

# *New Haven Review*







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# The Afterlife

Amy Hempel

*We are pleased to reprint Amy Hempel's much beloved short story, "The Afterlife," which appears in The Collected Stories (2006). It is followed by an original essay by her friend, the writer Jim Shepard, in which he discusses the story at length.*

*—The Editors*

**When my mother died, my father's early widowhood gave him**

social cachet he would not have had if they had divorced. He was a bigger catch for the sorrow attached. He was kind, cultured, youthful, and good-looking, and many women tended to him. They cooked dinner for him, and sent their housekeepers to his Victorian near the Presidio Gate. My brothers were away in college, but I, who had dropped out of school, spent a good deal of time at the house.

Some of the women who looked after my father banked their right actions for later, I felt. One woman signed him up for a concert series, but it was a kind of music he didn't much like, and he had been at a concert—chamber music—the night my mother died.

One woman stocked his kitchen with candied ginger and snail shells and bottles of good red wine. I would prop bags of Oreos and Fig Newtons alongside so my brothers would find something familiar when they came home.

One woman sang to him; another, when he asked if she could sing, said, "If I were to sing, it would sound like talking louder." A couple of the women courted me as the best bet. There were shopping trips, lunches in their gardens, suggestions for cutting my hair. I was not used to that kind of attention, and seeing through it didn't mean I didn't also like it.

One woman was impatient with his mourning, another seemed excited by it. She didn't wear underwear when she came to visit; I knew because I heard her tell him. He told me she sent him pictures of herself naked; he was midwestern enough to be stunned.

The woman I liked—for a while she came over every night. She would get to his house when it was still light enough to see fog blowing down the street from the bay window in the living room. He would make her a drink in the kitchen, stirring in the Rose's lime juice with a chopstick from the Japanese take-out place. He would carry it in to where he had seated her on the toast-colored Italian couch in front of the fire. The house was a hundred years old, but the furniture was futuristic.

*She* was futuristic. She was forward-looking, although the past was what they had between them. Jane Stein had known my mother in college. She had married a friend of my father's, and then had not seen my parents since. She still lived in the Midwest, but not with her husband anymore. I had looked her up the month before when I was in Chicago. When I found out she was going to San Francisco, I told my father to take her to dinner. On their second date, she arrived at the house with a black cashmere sweater for me—a "finder's fee," she said.

On their third date, the three of us went to dinner. Other of the women had wanted me along so my father could see them draw me out. Jane wanted me there because we thought the same things were funny. When my father complained about a nosy woman who detained him in the grocery store, Jane said, "That's the trouble with people in general—you have to run into them."

When I hung back a bit walking to the car, she said, "Take up space!" and pulled me along by the arm. The next week, she didn't mind that I saw my father walk her to the front door in the morning.

One night: "I made a fool of myself on that trip," I heard my father say. "Staying in the places I stayed with their mother years ago—I was posing the whole time," he said, "playing the part of a man in grief, from St. Petersburg to Captiva."

He was telling her about the time he'd gone by himself to Florida, only a few weeks after my mother died. Jane and my father were in the habit of travel. Every night they returned to his house,

he mixed her a drink with a wooden chopstick, and took her on the trips he had taken to China, and Switzerland, and Venice with his late wife. Jane told him she would have thought she would be more interested in hearing about the places she had not seen herself, but was, in fact, more interested in where they gone in this country, especially the places that she knew, too, along the coast of Florida. “What year was that?” she would ask, then do the math to see what she had been doing at the time.

When it was time for her to leave for the night, or the next morning, my father would put an object in her hands for her to take; he would divest himself of yet another *thing*—a Waring blender, a toaster oven—he could not imagine using again. He gave her classical CDs, a copper omelet pan, several crystal vases, a Victorian planter, a set of good knives, sweaters if the temperature had dropped the slightest bit, a comforter, books, a pumpkin pie he had made—he gave her something every day. Most of it she gave to the women’s shelter she was in town to advise. Then she would reappear, note all that had been given up or given away—the travel, the glass stirrer for drinks—and let him return to a place she’d never been.

On the last night she visted my father, she asked him if the two of them might go somewhere together. And he said, “Darling, I don’t go to the *dining room* anymore.”

“Is there a place you *could* go and be happy?” she asked.

My father said that maybe he could go back to Aspen. That was where he and my mother, and sometimes we kids, went every summer for a handful of years. None of us were skiers, and in summer the town hosted a music festival in a huge tent set up in a meadow. World-class musicians filled small hotels, and swam in the pools with tourists like us. My father knew a lot about classical music, so he was happy discussing the afternoon program with the First Chair Violin while my mother read on a chaise in the sun, and my brothers tried to land on me in the deep end from the high board.

This was when we had lived in a suburb of Denver, and went rock-collecting weekends in the foothills. The lichen-covered rocks we brought back in the car ended up in the yard framing native flowering plants. I got to stay in the car and drink Tab after a rock I picked up freed something I still have dreams about. The moutnains had nothing for me, and I did not yet know that *water* was going to be my place on earth, not swimming pools at small hotels, but lakes, the ocean, a lazy-waved bay, ponds ringed with willows, and me the girl swimming under low-hanging branches brushed by leaves for the rest of my days.

I heard Jane ask my father if he was happiest when he was in Aspen. He said, “I was, and then I wasn’t.” She said, “You can *was* again.” He said he didn’t think so. And she didn’t come back the next day.

In a note to me a couple of weeks later, Jane wrote from Chicago that she would miss us. She said she understood that my father’s life had ended with my mother’s death, and that what he inhabited now was a kind of afterlife—not dead, but not alive to possibility, to what else one might still choose, and “Who would choose to live less?” she asked.

I didn’t mention the note to my father but I asked him if he wished she still came over. He said she was a terrific person.

The women that followed included a self-styled libertine, and a beauty whose parents had called a priest to exorcise her when she was a child. Some of the women were contenders—generous, brimming, and game.

The woman he sees now seems decent and kind. I met her at his house this morning. She was clearing his garden of weeds, advising him on the palcement of a eucalyptus tree.

She left before I did. My father waved to her from the bay window, and asked if I didn’t think she looked a little like Jane Stein.

I said, “That was a long time ago,” and he said, so I understood him, “*Nothing* is a long time ago.”



# Emotional Indirection

*On Amy Hempel's "The  
Afterlife"*

**Jim Shepard**

**Besides sheer economy, if there's one strategy central to that** group of American writers who have been tagged as minimalists by reviewers and critics—from Raymond Carver, as presented by Gordon Lish in the late seventies, to Amy Hempel now—it might be the strategy of emotional indirection, in particular a specific type of emotional indirection: the gambit of a narrator's telling someone else's story as a way of telling her own. Given that minimalism dramatized in its very form the tension inherent in so much literature between the need to release and the need to protect certain emotional information, it's probably not surprising that so many of minimalism's protagonists seem to operate that way. This strategy is a version of something literature has done forever, of course—the old objective correlative—but this new version has its own taxonomic features, features that are useful for understanding twenty-first-century American fiction, features that are lucidly on display in a short story like Amy Hempel's "The Afterlife," from her collection *The Dog of the Marriage*.

Oscar Wilde wrote, "Man is least himself when he talks in his own persona. Give him a mask and he will tell you the truth." There's a painful intimacy involved in the writing of literary fiction, if the writer is going about it the right way, since, if she's writing about what she thinks is important, a) it represents to her in some crucial way an irresolvable conflict or collision of values, and b) it seems painfully close to home. But as anyone who's been involved with a literary writer will tell you, a comprehensive and naturally occurring emotional openness might *not* be our most common trait. Which means that when we grapple with those issues that we find most charged, we're all looking for ways to instruct ourselves in—or, for those who are even more recalcitrant—trick ourselves into more rigorous forms of emotional honesty.

One way of doing that is immersing oneself in what at first seems to be the safety of an entirely alien sensibility—say, the em-

peror Hadrian, in Marguerite Yourcenar's magnificent novel *Memoirs of Hadrian*, or that of any number of unsuspecting nineteenth-century Nebraskans blindsided by the worst blizzard in their state's history in Ron Hansen's story "Wickedness"—in order to discover that it's not, of course, so entirely alien a sensibility after all. Which is why the writer was drawn to it in the first place. Those writers had already discovered that attempting to understand crucial aspects of an alien sensibility's operating methods, in all of its dysfunctional glory, would in its roundabout way provide some understanding of their own hopelessly opaque and muddled inner lives.

More commonly, though, American fiction writers have instructed themselves in a more rigorous form of emotional honesty by imagining they were really writing about their mothers or lovers or best friends and then discovering in the attempt that they seemed to be learning a whole lot about whoever was doing the perceiving.

Amy Hempel's "The Afterlife" is a nice example of the kind of emotional indirection in which Hempel specializes. There's a *huge* tension, in her protagonists, between guarding information and needing to release it. Part of her way of embodying that tension, of course, is through the epigrammatic economy for which she's known. And one of her other less obvious but equally central strategies over the years has been to have a protagonist present what appears to be a compassionate and often witty examination of someone else's problem, which quietly then reveals itself to be something else entirely, or at least primarily. So that her most famous story, "In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried," initially offers itself as its narrator's grieving portrait of a dying friend's heroic wryness in the face of death, but turns out to be even more about the narrator's crushing sense of shame at her inadequacy as a friend when it counted most. And the alacrity with which even she—who loved her friend so much—was able to put herself first.

**Negotiating any work of literary fiction means engaging nearly immediately on some level with two interpretive issues—*What's at***

*stake here? And Who's in trouble, and how much?*—but “The After-life” begins by vexing both of those questions, especially the second one.

When my mother died, my father's early widowhood gave him social cachet he would not have had if they had divorced. He was a bigger catch for the sorrow attached.

This is so epigrammatically vivid about the father that at first we nearly overlook that it's even *more* characterizing about the speaker. *The first thing I want you to know about Dad—and myself—is that we suffered a loss. But let's move past that as fast as we possibly can—*Mom's death is relegated to the opening dependent clause!—*in order to get to the real first thing I want you to know about Dad: the heart of the sentence in grammatical terms. That big loss that Dad had: didn't it make him more attractive? Catastrophe, in Dad's case, gave him a leg up. And you know what? That's something I admire. And it's also something that I'm willing and able, in my understated way, to judge.*

The sentence manages to occlude—partially through what seems to be a frank and reasonable matter-of-factness—a large part of what turns out to be, upon further examination, its startling ruthlessness.

“...my father's early widowhood gave him a social cachet he would not have had if they had divorced.” Well. Lucky him.

Consider the elegance—both tender and slightly demolishing—of “He was a bigger catch for the sorrow attached.” That elegance is a kind of compression. And inside that compression is the inner tension that powers the story: the tension between a narrator who's simultaneously *compassionate* and *dispassionate* about that person in the world who means the most to her.

“He was kind, cultured, youthful, and good-looking, and many women tended to him,” the narrator informs us, and the syntactical progression tells us she knows that those women didn't dote on her

father *only* out of compassion. He did have “kind, cultured, youthful, and good-looking” going for him. They not only cooked dinner for him but they also “sent their housekeepers to his Victorian near the Presidio Gate”: the first of many class markers that indicate that the narrator is also aware of the *other* ways in which Dad already had a leg up.

Her brothers were away at college, the narrator tells us, “but I, who had dropped out of school, spent a good deal of time at the house.” This is the first of a series of off-handed and interconnected indications that the narrator’s situation, although she herself chooses almost never to talk about it directly, may be more dire than her father’s. Note how off-handed this first indication really is: the red flags that are raised by the news that she’s dropped out of school are lowered somewhat by the banality of where the sentence seems to end up: *so, anyway, I spent a good deal of time at the house.*

“Some of the women who looked after my father banked their right actions for later, I felt,” she goes on to tell us, and we note the verb *banked*’s casual way of suggesting compassion as calculation, and note as well the narrator’s making explicit that she’s the one doing the judging: *I felt*. We learn the various ways in which women strike out with Dad, and we learn as well that the narrator believes it’s because they’re offering exoticism and change—candied ginger and snail shells, etc.—whereas she’s providing the comfort of the quotidian, and continuity: those Oreos and Fig Newtons she props alongside the other stuff so her brothers would find something familiar when they came home.

A couple of women, she notes, courted *her* as the best bet—speaking of compassion as calculation—and she says about the various rivals’ ministrations, “I was not used to that kind of attention, and seeing through it didn’t mean I didn’t also like it.” And with the first half of that sentence, just that quietly, a whole history of neglect—probably maternal neglect—is suggested. Our narrator liked the attention because she needed it. We note the implication that even *that* much attention was more than she was used to. And

the second half of her sentence registers one of the paradoxes at the story's heart: that compassion delivered partially in calculation is still a form of compassion. A huge amount of Amy Hempel's work, in thematic terms, is about the struggle to separate the strands of selfishness from selflessness in our intimate relationships.

We might well ask ourselves: *why* is Jane, who's about to appear, so perfect a match for the narrator? We've already learned that the narrator wants to both give (remember the Oreos) and receive care. It's already becoming clear that Dad is not much interested in enabling either one. Jane is. Jane's going to be offering to solve two problems at once: putting herself forward as both a partner to Dad and a surrogate mother to the narrator.

"The woman I liked—for a while she came over every night." Part of what it means to be successfully economical is to take great advantage of pronouns. "*The woman I liked...*": as in, *There were a lot of women. How many did I like?*

And here's a good rule of thumb, when it comes to negotiating an Amy Hempel story: crucial emotional information will always follow the story's first dash. (One of her early stories begins "My heart—I thought it stopped.") "The woman I liked—for a while she came over every night." So: disappointment and loss are *built into* Jane's very introduction.

It turns out that every night she would come over and the narrator's father would make her a drink, stirring it with a chopstick. In a story less than six pages long that chopstick, of all things, gets mentioned *twice*, and there's a reason for that. Immediately after we learn that Dad's stirring drinks with a chopstick we learn that he would then carry the drinks into "where he had seated her on the toast-colored Italian couch in front of the fire." A "toast-colored Italian couch"? So apparently he's *not* Seth Rogen. He's not stirring drinks with a chopstick because he's a slob. Then why is he? Consider the theatricality of the gesture, when it comes to his self-presentation as a man undone by grief. *Hey: want a drink? Here. Let me stir it with this butcher knife. What difference does it make anymore,*

*anyway?* Am I being too hard on him? The narrator notices, again, on the next page, his dogged insistence on that chopstick as part of his routine with Jane: “Every night they returned to his house, he mixed her a drink with a wooden chopstick...” And that follows immediately on the heels of Dad’s confession to Jane about precisely that theatricality that the chopstick represents: he made a fool of himself on his travels after his wife’s death, he recounts, because he “was posing the whole time ... playing the part of a man in grief, from St. Petersburg to Captiva.” A page later, when we’re told that another one of his habits was to divest himself of yet another *thing* whenever Jane was leaving—speaking of the theatricality of I-have-nothing-to-live-for gestures—one of the items that the narrator takes the time to note that he gives away is a glass stirrer for drinks.

The narrator’s father’s house “was a hundred years old, but the furniture was futuristic. *She* was futuristic,” the narrator tells us about Jane. “She was forward-looking, although the past was what they had between them.” They’re a match! And on what terms? Even despite the past, Jane can see a future. She’s the perfect woman to help them both, because she seems to a) bring to the table both a worldview that’s exactly what the father needs to shake him out of the perversity of his stasis, and b) provide for the narrator a kindred spirit who knows what she’s going through and what she needs.

How did Jane happen to reunite with the narrator’s father in the first place? The narrator looked her up when in Chicago. And when she discovered that Jane was heading to San Francisco, the narrator told her father to take the woman to dinner. Without announcing she was doing it, in other words, the narrator had decided a while ago that it fell to her to be proactive and kick-start this family again. Apparently it paid off: on the second date, Jane showed up with a cashmere sweater for the narrator: “a ‘finder’s fee,’ she said.” And thereby began to further cement her appeal: you give a finder’s fee to another adult who’s performed a valuable service. As a gesture it’s witty and respectful. It also acknowledges the usefulness of

self-interest: *You did a good turn for me; I'll do a good turn for you.*  
We're back to compassion and calculation again.

On the third date, it's a threesome.

Other of the women had wanted me along so my father could see them draw me out. Jane wanted me there because we thought the same things were funny. When my father complained about a nosy woman who detained him in the grocery store, Jane said, "That's the trouble with people in general—you have to run into them."

Apparently even the *other* women knew that the narrator was in enough distress that she needed to be drawn out. Being able to minister to *her*, they realized, would be a necessary part of their application process. Apparently the amount of difficulty that the narrator has been in has been much clearer than the narrator has let on. Jane, by contrast, wanted the narrator along because they both thought the same things were funny. And what are those same things? Dad complains about a nosy woman. And Jane's joking response is about misanthropy. Her joke is instructing Dad—and the narrator—on how to climb out of their self-imposed isolation.

"When I hung back a bit walking to the car," the narrator continues, Jane tells her, "'Take up space!' and pulled me along by the arm." Jane and the story are reminding us of the narrator's tendency toward a kind of recessive invisibility; and with those three words Jane is providing exactly the right kind of maternal advice—advice, we're invited to speculate, that's perhaps the opposite of what her real mother gave her. As she did before, the narrator appreciates being treated like an adult, and being let in on important intimacies: "The next week she didn't mind that I saw my father walk her to the front door in the morning."

The narrator is showing us what *she* values and needs by closely examining someone else: Jane. The operating method here is a version of Ernest Hemingway's claim about the primary way in

which his fiction operated: “A hard light thrown on objects softly illuminates the beholder.” (That’s an aesthetic that provides crucial operating instructions for puzzling out how a story like his “Big Two-Hearted River” works. We look at one thing, and it evokes emotion about something else: the old objective correlative, reconfigured in a nicely understated way.)

**Dad’s clearly in some trouble, here, we’ve figured out. He**

seems to be in the process of shutting down, and in a disconcertingly untroubled way. And the narrator lets us know in a beautifully understated way that Jane is extraordinarily patient with his ongoing self-absorption: every night they return to his house, he stirs her drink with that same chopstick, and he walks her through trips *he’s* taken, with his late wife. Well: how nice for Jane. And notice how graciously Jane hints around about how he’s behaving: “Jane told him she would have *thought* she would be more interested in hearing about the places she had not seen herself, but was, in fact, more interested in where they had gone in this country, especially the places she knew, too, along the coast of Florida.” She offers a lovely and romantic response to his self-absorption: “‘What year was that?’ she would ask, then do the math to see what she had been doing at the time.” *You talk about where you were, without me. I’ll match that to where I was, and in that way bring us together.*

Dad’s not to be comforted, though. He gives away his possessions, one by one, each time she leaves. Some of them are genuine and heartfelt gifts—a pumpkin pie he made himself, for example—and others are purely theatrical gestures. Does Jane recognize that? “Most of it she gave to the women’s shelter she was in town to advise.” And then she continues to relent, “... and let him to return to a place she’d never been....”

Her patience has limits, though. “On the last night she visited my father, she asked him if the two of them might go somewhere together.” The coming disaster is indicated in the opening clause: that was the night she finally fully registered the implacable perversity of the

narrator's father's *pride* in his emotional stasis, and that's also when she learned the nature of his version of the Edenic. She doesn't fail for lack of trying, however. She starts by asking—after however many nights of listening to him recount his trips with his dead wife—if the two of *them* might go somewhere together. The narrator registers with pride how funny his response is—"Darling, I don't go to the *dining room* anymore"—even as she also registers both its perversity and its aggression. Jane isn't backing down yet, though. Her next question is not a small one: "Is there a place you *could* go and be happy?" Dad's answer is wonderfully grudging: "My father said that maybe he could go back to Aspen."

Okay, then. And what does Dad's best-place-ever look like? Turns out that's where he and his wife went for a handful of years. Were his children a big part of that pleasure? "...sometimes we kids went." Did he have rapturously good times with his wife, at least? "My father knew a lot about classical music, so he was happy discussing the afternoon program with the First Chair Violin while my mother read on a chaise in the sun, and my brothers tried to land on me in the deep end from the high board."

And what was it like for the narrator? "I got to stay in the car and drink Tab after a rock I picked up freed something I still have dreams about."

Hmm. Was that world fraught for her? Apparently. And quite a bit more than she might have let on. She was the kind of girl who would be wiped out for the day because of something she found under a rock. And we note that while she's communicating this, she's also slipping in a metaphoric justification for emotional guardedness. Even then, she's reminding us, turning over rocks had the potential to generate lifelong nightmares.

