been the medium of expression for the critique of colonialism from the beginning of the Russian conquest. No language is ever entirely bound by its past, and Russian certainly has the capacity to facilitate communication among the many different peoples of the region.

I was drawn to Persian for reasons as visceral as those that drew me first to Russian and then to Georgian: because of the cognitive universes poetry in this language made possible. The suspension of belief induced by the recitation of Persian verses compelled me to continue along the path struck by Hafez and Saq̄di towards the annihilation of my self. In Islamic poetics, this is referred to as the opposition of *haqiqa*, the truth that exceeds figural representation, to *majaz*, the world of the imagination that is embodied in rhetorical figures. The thirteenth century poet Hasan Sijzi of Delhi, sums up this apperception well: “After tomorrow,” he states in a *ghazal*, “the days disappear [*az an farda ke pas farda nadorad*].”

The two languages I have loved the most—Russian and Persian—have been engaged in covert wars with the country into which I was born for the past several decades. Practically if not officially, the Cold War was over when I entered the world. Hence, US-Russian enmity did not visibly constrain my encounter with Russian literature. Born as I was a few months prior to Iran’s Islamic Revolution (1979), US-Iranian enmity has featured consistently in my life, constraining my horizons and limiting my mobility to Persian-speaking regions of the world.

As with many Americans born around the time of the Iranian Revolution, Iran has been an off-limits country for most of my life. While I have managed to visit Iran four times, each visit was brief and filled with anxiety. While this geopolitical hostility has made the geography of Persian into a region more accessible to my imagination than to my body, it has not limited my love for it. It has limited

the forms my love for Persian has been able to take, and the selves I have been able to acquire through my contact with it. Perhaps for this reason Persian does not induce in me the same visceral reactions as Russian does. The Persian familiar to me is the classical diction of Hafez and Sa'di, not modern Farsi.

Partly as a result of difficulty of travel to Iran, Persian has become for me the penultimate language of cosmopolitan identity, linking past, present, and future, Samarqand and Tabriz, Shiraz and Sarajevo, into a meaningful geography. It is a language of doubt and probability, of infinite horizons and continuously expanding possibilities. Only in Persian could Khaqani portray himself in his verse as a prophet, as the rightful successor to Jesus, not because he had been chosen by God, but because of his gift for poetry:

نیست اقلیم سخن را بهتر از من پادشا  
در جهان ملک سخن راندن مسلم شد مرا

The kingdom of speech will never find a Shah better than I.  
Dominating the land of speech is my indisputable destiny.

In Persian, concern for justice generates awareness of the cosmic fleetingness of existence, as in Sa'di's famous verse, *ba'ni adam 'uzve yek paykarand* ("the children of Adam are limbs of each other"). Georgian has a close equivalent to this Persian insight in the evocative word *tsutisopeli* (which literally translates as "a fleeting village," and means that the human community is but a wrinkle in time). Persian is a language that inspires dreams while questioning reality. In modernity, Persian has birthed the magic realist aesthetics of experimental texts like Sadeq Hedayat's *Blind Owl* (1936) and Bahram Sedeghi's *Heavenly Kingdom* (1971). Persian speaks and lives in poetry. This language's relationship to the world it references causes poetry to inflect countless aspects of everyday life.

Those who move from one language to another as I have done all my adult life are often assumed to possess an extraordinary gift for language learning. This view makes the mistake of viewing languages as innate qualities rather than acquired loves. There is indeed something about speaking a language that calls for more than pure labour. The qualities needed to learn to use a language are fortuitous, but the gift does not reside with the lover. Reading a text in a foreign language—or for that matter, in one’s native tongue—always requires exertion. The phenomenon of the polyglot is explained better by motivation—and ultimately by love—than by talent. To cultivate multilingualism it is more important to embrace a multitude of identities, than to have a ‘knack’ for languages, whatever this means. My multilingualism is driven by my need for linguistic difference as a feature of my encounter with every literary text. A need for the multiplicity within the languages that I speak, and the literatures I read, drives me forward in my journeys with languages, not an innate talent for language. My language learning is motivated entirely by love. When there is no love, there is no need for language.

I have cultivated the habit of reading in Persian, Georgian, and Russian, and in a range of other languages (Arabic, French, German, Italian, Chechen) to lesser degrees. Yet my identity, professional or personal, will never align with any single literary or linguistic tradition. René Wellek, the Czech founder of Comparative Literature following his migration to the United States in 1939, stated at the second congress of the International Comparative Literature Association (1958), “Comparative Literature arose as a reaction against the narrow nationalism of much nineteenth-century scholarship.” Wellek, a European transplant to the US following the Second World War, understood how literature could help us transcend national borders. Notwithstanding these auspicious beginnings for the comparative study of literature in the monolingual United States, Wellek felt compelled to lament the “strange system of cultural book-keeping,” that

had overtaken his discipline, and which had caused it to be dominated by “a desire to accumulate credits for one’s nation by proving as many influences as possible on other nations.”

Needless to say, Wellek regarded the zero-sum game that was fostered by the discipline of Comparative Literature in its nascent state as a dangerous development for the study of literature. As he insisted, “There are no propriety rights and no recognised ‘vested interests’ in literary scholarship...The whole conception of fenced off reservations, with signs of ‘no trespassing,’ must be distasteful to a free mind.” Although he was writing half a century ago, Wellek understood better than most readers today that literary traditions must be protected from the ideologies that underwrite nation states. The literatures to which I have dedicated my professional life—Russian, Georgian, and Persian—have too frequently been held captive by nation-based ideologies. Meanwhile, my personal and professional life has been a continual movement towards non-national and non-territorial multilingualism.

When projected onto literature, national categories underestimate this medium’s necessary subversion of all forms of ethnic exclusivity. Whether a scholar or a lover, a comparatist finds meaning and inspiration in the movement between and across languages, rather than in their static reinforcement of existing norms. A comparatist rejects mono-nationalism just as she rejects racism, closed borders, and narrow ways of seeing. She asserts no property rights over any literary tradition or national identity. She knows that Comparative Literature must find ways to contest the nation-state model of geopolitics that accounts for so many political travesties in our times and which creates insurmountable disciplinary divides, locking scholars away from each other and shutting down conversation. A comparatist recognises that partitioned scholarship is a recipe for war as well as intellectual stultification.

Every language inculcates its own ways of loving, and of being loved. Every language confers new identities on the reader, writer, and speaker. As a comparatist, I acquired my identities by loving po-

etry in the original language. Before I began to fret over its meaning, I first experienced poetry as music and responded to its cadences. As I internalised each language through its literature, I could have said with Wallace Stevens, “Music is feeling then, not sound.” Literary language is a collocation of sounds that also involve feeling. Meaning begins to matter much later in the aesthetic experience, and it is only at this point that national, religious, ethnic, and cultural categories become relevant. As a comparatist—as a lover of language’s many ways of being—I am committed to knowing and experiencing the collocations of sounds that precede meaning. This pre-conceptual usage of language is the only prism through which humans can cognize their place in the universe. This prism surrenders the self and recovers it, in a new verbal medium. It gives to every reader who desires a world larger than their current horizons a new way of belonging to a community of listeners, readers, viewers, and auditors in a cosmopolitan world.

### Further Reading

The quote from Rene Wellek can be found in “The Crisis of Comparative Literature,” in *Proceedings of the Second Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association*, ed. Werner P. Friedrich (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 1959), 1: 153-6. Some of the experience of living in Tbilisi described here is recounted in more detail in Rebecca Ruth Gould, “Becoming a Georgian Woman,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 31.2 (2010): 127-144.

My translations of Titsian Tabdize are available in *Pleiades: Literature in Context* 37.2 (2017): 138-139; *Rhino Poetry* 16 (2016): 148; *The Brooklyn Quarterly* 7 (Online, 2016); *Tin House* (Open Bar Broadside Online, 2016); *Seizure* (2016); *The Adirondack Review* 18.1 (2016); *Lunch Ticket* (Online, Summer/Fall 2016); and *Silk Road Review* 15 (2016); *Prairie Schooner* 89.1 (2015): 37-38; and *Metamorphosis: A Journal of Literary Translation* 17 (1): 66-103

(here with translations of poems by Paolo Iashvili and Galaktion Tabidze). Other translations I completed in the times and places recounted in this essay include: *High Tide of the Eyes: Poems by Bijan Elahi*. Co-Translated with Kayvan Tahmasebian (New York: The Operating System, Glossarium: Unsilenced Texts & Modern Translations series, 2019); *The Death of Bagrat Zakharych and other Stories by Vazha-Pshavela* (London: Paper & Ink, 2019); *After Tomorrow the Days Disappear: Ghazals and Other Poems of Hasan Sijzi of Delhi* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, World Classics series, 2016); *The Prose of the Mountains: Three Tales of the Caucasus* (Budapest: Central European University Press, CEUP Classics series, 2015).