This by the way is a typical admission by an Amy Hempel protagonist; it's the way her version of minimalism works: what makes the line funny is the way it's very clear about the extremity of the trauma, and absolutely opaque as to the exact nature of what catalyzed it.

Aspen might not have worked for her, the narrator tells us, but she did have another option:

...*water* was going to be my place on earth, not swimming pools at small hotels, but lakes, the ocean, a lazy-waved bay, ponds ringed with willows, and me the girl swimming under low-hanging branches brushed by leaves for the rest of my days.

Here, finally, is where the narrator says she belongs, and her image of sanctuary is that of herself as Ophelia, already forsaken. In one gesture she not only re-registers her distress, but also *its* theatricality: a theatricality a lot like her father's.

"The things you think of to link are not in your control," the poet Anne Carson has written. "It's just who you are, bumping into the world. But how you link them is what shows the nature of your mind. Individuality resides in the way links are made."

**Jane, however—back to that fateful night—still hasn't given** up, though her first two questions went nowhere. Okay, she thinks: Aspen. Let's see if we can nail that down, and get him to think about it. "I heard Jane ask my father if he was happiest when he was in Aspen. He said, 'I was, and then I wasn't.' " Her third attempt has generated only more maddening caginess from Dad. And despite all that, she tries a final, fourth time: "She said, 'You can *was* again.' " The indirect discourse of Dad's answer emphasizes how painful its casualness really was: "He said he didn't think so." No wonder she didn't come back the next day.

She sends a note to the narrator a couple of weeks later. The weeks suggest the extent of the hurt and anger. She's writing to suggest that she's giving up on Dad, and now warning the narrator: because she's already figured out that the extent to which the narrator can or will move on may depend on the extent to which her father will move on. Is she angry? "She said she understood that

my father's life had ended with my mother's death..." Ouch. Is she trying to instruct? "...and that what he inhabited now was a kind of afterlife—not dead, but not alive to possibility, to what else one might choose, and 'Who would choose to live less?' she asked." Yes: who would?

Jane's been aware that the narrator is someone for whom watchfulness has long since become a survival skill. That watchfulness—and its corollary, a habit of detachment—has become for the narrator a second nature, an occupational hazard of her isolation. Her father is suffering, even more willfully, from the same condition: the sense that life is not there for him to engage, but to review, and/or to judge. But if that sort of focused observation is part of the problem, Jane is there to remind the narrator—and us—that it's also a huge part of the solution. Because if you're *really* paying attention, you *will* be re-immersed in life. In Simone Weil's lovely formulation, attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity. Or as Eudora Welty once put it: "Focus means awareness, discernment, order, clarity, and insight. They are like the attributes of love."

**The narrator doesn't mention Jane's note to her father. She** asks instead if he wished Jane still came over. If he says he does, we know she'll be on the phone in an instant. And Dad's answer is pure Dad, in its bland generosity and perverse passivity: "He said she was a terrific person."

What follows, then, on the narrator's part, is dispirited, and sounds like it: "The women that followed included..." Etc. That's the category, now, for both of them: the women that followed. The woman he sees now seems decent and kind. Well, there's that, anyway. And when that woman is leaving, Dad asks the narrator "if I didn't think she looked a little like Jane Stein." Which stands, in its complexity, as a lovely combination of both Dad's wistful inability to forget Jane and his willingness to twist the knife when it comes

to his daughter. Why would he feel any aggression toward his daughter on the subject of Jane? Well, the whole thing was his daughter's idea in the first place, wasn't it.

She picks up on his aggression and tells him, "That was a long time ago." And he picks up on *hers*, and comes back at her with both barrels: "...and he said, so I understood him, '*Nothing* is a long time ago.'" It's hard to think of four words in a final sentence as reorienting and devastating as that "*so I understood him.*" The narrator is grabbing our figurative lapels the way her father grabbed hers, and confronting us with the cruelty and the breathtaking ruthlessness of what he's saying. Traditional advice to someone paralyzed with grief is *It's time to move on*. Dad is saying *It'll never be time to move on, because I say so. Here is my amended life philosophy, for better and for worse. Understand me: I am not getting better. I am not letting this go. And: I say that to you knowing as I do that on some level you have linked your recovery to mine.*

We've plunged through quite a false bottom here, in terms of dismaying revelations. It's *not* that Dad hasn't realized the damage he's been doing by indulging himself. He's willing to *pay* that cost. He's willing to let his daughter *know* that he's willing to pay that cost. And he's willing to see *her* pay that cost.

That's the sort of harrowing emotional resting point that most writers—most people—don't go looking for. And it was the indirection in Amy Hempel's method of constructing her story that allowed her to get there.

Some of us get there, every so often, for a little while. "I always wanted to be tough," the poet Richard Hugo once wrote. "And in my poems, I could get tough, at least with myself. I could create something, out of my past personal sense of futility, in language hard enough to prohibit wallowing in melancholy. For the duration of the poem, I became a man sufficiently honest to warrant my own approval."



# **Ephemeral = Permanence**

**Ravi Shankar and Lena Kallergi**

Each reading of your palm a different road  
verging from soil and forking into possibilities  
in a wild and foreign ocean  
no vaster than the line it makes with the sky  
changing with touch  
to resemble a soap bubble's rim—  
how it trails, surfaces illusion,  
peppers translucence with lids  
of water underneath the skin  
layered with centuries of silt and smelt—  
sea of the past, rivers of tomorrow  
branch backwards in tributaries that  
cannot be named and will not stay.  
I know no secret that won't sail away  
so come with me, where  
no knot not nautical in nature  
binds us like twisting sheets to a cleat.

# Human Sacrifice

*A lawyer on the death  
penalty as entertainment*

**Kevin Frazier**

**I once represented a man on San Quentin's death row, and it** was the most entertaining experience of my legal career. That's an ugly way to put it, but it's accurate: The case thrilled me in the same voyeuristic, adrenaline-pumping way that death often thrills me in movies and books. Violence has always been a reliable source of amusement, from the Cyclops smashing the sailors in the *Odyssey* to the run of killings at the end of *Hamlet* and the computer-enhanced exploding heads in the latest Hollywood action flicks. When we talk about the death penalty, we usually pretend that our fascination with death—and our addiction to violence porn—has little to do with the discussion. Certainly I never told anyone that I was drawn to work on a death-penalty case in part because I felt the pull of violence, the lurid pleasures of dealing with questions of murder and execution. I was a young attorney, only a few years out of law school, and I was part of the team that prepared our client's federal habeas petition, a constitutional review of his original conviction and sentencing. The petition was ultimately successful, leading to a federal appellate ruling that reversed his death sentence and entitled him to a new trial. Yet my interest in death as an object of vicarious excitement—an interest that is still part of me—left me with a permanent sense of shame, both toward myself and toward the entire death-penalty process.

I know I'm not alone in feeling the gap between the seriousness of the death penalty and our often frivolous consumption of it in our thoughts. Every capital case comes to us with at least a double shot of killing: the actual death of each victim and the potential death of the accused. It gives us the exhilaration of danger without requiring us to take any risk.

The shame comes, I think, from our finding dishonest ways to mask this exhilaration. The dishonesty has consequences. In America our current form of capital punishment feeds a variety of cultural

and emotional cravings while hiding the real implications of convictions—the complexities of taking another life through a specific system with specific problems. Whether we oppose the death penalty or support it, we gorge on it and the debate surrounding it much as we gorge on junk food, and with similar results. The sheer number of our death-row inmates swells our laziest, most self-indulgent fantasies beyond healthy measure.

A vague national discomfort over the way we practice the death penalty has been in the air for several years. Gallup polls show that a substantial majority of Americans—65 percent—still favors capital punishment, a figure that has remained consistent since 2004. This is, however, a significant decline from the 80 percent of Americans who expressed support for the death penalty in 1994. Recent unease over the death penalty focuses less on the question of whether it's ever right to execute someone than on concerns about how the present system operates. The Innocence Project reports that DNA testing has already resulted in the exoneration of 266 convicts, 17 of them for death-penalty cases. This has made juries much more aware of the possibility that even their most confident decisions can prove disastrously wrong, and with the spread of life-without-parole sentencing options, juries in 2010 handed down a nationwide total of 114 death sentences, compared to 328 in 1994.

In addition, as most states face budget problems, many people are paying closer attention to the economics of capital cases. A 2008 report from the California State Senate's Commission on the Fair Administration of Justice estimated that the death penalty would cost the state \$137 million per year, while an alternative system of lifetime incarcerations would cost only \$11.5 million per year. In Illinois, similar findings fueled the legislature's recent decision to end capital punishment completely, even helping convince four Republicans to vote for the proposal.

David Garland, a well-known professor of law and sociology at New York University, brings a number of the issues surrounding capital punishment into calm, intelligent focus with his book *Peculiar*

*Institution: America's Death Penalty in an Age of Abolition*. Avoiding another polemic either for or against executions, Garland tries to answer a question that embarrasses both sides of the debate: How did we get here? What are the cultural, political, legal, and historical influences that have led America to strengthen its grip on the death penalty as the rest of the Western world has rejected it? Related, and equally troubling in their implications: How do we use the death penalty in America? What interests does it serve, and how does it gratify us even when we think we oppose it?

Garland's book has already achieved a special historical distinction, as its publication last fall led retired Supreme Court justice John Paul Stevens to write an essay for *The New York Review of Books*, examining *Peculiar Institution* in detail but also talking about his role in shaping our modern capital-punishment system. Stevens used the review to clarify his reasons for turning against the death penalty and to describe many of the relevant Supreme Court decisions in which he participated. *Peculiar Institution* thus now stands at the center of a renewed discussion about capital punishment that attempts to leave behind some of the harsh zealotries of the traditional death-penalty debate and to view the subject with a fresh appreciation for its difficulties.

**Garland believes that the death penalty is now largely** unmoored from any practical effort to deter murders or influence crime rates. He notes that even supporters of capital punishment seldom claim deterrence as a serious goal of today's system. Instead, Garland argues, both sides of the debate use the death penalty to advance their larger interests, bolstering the discussion of broader cultural and political topics in a fashion that flatters or benefits the speakers. The death penalty has achieved its greatest prominence less as a series of actions than as a stylized topic of conversation and thought. In public it is discussed and analyzed in predictable, self-serving ways, deliberately obscuring its private or veiled dynamics. As part of this process, capital punishment also has become

absorbed by the American entertainment industry, which endlessly recycles the attention-catching battle between opposing forms of self-righteousness. Even in the news media, Garland maintains, death-penalty cases are reported in a style that tends to heighten their thrill value, as the stories are often pressed into one of two audience-pleasing forms: the horror of innocent victims being murdered by monsters, or the horror of innocent or at least understandable defendants being convicted by an unfair system.

A devastating example of the first storyline—ordinary people experiencing violent death—is the triple-homicide case in Cheshire, Connecticut, from 2007. The account in *The New York Times* of the crime depicted the stark, enraging brutality of a home invasion that ended in rape and murder:

The men, the authorities say, had already strangled Dr. Petit's wife, Jennifer Hawke-Petit, 48, and in short order would also kill the couple's two daughters, Hayley, 17, and Michaela, 11. The elder suspect, Steven J. Hayes, 44, had poured gasoline on the girls and their mother, according to a lawyer and a law enforcement official involved in the case, in hopes of concealing DNA evidence of sexual assault. He had raped Ms. Hawke-Petit, and his partner, Joshua Komisarjevsky, 26, had sexually assaulted Michaela.

Moments after Dr. Petit escaped, as the house was being surrounded by police officers, the men lighted the gasoline. The girls were tied to their beds but alive when the gas Mr. Hayes had spread around the house was set aflame.<sup>1</sup>

How many of us could read this and not want to see the defendants forced to suffer and die just as they made their victims suffer and die? Yet with the change of a few key accusations, a similar home-invasion case can give rise to an entirely different reaction. This

<sup>1</sup> Manny Fernandez and Alison Leigh Cowan, "When Horror Came to a Connecticut Family," *New York Times*, August 7, 2007.

second storyline—the death penalty as a force for injustice—can be seen in another *Times* article, “Judges’ Dissents for Death Row Inmates Are Rising,” from August 2009.<sup>2</sup> The article describes the dissent written by Ninth Circuit judge William A. Fletcher in the case of *Cooper v. Brown* (2009).<sup>3</sup> Fletcher’s opinion set forth evidence that the wrong person had been convicted for the home-invasion murders of two parents, their daughter, and a house guest on June 4, 1983. Kevin Cooper, the African-American given the death sentence for the murders, had escaped from prison two days before the killings took place. On June 4, Cooper was hiding in a vacant house near the victims’ home. The police and other officials were convinced that Cooper’s proximity couldn’t be a coincidence. Yet Judge Fletcher suggested that the authorities ignored, concealed, or destroyed critical proof of Cooper’s innocence. The only survivor among the victims—the eight-year-old son of the murdered parents—originally identified the killers as three white males and specifically said that Cooper wasn’t one of the attackers. The coroner initially concluded that the nature of the victims’ wounds indicated more than one killer, and a pair of women provided affidavits implicating three men who were supposedly attempting to collect a debt for an Aryan Brotherhood group. These men allegedly went to the wrong house—the victims’ home—and killed them by mistake. Although Judge Fletcher presented only one side of the case, nearly anyone reading his account, or the summary of the account in the *Times*, would recognize it as a classic version of the abolitionist storyline, where the public’s desire for revenge leads to a grotesque compounding of the original injustice of the killings. The wrong person is sentenced to death while the actual murderers go free: the worst outcome imaginable from just about every standpoint.

<sup>2</sup> John Schwartz, “Judges’ Dissents for Death Row Inmates Are Rising,” *New York Times*, August 13, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Judge Fletcher’s published dissent in *Cooper v. Brown* (9th cir. 2009), no. 05-99004, D.C. no. CV-04-00656-H, dissent to denial of petition for rehearing, order filed May 11, 2009.

Garland doesn't suggest a moral equivalence between the abolitionist and pro-execution storylines. Despite his refusal to state his position openly, it's instantly clear from the title of his book—with its overt connection of capital punishment to slavery—that he favors abolition, apparently on the practical grounds that the system is unacceptably wasteful and ineffective. I don't believe, however, that even a staunch death-penalty supporter can dismiss *Peculiar Institution* in good faith. (I write this, obviously, as an opponent of the death penalty.) Garland isn't objective in the impossible sense of having no bias or personal viewpoint, but he does substantial justice to the opinions that help sustain capital punishment, and he goes out of his way not to score cheap points against death-penalty advocates. He is far less interested in attacking the survival of the death penalty than he is in understanding it.

**Much of *Peculiar Institution* is devoted to comparing the** American death penalty to the abolition movement in the rest of the Western world. I live in Finland these days, and for a number of years now I've taught law students at Helsinki University as well as students from other universities and institutions. I'm not sure most Americans understand how deep the international contempt is for our legal system, or how large a role the death penalty plays in stoking that contempt. My students come from all over Europe, and they're nearly unanimous in their belief that the death penalty is a blatant human rights violation, demonstrating a vast cultural gap separating them from Americans.

Garland, however, sets out to prove that the clash between the U.S. approach to the death penalty and the approach of other Western nations is less a matter of deep philosophical differences than of specific procedural and structural distinctions. *Peculiar Institution* proposes his own version of a fairly common historical thesis: European nations eliminated the death penalty through central, top-down authority, while the American government's deference to

local communities has given individual states the ability to derail all attempts at nationwide abolition.

Garland follows the view that the death penalty expanded in Europe during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as a tool for governments to solidify their power. Then in the 1700s, with the state more securely established, capital punishment shifted toward addressing public safety. As the Enlightenment took hold, executions became a target for secular criticism. Abolitionist views accompanied the growth of bourgeois culture, acknowledged liberal belief in individual rights, and reinforced the power interests of various rising social classes and existing elites.

This liberal attack on capital punishment quickly generated a liberal defense: “From the nineteenth century onward,” Garland says, “authorities justified the death penalty by pointing to its capacity to deter criminals and control crime, thereby enhancing the general welfare.” Where death-penalty opponents saw execution as violating the rights of the condemned, supporters saw it as protecting the rights of the victim, “a way of expressing respect for human life.” A majority of citizens from most European nations favored the death penalty, and continued to favor it through the main period of European abolition, from the end of World War II through the 1970s. Even now, public opinion all around the world “tends to support the use of the death penalty for the most atrocious murders.”

Meanwhile, for many years the United States was a leader in restricting and rejecting capital punishment. Connecticut’s James Dana commented during the late 1700s on the contrast between America’s handling of the death penalty and the large number of capital offenses in the English penal code: “It doth honor to the wisdom as well as the lenity of our legislators that not more than six crimes are capital by our law.” Similarly, in 1830, decades before England, Austria, or Germany came to the same decision, Connecticut put a stop to holding its executions in public. Michigan, Rhode Island, and Wisconsin repealed their capital punishment statutes

altogether. Starting in the 1930s, America experienced a long-term drop in executions, from a high of 199 in 1935 to fewer than 100 in 1952 to zero in 1968. Gallup polls revealed that from 1953 to 1966 the share of people supporting the death penalty fell by 26 percent. In 1966 the polls showed that for the first time a majority of Americans had swung from accepting capital punishment to opposing it.

Up to this point America followed much the same course as the international abolition movement, which during the 1960s was advancing across continental Europe, Britain, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. Here, however, is where Garland draws his sharpest line between the United States and other Western nations. He believes that in most Western governments, with their traditions of top-down, centralized authority, modern liberal elites could impose abolition on their citizens. Judges, lawyers, intellectuals, politicians, and other European opinion makers simply disregarded the broad public support for the death penalty and instituted abolition.

In the United States, however, Garland feels that top-down authority can't easily ignore local viewpoints. The Constitution makes it procedurally and politically difficult to override local opinion on criminal law issues. Abolitionist bills could be passed in states that didn't want the death penalty, and four states repealed capital punishment in 1965. Yet it was nearly impossible to pass a national ban that would encompass states where local authorities and local communities preferred executions to continue.

Because this "local democratic populism," as Garland terms it, is built into the legislative structure, American abolitionists concentrated on attacking capital punishment through the legal system. The goal was to have the Supreme Court declare the death penalty unconstitutional, an approach that had already effectively dismantled segregation and undermined Jim Crow. The Legal Defense Fund, at its start a department of the NAACP, led the litigation against the death penalty as part of the larger assault on American racism. At first the strategy worked, as the Legal Defense Fund attempted to bring cases in every death-penalty jurisdiction and

achieved a complete suspension of executions for a full ten years, from 1967 to 1977. In 1972 the Supreme Court issued the *Furman v. Georgia* decision, which invalidated all the nation's existing death-penalty statutes, seemingly on the grounds that they were too arbitrary under the Fourteenth Amendment and constituted cruel and unusual punishment under the Eighth Amendment. "Overnight," Garland says, "capital punishment ceased to exist anywhere in the United States." Many people at the time assumed that *Furman* had ended the death penalty forever.

**It didn't turn out that way, as the reaction to *Furman* launched** a startling new American commitment to capital punishment, and Garland thinks the reaction was greatly strengthened by the decision to throw abolition into the courts. Far from ending the death penalty, the litigation process generated an organized resistance to abolition. "What had previously been a rarely used penal sanction dogged by moral controversy," Garland says, "was rapidly transformed into a hot-button political issue with multiple meanings, all of them highly charged and deeply contested."

The fiercely adversarial nature of our court proceedings encourages extreme oppositions, and the Legal Defense Fund's arguments required death-penalty supporters to come up with fresh and more effective reasons for continuing capital punishment. The most successful justification for the death penalty has been the concept that it's an issue of local law, to be decided by local authorities and local communities. The localization approach allows death-penalty supporters to accomplish a number of otherwise problematic political and social goals. In the 1960s and 1970s, it helped the Republicans win over voters from the Southern states who had historically supported the Democrats, and it deepens the Southern commitment to Republican candidates to this day. The Southern Strategy, crucial to Nixon's victories in 1968 and 1972, used the death penalty as a symbol for protecting states' rights, enforcing law and order, and honoring traditional values.

Localization also was immensely effective at repackaging Southern anger over the civil rights movement. “The Republican embrace of states’ rights,” Garland says, “could be represented to the nation as a principled belief that overreaching federal government was the problem and local control the solution.” This representation cloaked localization’s other message to Southerners, which was that Republicans “would seek to undo the gains of the civil rights movement and restore the ‘Southern way of life’ with its racial inequalities and its religious commitments.”

The localization stance was so successful that it worked not only in the South, but in many communities throughout the country. With Southern states leading the way, thirty-five states passed rewritten death-penalty legislation within two years of *Furman* and dared the Supreme Court to strike the statutes down. Since then, the death penalty has become nearly as accepted in Democratic circles as it has in Republican ones, though the South’s special devotion to the death penalty remains striking: Since 1976, the South has been responsible for 80 percent of all American executions. Texas alone is responsible for 449 executions, followed by Virginia with 105, Oklahoma with 91, and Florida with 68.<sup>4</sup>

The Supreme Court has come to endorse localization with great enthusiasm. The 1976 *Gregg v. Georgia* decision officially revived capital punishment and held that the court would allow the new death-penalty statutes so long as local communities followed heightened due-process requirements. Since *Gregg*, the court has given local elites broad scope to act as they see fit. It has declined to question the constitutional implications of the powers of local prosecutors, who choose when to seek the death penalty, are often locally elected, and are extremely responsive to public opinion in their jurisdiction. The court further refused, in *McCleskey v. Kemp* (1987), to give

<sup>4</sup> Some readers might quibble with Garland’s broad definition of the South, but certainly all of these states belong to the geographical areas that the Southern Strategy was designed to influence.

practical recognition to evidence of systematic local racism in capital cases. The study at issue in *McCleskey* indicated that in Georgia “murderers of white victims were sentenced to death 4.3 times more frequently than murderers of black victims.”<sup>5</sup> The court held that, even if the study was correct, no constitutional violation existed unless the evidence proved that the specific decision makers in the case acted with a discriminatory purpose, producing a deliberate discriminatory effect. *McCleskey* has almost entirely eliminated the constitutional review of racism in the way that local communities apply the death penalty to minorities.

As Garland notes, cases like *Gregg* and *McCleskey* represent an extraordinary abdication of the court’s established duty to prevent local majorities from violating the constitutional rights of individuals. The Constitution was never intended to defer automatically to the opinion of either local or national democratic majorities. Rather, it was designed to require the overruling of majority opinion when that opinion violates substantive constitutional principles. If the Supreme Court had applied its current analysis of local majorities to segregation, for instance, it would have been forced to conclude that the federal government had no business interfering with the racist decisions of the Southern communities that supported Jim Crow.

<sup>5</sup> It’s hard not to notice the prominent role Georgia has played in the Supreme Court’s death penalty decisions, and Garland samples some of the more aggressive pro-death-penalty quotes that Georgian politicians like Lester Maddox and James H. Floyd made during the backlash against *Furman*. Lately, Georgia’s by-any-means-necessary attitude toward capital punishment might have driven the state to break the law. In March 2011, the federal Drug Enforcement Administration seized Georgia’s supply of sodium thiopental, the drug Georgia uses as part of the lethal injection process. The DEA is investigating an allegation that Georgia obtained the sodium thiopental illegally from a supplier in Great Britain after the sole American manufacturer of the drug abandoned its production.

In a similar vein, the Supreme Court has now determined that jury sentencing is “a constitutional requirement of capital cases.” This is a new demand, Garland says, and an odd one, since few jurisdictions require jury sentencing in any other area of criminal law. The court, however, has stated that the correct purpose of capital punishment is to express “the community’s moral sensibility.” To achieve this, “a representative cross-section of the community must be given the responsibility for making that decision.”

The thinking behind these cases gives us a clue as to why the public’s emotional reactions to the death penalty have become so important, so isolated from nuanced criticism, and so vulnerable to the oversimplifications of mass entertainment. With the court’s apparent conclusion that the death penalty is valid as long as local communities accept it, capital punishment has left the realm of closely reasoned legal or factual analysis. Instead, it has defaulted to the realm of public prejudice. After all, one of the least likely places for a calm and balanced response to a murder is the community where it occurs, especially when the Supreme Court has given local authorities such unrestricted freedom to play up the most inflammatory aspects of capital cases. Consequently, the melodramatic way that the death penalty is presented in the entertainment media has grown increasingly influential, and increasingly divorced from any scrutiny that would recognize standards other than the public’s immediate emotional reactions to the issue. The Supreme Court has not merely allowed the death penalty’s validity to turn heavily on its entertainment value, but has actively encouraged the process.

**The Supreme Court’s defense of the death penalty as an expression of the local community’s will** has, Garland asserts, expanded in importance “as the rationales for the death penalty have grown fewer.” Part of the public’s recent disenchantment with our capital punishment system comes from the increasingly clear ineffectiveness of our executions as a deterrent. For the death penalty to have any chance to decrease homicide rates, it must be applied swiftly, certainly, and

frequently, with high visibility. The current death penalty meets none of these requirements, and can't meet them while still complying with any modern sense of due process. The average time between sentencing and execution is twelve years. Around 66 percent of capital sentences are reversed before execution, giving a country with 14,000 murders per year an average of 60 executions per year. Even in states with the least rigorous approach to due process, the connection between murder and execution is far too tenuous for deterrent purposes. The same factors also make executions more harrowing than effective as a form of retribution, for both the survivors of the murder victims and the community overall. Yet short of throwing out due process altogether, which is unacceptable to any credible movement even in extreme political circles, it's hard to see how capital punishment can seriously contribute to lowering homicide rates.

One of Garland's most important points about today's death penalty is that it reflects contradictory urges in our society, clashing needs that have made death-penalty law chaotic, inefficient, and counterproductive. The *Gregg* due-process requirements aren't an artificial afterthought grafted onto capital cases without public support. Quite the opposite: The heightened due-process oversight that the Supreme Court imposed after 1976 was precisely what allowed many Americans to stop worrying about the death penalty as a blatantly unjust institution. We don't practice the death penalty of the past, but a new form of execution that incorporates much of the criticism from the international abolition movement. And as today's concerns about DNA testing, wrongful convictions, and lethal injections demonstrate, our society is still deeply sensitive to the long-standing abolitionist concerns with decency and due process.

As more time passes, though, and as our death rows remain flooded with thousands of inmates, the tensions in the system have grown more extreme. On the one hand, we have no serious desire to dismantle the bulk of the due-process standards that make capital punishment so time-consuming and expensive. Supporters of the death penalty rely on those standards as much as opponents do: Due

process is always cited as proof that capital punishment has broken its historical connection with lynching. On the other hand, we're finding it harder to ignore the lack of deterrence, the absence of any measurable benefit in penal policy terms, the massive economic drain on our resources, and the DNA-spotlighted risks of still convicting the innocent. If executing people is so costly and inefficient, and if it isn't lowering murder rates or providing dependable retribution, why are we so committed to it? Whose interests is the death penalty serving?

Garland has a range of answers to that question. First, the death penalty benefits quite a few professionals either financially or by providing them with a sense of personal satisfaction. A large number of people, from lawyers and judges to prison wardens and psychiatric experts, are involved in the death-penalty system, and all of them receive tangible or intangible compensation for their work. Second, political figures use the death penalty for all kinds of purposes. In addition to assisting specific political efforts like the Southern Strategy, the death-penalty debate can be customized to function as a popular symbol of what Garland calls "masculine resolve" for both Republicans and Democrats. By standing up for capital punishment, politicians can demonstrate "a determined, warrior-like commitment to face down murderous criminals and protect the lives of citizens." Third, as already noted, the mass media and the public have a mutually reinforcing relationship with each other on death-penalty cases. As part of our perpetual loop of entertainment, the presentation of capital punishment offers a constant pandering to our sweet tooth for sensationalism. The abolitionists' storyline of innocent defendants alternates with the death-penalty supporters' storyline of innocent victims, and we enjoy the emotional charge of both—the pleasure of agreeing with the simplified views we accept, disagreeing with the simplified views we reject, and secretly thrilling to the fascination of violent death. The death penalty, Garland says, "commands our attention, especially when the killing is done in our name and at our behest." It satisfies our revenge fantasies, our

dreams of ourselves as Dirty Harry or Lisbeth Salander retaliating against human beasts. And for those of us who are abolitionists, the death penalty also satisfies our smug protecting-the-weak fantasies, allowing us to indulge in condescending *To Kill a Mockingbird* visions of helping the disadvantaged through our superior sensibility. These tawdry pleasures are so much easier and more gratifying than thinking hard about the actual intricacy of capital punishment that we fall back on them in relief. The roller coaster ride goes on and on, amusing us without changing anything.

**In his essay on *Peculiar Institution* for *The New York Review of Books***, former justice John Paul Stevens praises Garland while defending or reinterpreting some of the cases that Garland criticizes. Most intriguingly, Stevens condemns the current capital-punishment system and offers a new five-point test for determining when death-penalty legislation should be allowed under the Constitution.

Stevens makes a formidable death-penalty opponent because he started as a moderate conservative who supported the reinstatement of capital punishment. President Ford appointed Stevens to the court at the end of 1975. One of the earliest Stevens cases was the *Gregg* decision's validation of the new death-penalty statutes enacted after *Furman*. Stevens voted in favor of the validation, on the basis that fuller attention to due process could guarantee "even-handed, rational, and consistent imposition of death sentences under law."

Stevens devotes much of the *New York Review* essay to explaining how his death-penalty opinions grew out of his understanding of *Furman*'s rejection of the earlier statutes. He thinks that Garland takes an all-or-nothing view of capital punishment by assuming that the only choice is between total acceptance of the death penalty and total abolition. For Stevens, however, *Furman* should have established the "narrowing approach" that Justice Stewart set forth in one of the case's concurring opinions, and should have resulted in far fewer executions under a far stricter due process scrutiny.

We now have a much larger number of death sentences than we did before *Furman*, and Stevens blames this on “the regrettable judicial activism” of the court’s recent, more conservative justices. One of the rulings that Stevens singles out for special criticism is *Uttecht v. Brown* (2007), which held that the prosecution can disqualify or exclude jurors who are personally opposed to the death penalty, and can ensure that a jury is “death qualified.” Stevens scorns the decision as mandating a hanging jury that nonetheless “may be accepted as a fair cross-section of the community.” He also attacks the court’s approval of victim-impact statements and *McCleskey*’s exclusion of racial evidence. Yet he follows these criticisms not with a clear call for the death penalty’s permanent abolition but for a new test that would consider five different factors in examining the constitutional validity of all death-penalty statutes. “To be reasonable,” he writes, “legislative imposition of death-penalty eligibility must be rooted in benefits for at least one of the five classes of persons affected by capital offenses.”

He specifies the five classes as the victims; the family and close friends of the victims; the participants in the judicial process, that is, prosecutors, judges, jurors, and so forth; the general public; and the condemned inmates awaiting execution. Drawing heavily on Garland’s analysis, Stevens then goes through each class and finds that none of them receives a valid, significant benefit from the death penalty. Since murder victims are dead, they “have no continuing interest” in the execution of their killers. The family and friends of the victims suffer immeasurable harm, but the harm can’t be compensated adequately by killing the condemned, and retribution alone is an insufficient justification for execution. “We do not, after all, execute drunk drivers who cause fatal accidents,” Stevens writes. Any benefits to the participants in the judicial process are outweighed by the financial costs of the death penalty and by “the impact on the conscientious juror obliged to make a life-and-death decision despite residual doubts about a defendant’s guilt.” Similarly, the benefits to the public in Garland’s terms of “political exchange and

cultural consumption” provide “woefully inadequate justifications for putting anyone to death,” especially when the alternative of life-without-parole sentencing exists. The bulk of the thousands of death row inmates would obviously receive no personal benefit from their execution—a doubly significant factor because, according to Stevens, many inmates “have repented and made important contributions to society,” a controversial contention that the essay doesn’t argue in detail. Finally, Stevens notes that going forward with the death penalty always “includes the risk that the state may put an actually innocent person to death.”

Stevens is a bit coy on whether he thinks any death-penalty statute could survive his five-point review. He has already expressly rejected the death penalty in the *Baze v. Rees* decision from 2008, and his *Peculiar Institution* essay repeats the key phrase from his *Baze* concurrence, quoting Justice White’s statement that the death penalty represents “the pointless and needless extinction of life with only marginal contributions to any discernible social or public purposes.” Yet the essay also lists a series of extreme death-penalty categories that Stevens thinks the narrowing approach from *Furman* might still recognize: treason, Timothy McVeigh’s bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City, attempted assassination of the Pope, murder of police officers or prison guards, and serial killings. Stevens regrets that Garland “does not tell us whether he would be an abolitionist in such cases,” but Stevens also doesn’t quite tell us this for himself.

The ambiguity may be tactical. Stevens is clear that he finds the death penalty as it now exists unconstitutional, but is less clear on whether it might be made constitutional in a much more restricted form. I suspect that he would prefer complete abolition, but if this can’t be accomplished, he wants at a minimum for the court’s expansionist tendencies to be reversed as firmly as possible. Regardless of his intentions, however, his five-point test is a risky proposition. The question of benefit to each class of affected persons could easily be twisted to justify a still greater growth in the number of death

sentences. The best argument against narrowing the death penalty is *Furman* itself: The narrowing principles found in that decision were reinterpreted to justify enlargement. A narrowed death penalty is an expanded death penalty waiting to happen. From a utilitarian viewpoint, the only sure way to prevent abuse of capital punishment is to eliminate it.

**Garland and Stevens share a method of evaluating the problems** with the death penalty in pragmatic terms, downplaying the partisan political and cultural divisions that the subject inspires. In this sense, their approach is very much in line with the American Law Institute's 2009 decision to withdraw its model penal-code provision on capital punishment. The ALI stated that it had chosen to remove the provision due to "the current intractable institutional and structural obstacles to ensuring a minimally adequate system for administering capital punishment."

The general public remains largely unaware of the ALI decision, but its significance for the legal foundation of the death penalty is considerable. An independent and long-established nonprofit organization with four thousand members, the ALI produces a great deal of scholarly material that lawyers and judges rely on in their everyday work, including the ALI restatements of the law and model principles. In addition, the ALI's work has substantially affected the common law and legislation in many states. This is especially true of its model penal code's death-penalty provision, Section 210.6. The provision dates back to 1962, when the ALI determined that it was inappropriate for the organization to take a position on abolition as a political issue. The ALI decided that it instead had a duty to provide "the most reasonable standards and procedures for application of the death penalty for use by those jurisdictions which chose to retain it." After *Furman*, many states used Section 210.6 as a guide for their revised legislation, since the ALI's prestige gave the laws extra credibility for Supreme Court review. The revival of capital punishment since 1976 owes much of its legislative form to the ALI's influence.

Now, however, the ALI has declared that Section 210.6 no longer works, and that it isn't possible to devise an acceptable model death-penalty provision under the current system. The organization still refuses to express an opinion on whether the death penalty should be abolished. Its decision, as explained in its April 2009 council report to its members, springs from doubts as to "whether the capital-punishment regimes in place in three-fourths of the states, or in any form likely to be implemented in the near future, meet or are likely ever to meet basic concerns of fairness in process and outcome." The ALI had earlier commissioned a paper on Section 210.6 from the independent researchers Carol Steiker and Jordan Steiker. The paper raised many of the difficulties that Garland and Stevens note, including the politicization of judicial elections, where "candidate statements of personal views on the death penalty and incumbent judges' actions in death-penalty cases become campaign issues." The paper also identified inherent difficulties in creating constitutionally fair lists of aggravating factors or acceptable categories for death sentences.

I interviewed Michael Traynor, the president emeritus of the ALI, who spoke to me with the understanding that his comments were personal and not made on the ALI's behalf. Traynor talked about the death-penalty system in his home state of California, and concentrated on the huge amounts of time, money, and energy that capital punishment consumes.

"When you look at the substantial resources being spent on the death penalty," Traynor said, "you have to consider whether they could be better allocated for other purposes."

I asked him if he thought the death penalty should be declared unconstitutional as a form of cruel and unusual punishment or on any other broad moral grounds.

"I don't think you need to reach those issues," he said. "I believe the ALI simply reacted to the unworkability of capital punishment, which is riddled with these resource and fair-enforcement problems."

I also talked with Natasha Minsker, another ALI member, who is the death-penalty policy director for the ACLU of Northern California. She wasn't yet part of the ALI when Section 210.6 was withdrawn, but like Traynor she finds the death penalty problematic in legal and practical terms, and sees these as the ALI's concerns.

"The ALI represents the intellectual leadership of the legal community," Minsker said. "For that leadership to withdraw its support from its death-penalty provision is like the National Academy of Sciences saying that it no longer thinks the theory of evolution is real. Everyone knows that the ALI's decision was made through a long process of review and serious, scholarly consideration."

In California, Minsker argued, the capital-punishment system demonstrates the legitimacy of the ALI's decision, and illustrates why public opinion on the system no longer splits along clear conservative and liberal lines. "Universally," she said,

everyone in California agrees that the death penalty here is a failure. Even people in favor of capital punishment recognize that it's broken, that it doesn't serve any of the purposes they think the death penalty is there for. And then you add the costs—many people haven't known how much capital punishment is costing, and they're shocked when they find out. They're discovering, after thirty years of experimenting with the death penalty, that life-without-parole provides swifter and more certain justice, without putting family members and other survivors through such a decades-long ordeal.

Since Minsker works for the ACLU, her opposition to the death penalty is unsurprising. Part of what makes her comments interesting, though, is how she couches that opposition in utilitarian language. Like Garland, she seems to believe that Americans who aren't ready to reject the death penalty on moral grounds might be ready to reject it on the grounds of financial waste and ineffectuality.

## **Not everyone agrees with the pragmatic outlook of Garland**

and the ALI, or would draw the same conclusions from that outlook. William “Rusty” Hubbard is the vice-president of Justice For All, a victims’ rights group that is a leading public supporter of the death penalty. In speaking with me, Hubbard brought to the center of the discussion some of the considerations that Garland tries to sideline: the moral justifications for capital punishment, and the importance of remembering the pain of the murder victims.

As the former counsel of the Pardons and Paroles Division of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, as well as through his earlier work for the attorney general’s office, Hubbard developed an extensive familiarity with death-penalty cases. In 1995 he left his position with the state and joined Justice For All. Over the phone, he was straightforward and forceful in presenting me with his reasons for believing in capital punishment.

“It’s the ultimate sanction for the ultimate violation: the taking of a human life,” he said. “In Texas, not every murder gives rise to the death penalty. We aren’t executing people for rape or for anything less than murder committed in certain special circumstances. Often the murder involves protected classes of individuals, like children or the elderly or public servants in the course of their duties.”

He gave great weight to the jury’s role in death sentencing. “It’s a jury of their peers who put these people on death row, not some arbitrary Roman emperor with a thumb. This is a jury that, through an extensive trial process, has had the opportunity to judge all aspects of the crime and has been able to make an informed decision to send that person to death row.”

On the question of deterrence, Hubbard made two points. First, he said, he believes that the death penalty does indeed have a deterrent effect. A murderer who is executed has no ability to murder again, either by killing innocent citizens upon potentially re-entering society or by killing fellow inmates in prison. Second, even if the deterrent effect didn’t exist, Hubbard would still consider

the death penalty justified as the correct degree of response to the extreme act of depriving another person of his or her life:

Murderers need to be held responsible for their actions. Remember: Their victims don't get another twenty years of living after they are killed. Even the inmates who are on death row, they're still breathing, they're still alive, they're still experiencing occasional pleasurable sensations, and yet they have robbed someone of those same sensations in order to get to this point. They have magazines, they have books, they have whatever outside stimulation they receive. They still have contact with family members. They still have life. They have not been deprived of the most basic part of human existence, even though they have taken it away from others. Murderers must pay the price for the crimes they have committed, regardless of how they might reform afterwards, because otherwise you minimize the lives of the people they have killed.

Again and again, Hubbarth came back to the singular, irreplaceable loss that murderers impose on their victims. Given the seriousness of this deprivation, Hubbarth found it hard to say that death-penalty cases cost too much. Furthermore, to the degree that the capital punishment system might be wasteful and expensive, he blamed the obstructive tactics of death-penalty opponents, and proposed streamlining the entire post-sentencing process.

"It's the defense on appeals and on habeas proceedings that drives the costs up so high," he said. Part of the solution, he thought, might be to limit the number of appeals and petitions, and to create stricter time frames for proceeding at every level. The death penalty might be fast-tracked, set on a capital punishment version of the "rocket docket" approach that many jurisdictions are already taking to handle other kinds of cases more expeditiously. For Hubbarth, the time from sentencing to execution should last no longer than five or six years.