# Nicodemus

Justin Lee

**Now there was a young man named Renato Buendía, a second-generation Spanish-American and doctoral candidate in comparative literature at a prestigious university in a more or less dignified city located somewhere in the drear of New England, who, sitting across from a fair-skinned, lucid-eyed rascal of a woman at a trendy downtown eatery (Café Nonchalance), arrived, rather elliptically, at an epiphany: he was in love.**

Immediately, Renato Buendía distrusted this idea. What was love, anyway? Emotion? Commitment over a lengthy course? A transcendent spiritual connectedness? Just this thump in his chest? He thought of his father sermonizing to him on the subject when he was sixteen, skinny, and rather ugly. They were alone on the back porch of the family home in Georgia, sharing a cold Coors in the heat. “Never over-glorify it, son. The emotion comes and goes. Mostly it goes. In the end love is nothing more than an action.” José Arcadio was a sturdy pragmatist (oblivious to the irony of his name, though his son was not), a no-nonsense sort of man full of wisdom and bullshit in equal measure. Renato expected this advice was something of both. Certainly the emotion was there, and had been for the bulk of his seven-month relationship with Lara. The action was there, too, presenting itself in gestures large and small—repainting her house and cleaning the gutters; the time-sacrifices he made to accommodate her nursing schedule; the notes of encouragement he secreted about her home whenever he sensed she was melancholy or exhausted. But was seven months long enough a time to solidify that action, to prove its endurance? He suspected not, but had a strange urge to scream otherwise.

Lara was staring at him, challenging him through the chromatic dissonance of her eyes, waiting for him to say something, probably reading his mind. She spoke.

“Stop it.”

“What?”

“Shifting your glance. First you stare at my green eye, then at my blue eye. Then back again. Just pick one. You know it makes me self-conscious.”

“I’m sorry. I really can’t help it. *You* know that. It’s what people normally do in conversation. They look at one eye, then the other. It’s silly of you to be self-conscious about such a thing. It’s not like I called you Blugra.”

Lara narrowed her eyes. The sobriquet “Blugra,” an uninspired contraction of “blue-green,” had followed her from the second grade through the end of middle school, in permutations ranging from “Blago” to “Beluga.” Lara hated it. She sipped at her water and then spat a fine mist at Renato.

He swatted the air, cursed, and wiped his face. “I love you,” he said, and sat rigid. He had startled the hell out of himself.

“Are you sure?” Lara asked.

“What? God. Of course I’m sure.” He thought maybe he was losing his mind.

“Well, I’m not so sure. You look like you just pissed yourself.”

“I—” he paused, a heat creeping into his ears. “I caught myself off guard. It’s not something I thought I’d say for a while.”

“If it’s true, then why shouldn’t you say it?”

Renato sighed and leaned forward. “There’s no reason. Actually, I think it just now occurred to me that I am, that I do, that—” he lost it again. “Hell, you know what I mean?”

“Nope. But I love you, too.”

She leaned forward, grinning like a succubus, and grabbed him by the collar and pulled him across the table. The kiss was quick and fearsome, her tongue slashing through his mouth like an orthodontic instrument. Renato flailed his arms in surprise. Somehow, all of it was delightful.

When they unfastened, she wiped the saliva from his lips with the blade of her hand and sat back in her chair. “You know, women expect more from Spaniards. We have this deep-down lust for dark romanticism. We want to be conquered and swept away. Or at least I

do. I want a Conquistador. I expect a Conquistador. And you literally just flailed your arms when I kissed you. Literally. Flailed. *Conquistadors don't flail*. If we're going to be in love now, you need to get your shit together."

Her hot spew of verbiage made Renato's neck go flush. He never knew what to expect of her. Even though she was clearly teasing, he felt ashamed. He longed to be suave, self-assured, debonair. He longed to dash around on a white horse, brandishing a gilt rapier, rushing into danger. Longed to brush aside his tired, scholarly husk, to dive out the lone window of his ivory tower. For a moment he stared at Lara, imagining her in a glittering white gown, tied to her chair, at the mercy of some murderous rogue (the *Rogue Barista of Nonchalance*, perhaps). Suddenly, he was aware of men looking in their direction, or at least thought he was aware of them—scores of them, hundreds of them, thousands, hell, all of the men in New England seemed to have materialized within the walls of *Café Nonchalance*, or perhaps it was just their essences, or one single essence, the essence of the *other man*, the usurper, the scourge. He stood abruptly, absurdly. An ancestral wildness flung itself upon him, unearthed blood-memories, images of savagery, of brilliance, of men in round-ridged helmets with long spears and iron breastplates, of men dressed in flamboyant gold capes, of the deaths of bulls and the silver-throated cheers of dusty crowds. Without a word, without a clue as to what in holy hell he was doing, he strode around the table, lifted Lara over his shoulder and rushed out of the café.

He made it half a block before getting tired and regaining some sense of who and where he was. Lara was laughing like a hyena.

**They made their way to a nearby park and lay down under an oak tree, wanting desperately to touch each other, worried about the impropriety of doing so in public on a Sunday afternoon while still wearing their church clothes. Lara settled for laying her head on Renato's shoulder.**

A lovely silence ensued for half an hour. Then,

“Do you feel reborn?”

Lara spoke with her cheek against Renato’s clavicle. It felt as though his own body had produced the sound.

“I’ve been thinking—” she began.

“Oh, honey, don’t do *that*.” As soon as he said it, Renato felt the pinch of Lara’s teeth on his pectoral. “You bit me!”

“You interrupted me,” she said. “I was being serious.”

“Then be serious.” Renato rubbed his chest.

“What did you mean when you said you loved me?”

Renato froze. He became aware of an acorn digging into his back. “How am I supposed to answer that? I meant, I mean, that I love you.”

“But what is love? What does ‘love’ mean to you?”

“It means what it means to everyone—”

“Stop parrying.”

Renato sighed. He reached beneath him and removed the offending acorn. He held it in his hand and looked at it.

“I don’t want you to love me with some non-specific, off-brand love. I want juicy, idiosyncratic, weird-ass Renato love. Come on, tell me what that love is.”

Renato squeezed a fist around the acorn and sat up. He thought for the second time that day about his father. Jose Arcadio rarely said the word “love,” but Renato could always feel it—in his attentiveness, his patience with his wife and son.

“It isn’t non-specific,” he said. “It’s just new. Even right now I’m discovering what it means.”

“That’s better, but it still feels like a dodge.”

“Earlier, when I carried you, that was absurd. But it was right. It was like all of sudden I was incredibly jealous. But it was an abstract jealousy. Being around you, I want to conjure up enemies to contend with. I want someone to try and mug us so I can throw myself at the guy to protect you. I think I actually mean that. It’s all this hormonal bravado. Emotion that needs to translate itself into action.” He was

silent for a moment. “That’s it,” he said. “It’s the certainty that I’ll act on your behalf, for your good.”

Lara smiled. She took Renato’s hand and pried the acorn from his fingers.

“Your turn,” Renato said.

“I asked you earlier if you feel reborn,” she said.

“Reborn?”

“Into water and the spirit?”

He had retained only vagaries from that morning’s sermon—God’s love, spiritual rebirth, light bursting into the world and all that jazz. He had spent most of his time at church entertaining the horrific image of old Nicodemus clawing his way back inside his mother. “Yeah, I do. Of course I do.”

She rocked her head on his chest for a moment and then sat up. She looked at him and said, “I’ve been thinking that it’s more than that.”

“More than what?”

“More than purely spiritual. That it’s here and now, and messy. God’s love demands that we die and be reborn. I want all love to be that way. To force me to let go of things. Be a better me. I want your love for me to do that. And I want my love to do that for you.”

Renato leaned forward and kissed her once.

She smiled. “Now that we love each other, what are we leaving behind? What part of the old self is falling off?”

Renato was silent for a moment, pondering. “You go first,” he said. And she did.

She laid out for him all her insecurities, her dissatisfactions with past lovers, her expectations of future dissatisfaction. She told him about her distant father, the way she felt like a stereotype every time she chased a man’s approval, how she had never learned to simply be alone with herself. She told him she would leave it all behind and be reborn through their romance.

“Now you go,” she said.

Renato searched his mind. While reflective by nature, his self-inspection tended to be a passive affair, a search for self-knowledge for its own sake, rarely for application. He knew this in itself was something that had to go, and he told her as much. He also shared the full extent of his loneliness over the past several years. Renato was almost thirty years old and Lara was his first serious relationship. Because of her the loneliness had abated, but it was still there, waiting like a shadow under soft lights. He could not tell her about the specter of his shame, how he believed his long years of isolation to be a justice, that there was something sullied and off-balance within him that others could smell and knew to avoid.