In place of spending such large amounts on the post-trial process, Hubbarth would devote greater resources to ensuring that the trial itself is performed as fairly as possible:

If you're going to have capital punishment, for God's sake do it right. Make sure the prosecutor is competent. Make sure the defense counsel is competent. Otherwise, you end up with procedural issues that detract from the purpose of the death penalty. So have fair representation on both sides. That's where the effort should go.

It didn't trouble Hubbarth if different parts of the country had different attitudes towards the death penalty. He looked at it as part of America's inherent variety, and as a sign of our freedom to choose our own environments:

I'm a Texan, and I know how folks in states that use the death penalty tend to get portrayed as a bunch of grinning bloodthirsty yahoos. But that's not the case. We're American citizens. And how we feel about capital punishment is a reflection of our beliefs. That may change in different areas. But then people are drawn to different places. So if you don't like the death penalty and you don't want to live around people who believe in capital punishment, move to areas where they don't have it. If you support the death penalty, move to areas that do have it. But the death penalty needs to be in touch with local mores.

***Peculiar Institution*** is understandably vague on the details of abolition in other Western countries: The topic is so large that it would have taken too much space to address it thoroughly. After reading the book, though, I wanted to see how some of Garland's generalities about Europe-versus-America played out against a specific historical example. With this in mind, I talked to two of Helsinki University's criminal law professors about the Finnish death

penalty and Nordic methods of administering criminal justice.

“For us here in Finland,” said Kimmo Nuotio, a specialist in Nordic, European, and international criminal law, “an essential difference between the Finnish and American attitudes towards crime can be traced to the concept of Nordic exceptionalism. Nordic exceptionalism is the basis for our penal exceptionalism—shorter prison sentences and lower imprisonment rates. The policy has its roots in Nordic notions of egalitarianism, and in our view that penal policy is less to punish than to reform.”

Nuotio directed me to a 2007 article on the practice of Nordic exceptionalism in penal law, written by New Zealand legal scholar John Pratt. Pratt gives the Finnish imprisonment rate as 68 inmates per 100,000 people. The American rate is 750 per 100,000, more than ten times the Finnish figure. Since the Nordic countries also have substantially lower crime rates than America does, their imprisonment practices pose a challenge to the common U.S. assumption that a tough punishment policy, with death as the toughest punishment of all, is necessary to keep crime under control.

The other professor I interviewed, Jukka Kekkonen, is an expert on Finnish legal history and on the comparative history of criminal law and punishment systems. Kekkonen told me that he knows Garland personally. He had much to say about Garland’s work, and about the death penalty’s abolition in Finland:

The Finnish death penalty ended in 1826. For 700 years Finland was under Swedish rule. Then in 1809 it came under the control of Russia as part of the deal-brokering of the Napoleonic wars. For political reasons, after Nicholas I became the new Russian emperor in 1825, he decided to make some minor liberal reforms. He decreed that he would pardon any death sentence in Finland unless the case involved a threat to the tsar’s family or to the state. In return, he required that the pardoned convict should be deported to Siberia, which the Russian government was attempting to colonize. It was a political strategy on his part.

After the tsar's decree, no death sentence was ever again carried out in Finland during peacetime. "Nevertheless," Kekkonen said,

Finland has had these crisis episodes in its history where there has been strict and frequent use of the death penalty. Our civil war started in 1918, soon after Finland declared its independence from Russia in 1917. During the civil war, the Whites executed more than 8,400 Reds after summary court martials, and the Reds executed 1,830 Whites. Another 150 executions occurred right after the war, though still in 1918. Then came the next period of frequent death penalty use, the Winter War of 1939–1940, when Finland was attacked by the Soviet Union. This was followed by Finland's complicated involvement in World War II. A total of 681 capital punishment sentences were made between 1939 and 1946, and at least 528 of the sentences were carried out, mostly during the "continuation war" of 1941–44, when Finland was fighting on the same side as Hitler against the Soviets.

Since the time of these dramatic exceptions, however, the death penalty has vanished from Finland, in both law and practice. During the 1960s and 1970s, the country's modern criminal justice system began to intensify its adoption of the standards of Nordic exceptionalism. That process was closely tied to the comparatively late development of a Nordic-style welfare state in Finland.

The Finnish example is consistent with Garland's theory of top-down abolition in Europe, since it involves a centralized decision made without concern for local opinion. Yet even a superficial summary of Finland's complex historical circumstances illustrates how much Garland's overview ignores or glosses over. In the nineteenth century, it was Finland's peasants, liberal bourgeoisie, and lower clergy who sought more lenient criminal control policies, while it was the highest estates that wanted the death penalty. Then in the first half of the twentieth century, during the period when Finland was gaining and consolidating its independence, leftwing parties that represented the working classes were the death penalty's

most outspoken opponents. The liberal middle classes also tended to oppose the death penalty, but less fervently than the leftists did. Only the conservative bourgeois parties were outright death-penalty supporters. After World War II, however, all but certain right-wing groups reached a consensus against capital punishment—a consensus that remained relatively stable over the coming decades. Though the Finnish example doesn't entirely contradict Garland's thesis, it reminds us how resistant specific events are to even intelligent attempts to generalize about them on an international scale.

In addition, while Kekkonen admires Garland's research and writing, he thinks that *Peculiar Institution* should have paid fuller attention to a topic it treats only briefly: the influence of economic inequality on capital-punishment law.

"In every legal system that I know from antiquity to today," Kekkonen said, "the basic issue of criminal and penal control is connected to the power structures, and to how wide the gap is between the rich and the poor. If the divide between them is very large, the control system as a whole is probably quite harsh. And if the divide is not so large, the opposite is true."

Kekkonen had brought this issue up with Garland when they had met: "I commented to him, 'You might have compared the different states in the U.S., since anyone can see at a glance that it's states like Texas, where the wealth gaps are very wide, that perform more executions.' For the most part I agree with Garland. But he should have looked in more detail at what factors unite, say, the Southern states in regard to wealth distribution and what kinds of possibilities the underprivileged have for social mobility in those states."

My own feeling is that Garland acknowledges the role of economic inequality in the death penalty, but that he touches on the subject as lightly as possible to avoid alienating his more conservative readers. *Peculiar Institution* is a cautious book, and Garland generally errs on the side of avoiding direct confrontation on political issues that might

take him away from his utilitarian analysis of capital punishment in its practical and cultural dimensions.

**Through his criticism of capital punishment as entertainment,** Garland presses us to consider more closely the question of how we fantasize about murder cases. It's easy to say that the act of fantasizing is itself the problem, but that goes too far, and in the wrong direction. All our thoughts require fantasy—the ability to imagine things we haven't directly experienced—to help us understand the world. It's crucial for us to rely on our imagination in contemplating the death penalty.

The problem isn't that we fantasize about murder and execution, but that our fantasies are so self-indulgent. Our thoughts on death-penalty cases are too tied up with sensationalism and wish fulfillment, the Hollywood clichés of revenge against the guilty or salvation of the underprivileged. There's no reason we need to accept this. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare starts with a revenge scenario as common for his audiences as it is for us: We've all grown up with an endless supply of action stories where the hero sets out to destroy the criminal who killed his partner or his wife. But Shakespeare doesn't give us the easy triumphalism we expect from our blockbuster movies and bestselling books, the shopworn struggle between good and evil, with the villains defeated at the end. Instead, he drives every aspect of the play into paradox, into the hard complexities that revenge creates. He is relentless in showing the difficulties all our choices contain, from Hamlet's depressed inaction to Claudius's patient manipulations to Laertes's rash boldness. Just before his final duel with Laertes, Hamlet says he has shot an arrow over his house and hurt his brother. It's a statement that could apply to most of the characters. Trying to protect his marriage and his crown, Claudius brings about the murders of both Gertrude and himself, while Polonius sets in motion the deaths of his two children. Claudius plots and dies, Laertes attacks and dies, Gertrude loves and

dies, Ophelia obeys and dies, Hamlet agonizes and dies; nobody escapes. Shakespeare never loses sight of the unpredictable and largely uncontrollable consequences of violence.

It's obviously unfair to expect the average Hollywood movie to meet the standards of the greatest poet and playwright in the English language. But we can take at least as much pleasure from complex, sophisticated fantasies as from trashy, self-serving ones. *Hamlet* has always been one of Shakespeare's most popular plays, and some of our best contemporary writers and filmmakers, from Cormac McCarthy to Martin Scorsese, have found a large audience without sacrificing their abilities to portray violence as something other than an excuse for easy heroics. The superb new crime novelist James Thompson has written two books—*Snow Angels* and *Lucifer's Tears*—that combine his extraordinary skills as a stylist and storyteller with his mature and moving awareness of the costs that violence exacts from individuals and from society as a whole. Both J. G. Ballard with *Crash* and Anthony Burgess with *A Clockwork Orange* achieved lasting pop-culture success writing about violence while avoiding lowest-common-denominator exploitation, and the same can be said of less artful yet honorable novels like Scott Turow's *Presumed Innocent*. Even in movies and television, where our expectations tend to be lower than with books, a genuine difference still exists between productions that wallow in dumb, essentially one-note revenge fantasies, like *Death Wish* or *Man on Fire*, and productions that attempt to complicate our responses, like *Blue Velvet* or *Unforgiven* or *The Sopranos*.

If, in our fantasies about the death penalty, we accept low-grade entertainment—visions that work on our minds the same way that cut-rate candy works on our bodies—it's not because we're incapable of enjoying anything else. It's because we've surrendered to the sugar rush. This is damaging in all areas of our lives, but it's particularly damaging where the death penalty is concerned. We're literally offering human sacrifices to our imagination, while we neglect the

complicated facts that have made our capital punishment system so contradictory and confused.

In his 1923 poem “Meditations in Time of Civil War,” Yeats wrote: “We had fed the heart on fantasies. / The heart’s grown brutal from the fare.” Yeats knew that brutality thrives on fantasies of revenge and injustice, and that these fantasies can easily become addictive. Yet he also understood the importance of fantasy, and famously reminded us that in dreams begin responsibility. We’ve been dreaming about our modern form of the death penalty since 1976. Now would be a good time for us to use those dreams to move toward a deeper sense of our responsibilities.

# Two Poems

**Maya Pindyck**

### **Inquisitor**

Asking—no, crowing—  
at the guard among the peonies,  
crowned with a false sense  
of sunlight, your fair inquisitor  
lights up. Husk of maize  
brandishes your tongue  
to remind you of all that's been  
crushed by the Colonel. Music  
in the garden: a quintet of pinks  
rhapsodizes a mania of sunsets.  
Do you hear it when your eyes spring open?  
Do you find it between the fringes  
of daybreak, leashing one world  
while hunting another?

It took some time to find  
the perfect patch of grass  
beneath the wild berries  
oozing from the shrubs.

And the patch was no more perfect  
than any other patch  
with its chirps and buzzes,  
grasses and ants,  
unseen dog  
barking just two patches away,  
the river singing her usual song—

I wanted to write, *the river calls to me*.

Instead I write, *the river calls me*,  
and seek my name in what I write.



# **A Practical Guide to Loving the Dead**

**Rachel Swirsky**

**Debra Edgecombe, cynic, accountant, and necrophiliac,**  
couldn't believe her ears.

"You set me up on a what?"

"A blind date," repeated Debra's best friend, Kathy.

They sat in the office break room. Math puns branded the coffee mugs with slogans: *Working here is the first sine of madness. Geometry is for squares.*

"Is he breathing?" asked Debra.

"Yes."

"Any sign of terminal illness? Decay? Worms in the eyes?"

"No."

"Then he's not my type."

Kathy adjusted her copper-rimmed glasses. Quartz crystals hung at her neck and her fingers were decorated with Celtic rings. She wore one of the long, loose dresses she'd favored since officially giving up Episcopalianism last year. As far as atheistic Debra was concerned both theologies were equally silly, but since Kathy's conversion, some of their evangelical coworkers had started treating her as if she was seconds away from growing horns and filling out forms with repetitions of 666.

"Just meet him." Kathy pulled a business card out of her purse. "You've got reservations at an Italian restaurant, Butta La Pasta, on Saturday at eight. His number's on the back."

Debra didn't reach for the card. Kathy slid it across the table.

"His name's Eddie," Kathy added.

"Thanks for telling me," Debra muttered, but she called to confirm anyway.

**Debra's long road to self-acceptance as a necrophiliac** had been strewn with many obstacles. Unlike some, Debra fetished in her imagination only. She drew a strict line at breaking into tombs.

Which meant that if she was going to have any sex other than solo, she needed to date. During college, she'd hidden her preferences, submitting to a series of boring love affairs. Sometimes she'd felt her situation was similar to that of a lesbian dating men—decent company but no chemistry. After college, Debra experimented with confiding in her partners. Several left immediately. Worse, others stuck around for two or three more dates until they could politely squirm away. Debra got used to rabbit-eyed stares and hapless fidgeting.

Debra's last boyfriend, Walter, had seemed like an improvement. When she told him about her fetish, he got excited. "Maybe we could try some role play?" he suggested.

"Um ... sure," said Debra.

So she bought some candles, dressed her room in black curtains, and waited for Walter to ring the bell. When she answered the door, she discovered him standing on the front porch with a sheet over his head and his arms stretched out like a zombie's.

"Ouuuga ouuuga ouu," he declared, and Debra decided she was through with the living.

**Butta La Pasta featured red-checked wallpaper and the overwhelming smell of garlic.** The host led Debra to a table beside a gigantic, three-tiered fountain decorated with plaster cupids and fake roses.

*What the hell was Kathy thinking?* Debra asked herself. *What kind of guy would plan a date at a place like this?*

Debra got the answer to her question a moment later when Eddie approached. He had the kind of genial, broad-featured good looks that Debra associated with English boarding schools. He wore a white button-down shirt with neatly turned cuffs, black slacks, and Oxfords, and stood with the trained confidence of people who spend their free time reading books on body language. The only remarkable things about his appearance were his extremely large, deep-set eyes, so dark that the pupil and iris seemed to be the same hue. They stared out from beneath his blond brows, intense and unsettling.

Despite his poise, his voice wavered with anxiety. “Debra? Edgecombe? I’m Eddie, Kathy’s friend. You sounded nice on my answering machine. And you look nice, too. Did you get here okay? Have you ordered yet?”

Debra reached out to shake his hand on the theory that it might stem the flow of his conversation. “I waited for you. I asked for separate checks.”

Eddie slid into the vinyl chair and unfolded his menu. “This is a long one, isn’t it? That’s for the best, I guess. Lots of choices for everyone. What are you getting?”

“I settled on the linguini.”

“That sounds good. I’m sure it’ll be great.”

Debra watched Eddie’s mouth twitch with nervous energy. When he didn’t continue, she figured it was her turn to sift through The Date Questions. She settled on *What do you do?*

“I’m an allergist. It’s a natural career for me since I have problems with dust and dander. You’d think that would make me an outdoor person since I have a cat and high ceilings, but once you’re outside, there’s pollen, and that’s no better. What do you do?”

“I’m an accountant. It’s a natural career for me since I’m good with numbers and don’t like people very much.”

The waitress came by. Debra chose minestrone to go with her linguini. Eddie asked for just a salad, thank you.

“My father had a heart attack when he was thirty-six,” Eddie explained as the waitress collected their menus. “I have to watch my diet or my blood pressure skyrockets.” Without pausing, he switched subjects. “I like what you’re wearing. Your pantsuit, I mean. The color is, you know, very nice.”

The suit was black. “Thanks,” Debra said.

“It’s nice to see a woman who doesn’t go around nearly naked. It’s probably what they think men want. But some of us like a little mystery, you know? We don’t need to have everything on display. ‘Thirty-five percent off, today only! Get it while it lasts!’ Not that you would ... you know, sell yourself....”

Debra casted for a polite response. "You're very frank," she said.

The conversation lulled. Eventually, Eddie forced a laugh and said, "The Accountant and the Allergist. It has a ring. We could be a sitcom."

"Not one that could air on prime time."

Eddie's grin widened. He waggled his eyebrows suggestively. "Oh?"

"Not the way you're thinking," said Debra flatly.

The whole conversation was giving her a headache. But the silences were even worse.

"So, how do you cure dust allergies?" she asked.

"Medications can help," said Eddie. "In persistent cases, you can go in for a series of shots. But for really bad cases, like mine, a lot of patients go outside Western medicine. Homeopathy, acupuncture ... hypnosis can be very good...."

"What do you use?"

"I used to go in for shots. These days I, uh...."

"Yes?"

Color rushed into Eddie's cheeks. "Most people think hypnosis is all past life regression and repressed memories. But hypnosis can be very therapeutic. A good hypnotherapist can put you in touch with your subconscious."

"Your dust allergy is caused by your subconscious?"

"Well, no."

"Ah, well then. That makes perfect sense."

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Debra had the sensation of having kicked a puppy.

"Listen," she said. "You've been blunt with me. It's only fair of me to do the same. Whatever Kathy told you, it's only part of the story. I appreciate your coming out here, but this isn't going to work."

Eddie's face fell. "Oh, er, well," he stammered. "Kathy warned me that you might not. Well. Most women don't.... Well. It's all right."

Debra felt another flash of guilt. "We can stay and eat."

"Well, we could, yes. It's just that I ... well, it's only a salad, isn't it?" Eddie forced a smile. "Enjoy it with your linguini."

Eddie tried to stand up, which took some time as he tried to figure out the complicated logistics of freeing his chair from the back corner without smacking into the fountain.

He really was nice looking, thought Debra. Too bad he wasn't a few days into a good rot.

"I didn't mean to hurt your feelings," Debra said.

"It's okay, really," said Eddie, at which point the waitress arrived with a broom and distracted Debra long enough for Eddie to slip out the door.

**The next day at work, Kathy didn't show up in the break room.**

Debra grabbed her *For a good prime call: 555.793.7319* mug and went to Kathy's cubicle.

"I hope I didn't upset your friend too much," Debra said.

Kathy hammered numbers into her adding machine. "You went. You tried."

"So I did upset him."

"Eddie is easily disappointed. He has bad luck with women."

"So you thought he'd be good for me?"

"I know he'd be good for you."

"If I'd known his ego was so fragile, I would never have gone. It's completely unfair of you to blame me."

"I'm not blaming you."

"It seems like you are."

Kathy swiveled her chair around to face Debra. "Maybe I am, but trust me. I know what's good for you."

"A nervous New Age allergist? You don't know me that well."

"Some of us perceive things on a level you aren't aware of."

"Is that how you met him?" Debra pressed. "Through your New Age stuff?"

Kathy's mouth tightened. "He runs an alternative medicine

group. I went with my acupuncturist. What does that have to do with anything?”

“It’s another thing we don’t have in common! ‘Hello, I’m a necrophiliac, and also I think everything you believe is hogwash.’ Don’t you think it’s complicated enough for me to date?”

“Look, no one knows you better than I do. He can give you what you want.”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t ask for details, okay? I didn’t tell him your fantasies, and I won’t tell you his. If you want to know, you’ll have to pick up your phone and ask him.” Kathy pivoted back to her computer screen. “Or forget it. It’s up to you.”

**Eddie suggested they meet in his apartment. He lived in the** attic of a dilapidated Victorian with a dormer window that stared down at the street like a gigantic eye. Debra knocked once. Eddie whipped open the door before her knuckles could land a second time.

The parlor was crammed wall to wall with antique furniture: overfilled curio cabinets, high-backed chairs, fringed floor lamps. An orange tabby sat on the highest shelf of a mahogany bookcase, nestled beside a fully articulated sparrow skeleton, one marmalade paw draping over the side. Green eyes tracked Debra’s progress.

“Greetings,” said Eddie. He gestured for Debra to sit on a love seat upholstered in lime-colored velvet. His demeanor was more awkward than it had been the previous night, though that hardly seemed possible.

“Kathy says I should give this another shot,” said Debra. “Sorry I blew you off last night.”

“It’s okay. I’m not offended.”

Eddie’s gaze darted nervously toward Debra and then swung away like a pendulum. His eyes were on her hands, the brass oil lamp, the faux-marble end table, her hands again.

"Kathy says I should ask what you can do for me," Debra said.

"I can't answer that."

Debra started to stand. "Then I apologize for wasting your time. Again."

"No, it's not exactly—I mean, I don't know anything about you, so how can I know?"

"Know what?"

"It's just that if I know Kathy, then she's plotting something. But I can't figure out my part in the plot until you tell me yours. Do you have any idea what I'm talking about?"