As he spoke, he felt himself withdrawing from her into a half-honesty. Lara's gaze shifted down his face and he sensed her mood cooling. She knows I'm withholding, he thought. But he would not disclose himself further.

He returned to his apartment feeling that he had stalemated things, knowing that something awful had its claws in him.

**He could get no work done on his dissertation that night, only** false starts and dead ends. He would write a brilliant paragraph and lick his lips with excitement, only to realize that it had absolutely nothing to do with his thesis. He was about a fifth finished and his working title was *Awe of the Absurd: Borges, Garcia Marquez, and the Legacy of Existentialism*. Tonight, for the first time, he realized how pretentious that title sounded and beat his fist against the desk.

At one point he got cooking for about forty minutes and kicked out nearly three pages. He lifted his hands from the keyboard, rubbed his eyes and reviewed what he had written:

It is no exaggeration to say that Borges not only esteemed the melancholic Czech, but also found in him an inspiration which surpassed even that of Dante. This, of course, is no small claim. We see in *La Infernos*, the first of Borges' Seven Nights, the renowned lecture series given in Buenos Aires during the week of the week of the week of

the unspeakable the unspeakable the intractable the week of that thing which was done perpetrated exacted to and from you when your cosmic fool of a father took your blessed family to the gold and dusted land of your forebears and left you let alone you a poor babe alone with your uncle on that brown outskirts of Madrid in the gray room of that gray house left you to the foul unknown tastes of of of when he had left gone for sights and romance with mother touched you there in the grayness stole you there in the grayness voided you there held hands behind your back and slid jeans down twelve-year-old thighs placed ruddy laborer's thumb there in the sweet foulness licked salty tears from dirty cheeks stole made corrupt left chaff only chaff dry and salt and fuck and drained of innocence and this this this rips down all a blind white flat-headed worm sightless drinking darkness absorbing the blood the life the the Christ the the

The passage went on like this, folding back on itself, cyclic, inane, engorged with both nonsense and painful truth—a dark, solitary abreaction. Renato rose and walked steadily to the bathroom and began dry heaving over the sink. The image of a man's face sat dark and heavy over his mind. He felt very old. A long-buried self-hatred burned its way to the surface of his consciousness and Renato gripped the porcelain sink hard enough to pop his knuckles. He was breaking apart. Despair like a beast fell upon him.

He dropped to his knees and tried to cry out. But he spoke in a whisper, "*Forgive, forgive, oh. Burn it away.*"

He stood and lumbered his way to his bedroom. He collapsed into his covers and was overcome by a black sleep.

**What dreams he had were dark and fleeting, the shapeless** dreams of a fetus suspended in ether. When he awakened he blinked at the strange yellow light pouring through the window. He was in pain the likes of which he had never thought possible. He tried to move his toes but could not. He exhaled and the meat of his lungs rattled his ribcage. He touched his face and then looked at his hands.

He screamed, but what came out was mere dust and rasping. During sleep he had undergone a transformation. He struggled to prop himself up and look at his twisted body, naked though he knew he had gone to sleep in his clothes. What he saw was monstrous: he was an old man, ancient and rotting. He smelled of dead things and excrement. Renato let out a long moan. Tears ran from his eyes.

Suddenly, he felt an urge to be free of his bedroom and his apartment. He tried to move his legs, but they were useless logs, dead weight. He pushed himself upright and let his own miserable weight tumble him out of bed. His head thudded against the floor and violet lightning struck in his periphery. When he felt his head, he discovered that it had split open and that it was hairless. He began to crawl forward, knowing that something like gelatin was sliding down his face.

He made it to the stairway and began pulling himself down using the rungs of the banister. The carpet tore at the flesh of his belly and he knew it was peeling off and rubbing away. He felt like a skinned rabbit dumped into a salt-bin. At the bottom of the stairs he twisted his neck and saw that he was trailing gore. His carpet was thick with it. One leg had become detached from his hip and lay oozing three steps up. A brackish fluid gurgled from his mouth.

He arrived, miraculously, at his front door. Salvation lay beyond the threshold. He knew this, knew only this. All else was darkness. With all his strength he pushed forward and fumbled at the knob. He grasped it, organs falling out of his open chest, and turned.

The door fell ajar and the apartment was flooded with the crisp light of an October morning.

Renato slid forward over the slickness of his discharged viscera. He collapsed with his head just beyond the threshold, staring at the street, his mouth leering obscenely.

Something twisted in what remained of his chest, pushing itself upward. Soon it was in his neck, thick as a bowling ball and driving hard. It exploded out of his mouth in an excruciating splash of teeth and gums.

And then he was that something. He clawed his way forward,

pushing away at the bloody lips constricted around his chest. Then he was free.

He stood up, naked, hot with youth, covered in black blood and unspeakable fluids, and looked back at the withered mess of old man which sat like a pool of placenta in his doorway. Its mouth was the size of a toilet bowl.

An irrepressible joy filled him, head to foot.

Renato Buendía tore down the street, wanting desperately to embrace someone. It took him ten minutes of sprinting to reach Lara's small, yellow house. He pounded on the front door, unaware that he was dripping afterbirth on the welcome mat. A rustling came from within the white-shuttered window. The venetian blinds were cracked and a green eye stared out at him. Lara opened the door and stared wide-eyed at Renato. He stared right back.

She was stark naked, her body wrapped in the same bloody, gellatinous caul as his own, her long brown hair a dark curtain of mucous, napped and pasted to her back. Her breasts were slick, lidded with film like the eyes of bullfrogs. She reached out and picked a veiny tendril of gore from Renato's shoulder and looked at it before flicking it aside.

He opened his mouth to speak, but she pressed her index finger to his lips and shook her head. Smiling, she pulled him inside and shut the door.

# Unlikely Partners

*What happened with  
Barbara, and with the help  
of a dedicated cop*

**Bobby Neel Adams**

## A San Francisco Tragedy

A sickly sweet smell flicked my nose. I was sitting in a drab green room at the Police Department on Bryant Street in San Francisco. Jesus embellishments adorned the walls, Christian books on the shelf.

“I’ve had many a confession in this room.”

I didn’t know how to respond to this statement or why he’d said it. Instead, I sat passively while he hooked up the bands around my chest, arms, and fingers, each step fueling my deep apprehension.

He began with simple questions—name, shirt color, day of the week.

“Now I am going to ask you three questions that only you will know the answer to and I want you to lie on one of these questions and try to beat the polygraph: Are your mother and father still married?”

“No,” I answered falsely.

“Do you have a pet?”

“Yes.”

“Did you vote in the last election?”

“No.”

Sgt. Doe rewound the polygraph paper and pointed to the first set of graph lines.

“See this? Here you are lying. See how the lines are more jagged than the other questions?”

My palms were sweating.

“Now I want to ask you a few questions before we start the polygraph to get a baseline. Just answer truthfully. Are you a homosexual?”

“No.”

“Are you sure? Many young boys experiment with other boys. Didn’t you experiment?”

“No.” At this point I wasn’t sure what the truth was.

“Was Barbara your girlfriend?”

“Yes. But we were apart for almost one year.”

“Yes or No.”

“Yes.”

“Did you ever do anything to hurt Barbara?”

“What do you mean by hurt? Did I ever physically hurt her?”

“Yes or no. Did you ever do anything to hurt Barbara?”

Of course I had hurt Barbara. I’d said things I’d regretted, but never physically harmed her. How could you go through seven years without hurting someone? I decided to answer the question regarding “hurt” as physical. My hands left a skein of water on the arms of the chair.

“Did you and Barbara have rough sex?”

“What? No!” I took in the Jesus odds and ends. Was this guy a Born Again? What was his definition of rough sex? Was anal sex rough? Biting? Scratching? My heart bucked like a bronco shot full of steroids.

“Now I am going to ask you some questions pertaining to Ms. Martz’s murder: Did you ever hurt Barbara Martz?”

“No,” I answered uncertainly.

“Did you do anything to end Barbara Martz’s life?”

“Never.”

“Yes or no. Did you do anything to end Barbara Martz’s life?”

“No.”

“Did you rape Barbara Martz?”

“No.”

“Did you have sex with Barbara Martz on either December third or fourth, 1985?”

“No.”

“Do you know who murdered Barbara Martz?”

“No.”

It was over. Everything I’d experienced—sweat, pounding heart, tremors—must prove I was lying. I hated this cop.

“Mr. Adams, one of us knows who told the truth in this room.”

“I think we both know.”

*Motherfucker*, I thought.

### **I met Barbara Martz at Goddard College in the mid-Seventies**

when she ran out of a burning wood-fired sauna with only a towel covering her. We stood and watched the sauna burn while the student fire department rolled out the hoses. I fell for her immediately but knew she was out of my league. She was trim, athletic and the tallest woman for miles. Her blonde hair and pale blue eyes were striking and her smile could blind a passing bird. We often ran into each other in the college darkroom and I soon learned that she had a boyfriend ten years older. That sealed it—I didn’t stand a chance. Barb soon left the school and that was that.

After I graduated from college in Vermont I returned to my hometown in Colorado with nothing but a car and a couple of cameras. My high school years had been stifling. I never truly belonged to any group. In my last semester, I took only two required classes and by ten a.m. would be on my bicycle, peddling into the isolation and beauty of the Rocky Mountains. Returning to my parents’ house after college, I hated it even more. For the next seven months I worked on a land-surveying crew, saving every penny I could, treading water until I could get out.

A couple of my college friends had moved to San Francisco and I was determined to join them in September. A week before I left, I saw a For Sale sign on a canary yellow 1955 Cadillac Coupe de Ville. I figured if I bought it I could sell it on the west coast for twice the money. So I handed the old man, the original owner, the \$800 he was asking and felt horrible when I saw him shed a tear as I backed out of his driveway.

A week later, I attached my 1953 Chevy Bel Aire to the Caddy with a tow bar. The Chevy was packed with my worldly possessions and my bicycle was on a rack on the trunk. I had two passengers: Guri, a friend from high school, and Jill, a pretty nurse who’d found

my posting on a ride board at the local college. In our connected convoy we looked like Okies fleeing the dust bowl.

We traveled north to Interstate 80 in Wyoming. I quickly learned how to under-steer to prevent the Chevy from fishtailing. Around Rock Springs I let Guri take the wheel but she was done in two miles and Jill lasted another fifteen. That left all of the driving to me. We dropped Guri in Lodi where I separated the two cars and Jill and I finally crossed the Bay Bridge at sunset after thirty hours of straight driving. Golden light banged off the downtown windows and it truly felt magical. I believed deeply in my heart that I had found my final destination.

**Another old friend of mine, Elliot, was attending the San Francisco Art Institute and informed me that he was Barbara Martz's roommate. Months later, we all met at a North Beach bar and, amazingly, Barb and I spent the entire evening talking non-stop. When the bar closed, she offered me a ride to my flat on the back of her motorcycle. On the way, I directed her to the Marlborough billboard that loomed above the Bay Bridge.**

She parked her bike on the empty street below and followed me into the high weeds. We pulled ourselves up the massive I-beams, reached the steel ladder and started straight up. At the top, there is a long four-foot wide platform below the Marlborough man smoking on his horse. We watched the traffic pour across the bridge and soon began kissing. Our tryst was interrupted five minutes later when a police car rolled up behind her motorcycle. The cop clearly thought the motorcycle was out of place. We watched him circle the bike and walk into the weeds. As we peeked between the boards, I feared we were in for a trespass violation and possibly a trip to the county jail.

"Maybe we should call down and give ourselves up," I whispered.

"No, let's wait," she said, squeezing my hand.

We lay prone on the wooden planks and watched the cop continue his search, writing down the bike's license number on his pad. Finally, he got back in his car but just sat there. After ten minutes,

the engine turned over and he slowly crept up the hill. When his taillights disappeared, we scrambled down the ladder as fast as we could.

That was the first night we spent together and I was spellbound. The following morning, with almost no sleep, Barb took me on her bike to the Angel Island Ferry. After disembarking, we walked up the hill.

“What’s that chattering?” I asked.

“Monkeys.”

“They got monkeys out here?”

Barbara began laughing and I realized I was so punch-drunk that I thought anything was possible.

That’s how it began, and it probably kept going because we were so different.

### **Many might have seen us as an odd couple and I guess in**

some ways we were. In physical stature, Barb was a giant among women and I was a runt among men. In elementary school Barbara was always the tallest kid in her class and didn’t stop growing. In her early teens her parents took her to the family physician for hormone shots to jump-start her period and stop her steady growth.

The first few years of our relationship were the best. We made a Super-8 film together. Went to movies, went camping, went to punk rock shows, explored hot springs, and spent the holidays with each other’s families. At night we rotated between each other’s places and sometimes slept alone.

I was rooming with Elliot in South Park, a one-block neighborhood south of Market. Our absentee landlord was Rudy Serra, brother of the famous sculptor Richard. A big underground punk and art scene was in full stride. You could do anything you wanted and cops never ventured into our predominately black neighborhood. Around 1980, Barbara and I, and Ira, a friend from school, decided to open—on a wing and a prayer—a photo studio in the area.

Barbara lived in a warehouse on Folsom Street two doors down from our little studio above a small metal shop. This part of Folsom

was light industry during the day and morphed into a Mecca for gay S&M at night. Bathhouses and sex clubs were more prevalent than churches and restaurants combined. Barb was completely happy there as she was invisible to the leather boys. I, however, was a walking piece of meat.

That is until the plague hit. And it hit like a tsunami. My bartender at the local Hotel Utah was at work one night and five days later he was dead and no one who frequented the bar had even an inkling he was sick.

**Early in our relationship, Barb and I planned a vacation to Mexico to visit her grandmother, Martha, in San Miguel Miguel de Allende.** Because of her schedule Barb went two days earlier than I and met me at the airport. Mexicana Airlines lost my bag and we had to spend an hour filling out paperwork. Finally we made our way to the super new subway to take a trip to our B&B. It being rush hour, more and more people crammed onto the already overcrowded train car and Barbara and I became separated. After several stops, a young Mexican kid pressed himself into Barbara front to front. I saw Barb trying to push her forearm between her breasts and his face. To my horror he began dry humping her, and my attempts to push through the crowd were nearly useless. Two four-foot-tall Indian sisters saw what was going on and began beating the young man off her with their purses while cursing at him in Spanish. Barb nodded towards the door and when it opened up we made it through the shifting crowd. We spent only two days in the city and on the third day went to the bus station for our trip to San Miguel.

My first night at Martha's house was horrible. I sweated my way through, spending most of my time on the toilet until I was shitting clear water. Barb mopped my forehead through the night and, the next day, Martha sent her maid to the pharmacy for medicine that cleared me up within twelve hours.

Several days later we borrowed Martha's car and got on the highway to Guanajuato. We rounded a corner and saw a strange

sight of about a hundred children in a field surrounding an elephant and a giraffe. I pulled the car to the side of the road and we joined the children with our cameras. After a bit I noticed that all of the small girls had separated from the group and were trailing after Barbara like a kite's tail.

Later we visited the Museo de las Momias de Guanajuato. The mummies were on display in tall antique cases and Barbara discovered that none were locked.

These mummies were not what they seemed. On closer inspection we could see that the men were wearing polyester suits.

My bag never showed. I wore blue jeans and my Toshiro Mifune Samurai T-shirt the entire time we were in Mexico.

**Barbara was very athletic. Her family skied, rode bikes, and sailed.** She missed being on the water and began scouring the local want ads looking for a sailboat. Finally she found a two-person catamaran with a trailer. We picked her up and backed her down the Mission Rock Road public ramp into the Bay. I was worthless as a crewmember and Barb got the sails up by herself. The tide was coming in and the winds were blowing out, but the boat was such a dud we got sucked south towards Hunter's Point, another sketchy neighborhood. At some point we gave into defeat and dragged the boat up the ruffraff near a defunct power plant. I didn't like the idea of leaving Barb out there alone but Barb didn't like the idea of leaving the boat unattended. So she decided to stay and I hiked back and got the car and trailer. It was a bad day for Barbara as she hated being beaten by anything life might present.

**Four years into our partnership, Barb announced that she was** going to Peru to help make a documentary in the Amazon jungle with another woman. She was gone for three months, and I only had one postcard from her written shortly after she arrived. During this time Braniff Airways, her carrier, went belly up.

I had no idea what was going on until I received a collect call.

She'd made it to Texas and wanted me to drive to SFO and pay for her flight on to San Francisco. When I picked her up at the airport she was two-sticks for legs, having lost twenty pounds. Barb seemed very happy with her super-thin figure, but seeing her hipbones bulging above her panties put me off.

Two nights later she was throwing up in bed. The next day she was throwing up water—water she couldn't keep down. She refused to let me take her to the hospital, claiming she had the flu. After three days she was delirious. I disregarded her protests, got her in the car and took her to the health clinic several blocks away. The doctor took one look at her and off we went to San Francisco General where Barbara became an instant celebrity as none of the interns had seen a malaria patient before.

**For four years, things had been great. There was no jealousy** and much support, but the tensions of running a business together while being romantic partners began to put a strain on our relationship. Little problems exploded into big ones. The pressure to make money and grow our business was constant. We both needed room to breathe and the oxygen in our small studio evaporated quickly.

Around this time another photographer, Cindy, asked us if we wanted to move into this massive studio on Sixth Street. The neighborhood was a shithole and dangerous. The residents, many homeless, were a mixture of the mentally ill, crackheads, and alcoholics and often all three. Next door was a 'Glory Hole' that placed a placard on the sidewalk advertising: *Rimming Wednesdays, Corn Hole Thursdays, and Fisting Fridays*. Since crystal meth and amyl nitrate were readily available on the premises, the place was subject to police raids. Sexual activity was not the issue.