Long ago, Debra had decided that necrophilia wasn't something to be ashamed of. Fetishes happened. They weren't anyone's fault. As long as she didn't break into mortuaries to assault the supine and embalmed, she shouldn't be any more embarrassed than, say, a man who fantasized about women in leather.

Debra believed this with about fifty percent of her being about fifty percent of the time. It was hard, if not impossible, to get rid of the feelings of disgust that had been buried in her psyche since adolescence. She covered her insecurities with layers of humor and sarcasm, but it was still all too easy for a stray comment to turn her back into that fourteen-year-old girl who had thought she should kill herself if dead people were what she wanted.

All that aside, she believed one hundred percent in her ability as a cynic to deliver anything with a flat gaze and a monotone. So, with a flat gaze and a monotone, she said, "I'm a necrophiliac."

Eddie's subsequent laughter was so loud that the startled orange cat leapt down from the bookshelf, glared at Eddie and Debra, and stalked out of the room.

Debra bristled at Eddie's amusement. "What? Do you own a mortuary or something?"

"It's kind of scary how Kathy puts things together. I offered to cure her fear of spiders once. She looked at me and said, 'Eddie, I had no idea you found me so attractive.'"

"I'm not afraid of spiders."

"Of course not, it's just ..." He leaned forward. "I have a hypnofetish. I mean, it's nothing immoral. You could trust me to cure a phobia for you, no problem. I just happen to really, well, like what I do. Which is part of the reason I do it as a hobby instead of professionally."

"So you're saying you can hypnotize me not to be a necrophiliac?"

"Well, maybe, but I think what Kathy meant was ... I could hypnotize you to think I'm dead."

Debra's laugh came out as a short, sharp bark. "Would that work?"

"If you can be hypnotized. Some people can't."

Eddie pulled a scalloped-backed chair into the center of the room. He gestured for Debra to sit.

Debra looked down at the chair. "I don't even know you," she said. After a moment's thought, she added, "I suppose I know you as well as any random dead person I might fall in lust with. You won't hypnotize me to think I'm a dog and follow you around on all fours?"

"Would Kathy have fixed us up if I did things like that?" Eddie asked. "You've probably heard people say that when you're under hypnosis you won't do anything that you're morally opposed to. That's true. I can't, for instance, hypnotize you to murder someone."

"Well, that would be one way to get me a corpse," Debra muttered.

She wasn't sure about this. Hell, she wasn't sure she should even still be in his apartment, but the moment had its own strange gravity.

Debra sat. Eddie moved to stand in front of her. In the dim light from the shaded Victorian lamps, his eyes seemed even larger and darker than they had before.

Eddie's nervous voice shifted lower until it sounded resonant and theatrical. "Now, I want you to relax," he said. "Are you relaxing? Good. Feel the blood slowing in your veins. Release the tension in your muscles, starting at your temples and moving down, down through your neck, your shoulders, your back. There you go. You look less tense

already. Let your eyes fall closed....”

Debra wouldn't have gone along with it if she'd believed in hypnosis. She'd always figured hypnosis was a dime-store magic trick, and that whatever happened, she could snap awake without any trouble.

Instead, she found herself relaxing. Her arms tingled as her circulation slowed. Her limbs sagged. Her breath entered and left her lungs in a deep, rhythmic flow.

The next thing Debra knew, she and Eddie were lying together on his four-poster bed. “This was only an experiment,” he protested. She placed her finger over his lips to silence him.

Eddie's skin felt like marble, cold and smooth and etched with stagnant veins. His flesh smelled of embalming fluid, with a rancid hint beneath. There was no blood. Debra knew that some necrophiliacs liked to watch blood well up in their lovers' mouths, but she had never been drawn by gore.

Eddie writhed as Debra examined his body. The hypnotic spell incorporated his movements into her fantasy. His throes became rigor mortis. His moans became the sound of air hissing through his lips.

There was beauty in this. Debra had never been able to explain it. Lavishing pleasure on a corpse heightened her awareness of her own ephemeral physicality. Like the body that was numb to her caresses, she too had only a limited amount of time before she was called to her grave—

—and then the spell was over.

Debra's first reaction was to feel sad. The moment of ultimate transience had been made eternal. What should have been momentary could be repeated and repeated.

On the other hand, it could be repeated and repeated.

Eddie lay supine, his eyes sleepily half-lidded. He laid his hand gently on the small of Debra's back.

Debra began to feel embarrassed. “I hope that wasn't boring for you.”

“What man wouldn't want to lie back and let a woman do the

work? We're all fundamentally lazy."

Debra forced a laugh. The room was cold; goose bumps rose along her skin.

Eddie kept talking. "What I like is, well, knowing that you're under my control. And that was great. I mean, you're a really intense subject."

Debra pulled away from Eddie's touch. She got to her feet and took the bed sheet with her. She knew that it was ridiculous to worry about him seeing her naked now, but she clung to the sheet anyway as she put on her clothes.

"I have to go," she said.

"Hey, can I walk you out?"

Debra shook her head. "No need. I can take care of myself," she said, and fled out the door.

**"It was a nice evening," Debra told Kathy in the morning. She had drunk three cups of coffee and was trying to work through her break while Kathy pestered her.**

"Did you find out anything interesting?" Kathy pressed.

"We talked about it."

"And?"

"And we talked about it. I'm sorry, I can't chat right now. I have to get this done by three."

Kathy frowned. She rapped her nails on the cubicle wall. Her moonstone and garnet bracelets clacked against each other. "Well," she said, at last. "You take your own time, hon. I'll be here when you want to talk."

**All day, Debra indulged in self-flagellation. She felt inadequate and trembling and exposed. She thought of Eddie and the goose bumps rose across her skin again, and she knew that part of the reason she felt so humiliated was that she was aroused. Sharing her arousal with someone else had brought back all her old insecurities about her sexuality. She felt disgusted by her own skin.**

*What are you embarrassed for?* she chided herself. *Don't you remember last night? He's just another dead guy.*

No amount of cynical cajoling could dispel her bad humor.

She went home alone after work and tried to think about something else. She considered calling someone, but she'd become humorless and work-obsessed by her own description. Kathy was her only close friend and she didn't want to talk to Kathy. She could call her sister, but Nina would be having dinner with her husband and kids, and Debra didn't want to face another round of *wouldn't you be happier if you just settled down?*

Why had she let Kathy talk her into this date? She'd had a happy stasis. She liked her work. She liked her apartment. She enjoyed being alone. Her life had been a perfectly balanced equation, simple and perfect in the way that A and B added up to C. The last thing she'd needed was to add in an unknown variable D, which come to think of it stood for *date*, which was entirely the problem.

Around dusk, Debra heard knocking at her door. She felt a sense of relief as she went to let Kathy in. It would probably be better to talk all this out, even if it was embarrassing.

Instead, she found Eddie at her threshold. He held out a single rose.

"I hope this isn't presumptuous," he said.

"Um," said Debra, not moving to take the stem. "I don't know if presumptuous is the word. How did you find out where I live?"

Eddie shrugged. "Kathy."

"Kathy wouldn't give out my apartment number."

Eddie looked over Debra's shoulder into her dimly lit, undecorated apartment. He clearly wanted an invitation. Debra held her ground.

"I wanted to talk to you about last night," said Eddie.

Debra said, "I thought I was more comfortable with things than I am. It's not your fault. It's what I told you before. I'm not ready to be in a relationship. Last night made that clear."

"But I thought it went well." Eddie looked crushed. His brows

sagged miserably over his dark, enormous eyes. He extended the bloom again. “At least take the rose?”

Debra wanted Eddie to go away, but she didn’t want to hurt his feelings. She thought he might go more quickly and quietly if she did what he wanted. She reached out. “All right.”

Eddie’s fingers brushed Debra’s as she took the rose. He leaned in close, his breath warm on her face.

“You mesmerize me,” he said.

Debra blinked. She felt a little dizzy. She looked down at the rose in her hand and felt a strange tingle. She’d never been one for romantic gestures. When she’d done the accounting for her sister’s wedding, she’d set aside the floral bill specifically so that she could lecture Nina on how crazy it was to spend that much money on a bunch of bee attractors that would die in a day or two anyway. Yet for some strange, incomprehensible reason, this rose felt almost ... mesmerizing.

“Are you sure you won’t let me take you out?” asked Eddie.

Debra watched his huge, dark eyes. “I don’t know, I ... well, I suppose, why not?”

**They went out for Chinese food and ended up at a late night showing of *Night of the Living Dead*.**

“Does this do it for you?” Eddie asked.

Debra rolled her eyes. “No, that’s not what it’s about at all,” she said, but before she could explain about timelessness and repose and the exquisite beauty of the ephemeral, they were making out.

His fingers tangled in her hair. Her hands wandered down his back. Around his tongue, she managed to suggest, “Next time we’ll go see a movie with a hypnotist in it.”

“No, what we really need is to rent some old B horror,” Eddie said. “I bet we can find one with a hypnotist *and* a zombie.”

Debra broke away from the kiss. She grabbed Eddie’s hand. “Come on,” she said, even though the nearest person was several aisles away. “We should go. We don’t want to disturb anyone.”

They retired to Eddie's apartment. Eddie proposed being a reanimated corpse for the night, and even though Debra didn't think it would do anything for her, she agreed.

Despite Debra's expectations, it was amazing. She drove home humming "Monster Mash."

The next day at work, Kathy caught sight of Eddie's rose, which Debra had put into a mug reading *a good accountant is a debit to her profession*.

"Worked out how you feel?" Kathy asked.

Debra grinned. "Great would be one word for it."

"Pleased?" Kathy proposed.

"Elated."

"Satisfied?"

"Very." Debra clasped Kathy's fingers, and laid a kiss on one of her many rings. "Forgive me for doubting you."

Kathy waved it off airily. "I never refuse a penitent. Just don't let it happen again."

**That night, there was another rose. Eddie and Debra skipped** the trip out and stayed in Eddie's apartment. Eddie indulged what Debra guessed was one of his favorite pastimes, showing off his collection of rare books about hypnotism.

"What's that?" Debra asked, pointing to a woodcut of a woman in a bathtub. A man in eighteenth-century dress was rubbing an iron rod between her breasts to her evident delight.

"That's Mesmer, the father of hypnotism. He believed he could cure patients by using magnets." Eddie pointed to the girl in the tub. "He would have made her swallow iron before doing this. He was actually hypnotizing his patients, but he thought he was curing them with his animal magnetism. That's where we get the word *mesmerize*."

A thrill ran through Debra at the mention of being mesmerized. She eased the book out of Eddie's hand.

"Feel free to try your animal magnetism on me any time," she

said.

They experimented with time of death. Eddie hypnotized Debra to find him warm, cold, freshly deceased, embalmed, moldy, and worm-eaten. They decided to mix in some exotic settings. Mortuaries were an early favorite, quickly supplanted by Egyptian pyramids, church catacombs, medieval wakes, and even once the bathroom scene from *Clerks*.

That one prompted a question from Eddie. "I understand how male necrophiliacs do it, but what do women do with real corpses? They can't all die at attention."

"Skeletons have hands," she said.

The two of them interrupted their idyll only for brief forays into the outside world: trips to the store for cigarettes, coffee, and cheese-cake; meandering walks through the city streets; the inevitable hours at the office. Their longest time apart was when Debra took a trip to her apartment to pack enough clothes and necessities that she could stay with Eddie indefinitely.

That Thursday, Eddie kissed Debra's hand and presented her with the daily rose. "It's the last one," he said with a smile.

"You must have given me a dozen of these by now," Debra said. She put it in the ornate brass vase where she kept all the others except the one she'd taken to work.

"A baker's dozen," Eddie said. "The florist sells them in bunches of thirteen."

Debra examined the petals of the older roses for browning. "You bought them all at once? Didn't you give me the first one the day after we ... you know ... the first time?"

Eddie nodded. "Roses for my rose."

Debra plucked away a withering leaf. "Wasn't that a little fast? I might have sent you away and never spoken to you again."

Eddie came up behind her, and began to kiss her neck. "I thought it was worth the risk, my mesmerizing one."

At the word *mesmerize*, a pleasant shiver worked its way along

Debra's spine. Suddenly, she couldn't remember what she'd been thinking about the roses. She felt hot and muddled. She had the sense of grasping for something just beyond her reach, something she'd just figured out.

"I was thinking of going home tonight," she murmured, still confused. "I have a lot of work to do. I've been distracted lately at the office."

"Don't," said Eddie.

"I need to."

"I'm sure we can think of something more fun. You can be Lizzie Borden. I'll suffer the forty whacks."

"Lizzie killed her parents."

"Maybe she was planning to off her boyfriend, too."

"Thanks for the offer, but I think we need to save the axe for another time."

Eddie clasped Debra's waist. "Stay," he said.

She struggled. "No! I—"

"Let me find a way to mesmerize you."

Debra's mouth went dry. She felt the volition drain from her muscles; she went slack, allowing Eddie to pull her into his embrace.

"All right," she said. "I'll stay."

The roses in the brass vase were bright crimson, the shade of newly shed blood. They weren't decaying yet, but they were approaching their zenith: the stage when the petals stretched to their fullest, as though taking a final bow before yielding to death.

**"You and Eddie have been cloistering yourselves like a couple of nuns,"** Kathy said. She paused. "Horny nuns." She paused again. "Never mind. The point is: Greg and I are hosting a gathering for the fall equinox. We want you to come."

Debra grumbled. "Kathy, you know how I feel about your New Age friends."

"I thought Eddie might have helped you get over that."

“We’ll come,” said Debra. “If it works for Eddie.”

**At first, Eddie reacted to the promise of interacting as a couple** with excitement. He crowed about getting to show off his girl, which made Debra feel uncomfortably like a blue-ribbon racehorse. She considered saying so, but she didn’t want to snipe when Eddie meant to be sweet.

As the week wore toward Friday, Eddie became moody. He went to bed early while Debra reviewed last week’s figures, without bothering to say goodnight. In the morning, he made coffee for one and snarled at the orange cat (whose name was Pocket Watch) when she tried to settle on his lap. He became furious when Debra, who had finally finished her work, went to pull down one of his books on hypnosis.

“I have a system for organizing those!” he said, snatching the book away.

“What’s this really about?” she asked.

He gestured at her clothes. “You’re going to wear *that*? To a party?”

Debra looked down at her button-down shirt and slacks.

“What’s wrong with it?”

“They’re *men’s clothes*,” he said.

“Men’s clothes are cheaper.”

“People will be there. People I know. You’re going to embarrass me.”

“I thought you liked women who don’t go around nearly naked.”

“You can be modest without being a slob.”

That was enough. Debra crossed the room to grab her briefcase. Eddie moved to intersect her path.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“It’s time for work.”

“Do you know how much I do for you? How much I put up with to give you what you want?”

“Get out of my way, please.”

They stood, shoulder to shoulder, at a momentary impasse. Eddie reached out to brush Debra's cheek. Pocket Watch eyed them, the fur on her spine extended.

"Don't get mad," Eddie said. "Give me a smile before you go."

Debra lifted the corners of her mouth.

"There," said Eddie. He leaned in to kiss her. "All I want is for us to be a presentable couple. I want my friends to like you. That's not worth getting angry about, is it?"

Debra kept her smile in place as she took her briefcase and went out the door. It followed her down the stairs and out onto the sidewalk, the enormous eye of the dormer window watching as she walked to her car.

**Eddie visited unexpectedly at work during lunch. Debra hardly** remembered what he said, how she ended up back in his apartment, his voice rich, the trance deep, the sex desperate and fast. They pressed together a long time afterward, slick and spent.

He gave her a shoe box wrapped in brown paper. Inside there was a pair of scarlet pumps. She tried to tell him she didn't want them, but he said something, and then she didn't feel like protesting anymore. He slid the pumps onto her feet and knelt beside the bed, stroking the emphasized slope of her calf.

"Just beautiful," he said, and leaned her across the bed to kiss her, his hands caging her wrists, his tongue in her mouth, her feet in the pumps dangling over the side of the bed.

**Debra wore the damn heels to the party.**

"These things are torture devices," said Debra, tottering up the path to Kathy's craftsman. "They should have left them in the middle ages."

"Don't exaggerate," said Eddie.

Kathy greeted them at the door in a flutter of red gauze layered with heavy silver-and-gemstone necklaces. Her husband Greg stood nearby, eating chocolates and discussing criminal law with a blonde

in a cheongsam. Kathy frowned when she saw Debra. "I don't think I've ever seen you in a skirt before. Are those heels?"

Debra shrugged self-consciously. Eddie's smile grew wider. He put his hands on her shoulders as if he were presenting her at a debutante's ball. "Doesn't she look beautiful?"

"She looks nice," said Kathy. "She just doesn't look like my Debra."

Inside, there were cocktails. Someone had put together a tray of vegan appetizers in the shape of a penis and testicles, and several people were milling around the platter making jokes about what they would have been doing at a *real* autumn equinox. Candles glittered on every surface, brown and red and wheat gold. The scents of patchouli and sandalwood thickened the air.

Debra listened for a moment as a woman with a bleached buzz cut discussed her meditation routine with a man wearing camouflage and a nose ring.

"Oh for spit's sake," complained Debra. "Did he just say he's sending out mental vibrations to alien intelligences?"

Eddie glared at her.

Debra shuffled ashamedly. "It's not like I would have said anything to him," she muttered.

A woman in multi-layered, flowered skirts clasped Eddie's hands and pulled him aside to talk about past-life regression through hypnosis. Debra tried to listen, but she couldn't follow their conversation, and anyway she knew her contributions wouldn't be welcome.

She scanned the other guests. A man in a business suit was having a congenial discussion with a college-aged girl in jeans. "I really admire Kathy's visualization," said the girl, looking around the room. "This house is gorgeous."

Debra put on a friendly smile. "What kind of accountant would she be if she couldn't find a good shelter?"

It was the kind of joke that would have killed in the office. The man and girl turned to Debra, their body language clearly indicating they didn't appreciate her interjection.

"Shelter," repeated Debra. "Like a tax shelter."

"Funny," said the girl flatly.

The couple wandered off. Debra tottered back a step toward Eddie. She was beginning to wonder if she should ditch him and go find a drink when a large, bearded man caught her eye from a few steps away. He ambled over, sipping casually from a glass of white wine.

"Has anyone ever told you that you have an indigo aura?" he asked.

Debra hated those kinds of conversational sallies. They were inevitably hard to parry without giving offense. "I always assumed my aura was black," she said.

"Why?"

"I like black."

"Indigo is a good color. It means you're worldly and practical. I bet you don't believe in the paranormal."

Debra snorted. "What tipped you off?"

"Indigo is often associated with skeptics. Personally, I like skeptics. It signals an active mind."

Debra smiled despite herself. The man extended his hand.

"Bertrand Hurst," he said.

"Debra Edgecombe," she answered, shaking. "I work with Kathy."

"Accountant?"

"One of the few, the proud, the tedious."

"Come on. I doubt you're tedious."

Bertrand reached to touch Debra's cheek. His fingertips brushed her skin and she felt sudden, intense revulsion. She flinched, involuntarily.

Bertrand looked taken aback. "Sorry," he said. "Someone else has their mark on you. You didn't seem like the type."

Debra wiped at her face as if she could purge the sensation of his touch. She felt as though she'd been swarmed by maggots. She could hardly even look at him.

Eddie looked over from his conversation. His eyes hardened. He took Debra by the elbow. "What's going on?"

"I was only observing your girlfriend's striking indigo aura," said Bertrand. "No harm intended. Now if you'll excuse me, I believe Kathy wanted me to light a brown candle to success in the new year."

Bertrand inclined his head toward Debra and Eddie in succession, and then ambled into the crowd. Eddie's grip remained fastened on Debra's elbow. She looked up at his large, dark eyes, and felt afraid.

**They left before dinner. Eddie's hands were stiff on the wheel as** they drove back, his eyes focused coldly on the road. Debra twisted in her seat as they drove past the turn that would lead to her apartment.

"I thought I should go home tonight," she said.

"You embarrass me in front of everyone, and now you want to leave me alone?" asked Eddie. "What's wrong? Haven't you humiliated me enough?"

He parked beneath the dormer eye. Without speaking, he led her up the narrow stairway and into his apartment. Pocket Watch watched him throw home the bolt on the door once they were inside. She leapt from her perch on the bookshelf and sauntered out of the front room, as if deciding it would be a good night to hide.

"You have a problem with men," said Eddie. "Do you want all men to die, Debra?"

Debra began to protest. Eddie cut her off.