Within a five-square-block area, there were more than ten bathhouses, a city VD clinic, and nearly every other bar catered to the S&M scene. It was like living in a Fellini movie, and we were very guarded in our movements going in and out and never told anyone what was behind our doors.

To escape the chaos on Memorial weekend, Barb and I drove to Orr Hot Springs in the mountains between Ukiah and Mendocino. It was obvious that Barbara was the most beautiful woman at the springs as I could see in the eyes of some of the men who wondered what the hell she was doing with me. I often had the same thoughts myself—‘why did she choose me?’ Still, it was a relaxing weekend and nature kept us from bickering, but the trip back was absolute hell. Twenty miles out of San Francisco, traffic was nearly at a standstill. With no a/c, the car was hot and I began shifting lane to lane whenever I saw a break. This drove Barb crazy, rightfully. When we crawled across the Golden Gate Bridge into more traffic through Fisherman’s Wharf, my frustration escalated as Barb harped at me. At a stoplight I jumped out of the driver’s side door, yelling, “you drive!” Barb scooted over the gearshift, locked the doors, then sped off when the light turned green.

It wasn’t a joke. She didn’t look back. The bad part was that she had all my keys and my wallet. It took me over an hour to walk to Folsom Street. When someone opened the side door to her building I scooted in. I pounded on her door. When she answered, I icily said, “Give me my fucking keys.”

Barbara was one of the most complicated women I have ever known—at times a complete contradiction. She was very generous and loving but could explode at the smallest perceived slight. I had a hard time tiptoeing around her because her temper could flair so unexpectedly.

After seeing a couples counselor for four months, we finally agreed it best to stop seeing each other as a couple and limit our relationship to the studio. This took some pressure off for me, but Barbara had a difficult time adjusting.

This arrangement continued for almost a year until my birthday rolled around and Barb threw a surprise party for me. We ended up spending the night together and Barbara proposed getting out of our business partnership to restart our relationship. We proceeded carefully, and Barbara began working as an assistant for other photographers.

One thing certainly changed: we began treating each other with much more respect and once again I enjoyed her company.

With her father's help, Barbara bought a house on the backside of Potrero Hill just below the Terrace, a massive public housing project. Her house was set back off the street with a huge hedge that blocked it from view. Between the house and hedge was a beautiful garden with a fountain in the middle. Barb asked me to move in, but I felt it was too soon to consider that. So Barb brought in a roommate, Mindy.

**The weekend before Barb's death we made our last trip to Orr Springs.** There were very few visitors and it was one of the most romantic weekends we ever spent together. Two days after our return, Barbara offered to make supper if I would come over and help her retille her bathroom. After work, I went home, called her number and got the machine. I asked her to let me know when she got home. I turned on the news and after a half-hour wondered why she hadn't called. I called again and this time got a busy signal. I cursed the fact that she refused to get call waiting.

After a third call, the busy signal convinced me she was home. I got on my motorcycle and pulled onto I-280. Arriving, I parked in the driveway and thought it strange that the gate was swinging on its hinges. Stranger still, the front door was wide open. Walking into a flood of TV static, I called Barb's name. That's when I saw her, naked on the floor in a pool of blood, and the phone off its cradle near her body.

Her eyes were open, staring at nothing. Her face was warm to my touch. It was confusing. I knew she was dead, but maybe . . . I put the receiver on the hook then lifted it to get a dial tone and called 911. After I hung up, I called Ira my business partner and told him Barb had been killed. Shaking, I knelt into a pool of blood, kissed her goodbye, and walked out of the house into a drizzle of rain.

I knocked on the door of the neighbor's house and asked the old man if he'd heard anything. He'd heard nothing. Ira and a friend arrived quickly—ten minutes before the first patrol car. I refused to let

Ira go into the house.

Cops appeared and each asked me the same questions over and over while camera flashes lit up the house. Finally two homicide detectives – Jeff Bosch and Ed Erdalatz—took me to the main police station on Bryant Street and the questions began all over, but with a tape recorder.

**I didn't know what survivor's guilt was until I got it. Why the fuck hadn't I gone straight to Barbara's house as soon as I got the busy signal? Would I have gotten there in time? Would I be dead as well? These thoughts took over my mind, skipping like stones over water until I was exhausted. The worst days, my mind drifted into a black movie where I imagined the horrible violence that took place: a vicious rape ending with a knife plunged multiple times into her naked body. Her screams filled my day and nighttime dreams. These images were horribly powerful and couldn't be turned off. Running water sent me into fits of tears.**

I would have traded places with Barbara in a minute. She deserved life so much more than I. But part of me was angry with her for leaving me with this poisonous black weight. And thinking these thoughts disgusted me. My life had been hijacked by utter chaos.

The first year after her death I was on autopilot. A couple of times while riding my motorcycle up the I-280 ramp high above the ground I would suddenly have the impulse to

let my bike drift into the right barrier to launch myself into oblivion. I could commit suicide and it would be labeled an accidental death.

**On December 16, 1985, a week and a half after Barbara's murder,** I impulsively walked into the Second Street Gun Shop. I had never personally experienced extreme violence in my life and my innocence was now shattered.

I stared into the glass case.

“Can I help you?”

“I’d like to buy a gun.”

“What kind?”

“A pistol.”

“Revolver?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Well you have two choices, either a revolver or a semi-auto. A semi needs to be maintained, a spring feeds the shell into the chamber. If you are not using the gun often, the spring can become weak and cause the gun to jam. A revolver can misfire but it won’t jam.”

“Show me a revolver.”

“What caliber?”

“Something bigger than a .22 but nothing huge.”

“Do you want a gun that will fit in your pocket?”

“Um ... yea.”

“This is a Smith and Wesson Snub-nose .38, it has a two-and-one-half-inch barrel. Fairly accurate if you are sharing an elevator with a bad guy.”

I held the gun in my hand. It was flat black with a matching grip and looked exactly like every pistol I’d ever seen in a 1950s gangster movie.

I made a vow to myself that if anyone ever attempted to assault one of my friends and the gun was handy, I’d shoot the aggressor in the kneecap or the head, depending on the circumstance.

**I suppose that I had some mild form of PTSD that first year. I**

had a head of cotton and remember very little of it. Thankfully, I had excellent friends who kept close. And maybe not so strangely I had so-called friends that couldn’t deal with it and avoided contact. One day I ran into my neighbor, Bruce, on Third Street and he asked if the cops had a suspect. When I replied that they didn’t, he said that if they figured out who murdered Barb he would help me ‘kill the bastard.’ This was one of the most truthful acts of kindness that happened because I knew Bruce meant it.

One day the phone at the studio rang and the caller asked for

Barbara Martz. These types of calls happened semi-frequently during the first few months after her death and they were terribly uncomfortable.

“She’s no longer here,” I told the man.

“Do you have a forwarding phone number?”

“Who’s calling?”

He stated his name and that he was from the California Victims of Violent Crimes unit. Six months before, Barbara had been robbed and assaulted in the alleyway next to our studio. Barbara hit the thief and broke several bones in her hand. The police put her in touch with the Victim’s Program to help pay her medical bills. I told the caller she was dead—murdered.

There was a long silence. “Oh, my God,” he replied. Eventually, I told him she was my girlfriend and business partner and that I had discovered her body. He asked if I had been seeing a therapist? When I said I couldn’t afford one, he told me that I would be eligible for the Victim’s Program and he would mail me the paperwork.

I found a therapist and asked the agent from the program to call her and confirm that they would pay for my visits. After three months of weekly visits, the agent called to inform me that my claim was denied because I was not at the scene during the commission of the crime. At this point I owed the therapist \$1000 and didn’t have a cent in my account. I started to freak out, and the agent tried to calm me and said that we could appeal the decision and that I should continue therapy. The nearest hearing date in San Francisco was four months away but if I made the trip to Sacramento, I could attend a hearing in one month. I opted for the latter.

The day of the hearing I headed north on my motorcycle. Half-way there I realized I was running late, so I started speeding and was soon pulled over and ticketed by the police, making me twenty minutes late.

I sat at the rear of the room and watched as other cases were heard, all with some type of counsel. My case was called last. The panel of doctors and health professionals asked if I had my representative

present. I told them I didn't. They conferred and I slowly realized that my agent must have been terminated. With no questioning, I was told for the second time that they would not pay for my therapy because I had not been at the scene during the commission of the crime.

I stuttered, "Your employee made a contract with both my therapist and myself by confirming that the Victims of Violent Crime Program would pay for therapy, and now you've broken this contract. It's that simple. Whether I met the requirements or not is irrelevant."

"We're sorry, sir, we don't have the power to alter these requirements."