"No, I'm sure it isn't conscious. It's an ingrained problem. You're threatened by us, so you fantasize about us being dead because it makes us powerless. And now you're taking out your anxieties on me."

He shook his head. His expression showed hard-worn resentment.

"Night after night, I cater to your fantasies. I let you crawl over me and pretend ... what you pretend. And when I ask you to wear a pair of high heels, you can't even do that without complaining. And

then you hit on other men while I'm standing right there?"

Debra trembled with exhaustion. Eddie's face was flushed, flushed with anger she supposed, but his expression was the same as when they were having sex. He neared her, his body a little too close to her body, his face a little too close to her face.

"Don't worry, Debra. I know it's not your fault. It's something wrong in your head, that's all. I'll take care of you. I can get rid of the problem at its source." He brushed his fingers across her wrist. Her heart raced. "Let me cure your necrophilia."

Debra burned with confusion. The conversation felt strange and unreal. Eddie's words blurred into her head so that she seemed to feel them rather than hear them.

"Do this for me, Debra," he said. "Let me mesmerize you. Your necrophilia has damaged your psyche. It's damaged your life. Are you going to let it damage our relationship, too? Let me mesmerize you...."

Debra felt a strange sensation of splitting, as if she were becoming two people. One half knew that she should run down the rickety stairs and then change her locks and her phone number. The other knew that Eddie was right. Necrophilia *was* a sickness. How many psych papers had she read, hoping this would be the one that had discovered a cure for sexual fixation?

Eddie's fingers traced the line of her face. "You know I love you, Debra. I want to do what's best for you. My mesmerizing one."

Debra's hands shook. She could barely breathe. She tried to tell Eddie to stop, but he kept coming after her. His hands closed on her wrists. She broke his grip. He tried to force her onto the lime velvet love seat. She twisted away.

His expression was furious now. He barreled toward Debra, rushing her like an angry animal. She jumped aside. He crashed into a bookcase, books and bird skeletons and sepia-toned historical photographs clattering to the ground. He pulled himself up and started toward her again.

Debra grabbed something from the pile of fallen curios. She

didn't even think. Her arm swung in one clean, strong arc. Eddie fell to the floor, felled by an enormous, leather-bound copy of *The History of Mesmerism*.

**For the first few moments that Eddie lay on the floor, unmoving,** Debra wondered what it would be like to fuck his corpse for real.

In the end, she decided that she wouldn't fuck Eddie again if he were the last dead thing on earth. She attached a note explaining as much to the bouquet of wilting red roses she sent to his hospital room after the doctors announced that he would, unfortunately, recover.

**Debra and Kathy discussed it over coffee in the break room,** drinking from *Sweet as 3.14159* and *Don't drink and derive*.

"I don't understand," Kathy said. "I thought you couldn't do anything under hypnosis that you thought was wrong."

"There are a lot of things you don't really want to do but that you don't think are morally wrong. Eddie knew I was conflicted about my sexuality. He played on my ambivalence. It wasn't until he pushed me too fast and too hard that the trance finally broke." Debra sipped her coffee. "He implanted a number of commands during our first session. He tried to control me with a trigger word that would make me do whatever he wanted."

"What word?"

Debra grimaced. "*Mesmerize*," she said, with a little shudder.

"How did you figure all of it out?"

"I've been doing a little reading."

Kathy shook her head. "So he's going to recover?"

"One hundred percent, apparently. But it'll be a few painful months before then."

"Well, if we can't get him dead," said Kathy, "maybe we can screw him on the other inevitability."

"You want to mess up his taxes?"

Kathy grinned. "Guess which firm he hired to do them?"

Debra laughed briefly. "Go ahead if you want to, but I've got my own plans for revenge."

"Yeah?"

"Well, I say revenge, but it's more for me than for him...."

**Corpses lined the catacomb walls like art pieces in a museum.**

A monk's mummified body stood mounted at the fore of the chamber, hands clasped piously before him. The skeletal corpses of young men and women stood along the walls, lifting their faces toward heaven. A pair of dead children sat together on a wooden bench at the back, holding hands, their eye sockets hollow and dark.

A single fresh body lay alone on a bier, surrounded by candles. Debra knelt beside him. The abbess had assigned her the honor of praying over his remains even though she had only recently taken the veil, but she couldn't help lifting her eyes from her contemplation to watch his body. He'd been a man of extraordinary beauty. They said he'd been uncommonly virtuous, too—so pure that he'd never been sullied by a woman's touch.

Debra knew she shouldn't, but she reached up to touch his motionless form. His sculpted chest still held a hint of warmth as she slid her palm across his heart. His features remained as serene and immobile as if carved from marble.

"Mmm, that feels so good," Peter groaned as Debra slid down on him. Peter was a swimmer at the local community college who had a thing for older women.

"Shhh," Debra said. "Lie back."

Obediently, Peter closed his eyes and relaxed. Debra had to admit he was a good lover. He wasn't shy about saying that he found it really hot that Debra insisted on doing everything, but he kept forgetting to lie still. She forgave him for his flaws as she traced her fingers down his perfect abdominals.

The candles flickered, spattering drops of hot wax across the

bier. The catacomb's reek of decay clashed with the beauty of the young man's body. Debra leaned forward to kiss his mouth.

*How sad it is that you can't feel this*, she thought, pressing her cheek against his still, breathless chest.

"That is *so fucking good*," Peter groaned. He flailed, knocking a book off of Debra's nightstand. It made a *thunk* against the rug. "What was that?" Peter asked.

Debra reached over the side of the bed and retrieved the book. The title looped in bold red letters across the cover: *Erotic Pleasure through Self-Hypnosis*. She'd promised to teach Peter how to do it, but now was not the time.

"Nothing important." She traced her finger around the bud of his nipple. "Now hush," she said, and leaned in for another kiss.



# Two Poems

**Brian Cochran**

## Migration

Same roads  
up and down  
day in, day out

some go to seed  
others to birds

their call calling  
caw cawing  
ttreet ttreeting

and all those mnemonics  
mnemonicking  
(old sam peabody, peabody)

the rusty oil-derrick rrrrreeork  
of the shocked heron, shocking  
as anything I've ever heard  
as pure sound

what does it mean to be  
a brain mapped to wind

to know the rivers all the way to Texas

to make a line fifteen, twenty miles long

continuous, ten or more birds thick,  
still going strong at nightfall

## **Meditation Practice**

Swallows, a constellation of leaves

their slate-on-metal plea bargain with the air

the last daylight barge passing under the bridge,  
rides high, empty

leaves, hold your hats on

new version of the old fish story:  
there were dozens of vireos here, thursday

river dropped at least 10 feet, guy in the pickup says

oriole without a song  
just sort of puts out notes

just sort of like this

the pelican comes in

sky's last thought for evening



# **Anniversary Report**

*Reflections on a college  
reunion not attended*

**Michael Milburn**

And did you get what you wanted  
from this life, even so?

—Raymond Carver, “Late Fragment”

**In the early 1980s my wife Mary and I, both of us aspiring**

poets, lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where I worked in a small library and Mary organized trade shows for a computer company. One of Mary’s colleagues, David, an expert in computer networks, prized her marketing skills, and when he left to start his own consulting firm, he hired her. David and his wife Susan soon began to invite us to their house for dinner; they spent most of their time around businesspeople and were intrigued by Mary’s and my literary pursuits. While it was easier to talk about writing than about David’s arcane computer work, I soon gathered that his skills were in demand. Mary told me of sending out invoices charging as much for a three-day consultation as I made in a year at the library.

David and Susan owned a penthouse condominium off Harvard Street, just a block from the Harvard Union, where he and I had eaten our meals as freshmen. It was at Harvard that David began to explore his interest in computers, then a nascent field, while I took a writing course that sparked my love of poetry. As I sat in his and Susan’s expensively furnished living room, sharing my experiences of trying to get published, I was struck by how our lives had diverged since college. Whereas David’s gift for computers had become staggeringly lucrative, mine for poetry would never provide me with enough to live on. I tried to imagine our lives with our circumstances reversed: poetry the hot new industry and computer science the labor of love. On days when I spent hours folding copies of my poems to send to literary magazines—most of which, I knew, would return them with rejection slips—I couldn’t see David performing a task that promised as little spiritual or monetary reward. Although

he took a flattering interest in Mary's and my writing, I felt that he looked upon us as curiosities.

Our differences led me to reflect on the nature of success. How much of it was due to temperament, talent, chance, or simply one's definition of the term? The notion was complicated by my affluent background, as I inherited material circumstances that many people hoping to be successful would aspire to. Even in my youth, when I was simply conforming to my parents' lives—swimming in the family pool, matriculating at prep school—most observers would have envied my situation. I had done nothing in my life except to be born and cooperate with adults, yet I already had a head start in the race to prosperity.

Maybe that's why I gravitated toward poetry. It seemed like a humble pursuit—though not, I hoped, self-consciously humble, as when a rich kid chooses to work construction—and my success as a poet would depend on me alone. My father might have helped to win me admittance to a good law school or country club, but held no sway over the poetry editor of the *Indiana Review*. Even here, though, the cushion of family money ensured that I would never become penniless or have to take a more demanding job to survive. The funds that provided this cushion were neither extravagant nor unlimited—if I had wanted a summer house or luxury car I would have had to choose more profitable and time-consuming employment. But such tokens of wealth had made me uncomfortable as a child, having nothing to do with my own accomplishments.

My background fascinated David. In my experience, the people most curious about inherited money are the ones concerned with acquiring wealth on their own. They wonder how families with old money live, as if seeking an example for how they should live so as not to appear unsophisticated. Sometimes their interest masks envy or resentment, as if they want to clarify that they are working for their advantage and I am not (though I never need reminding of that). They press me with questions about how many servants worked in my parents' house, or ask why I go to cheap restaurants

when I could afford fancy ones. David often grilled me about my upbringing like an anthropologist interviewing a member of a newly discovered tribe. But I had my own burning interest in his life, about which he appeared to lack any curiosity. His questions revealed a concern with how to adapt to success, not any desire to analyze it.

Eventually, Mary found the computer business too stressful and took a job teaching writing in Syracuse, New York. Soon after the move, she and I divorced. Periodically, Mary heard from David and Susan that they were still together and happy, and that the consulting business continued to thrive. I endured my own struggles with envy. David seemed to have achieved both personal and professional success while I, in my mid-thirties, had a failed marriage and (since relocating to Syracuse) a low-paying teaching job that offered no health insurance. My poetry satisfied me, but it was not remunerative or in demand by anyone outside a very small circle of family and friends. My only tangible success, and it was a strong one, was the son that Mary and I had before we left Boston.

In my twenties, success was something to look forward to: tenured teaching jobs, loyal publishers, a stable family. In my thirties, I began to feel impatient for these rewards, and uneasy that my efforts to attain them had fallen short. I didn't think then that they were out of reach, just that I was ready to look at my life in terms of accomplishment as well as potential. As I aspired to more immediate satisfaction in the years after the move, David remained a point of reference for my frequent self-appraisals. In my late forties, I found myself beginning to look backward, a shift precipitated by my twenty-fifth college reunion.

**I had grown accustomed to names familiar from my college** classes appearing as by-lines in *The New York Times*, or in articles from the business, political, or arts sections of that newspaper. But I never considered attending Harvard's alumni celebrations in Cambridge. I had worked at the university for ten years after graduation and grown sick of the place, so the prospect of revisiting the skinny

streets, spires, and river views did not hold the same charm for me as for my long-absent classmates. Instead, my reunion took place within a thick crimson hardbound volume that arrived at my house in May.

Having compared my life to David's up to that point, I now had an abundance of new models to consult: At 1,300 pages, the reunion book contains entries from just over half of the Class of 1979. These entries describe myriad sentiments and experiences, including joy, tragedy, illness, healing, ambition, self-destruction, and good and bad luck. A few entries, like mine, merely give an address. But others offer detailed résumés, family information, a recent photo to pair with the one from the 1975 freshman facebook, and lengthy essays. For the authors of these essays Harvard remains a significant touchstone, as it does for me. These grateful alums were active in college life as undergraduates and now work in professions—law, medicine, business, academia—that prize a Harvard degree.

These are people whose lives have apparently turned out well. Not all of the contributors acquired money or prestige, or enjoy stable family lives. Nevertheless, one can't read far without encountering not just one success story, but page after page of them. Among my classmates are a software executive, a venture capitalist, a company president, and a nuclear pharmacist. There are doctors and lawyers, managers and consultants, professors across several disciplines. The Class of 1979 also includes writers and teachers, many of them with credentials far more prestigious than mine. Stories of prosperity and contentment dominate; not a single graduate confesses to being involuntarily unemployed. The happiest of my classmates cherish their roles within a tradition. They define themselves in terms of their attendance at Harvard and seem to cultivate this connection more fiercely as their graduation day recedes, having used Harvard as a springboard to vocations that capitalize on its instruction, prestige, or both.

My artist classmates, who I had expected to be philosophical about success, disappointed me. Few had grown rich from their

painting, writing, or musicianship, but several had won recognition and even fame. Having always thought of insecurity as an unavoidable, even healthy trait for an artist, I was struck by their satisfaction with their careers. One woman, who began a painting career soon after graduation, listed a twenty-year run of grants and exhibits, one affirmation after another. I wouldn't have thought that a career that began with a graduate—even a Harvard graduate—moving to New York City to paint could turn out so well. Like her classmates in other fields, this woman exhibited no self-doubt about her rewards. Neither did the man who left his law practice to write. The language he uses to relate his feats brims with confidence. He quickly published an acclaimed memoir and saw his subsequent book made into a Hollywood film. Turning his hand to documentary filmmaking, he produced a dozen films, including a feature for HBO. He also recently revived his interest in music and performed on television with two world-famous accompanists.

The extravagance of my classmates' professional achievements did not surprise me. I was less prepared for their personal success. Family stability was also the rule rather than the exception. Twenty consecutive entries contained nineteen marriages, all reported to be secure, with an average length of eleven years. Divorces were infrequent and when they happened, happy remarriages often followed. Many wrote contentedly about their enduring love for their spouses and joy in watching their children grow. Reflecting on the emotional wounds and detours of my own life since Harvard, including my geographical distance from my son and my second divorce, I was amazed that twenty-five years could pass so smoothly for anyone.

The individual achievers' domination of the report left a struggler like myself feeling like an aberration, a blemish on the prosperous face of the class. Perhaps in consolation, I assumed that many of the book's cursory entries—no more than a name and an address—represented people like me who chose not to publish their mistakes and regrets. I briefly even contemplated an anti-reunion book featuring these sad tales to comfort those of us who had not fulfilled the

promise of our Harvard admission. Like an ambivalent guest at one of the reunion events in Cambridge, circling the tent with his cocktail, I then took to touring the book in search of approachable faces. A few anomalies appeared—the Jesuit monk, the South American expatriate who alluded to underworld ties. There was the handful of divorcees, a surprising number of widows and widowers, a veteran schoolteacher who wondered (self-righteously, I thought) whether his wealthier classmates had remained as true to their ideals as he had. Encountering a man who had left his medical practice to sell solar homes and a woman who had finalized her long-contested divorce the morning she wrote her entry, I thought, *Good for you*, with an enthusiasm I could not muster for classmates crowing about more spectacular achievements.

I didn't want to romanticize hardship or iconoclasm, yet these lives allowed me to look beyond obvious elements of success that I did not possess—the perfect job, the perfect marriage—to see what other criteria I might use in assessing my own life. The divorcee sounded as if she had finally overcome her failed marriage, which surely takes as much character as sustaining a good one. The ex-doctor had chosen to sacrifice prestige and income in order to improve the environment. In my eyes, his decision—made several years before global warming began to dominate the news—gave him a glamor as attractive as any surgeon's. In an age of SUVs and McMansions, the marketing of solar houses must have required as much ingenuity as medicine. The fact that these people demonstrated inner strength and passion in correcting their courses appealed to me. In the social milieu that I grew up in, such qualities were often overlooked during discussions of one's future.

**I bear my Harvard degree like an inherited title: impressive but irrelevant to my actual accomplishments.** Perhaps I am just as preoccupied with my college years as my more prestigious classmates, but my interest is less logical and, oddly, mixed with apathy. As an undergraduate I made few friends and engaged in no extracurricular

activities other than freshman sports. After twenty-five years of laboring in literature's least marketable genres, poetry and the essay, I have little to boast about in the company of my Harvard classmates besides their company itself. My life has turned out—well, I'm still figuring it out. My ninth-grade students praise my classes, but this improves neither the status nor the income of my teaching job, and my pupils rarely express interest in where I attended college.

I worried that any skepticism I felt about my classmates' thriving, satisfying careers arose from envy. Their work was going a lot better than mine. By the time of our twenty-five-year reunion, so many unpublished poems had piled up on my desk that it seemed pointless to keep adding to the glut. I had published a book of essays, after a demoralizing three-year wait during which the small press that had contracted to publish it settled a lawsuit. Holding an advance copy of the collection, which had taken eleven years to compile, I felt daunted by the prospect of starting a new one—not because of the length or difficulty of the process, but because the risk of failure and repeating myself seemed so great. I couldn't conceive of consecutive grants or guaranteed publication: I had toiled and pined unsuccessfully for such rewards for so long that the struggle had become an indispensable part of my motivation.

I admired my artist classmates' accomplishments and understood their gratification, but I couldn't bring myself to trust it. Their lack of introspection reminded me of someone who finds money on the street and declines to investigate in case he might have to give it back. The probing for deeper truths, meanwhile, seemed to occur among my classmates who had experienced setbacks or failure. The father who had coped for years with his children's poor health, the woman emerging from a divorce—these people reflected on both hardship and success, and always saw the latter in relation to the former. I don't think I respected them solely out of pity or empathy or because they eased my feelings, strange as it may sound, of being an outsider. I responded to glimmers of introspection from the others as well, such as the investment banker who, after twenty-five

years of a grueling work schedule, wondered whether he had given enough time to his family.

I don't believe that self-examination would have made the hard-charging, conventionally successful professionals any happier; it might have held them back. Introspection tends to feed my insecurity, sapping my initiative and hindering accomplishment. Still, it remains a trait that I value, even as it engenders ambiguity, ambivalence, and sometimes sadness. I have always regretted that my marriages did not work out, and always lusted after literary recognition. At the same time, being a single father who only sees my son on weekends and school vacations has probably made me treasure fatherhood more than I would have if my son lived with me rather than with his mother. Literary obscurity may often have made me miserable, but it has also made me less satisfied with my work and thus more like the kind of writer I want to be. Regardless of how my career turns out, I would rather look back on it with the perspective of T.S. Eliot, who professed to have no confidence in the lastingness of his poetry, than that of my classmates who appear to believe the judgments of those who praise them. I don't equate failure or self-doubt with success, but I do consider triumph over these to be a precious kind of success, one that requires self-awareness and appreciativeness. The fact that it owes more to character than to luck, talent, or public opinion makes it more worthwhile to its subject and easier for others to identify with.

**In their book *Just Enough: Tools for Creating Success in Your Work and Life*, Laura Nash and Howard Stevenson, two Harvard Business School researchers, criticize the notion of success as a mere tally of wealth and status. They recommend measured and equal accomplishment in four areas: happiness, achievement, significance, and legacy. According to this model, many of my classmates reached their twenty-fifth reunions rich in achievement—primarily money and prestige—but impoverished in one or more of the other categories. The driven but conscience-stricken investment banker could**

have put in fewer hours at work, still made a comfortable living, and been happier spending more time with his family. He could also have enhanced his work's significance by doing something in addition to his mercenary job and left a positive legacy by, say, starting a scholarship program in his firm or community. His achievement, as defined by the book's authors, would decrease, but his level of general success would rise.

A broader definition of success demands more than the glamorous job and stable family that so many of my classmates reported. It values a success that grows slowly and inconspicuously, and that one often achieves by responding to a need rather than by trying to advance one's career. The authors of *Just Enough*, who base their theory primarily on interviews with corporate executives, also discovered that

every one of the enduring successes showed resilience. None had escaped setbacks or defeats in their lives, and many felt that those moments were the ones they learned the most from.... A key factor relevant to our model is the ability to look at the entire picture of your success and that of others.

Published in 2004, the Class of 1979's anniversary report predates the current economic downturn, which has no doubt dimmed the outlooks of my classmates who have lost jobs or seen their retirement funds diminish. I'm curious as to how these graduates, who came of age in prosperous times, will frame their setbacks in future updates. Certainly the number of them in a position to create success out of failure, and reassess their definitions of those words, has increased.