Realizing this was a losing battle and that I was about to burst into tears, I let them have it: "I found my girlfriend naked and dead in a pool of blood, you fucking bastards. Go fuck yourselves!" Then I spun and ran out of the room. I was officially a victim of the Victims of Violent Crime Program.

After that I decided to stop therapy because I usually felt shittier than I did before I went in. My Aikido class was more therapeutic and provided the few moments where my mind was relieved from the constant static of death.

Apparently, some of the panel members were upset about the decision because they reversed themselves at the next meeting and paid off my therapist.

**Barbara would sometimes come to me in my dreams. Like most** dreams they did not follow a rational arc. In an early dream we were together and she looked absolutely fine. I told her I was sorry for not being with her and I also asked who had raped and killed her. She showed me the guy. He was suddenly there; I could see him. It wasn't necessarily a bad dream although when I left my flat in the morning his was the first face I saw and it scared the shit out of me. It spooked me so much I went straight over to the homicide department and told the cops Bosch and Erdalatz about my dream. By the looks on their faces, I knew they didn't know how to respond and immediately I felt embarrassed. I was officially losing it. And then, to dig my hole

deeper, I asked them if they ever worked with a psychic. They were kind enough to humor me and answered no. What was happening to me? I didn't believe in psychics. I felt like someone had shoved me off the Golden Gate Bridge and after bursting into the bay, I had no idea where up was. Most days I just treaded water.

Another dream that reoccurred over the last thirty years went like this: I would see Barbara from a distance, and I would track her down. When we finally met face to face she would have a very strained smile that kept me at a distance. I had to work hard to pry out of her what had happened. She always looked exactly as I knew her at twenty seven years old. Finally, she would let me know that she had been revived at the hospital and then her parents took her away to recover and made sure that she never returned or contacted me because they blamed me for what happened. It was obvious that Barb was a different person and had no feeling for me. In several of these dreams, I broke through after much persistence and we became a couple again. Some of these dreams ended with lovemaking. It would be devastating when I woke up and discovered it was only a dream and I was alone. I could never flush this dream away; it had power and kept me connected to her.

### **A Cold Hit, and Pigeon Shit**

In August 2003, I received a voicemail asking me to call Inspector Jim Spillane at a number with a 415 area code. Apprehensive, I called back the next day.

“Detective Spillane,” said a quick, dry voice.

“Bobby Adams returning your call.”

“Mr. Adams did you ever live in San Francisco?” he asked in a monotone.

“Yes, until 1996.”

“And did you have a relationship with Barbara Martz.”

“Yes ... what's going on?”

“Sir, we have a Cold Hit. DNA evidence taken from Ms. Martz's

rape kit has been matched to an incarcerated individual.”

“Good God, that’s a miracle. Who?”

“Sorry, I’m not at liberty to give you any details until he is charged and we are working hard to do just that. Mr. Adams, we would like to fly you to San Francisco for an interview. Would you be willing to do this?”

**When I arrived in San Francisco, I met Lt. Jim Spillane who was slightly taller than my 5’6”.** He had short black hair neatly parted on the side and the prescribed cop’s mustache. Wearing a suit, he looked more like a car salesman than a cop. He led me to the exact room where I had been interviewed eighteen years before and asked me to go through the days prior to Barbara’s death and my subsequent arrival at her house. The interview lasted two hours and the questions took me back to that first interview. When Lt. Spillane asked me to take a polygraph. My stomach dropped.

“I took a polygraph a month after the murder,” I sputtered.

“What’s going on? Don’t you have it? Wait ... you’re not looking at me?”

“This is something that the DA’s office requested. They want to make sure that you are not connected to Barbara’s murder.”

This did not quiet my fears. “The day I took a polygraph was the second worst day of my life. The examiner asked me very personal questions that had nothing to do with the case.”

Lt. Spillane was unreadable. I had no idea where his sympathies fell. Was he friend or foe? I submitted reluctantly and, fortunately, the officer sent down from Sacramento to give me the polygraph was a decent guy.

“I overheard your conversation with the detectives and understand you had problems with some of the questioning during the first polygraph. Can you tell me what bothered you about the questions?”

“While I was hooked up to the machine the cop asked me very personal questions. Did Barbara and I have rough sex? Was I gay? And ambiguous questions like, did I ever hurt Barbara.”

“Got it. I will ask you a handful of yes/no questions and they

will be limited to this case only. I want to apologize. I was surprised they popped this polygraph request on you three minutes ago. I assumed you knew before coming to California that this was on the table. Don't worry. If anything comes up that bothers you I will turn off the machine and we'll discuss it."

"O.K. hook me up. I want to get out of here."

At one point, when I answered *definitely not*, he reminded me to say yes or no. I assume I passed the polygraph, although no one ever told me the results of either test.

**The cold hit would never have happened if it weren't for Tom Buckley and James Spillane.** Tom was the officer in charge of the evidence room. In the early 2000s, the San Francisco Police Department finished construction of its new crime lab. Tom's job was to help design the lab and develop methods for transferring and storing evidence without tainting or losing any. In appreciation for his hard work, Tom was asked to pick the first two cold cases with DNA evidence to run through the lab. He consulted with his friend, Jim, now working in Homicide, and although neither of them had worked on Barbara's case, they both remembered it. They knew that she was a twenty-seven-year-old woman on Potrero Hill, and that her death was brutal and unsolved. This evidence went to the lab.

When the Crime Lab matched DNA to the evidence in Barbara's file, San Francisco had its first cold hit.

**I returned to New York, barely noticing as time inched forward.** Months later, the *San Francisco Chronicle* broke the news that DNA evidence linked a John Davis to the murder of Barbara Martz. My phone rang.

"Bobby, this is Assistant District Attorney James Hammer, I will be working for the City of San Francisco to try John Davis."

"Hammer? Spillane? What's up with the names?"

He laughed, then arranged for me to fly to San Francisco again.

The day after I arrived, Lt. Spillane and I met to have lunch. At

11:30 a.m. I hopped in the front seat of a SFPD cruiser.

“Would you mind if I drove by Barbara’s house before we have lunch?”

“Oh God. I haven’t been there in years.”

We drove in through the Potrero Terrace projects and down the hill on 25th Street. Lt. Spillane walked me into a building under construction above Barbara’s house, flashing his badge at several laborers. We continued through the labyrinth of open framing to the rear of the building.

“That’s Barbara’s back yard. I think it’s possible the perp came in through a window at the rear of the house.” Lt. Spillane pointed.

Several weeks before she was killed, Barb had called me, worried that someone was in her back yard. It was unlike Barb to get spooked by anything so I drove up and spent the night.

We left the neighborhood and drove to Bernal Heights, the next hill west. For the first time, Jim (as I now called him) and I began talking about our lives, not the murder case.

Jim’s dad, after serving in the navy, became a San Francisco police officer in 1948. His uncle was an inspector for the department’s juvenile division. Both had shot and killed gun-wielding suspects in the line of duty. Jim entered the police academy appreciating the reality of police work, believing that the good he could do would offset the possibility of taking a human life. Although he spent over twenty years policing tough areas and had pulled his gun on several occasions, he never fired it.

**The Grand Jury convened in an open room unlike a courtroom.**

The jury occupied chairs scattered about the room. I sat facing them. ADA Jim Hammer asked me to describe my relationship to Barbara. Next, he asked me questions about the evening I found Barbara dead. When I said that she had been stabbed to death, Hammer stopped me saying, “strike that,” and asked me to describe Barbara as I found her. I told the jurors that she was nude, in a fetal position, surrounded by a pool of blood, and that a number of bloody holes

covered her neck and torso.

Later that day the jury voted to indict Davis on three counts: burglary, rape and murder.

**I know so little about John Davis. I know that he was eighteen** years old when Barbara was raped and murdered and, decades later, the semen he left behind finally caught up to him. In the public records at the San Francisco courthouse, I did find one mention of a John Davis convicted of a felony assault and burglary on Potrero Hill.

The *San Francisco Chronicle* reported: “Davis already is doing time for a string of crimes, including a 1993 robbery in San Francisco and an attack in prison in 2001 that landed him in Pelican Bay, one of the state’s highest-security lock-ups. Before being charged with Martz’s killing, he had been scheduled to get out of prison by 2008.”

John Davis lived only blocks from Barbara’s house with his mother and half-brothers. Barbara’s purse and credit cards had been found in a project basement, halfway between Davis’ residence and Barbara’s home.

I had always suspected that Barb’s murderer was a person she did not know—a predator who acted after weeks of observing a single woman, an easy target, before some huge malfunction in his brain caused him to snap and pounce.

**The case wouldn’t come to trial for two years. During that time,** Gabriel Bassan, John Davis’ attorney, made motion after motion to delay and was successful. Kamala Harris became the new DA, Hammer left the department, and the case was assigned to Claudia Phillips, an attorney drafted from Sex Crimes. This was her first murder trial.