Were my classmates who regularly confronted failure, both through grappling with crises and through work that offered little financial reward, better able to look at the entire picture of their success and that of others? Some of the artists fell into this category—not those with the literary, musical, or dramatic Midas touch,

but the ones who persevered in the face of minimal or no recognition. One acquaintance, with whom I had taken poetry classes and who later worked in a small-town library, kept writing after college. Though he had yet to publish his poetry, he included in his reunion entry a poem of his own that articulated his perspective on his life and the past quarter century. He was not polishing an armor of conspicuous accomplishment, but reporting from the front lines of struggle, where success is elusive and relative, rather than a way of life.

I respect vocations such as poetry for their resistance to self-perpetuating, snowballing success; every poem requires a new appeal to inspiration and to readers. My upbringing and education promised the opposite: a long-term contract with positive reinforcement. As undergraduates, many of my classmates envisioned a life of steady reward and advancement, and their reunion entries bear out their optimism. One pre-med acquaintance who used to pore over his chemistry textbook during meals is now a Stanford cardiologist; the dapper Groton graduate who carried a copy of *The Wall Street Journal* under his arm lists a Wall Street business address. At the time, those fellow twenty-year-olds mapping their futures looked practical to me, reproaches to my vague plan to write and figure out my livelihood when the need arose. Now I find it harder to admire someone who lacks introspection and some burden of disappointment.

The September 11 terrorist attacks prompted some of my reunion classmates to place their accomplishments in perspective. In contrast, those other entries that flaunt credentials sound arrogant. One architect embellishes the list of buildings he has designed with breathless adjectives: “prominent,” “important,” “noteworthy,” “monumental,” “notable,” “well-known.” *What next?* I want to ask. In the wake of such accomplishment and gratification at forty-six, how does one approach the future?

I should pose this question to David. According to his website, he retired from business at age fifty-five. I wonder if he ever stumbled

or came to examine his own life as avidly as he once examined mine. I like to imagine him undertaking a new vocation, one in which his passion outstrips his talent. “He who strives on and lives to strive / Can earn redemption still,” the angel says at the end of Goethe’s *Faust*. Even in failing he would succeed.

# Morning Provisional

Nancy Kuhl

It might collapse at any moment, the room;  
might split open at the seams. Drifts in mist

in rain; wind shook everything, almost shook  
everything loose. A man on the radio says

*vulnerability assessment says gap analysis.*  
Or he calls: years-away voice. Room tilting

precarious above the street. Carry on  
at late morning coffee, hover over the paper,

tabled. Already it's clear how every story  
ends. Trees knock branches to glass; wasps

let themselves in without asking. And letters  
pile by the door in luminous envelopes.

There is fracture and there is repair. Call or  
letter; riddle or time machine. Weeks of storm

and uncertainty and now splintering light  
delivered through clouds. A bell, a word,

the hinge in the narrative. Where pieces  
came together. The phone might be

an instrument of desire or a means of  
containment; a letter might be a compass.

When it turns back on itself like this, the sky  
*says look away; pretend the end is not upon you.*

# Money and a Room

*One woman gets real*

**Amy Weldon**

All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point—a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved.

—Virginia Woolf, *A Room Of One's Own*, 1929

I'm not sure when money came unhooked from security—tucking my small allowance into the bottom drawer of my white leatherette jewelry box with its twirling ballerina—and began to mean shame. Maybe it was the first time I bounced a check. Maybe it was during interviews for teaching jobs, when I charged suits, plane tickets, and conference fees on credit cards despite the queasy warning tug in my gut—*you don't even know where you'll be living this time next year*—and then charged wine-bar evenings with my friends to mute the fear. Money abusers need the same advice as alcoholics: *Pay attention. You have a problem.* But for too long it's been easier for me to live with that problem than to examine its cause: The lies I grew up on became the lies I told myself.

On New Year's Day of 2007, as snow whirled up and down my street, I totaled up all I owed: \$22,000 in credit card debt on seven different consumer and store cards, just under \$26,000 in car debt, and \$80,000 in student loans, all to be paid on a salary of what was then \$47,000 a year. A small-town Alabama doctor's daughter, I'd imbibed years of my family's unspoken belief that going into debt for anything but land was shameful. It was an article of their Republican faith: the right kind of people would always have money because they always worked for it, and so they would always be able to write checks for anything they wanted. Yet like my education in that other unspoken reality of our Southern Methodist world—sex—learning about money was for me a process of trying to decipher the unwritten rules separating good girls from bad, keep my parents' affection

and approval at any cost, and bridge increasingly puzzling gaps between theory and practice. My family lived on 300 acres of land, and bought more. We maintained horses and bird dogs and relatives. We wrote checks for used cars and tractors and trailers and private-school educations. Because we lived on a farm and needed to drive ourselves to school, my younger sister and I shared a much-loved 1982 Oldsmobile with a mildewed vinyl top and mismatched hub-caps that my father had bought for \$500 from an elderly patient; “it’s in great shape,” he crowed, “it only ever went to the grocery store and church.” Six feet tall by age fifteen, I was taken to department stores and dressed in double-knit slacks and size-twelve shoes from a stack of seven or eight boxes, all the manager could roust from the back room. “Better get all of these,” my mother sighed, “since we’ve finally found some that fit.” She swiped her credit card and smiled at me: In my lonely, rocky adolescence, scarred by boys who stole my English-class journal and read it aloud in the school halls, this was one need she could meet. I would wear those shoes until, ten years later, the last pair fell apart.

Yet money was also yoked to the wider world against which my sister and I, in particular, were warned, a world in which—with money on our side—we might move in ways our parents did not. I loved books more than anything—at that time, you could walk into Waldenbooks with a \$5 bill and walk out with a paperback and change. “Waste of money,” my mother said. “That’s what libraries are for.” But we lived half an hour from any public library, and I’d read everything in the little library at school. “Drop me off,” I’d beg, “just leave me there while you run errands.” But I was seldom allowed to go anywhere alone, physically or imaginatively. I was a girl: wandering, in any form, was dangerous.

Of course the world is full of threats. But in the conservative Deep South, tightening the leash on girls is more about enshrining parental—particularly male—authority than equipping them to judge their own safety and act on it. “Nobody but soldiers from Fort

Benning at the mall,” my father said, refusing my sister’s plea to go window-shopping—age sixteen—with her friends. “Just trolling for teenage girls.” But the dangers were, I see now, imagined as well as real, and a daughter’s transgressions were uniquely suspect: desiring the company of people—especially boys—her parents don’t know, wandering beyond fences her parents have built to keep her safe, makes them, in their fear, snatch at any means to keep her where she’s always been. I remember my father’s scorching words when I straggled into the house after dark from chasing a truant pony through the woods, or got a B on a test, or smeared an extra chunk of butter on my bread. “How much do you weigh now?” he barked when he saw me shove my teasing little brother. “I mean it. How much do you weigh? See how much bigger you are? You could hurt him. *Control* yourself.” I remember his look of disbelief when he saw my sister and me sitting with a group of friends in our den, a boy’s hand on my knee. It wasn’t only chagrin at my growing up, that look; I was nineteen or twenty by then, in college, tall and shy, never having even kissed a boy. He was surprised that any boy would find me attractive at all.

Eventually, the only places I wandered, anymore, were within my own mind, fueled by books I gulped indiscriminately, a high-school diet of Stephen King and Thomas Hardy and *Catch-22* and *The Sound and The Fury* (which I loved, although I couldn’t understand it) and bad historical romance novels and textbook poetry I tried to imitate in my journal. But perhaps that kind of wandering is most unforgivable, because it’s invisible, hard to see, hard to punish except by shame, inheritance, indirection. A good girl’s life is lived in a panopticon, her parents the all-seeing eye at the center, their approval her ultimate reward—held, always, just out of reach. Too many books distract from chores and Making Pleasant Conversation and Being There for Others. Too many books are subversive, even if nothing else in a good girl’s life even comes close to earning that distinction.

Music is subversive too. In junior high I chanted to myself the Run-DMC and Beastie Boys songs boys traded at school lockers—to *rock a rhyme that's right on time is tricky!*—but never dared to bring them home. In high school, prowling the Wal-Mart music department, I picked out a Janet Jackson cassette. My mother frowned—*waste of money*—although the money was mine, saved from birthdays or earned from chores. While she waited in the checkout line, I sneaked back and shoved my bill across the counter, then thrust the tape, freed from its plastic cage, into my pocket. The lump of change grew warm against my thigh. Rebellious emotion snaked through my brain—I'll *buy what I damn well want*. Money could open the route to the real person hidden in my large, awkward good-girl body—the person I'd be as soon as I left home. Money would be rebellion and education and self-definition, all at once.

**My credit card statements from my twenties—especially from** graduate school in Chapel Hill—carry charge after charge toward that aspirational self, a wavering flag of opposition to the small-town world of *no*. Record stores and rock clubs and sushi restaurants and bars, where I unearthed a hard-drinking, hard-smoking, raconteur self to which others flocked, especially men. Grocery stores and clothing shops. New bookstores. Used bookstores. I bought books even faster than I read them; as any overextended book nerd knows, if you buy a book, then you somehow, by osmosis, possess what's inside. I got good at ignoring the little voice that said *you can't afford this*. There were student loans and, surely, someday, a job to pay them back. In the meantime, there were credit cards. Yes, I was in control.

In 2005, I moved out of my one-bedroom rental apartment to a teaching job in Iowa, hiring a U-haul, on my credit card, for my couch and dishes and boxes and boxes of books. Ph.D in hand, I swayed out of town under a massive load of aspiration and debt. “We are so proud of you,” my parents said. Yet when I brought them my dissertation, then my first short story collection, they smiled

and put it aside: “Frankly, we’re probably not going to read it,” they said. “You know we don’t understand all that stuff.” *All right, then.* A newly mulish voice spoke in me, clear. *Y’all don’t read what I write. So I’m gonna write what I want.* Yet the old pleasing habit was hard to break. Like a cat bringing wounded birds to the back door, I relayed to my parents carefully edited bulletins of my latest professional success: this conference acceptance, that publication, although I no longer sent them copies of anything I wrote. I relayed news of my successful third-year review in my tenure-track job. “Oh, honey, that’s great,” said my mother. “Hey, did I tell you about your brother’s new job? He’s a teaching assistant! In the biology lab, working for a professor!” For the next seven minutes, she described it, in great and prideful detail: after five years and three different colleges, my little brother was now taking the master’s-level science courses he hoped would help him get into vet school. In my graduate career I’d taught one or two undergraduate courses a semester, with full grading and course-design responsibilities for each one; at the time, when I’d tried to describe them to my mother, her boredom was so obvious I’d quit. “That’s great,” I said now. “I’m glad for him.” I didn’t mention the sexy but extremely problematic man who’d dropped into my life and then out of it that year, or the crushing depression, or the mountain of medical bills, or the award-winning essay in the prestigious journal that described, among other things, my relationship with her. I still haven’t.

I would have my own life in my first job, I decided, eleven hundred miles from home, and all that stuff with my family wouldn’t matter anymore. I would get my affairs in order and buy a house. The mortgage broker at the local bank looked at my debt-to-income ratio and struggled to say something tactful. “But you are on the tenure track,” he finally said, “and you’re working on your debt, and we can help you get a home. Someday.” A real-estate agent walked me through some euphemistically named “starter properties,” including a cottage with a phone-booth-sized bathroom right off the den and a view of the gas station. Through a series of friend-of-friend seren-

dipities, I ended up renting the house I plan to buy: a 1901 Sears Roebuck house with high windows and a backyard I've filled with perennials and vegetables. "In San Francisco," observed a visiting friend, "this is a \$950,000 house. You are so lucky to live here." I know, I said. I am.

**And on that January day in 2007, I swore off credit cards for good.** Floundering in a sea of APRs as high as 24 percent, I called a nonprofit credit-counseling program. "I can't make minimum payments anymore," I confessed, and I started crying. "We can help you," the kind lady said, and they have. Ever since, if I can't pay cash for it, I don't do it. This is the famous rule of financial guru Dave Ramsey, my fellow Southerner. "The borrower is slave to the lender," he quotes the Book of Proverbs, in a resonant metaphor for both the black and white Southerners who fill his audiences: we won't be part of the system of slavery, not anymore.

Money is slavery when it's hooked to false systems of control, and it's freedom when it becomes an instrument of self-discipline and honesty—even if that honesty is at times uncomfortably self-indicting. "How can a rational being be ennobled by anything that is not obtained by its own exertions?" wondered the eighteenth-century English feminist Mary Wollstonecraft. "In fact, it is a farce to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of its own reason." Wollstonecraft's words have a salutary sting for me, the recovering good girl who has too often clutched the leash of parental approval tightly around my own neck. Exercising my own reason, in my mid-thirties and beyond, has therefore meant honesty and self-discipline about money and the roots of my attitudes about it, starting with what it takes to get out of debt, and continuing to look as honestly as I can at how far I still have to go.

Bringing home an average of \$2,900 a month, I pay more than \$1,900 of that for rent and car and credit card debt, leaving about one thousand dollars for everything else, including but not limited

to: car and renters' insurance, student loan payments, utilities, groceries, clothes (clearance sales, mostly), haircuts, cat food, and yoga classes. Luckily, in my little town, I can walk a lot, or ride the sturdy old mountain bike I adore. Inspired by Wendell Berry, Deborah Madison, and Shannon Hayes, I grow, cook, and freeze my own vegetables. I don't have cable, and my cell phone is a pay-as-you-go Tracfone I use only for travel and safety on bike rides. If I want books—and I still do, negotiating that last bad habit—I buy used, online. I take on extra teaching in the summers and at the community arts center. I'm luckier than 99 percent of the world. Yet routinely I find myself down to my last ten dollars with a week to go until payday. I live with a constant undertow of anxiety.

But something always straightens my spine and sends me on my way. I am free of the old illusions about credit cards and the spending habits they fostered in me. I've written a story collection, essays, a novel and a half. I'm addressing the results of my choices. And I've discovered—like any former addict—the power of sharing my story, on my new blog, *The Cheapskate Intellectual*. In bad moments, I quote Samuel Beckett: *I can't go on. I'll go on*. In good moments, I remember: things won't always be like this.

*This is a real achievement*, my friends marvel. "Debt is a weight," my father agreed, when I told him, in a rare attempt at candor, that I had signed with the credit counselor. "It sucks the life out of you." Struggling under years of declining Medicare payments, the bulk of income for his small-town practice, he's a man with a burden too. His depressed region blames its decline on everything except the real causes: global warming that decimates farms and pine forests and corporations that now prefer to import their lumber from Thailand. *We're in this together*, I thought.

**Then, in the summer of 2009, deep and struggling in my debt program, I learned that my parents had bought my little brother a house.**

Make that a second house. When my sister was an undergraduate, planning on vet school, my parents had bought a two-bedroom condo in which she lived until she finished vet school and married. “And your brother can live here too when he goes,” they reasoned to me. “It’s a good investment.” Yet when my brother got into veterinary school, my family bought him a second, brand-new duplex in the same town, three miles down the road from the condo, which they still own and are struggling, after expensive renovations, to sell. “This makes me worry about y’all’s retirement savings,” I told my mother, struggling for objectivity. I was the oldest daughter, the good girl. I must not get angry. “What about—”

“We don’t need financial advice from *you*, Amy,” she snapped. We’ve never discussed it again.

The sibling who stayed home to manage the land, the hard-working son, my brother, one might say, is owed a return for his labor. Yet this is only partial consolation to my sister and me, who achieved a DVM and a Ph.D. on student loans, teaching stipends, and extra jobs to pay our rent. When I asked if they might cosign a loan with me on a condo in Chapel Hill—about \$80,000 when I started graduate school in 1997, and now worth closer to \$130,000—my parents balked: “Well, we don’t know,” they said. “What if you don’t finish the program?” I shook all over, so angry I couldn’t breathe. My GPA had never been lower than A–. I’d never failed to finish anything I started, or to try to reach any bar they set. But they saw only their good girl moving away from home, into unknown territory. Backing her with their money would be a vote for that unknown life beyond their world, would make it real.

Even though I’m thirty-six, this favoritism still rankles, ricocheting through me in other stories of parental blessings sought and denied: my sister and I come to seem like Esau and Jacob, just gender-bent, parent-tricked. We’re two high-achieving daughters who, like Johnny Cash’s “Boy Named Sue,” had to “get tough or die,” funding, with our own jobs and loans and credit cards, dingy graduate-school apartments in rental complexes where muggings and

break-ins were common. Our brother is the youngest son ensconced in the second of two new homes in the same town. “Be safe,” my parents always warned their girls, out there in the world. They ensured that our brother, by their standards, actually is.

Groping for reasons, I search our family’s inherited stories about men, women, and money. Sons, especially youngest sons, need a little extra help. “It’s not easy to follow two sisters like y’all,” both my parents have told me, separately, as if that explained everything. Women just have to man up—*face reality*, I was told, *stop dreaming over those books or your whole life will just pass you right by, you’ll never actually experience anything*—because our lives, what we desire and suffer and fear, are never quite as real, never have quite the same claim on the family’s attention, as those of the men around us, whose orderly universe depends on good girls remaining happily in place. When girls make mistakes, we must be corrected. Once I brought home what I thought was a beautiful antique chair for the house I already dreamed of, paid for by the summer job I’d found myself, cleaning cabins at a Colorado dude ranch. I was nineteen. My parents and brother gathered around me and my first adult purchase, shaking their heads and laughing—*you paid how much for that?*—until I cried. And they kept laughing. When my brother brought home another horse, another cow, and then another, my parents praised his entrepreneurial sense, turned out his animals on their own pastures, and paid the feed bills. Each new animal was one more thing anchoring my brother home.

We inherit lies and contradictions. But we do make our own mistakes. In January 2009, driving back to Iowa from Alabama via Virginia—a route I’d never gone before, having visited friends over the holiday—I found myself at nightfall seven hours from home without enough money for both gas and a hotel. I had listened with joy all day to inauguration events and speeches on the radio, felt a surge of hope as I drove past American flags floating over car lots and malls, watched traffic streaming south to Washington as I went north. Yet when I stopped at an Ohio toll plaza to fuel up, my

checkbook confirmed what I knew: I didn't have enough money for gas and a hotel room too. How had I made such a mistake? I don't know. But with no credit cards, I had no cushion. I was seven hours from home. The snow was deep. I couldn't sleep in my car. I could keep driving till I reached my house, but I was too exhausted to stay awake, despite the coffee I'd been chugging. I'd skid off the road and I would die. In the toll plaza, I begged the kind woman at the information desk to let me use the phone, since my little Tracfone was nearly out of minutes. My mother was home. I explained the situation and burst into tears. Sighing, she agreed to fax her credit card number to a hotel when I stopped. The woman at the desk, and the security guard, patted me on the shoulder and helped me stop crying. *I have always depended on the kindness of strangers*, said that famous Southern traveler Blanche DuBois, as exhausted and broke as I felt in that moment. In these strangers' eyes, I could see an observation that made me burn with further shame, the same thing people must have thought looking at Blanche: *Honey, you don't look poor*. And more: *You're too old to be calling your mama*. This was embarrassing. Worse was the hiss deep in my brain: *I'm broke because my parents aren't buying me any damn house*. They aren't. But they didn't force me to run up \$22,000 worth of credit card debt, either.

Navigating a culture wrecked by incredibly bad financial choices—mortgage bubbles, too-big-to-fail banks, wobbling currencies and greed—the only way to steer a clear path ahead, as individuals and institutions, is to look clearly at how and why we got here and take responsibility for what we've done. Struggling with money and love and family, we can connect the truths we learn to see in our formative relationships with all the forces in this world that are selling us lies. I shudder with disgust when some designer tries to make me believe a dress assembled from twenty-five dollars worth of material by workers making three dollars an hour is worth \$1,500, and with horror when I remember the fate of Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*, who takes laudanum and dies because she has no man, no money, and therefore

no prospects. I'm a single female English professor, not an old-maid schoolteacher of the nineteenth century—thank God—and I remember Emerson's advice when I think about the shape my life can continue to take: "This time, like all times, is a good one, if we but know what to do with it." I try to dismiss blame, pursuing my Woolfian room of my own, fighting to clear the mental and emotional space necessary to keep becoming myself. I try to reconcile the twelve-year-old girl in me, who still wants her parents' approval, with the thirty-six-year-old woman I actually am. Sometimes, I win.