Bassan saw his opening and asked the court for a speedy trial. Davis had to be tried within sixty days, giving Phillips very little time to prepare.

Jim had called periodically to update me as the case crawled toward trial. In all those phone calls, I’d developed great respect for this uncommon cop.

**Twenty-two years after Barbara's murder, I took a hiatus from** my artist residency in New Hampshire and boarded an airplane for San Francisco. Upon landing, my cell phone came on ringing.

"Bobby, it's Jim, are you on the ground?"

"What are you, psychic? I'm on the tarmac."

"Where are you staying?"

"My friend Christine's house on Potrero Hill"

"What's the address, I'll meet you there in two hours."

I picked up a rental car and drove to Potrero Hill. Christine met me at the door with a hug and a kiss. I told her that Lt. Spillane was coming soon to meet me. Christine was concerned when he showed up in his blues. What would the neighbors think?

"What's with the uniform, Jim?" I asked. He mumbled something about a funeral.

As the fog rolled in, we sat on the porch overlooking San Francisco Bay. Two fifty-something guys watching Oakland turn into a mountain of cotton.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes and no. For many years, I gave into the fact that it would take a miraculous confession for this day to come. Then I stopped believing in miracles until you came along and fucked it all up. I feel blessed this scumbag will finally have his day in court. But I'm not looking forward to testifying. I can't open my mouth with more than three people in the room unless I've known them for over twenty years."

"I have a similar problem so I took a public speaking class just to be able to testify in court. There are tricks. Just focus your eyes right above the jurors' heads. Or, if you want, look at Claudia. Remember she's got your back. That's her job."

"I'll try."

"Listen, I've got to get home for dinner, but tomorrow I'm taking you to La Cumbre for lunch. You can't possibly be eating real Mexican food in New York."

"Right."

**Jim showed up the next day in a white sedan, wearing jeans**

and an untucked plaid shirt that partially hid his gun.

“Where’d you get this piece of junk?” I asked him.

“It’s from the motor pool. Probably some confiscated, low-level dealer’s heap.”

We drove to La Cumbre, a staple in the Mission District. After circling the block, Jim parked in a No-Parking zone on 16th Street. We ordered burritos and made our way to a booth.

“My life is changing buddy; my kids are nearly adults and leaving for college. Soon, it’s going to be just Paula and me. I’m not sure if I can adapt to all the silence.”

“Maybe you’re the last in a line of cops.”

“Could be. I’ll never do another homicide case. Homicide moves like molasses. It’s tedious. I’m quitting after Barb’s case. Moving back to the streets.”

“What? Why?”

“Every day is a new day on the streets. You never know what’s going to happen. You find a bad guy, catch him, book him, and get back to the streets and do it again. Look how long this has taken. That S.O.B. prosecutor threw brick after brick onto the road. It’s not for me. I just don’t feel productive.”

“Well, I guess I’m lucky I got you before you moved on.”

“Even if I leave homicide, this is my case. I’m not gone until Davis is locked up for life.”

I handed him a napkin. “You’ve got sour cream on your mustache.”

“That’s what it’s for.”

“Let me ask you something. Why do ninety percent of you cops have mustaches?”

“Well . . . I guess because only ten percent of the force is women.”

We returned to a car covered in pigeon shit, under phone lines on which a festival of pigeons stood shoulder to shoulder.

“Is this the fine for parking a cop car illegally?”

“If it is, I’ve not seen it in my book.”

On our way to the City Hall, Jim spotted a by-hand car wash

that two women were running in a gas station parking lot to raise money for an Aids organization.

“Sorry about the car, girls.”

“It’s okay. We’ve got gloves.”

“Bobby, see that bar across the street? That’s where I caught my first homicide. Two drunks got into an argument and took it out to the street. One guy pulls a gun and attempts to shoot the other one. He misses but manages to hit an eighteen-year-old boy between the eyes while he was filling up his car. Poor guy was on the way to his birthday party.”

“That’s horrible.”

The day was overcast and drizzly. Something softly plopped on my head. I put my hand on my hair, drawing it away when I realized.

“Shit, Jim, I’ve been shit on.” Turning to the girls, “can I borrow your hose?”

I bowed my head to douse it with water.

“Give it to me,” said Jim, taking the hose from my hand.

*Good God, I’ve got a cop washing my hair.* I didn’t know anyone else who could make this claim, possibly no one in the whole wide world. When Jim finished, I gave the hose back and the girls rinsed the soapy shit off the sedan.

“Shall we dry it?” they asked.

“No need, you’ve done plenty. Thanks, girls,” Jim said, passing them a twenty for a ten-dollar wash.

As Jim turned right on 14th Street, we confronted a fat pigeon waddling across the road. He swerved at the last second to miss the bird.

“Missed him, Jim. Your aim’s off.”

“Naw, I just granted him a reprieve. He probably wasn’t even connected to those 16th street gangsters.” His mind drifted, then came back in focus.

“Hey, Bobby, back in the ’80s when I was a beat cop, there was a liquor store on the corner of Divisadero and Fillmore Street on the ground floor of an empty purple Victorian. Some guys broke into the second story and cut a hole in the floor to the liquor store below.

They walked out with as many bottles as they could carry. At our nightshift briefing, the Captain asked us to keep an eye on the place in case the thieves returned.

“My partner and I were on patrol when the dispatcher sent us to the address. When we got there, I asked my partner to wait on the street. The top floors had no electricity so I pulled my flashlight, leaving it unlit, and tiptoed up the stairs.”

“You didn’t fall down the hole?”

“No, I had a plan. I knew where the hole was and I waited until I got to it before lighting it up. I wanted the element of surprise.”

“What happened?”

“I found the hole, turned on my Mag-light and a flock of startled pigeons flew out spewing diarrhea. I was covered.”

“Oh Jesus, man. Did you catch the thieves?”

“Hell no! I drove home and took a shower.”

Jim dropped me at the Bryant Street Court House and told me to call him after my meeting with ADA Claudia Phillips.

Claudia outlined how she thought the trial would go and we went through some of the questions I might be asked. I was very nervous, having never even attended a trial. Claudia advised me to be honest and straightforward.

**Jim was waiting for me on the courthouse steps. He flashed his badge at security and we bypassed the metal detector. My fantasy of getting a gun into the courtroom could have been realized with his free pass. In the hall outside the court, Jim showed me a bench where I could wait until the bailiff called. Instead, I paced and took trip after trip to the toilet. The longer I spent waiting, the more nervous I became. After an hour, my name was called.**

Entering the courtroom, I saw John Davis in the flesh. He was huge. The back of his head shone like a polished bowling ball stacked on top of a white turtleneck sweater. My heart broke to realize that this motherfucker was the beast that gave Barbara her send off.

I was sworn in and Claudia asked me questions. Halfway into

my testimony, Jim started motioning to me to be broader. I was blowing it. It was theater and I was no actor.

Davis sat like a desert tortoise, rarely looking up from his chair and never at the jury. He'd been well coached.

Claudia introduced the crime scene photos, asking me to describe each one. I'd seen most of these photos but evidently not all of them. The last one was so gruesome it cut me to the bone. I choked, trying to describe it. Sensing my implosion, the Judge interrupted, "It is now 11:30 a.m. I suggest we break for lunch."

Claudia stayed at the courthouse to work on her presentation while Jim, Elsa – Barbara's mother—and I walked to the Flower Market for lunch.

"Jim, I'm blowing it, aren't I?"

"Nothing's been said that shouldn't have been said, but you need to expand your answers. Paint a picture. Let the jury know what you saw and how you felt when you saw it."

When we returned to court, the Public Defender, Gabriel Bas-san, had his turn with me.

"In 1985 you said this when interviewed by Inspectors Bausch and Erdalatz. Please read to the court the underlined section."

"I arrived at Barbara's house around 8:30 p.m."

"And then your 2003 statement: please read this section."

"I arrived at Barbara's house around 7:30."

"This is a one hour gap. Which statement is true? The one from 1985 or the one from 2003?"

"Most likely 1985. Why don't you check the Police Report?" I saw a tiny smile cross Jim's face.

**Before I left San Francisco for the final time, I met Jim and his daughter Allison at The Ramp, a restaurant overlooking the Bay. There was one table left on the deck. We ordered our food and began talking about the trial. Ten minutes later, I looked over Jim's shoulder and saw the letters RUB on a sailboat and then leaned to the left and saw a Y.**

“Jim, you’re not going to believe this but that sailboat, behind you, the *Ruby*, is the boat that took us out to scatter Barbara’s ashes into the bay.”

I jumped up and walked down the ramp, Jim and Alison trailing behind me. There was a man on board with white hair.

“Did you own this boat in 1985?” I asked.

“I built this boat thirty-five years ago.”

“In 1985 you took myself, friends, and family out underneath the Golden Gate Bridge to scatter my girlfriend Barbara Martz’s ashes.”

“I remember her. She lived on 25th Street.”

“Right.”

“She had a studio on Sixth Street, right?”

“Yes, she was my partner.”

“I remember you. If I remember correctly, she also planned a surprise birthday for you on the *Ruby*.”

“Wow, you have a great memory. Bobby,” I said extending my hand.

“Josh,” he replied.

I glanced back at Jim and he was shaking his head in wonder.

“You are not going to believe this but we’ve been attending the trial of the guy accused of murdering Barbara.”

“I thought that was long ago cold.”

“This is Lt. Jim Spillane, the cop that busted the case in 2002,” I said, putting my hand on Jim’s shoulder.

I began to experience a strange tingling on the back of my neck so decided to leave them to talk. “I’m going back up.”

When he got back to the table Jim stated, “This is an omen. I declare this an omen.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“It’s an omen, there is no question about it. Barbara just sent us a message.”

**My testimony complete, I returned to New Hampshire where I could work without the outside world marching in. Several days**

later, Jim called to tell me that the jury had been sent out to deliberate. The days ticked by while I waited to receive the verdict call. To survive, I immersed myself in my work. After five of the longest days of my life, I rode my motorcycle to a rental lab in Boston. I worked all that day and into the next, printing, before heading back to Peterborough. With forty miles to go, my gas warning light came on, so I pulled into a filling station. Seconds later my phone rang. Jim's name appeared on my screen.

"HE'S GUILTY, BOBBY! HE'S GUILTY. GUILTY. GUILTY. HE'LL BE GONE FOR LIFE." No "Hello"—just "*He's guilty.*"

"Jim, I was super worried the verdict was taking way too long and tried to convince myself that this was normal."

"It was taking too long! Claudia thought they would come back in a few hours but after two days we knew there was a problem."

"What happened?"

"The foreman told us that there was one holdout, a single woman who would be

Barbara's age if she were still alive."

"You're kidding me, the one juror that had the most in common with Barb held out? That's bizarre."

"It's a strange phenomenon. Statistically, middle-aged women have trouble making big decisions they believe will alter a person's life forever. They don't want that responsibility hanging on their backs."

"But what about Barb's life? Couldn't the juror see that Davis was the animal that altered her life permanently?"

"I hear you ... The real world doesn't always work the way we think it should. Luckily, the foreman was on point. He methodically called for transcripts and evidence to be brought into the jury room to show her that she'd either misunderstood or simply had it wrong. Finally, he won her over."

"Amazing. Thank God for that foreman."

"Bobby, I didn't want to tell you this until after the trial, but in some cultures, being shit on the head by a bird, specifically a pigeon, is a good luck omen."

“No man. Good luck is meeting a cop willing to wash the shit out of your hair! I love you, Jim. Without you, I would have gone to my deathbed never knowing.”

“I love you, too Bobby. Be well my friend.”

***It was over. The worst part of the ordeal was the years of*** waiting for the trial to occur. I thought about it constantly with gnawing anticipation. But once the trial ended and John Davis was sent away for life I felt nothing. Of course, I hated the man for brutally killing someone I loved but all I had left when the trial ended was the gaping hole of nothingness, something I'd lived with for over twenty-one years. The trial changed nothing. John Davis denied everything. He is a shell of nothingness. I wished that he could face up to his crimes and explain to me and Barb's family why he chose to take the life of someone he didn't know, who'd never harmed him or anyone else for that matter.

The one brilliant thing this experience gave me was a beautiful friendship with a man that put in years of his life bringing this cold, cold case to what *he* calls *justice*. On multiple occasions, Jim has told me that he would meet Barbara up in heaven. I never had the heart to tell him I didn't think that was possible.

These days we end our conversations with: 'I love you, Jim' and 'I love you, Bobby.'

*I love you, Barbara.*

# Real People Live in Cities

**Mike Corrao**

**A countryman walked out of his house and wound up in a desert.**

It was inevitable that it'd happen sometime or another. He wasn't prepared so he wore a flannel and bare feet. The sand burned his soles until they bubbled and popped. He drank out of cacti and wore the leftovers as sunhats. Every time he saw a camel, it was a mirage.

The countryman walked down south because the direction was familiar. He realized that the desert was everywhere and thought it'd be best to take a better grasp of it. He built a shop out of mirages where he sold other mirages to strangers—who themselves were likely mirages.

The business went on for years and years. Someone might walk in and he'd say, "How do you do?" and then they would silently point to what they wanted. He would grab it and they paid him. Returning customers weren't real because he wouldn't return home.

He slept on the sand and when he woke he was covered in the popped bubbles of his skin. By the time a decade rolled around he lost his flannel. When a real person finally stumbled across him, he was naked and scarred. His body was curled up. The real person prodded him with their foot. He opened up and said: "A naked person is a poem."

The real person nodded and set a small potted cactus next to the countryman. He sat up, tore it open, drank its water, and wore the top as a cap. "A naked person is a poem," he repeated to himself. "I'm not sure what a poem was before I showed up around here, but that's what I think it is now." The real person patted his head and walked away, taking the remains of the potted plant with them. Porcelain chips dripped as they walked away.

"Where do I go, where do I go, where do I go from here," the countryman whispered to himself, looking around the desert and its dunes. Wind quickly pulled the sand across the landscape, covering the pot shards. The countryman lay back down and took breaths in

as they came to him and when they stopped coming, he let things  
fade away.



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Bruce Tulgan and Debby Applegate

Maureen Auger

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Frank Bruckmann and Muffy Pendergast

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Gloria Cohen

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**Bobby Neel Adams** is a photographer presently residing in Arizona on the Mexico border. He has exhibited worldwide and his photographs are in the collections of: International Center for Photography, NY, Houston Museum of Fine Arts, Station Museum, diRosa Foundation, and the Norton Family Foundation to name a few. Adams has received grants and awards from the Aaron Siskind Foundation, LEF Foundation, MacDowell Art Colony, and the Hermitage. His book *Broken Wings* was published by the Greenville Museum in 1997. Adams is currently working on a series of memento mori photographs of insects, birds, and mammals.

**Hannah Allen** earned her undergraduate degree in philosophy and German at Wellesley College. She is currently pursuing her MFA in poetry at the University of Arkansas where she is the 2018-2019 recipient of the Walton Family Fellowship in Fiction. Her poetry can be found in *Hobart*, *Fifth Wednesday Journal*, and the *Hawai'i Pacific Review*.

**Mike Corrao** is a young writer working out of Minneapolis. His work has been featured in publications such as *Entropy*, *decomp*, *Cleaver*, and *Fanzine*. His first novel, *Man, Oh Man*, was released in the fall of 2018 by Orson's Publishing.

**Michael Coughlin** is a lawyer living in the Chicago suburbs. He has a dog, Samson, and now understands why artists dislike writing blurbs about themselves.

**Rebecca Ruth Gould** is a writer, translator, and scholar whose books include *Writers and Rebels: The Literatures of Insurgency in the Caucasus*, *After Tomorrow the Days Disappear: Ghazals and Other Poems of Hasan Sijzi of Delhi*, and *The Prose of the Mountains: Tales of the Caucasus*. Her essays and translations have appeared in *The Gettysburg Review*, *The Hudson Review*, *Nimrod*, *Asymptote* (which nominated her for a Pushcart Prize), and *Guernica*, among many other venues.

**John Haggerty** holds an MFA in creative writing from San Francisco State University. His work has appeared in dozens of magazines such as *Carolina Quarterly*, *Fourteen Hills*, *Indiana Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *New Orleans Review*, *Nimrod*, *Santa Monica Review*, and *The Pinch*, where his story won the 2013 Pinch Literary Award in fiction.

**Justin Lee** is graduate of the MFA program at UC Irvine and the recipient of a 2016 Emerging Writers Grant from the Elizabeth George Foundation. His fiction and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *ZYZZYVA*, *Vice*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Amazon's Day One*, *First Things*, *The Smart Set*, *Gargoyle Magazine*, and the Australian Broadcasting Co.'s *Religion and Ethics*. He lives in Newport Beach, CA, and teach undergraduate writing at UC Irvine.

Besides short stories, **JoAnneh Nagler** is the author of three published nonfiction books, several screenplays, and a stage play produced in Northern California in the summer of 2018.

**Peter Sagnella** teaches English at North Haven High School in North Haven, CT, and has published poetry and nonfiction in *Noctua*, and poetry in *Naugatuck River Review*, *Connecticut River Review*, *Rust + Moth*, *Common Ground*, *Pinyon*, *Connecticut Woodlands*, *Plainsongs*, and *Borderlands*. For 2017, he was selected Edwin Way Teale Writer-in-Residence at Trail Wood in Hampton, CT.