By June 2011, just as my young lilacs are blooming, I expect to have paid off my credit cards and my car, killing almost fifty thousand dollars of debt in four years. I've been lucky; I have tenure. My parents, who gave me a childhood rich and joyous in many ways, have the right to do as they choose with their money. So why tell of it at all? I see so many people like me, though, toggling between debts and jobs and emotional inheritances. In silence, in over our heads, we think we're doing all right. We're not. We think we're alone. We're not. To keep moving forward, we have to look backwards as well, and we have to tell the truth. The more we speak it, the less it rankles, and the less what once seemed great injustice comes to matter. Everyone, with the passage of time, can get a little mercy. *God bless the child who's got her own.*

# **Fun with Dying**

**Cameron Gearen**

The year you died was gala festive. Didn't I party dress for monthly plane flights from my lake to your ocean? Each time you gauntly greeted, your skin poked carbon blue where needles entered, the strange

shunt dangle from its temporary home, you St. Sebastian and your arrows. Your girl and I ate out and brought you cheese. We tooled Seattle like tourists, its single rainless winter we sequined, brought you

accordioned nosegays. You seemed to like hospital sleeping, fluttering nurses to morphine drip. Sometimes we restauranted sans you. You loved to see us glow and we obliged. Layers peeled you papery,

trapeze-artist light, your fingernails gone to skin. The drugs took your hair and left you seal-smooth; carved chin to chisel, lashless eyes, the shell melting and your warm core soaking sheets, turning toward the grisly plants

we windowsilled. We shopped that city, found expensive knits, boutique sweaters with slate buttons. We bought eyeliner by the tub. Your girl, she held my hand while yours skeletoned. *Nothing* you said when we asked

what gifts. I zipped my knee-high boots, she fastened her trench. Breezed out, we always smelled of apricot scrub, avocado. Why would someone stay bedside, listen to a rattle? Rattles come from coughs and lead to comas.

We weren't the knitting type, we had exhausted crosswords. It was you who urged us *go*, a day not circumscribe our wantings. We wished you well again and burly but turned your sick ghoulish. The doc and residents predicted

nine more months—a long time in my short life. *Let's go, he wants us to*, I told her and we left you again, bright things to be bought, a turquoise scarf my neck needed, crème brulée I loved to its caramel end. You laid

thirty-nine mixed years quilted on your rotten body: thought things through.  
Set the pillows, rode the angles, fresh from your sponge bath. You  
knew the shift change rhythm like a poker hand. Nightcap nurse

took your vitals and we dropped off a confection. When months ticked through  
to April, we all agreed it had been a beautiful year and a fine one for dying in.  
No one could say when a starless Washington winter had glimmered so.



# **The Intruders**

**Sarah Goffman**

**In the geriatric wing of the hospital, the nurses come at nine**

a.m. and present Carl and his father, Bernard, with a menu for lunch. Turkey breast with lettuce and tomato or bologna with cheese. They search his covers for the remote that operates the elevation of the hospital bed. Carl holds the button down while the bed makes a sound like a garage door lifting. The top half of his father's body rises until his face is level with Carl's, and Carl notices that whoever shaved him stopped at his chin, leaving the skin below his jaw covered in coarse, white whiskers.

"Not much of a choice, is it," Carl says, putting the pencil in Bernard's swollen hand, helping him curl his fingers around it. He watches him draw a giant x in the box next to the turkey option.

"I told them I never ate bologna in my life. I don't want to see a bologna sandwich. I don't want to even smell it. Kids used to bring that crap to school, I would almost vomit right there in the cafeteria. Now I'm here and I'm old and they're trying to serve me the slop they feed to school kids."

**Carl's wife, Diane, and his daughter, Sandy, arrive hurriedly and**  
apologetically, bringing with them a wind of fresh air and perfume.

"I told you the tunnel would be a nightmare," Bernard says, opening his arms to receive their hugs. When they find chairs and everyone is settled, Bernard tells them about the day so far, about the choices on the menu, and they agree with him about the turkey.

After a while, the doctor stops in and looks not at his patient, but at Carl. He says he thinks Bernard's numbers will be right for surgery by tomorrow, but that they're putting him on the schedule for the afternoon just to be safe. He is a tall man, with an asymmetrical haircut like Carl sees kids wearing in the city, and long, thin fingers that he will use to repair Carl's father's heart.

Before leaving, he pats Carl's father on the knee and says, "We'll get you out of here soon enough, buddy!"

The moment they're alone, Bernard beckons the family closer. "Don't listen to a word this bozo says," he tells them. "That nice nurse that comes in here—she says I'm looking so good maybe they won't have to operate at all."

"Now come on, Dad," Carl says. "We've been through this." And he suddenly feels uncomfortable in a way he can't quite name.

"Don't be a baby, Pop." Diane says. "We need you strong."

**Lunch comes an hour late, and Carl watches his father hoist**

his legs up and swing them over the side of the bed, notices the way the flesh of his thighs hangs off the bone like a woman's legs. Carl looks over at Sandy, who, even at thirty-two with a child of her own, seems to glow with youth next to all this decay: her skin, brown and freckled from summer weekends on the shore, her hair matted and slightly tangled the way it used to be when she wouldn't let her mother touch it with a brush. He lets his eyes rest on her for a while, enjoys the momentary escape. Then he hears something like a growl and then a crash. He turns to see the plastic dish spinning on the linoleum floor like a giant coin, white bread and slices of bologna and American cheese scattered on the floor.

"Don't you people understand I haven't eaten all day?" Carl's father says, looking around quickly from face to face, the plate still rattling on the floor, taking forever to land still. Everyone is silent, standing back as if they were now in the presence of something wild. But no one is actually afraid of an old man, Carl thinks, only afraid that he might do something that will make them feel uncomfortable. No one likes being reminded of death.

**Driving home, tapping her lacquered nails against the wheel,**

Diane says, "What do you think it is with him? Like he's never been in the hospital before. Like he didn't get through that bypass with flying colors."

Carl is in the passenger's seat, watching the pavement beneath them, dark and slick with rain, the patches of woods lining Route 23 shockingly green and lush in contrast.

"That was over a decade ago. He's that much older now."

"No," Diane says. "No way. It can't have been that long."

"Sandy had to come home from college, remember?"

Her silence tells him that she does.

After a minute she startles him by making a sudden retching sound. Carl jerks around not knowing what to expect.

"Disgusting! You didn't see that?" she says.

"What," says Carl.

"Another coyote. They're everywhere. This one looked like a giant drowned rat from the rain. Like it crawled out of the sewer. Yuck."

They drive silently for a while, the sound of the wet road beneath them like peeling Velcro. At the light Carl turns to see Diane facing him, the windshield wipers moving patches of red and green across her face.

"You never look in time," she says.

**Carl opens his eyes as the spaces between the blinds on his** bedroom windows begin to glow with blue light. Next to him, under the rippled stripes the blinds project, is only a motionless cocoon of white down comforter, with hair, tinted red for the last decade or so, sprouting from the top. It is hard to believe, Carl thinks, that if he pulled back the covers, there would actually be a living, breathing woman there.

Carl's mouth is dry and filmy, and he can suddenly taste the gulp of whiskey he'd taken in the night. Bothered by the taste in his mouth, he forces himself out of bed, and as he staggers down the dark hallway, his hands searching the wall for the bathroom door, he remembers that he had dreamt about being a kid and standing knee deep in water at the beach. He could tell he was a kid only because he looked down and noticed his legs, thin and hairless. He remembers standing

there with the water sloshing around them, the way the receding tide pulled at his bare feet and ankles as they sunk farther and farther into the wet sand. He remembers the distant chatter of his mother and his aunts from under the umbrella, drinking grape soda from a glass bottle, and feeling repulsed by the bitter smell of his father's breath, who had been drinking from it before him. He woke with a turning stomach and a full bladder.

Carl falls back into bed and closes his eyes. Diane is undisturbed by all this movement. For the entirety of their marriage, she has slept with the heaviness of a child, unaware of the cacophony this sleep produced. When she first dozed off, she slipped into deep, groaning snores that reminded Carl of sneaking into his parents' room at night and watching his father sleep, wanting him to wake up but also terrified of the consequences, daring himself to get closer and closer. The snoring would gradually morph into heavy breathing that was sometimes raspy when she was congested and clear and hollow sounding when she wasn't. Sometimes she would pass gas loudly enough that her eyelids flickered and her breathing quickened momentarily, before she fell back into an even more tranquil sleep. Very early in their marriage, he realized he would be prisoner to these sounds. He'd always been a difficult sleeper, and as a young man he didn't like women to spend the night. But this was always overpowered by physical desire—it was a sacrifice he was willing to make. Still, there was a night after Sandy was born when, between her crying and his wife's snoring and breathing and farting, he had a premonition of years and years of sleepless nights, and felt powerless before his fate.

Carl squeezes his eyes shut tight until he sees bursts of color on the backs of his eyelids and tries to make himself think about a girl he used to know when he worked at a camp in the Berkshires in high school, but soon he slips in and out of dreams again that start with quick, vivid flashes of her hair that was so shiny and blonde it seemed almost as translucent in the sun as her thin, white t-shirts.

Soon she turns ethereal, her face becomes indistinct, and then hair and t-shirts become Diane's lipstick, bleeding into the creases of her mouth. He thinks about the way her body looks when she is in the bathtub: her breasts spread out over the pillowy-ness of her stomach, suspended in still, murky water. He opens his eyes wide, tries to remember the logic of this sequence but can't, and is left with an inexplicable feeling of shame. And then he hears shuffling and a shadow by the foot of his bed; he can see the unmistakable shape of the sunken torso and high, bony shoulders revolving slowly forward. When he sees the tail, hovering parallel to the ground, Carl knows with utter certainty that a coyote has gotten into his bedroom.

**"Dad." She said it sharply, exasperatedly, emphasizing the** consonants and shortening the single vowel, so that the address, which, in the last few decades had become more his name than anything else, sounded sterile, drained of all familiar connotation. It echoed in his head like *dead* or *dud*.

"Dad, you've got to get rid of that gun." He could hear his grandson in the background, the way he sort of growled at his toys.

"Alright honey," he said. "Whatever you want. It's Poppy's antique, you know. He used to put it out on the mantel just when your Aunt Jean's boyfriends came over." He couldn't help but let out a short laugh at this, unable to accurately express the vividness of the memory: the way his father would take down his Webley, which Carl always thought was just a funny name he had given it, and place it in Carl's twelve-year-old hands. He was surprised at how comfortable it felt—not much heavier than the toy guns Carl had vowed to stop playing with once he started junior high. He remembers looking straight into the muzzle, which, also to his surprise, was hexagonal rather than round, and imagining strange, hexagonal bullets blowing hexagonal holes through their victims. *Okay now, treat her with respect*, his father would say. *She's even older than your old Dad.*

"Daddy," Sandy said. "It's a *deadly weapon*."

She and Brian had been fighting about this, he could tell they had. Those were his words, not hers. Carl tried to imagine what the conversation had been like—how much of a fight Sandy had put up, if it had been in the car with Tommy in the car seat, or at night, getting ready for bed, or in the middle of the night when neither of them could sleep. Carl grimaced at the thought of Sandy in bed with this man, who could tell Carl what he could and could not have in his own house. He imagined Brian putting his hairy arm around her, coaxing her into agreement. He thought of the tattoo of a cartoonish guitar and musical note on his hairy shoulder, and Sandy nestling her head on that shoulder, and he thought he was going to be sick. Brian was seven years older than Sandy, and that faded tattoo, glaringly present at family trips to the shore, seemed to Carl an emblem of a life of seediness in its most unsophisticated form, lived in dive bars with women with big hair and long nails and men with half unbuttoned Hawaiian shirts while Sandy was still in braces.

But the thought of resisting exhausted him, the same way he never had the energy to resist Diane, who had such strong opinions about things that seemed so inconsequential. Like the way he folded the bathmat and hung it over the side of the bathtub, or the kind of cottage cheese he brought home from the supermarket. He let her reprimand him and swallowed any resistance. He was too old and too tired to make a big thing of it.

“Brian says it’s the first thing you learn nowadays—you don’t bring a child into a home with a gun in it. You think they won’t find them, but they will. Especially toddlers like Tommy. You know how he gets into everything. Brian says three children die every year due to accidents with their parents’ guns. You hear about it on the news all the time, Dad.”

Carl wanted to say that three a year didn’t really seem like that much if you thought about it, and that he wondered about the validity of figures like that in the first place. But before he could, she said, all in one breath, the way she would say things as a girl that she

knew would get her in trouble: “Brian says we can’t bring Tommy over with a gun in the house. That’s not worth a dumb antique, is it?”

Carl said, “Damn it, Sandy! I said I’d do it, didn’t I? You and your mother. What are we still talking about this for?” But what he really wanted to do was throw the phone across the room. He wanted to give Sandy one of those looks that used to make her snap into reverent fear when she was still living under his roof. But alone, in his empty house, all he could do was slam his fist down on the glass coffee table that Diane had always treated as if it would break if someone were to exhale on it, making the glass bowls of caramel candies rattle. Did this moron, this nobody from South Jersey with little more than a secretary position at some no-name insurance company, think he could threaten Carl?

“No,” said Carl to Sandy. “It’s not worth it.”

“Thanks, Daddy.” Sandy said again. “Thanks for understanding.”

Carl hung up the phone and looked down at his hand still clenched and poised on the table next to the dusty pile of magazines and photo albums, his skin, thin and papery, pulled taut against the knuckles and veins, his fingernails pressing into the flesh of his palm.

**Although Carl missed the coyote on the drive home that night,** what Diane doesn’t know is that he has seen several coyotes lurking in his backyard at night when he sits on the deck with a drink and, occasionally, a cigarette. For all these years, ever since his wife tried to make him quit when Sandy was born, he has been a clandestine smoker, at first sneaking one in while walking the dog or taking the garbage out. Diane must have noticed the smell, but she never said anything as long as he kept it out of sight. But now that Sandy is grown and Diane’s sleep has only gotten heavier, there are more opportunities. He and Diane used to go to bed at the same time every night, and he would lie there for an hour at least, pretending to

sleep. But a few years ago he stopped following her nine p.m. ascent from the living room up to the bedroom, and to his surprise, she never said anything about it. He soon began to stay up for several hours after her, eventually realizing he only needed to be beside her when she woke up in the morning.

When this rebellion lost its novelty, he began drinking alone—things Diane would never drink with him, like whiskey and gin and dark beer. He soon realized he could fall into bed stinking of booze and cigarettes and she would only respond with a short grunt in her sleep. At night, alone on the deck, he would take long drags and watch the smoke rise in serpentine patterns illuminated by the light of his industrial lantern. There was something thrilling about looking out onto the manicured lawn—Diane’s perfectly spherical hydrangea bushes, the boxed herbs that lined the railing—through a screen of smoke. He would hold it loosely between his fingers, relax his eyes so the lit end made trails in the darkness, and this conjured up memories of being twelve years old and smoking Virginia Slims stolen from his mother with other boys at night in the backyard, of the exhilaration of doing something forbidden and the longing to make it seem natural and ordinary; they would practice holding it in certain ways, try desperately to fully inhale and exhale without coughing or wincing, tell each other they couldn’t go back to school in September without being able to blow smoke through their nostrils. At the same time he remembers talking to friends in smoky bars as a young man, making huge gesticulations with his hands, his cigarette burning closer and closer to his knuckles, seeming but never really being unaware of it, dancing with girls and resting his hand, the lit cigarette still balanced precariously between his fingers, on the bare, smooth skin of their shoulders.

He was not unaccustomed to the howling at night—the hollow moaning and short, woeful yips that made him feel like he lived in the desert. The local paper attributed the rise in sightings in northwestern New Jersey and Pennsylvania to the destruction of their natural habitat in the state parks. “They’re extremely adaptable

animals,” Carl remembers his neighbor, Ron McPherson, telling him. He was another guy who smoked behind his wife’s back, or at least Carl assumed it was behind her back. Sometimes Carl would wander out into the front yard, hoping to see him standing on the corner down the block from his house, surrounded by a cloud of smoke turned green from the streetlight like a scene from a movie. Ron was a short, stout man with a belly that hung shamelessly over his trousers, an unruly beard, and crooked, stained teeth. Somehow these qualities made him seem savagely intimidating, as if he were not a financial planner but a mountain man who lived on a diet of freshly killed meat.

“They’re like cockroaches,” he had told Carl. “They can live anywhere, survive off anything. They’ll eat up your trash, your garden, even your puppy or kitten, greedy little fuckers.” Carl always wondered if Ron spoke this way only during these secret smoking breaks or if the McPhersons were the kind of family that didn’t flinch when someone cursed at the dinner table.

“It’s their tails that get me the most,” Carl had said. “The way they stick straight out behind them. That’s how you can tell one from a dog at a distance—their tails.” He paused and waited for Ron to say something. Ron didn’t. “I don’t know why,” Carl then said. “It just gets me. It’s obscene.”

At this, Ron smiled, let out one *heh* and Carl felt relieved.

Alone on his deck at night, he would think of Ron’s gravelly voice, his sharp exhalations of smoke as the consonants of his words escaped from under his wiry mustache. Carl would hear rustling in the grass on nights like this and look up from his book into the darkness, made even more opaque by the fluorescent light of his lantern. When it first started happening, he would just sit perfectly still until it seemed they had retreated. But lately, he would jump to his feet and grab the flashlight they kept on a hook next to the screen door. He would descend two, maybe three steps down from the deck, the arm that held the flashlight extended, poised like a fencer. Carl would stay still for a long time and allow them to get closer, now and

then taking a brazen step into a patch of light, revealing their bony torsos, or the muddy beards of fur that hung below their necks. He would look out into his empty yard and the woods beyond it and hiss in his loudest whisper so as not to wake the neighbors, *You stay away from my property, you rotten scavengers! I don't have a thing for you.* Once the Giordanos' light went on, and Carl quickly turned off his lantern, grabbed his book and glass, and rushed inside. After all, he didn't need Fran Giordano, who didn't have anything better to think about, asking why he was always sitting out on his porch so late at night, or even mentioning it to Sandy the next time she came over. That was the last thing he needed.

**Carl takes a sharp breath in and the coyote freezes for what** could be a few minutes or an hour. Carl blinks at the shadowy yet unmistakable mass frozen at the foot of his bed. He stays just as still and quiet, until finally the coyote begins to move. He thinks, *This is it. The backyard wasn't enough for you. You think you can just march into my home like you own the place, into my bedroom of all places, while my wife is sleeping.* Carl looks over and sees Diane fast asleep on her stomach, her nose pressed to the side of her face against the pillow, and looks again at the animal at the foot of his bed. He says out loud, *You're a wild, disgusting animal and there's no place for you here.*

The coyote turns to him and says, "You talking in your sleep, old man?"

Carl is unable to speak but lets out an audible gasp. The coyote looks like it is rearing back on its hind legs, rising until it is standing upright, and now Carl can see that it is not a coyote at all, but a man that stands before him. He sees this and the fear doesn't come from the thing itself but from his distrust in his own vision: He had been so, so certain. After all, there have been many nights when he has awoken suddenly, reaching for something that had only moments ago seemed so vivid and concrete, but in waking, alone in the darkness, had ceased

to exist. Why should this be any different? Paralyzed and alone, he has no choice but to resign to the assumption that he is dreaming again, to doubt the existence of the impending danger. He lies back down until the sound of his heart beating inside his skull subsides. No, he decides. He has not just seen a strange man standing in his bedroom. He's been wrong so many times before. Carl closes his eyes and waits for sleep to return.

**Dreaming, Carl is in the hospital with Bernard, and he knows** the surgery has already happened. An elaborate network of tubes pumps blood and air in and out of his father through loops and funnels, like something out of a chemist's laboratory. In the center of his shaven chest is a thinly bandaged incision still wet with blood: a lightning bolt carved into his sternum. There is the distant chatter of women's voices, which Carl knows must belong to his wife and daughter, though no words are distinguishable. Somewhere a television buzzes and blankets the room in pulsing blue light.

Then there is his father's hand, a sudden weight on Carl's arm. Carl looks over and his father is awake, pulling Carl's face close to his. His face is still clean-shaven but the hair on his neck has grown long and wiry, framing his face like the mane of an animal. Carl notices his eyes, wide and glistening; Carl can't tell if this is meant to express pleading or anger, and both terrify him equally.

"Carl." As his father begins to speak, Carl can see that he doesn't have his dentures in. The corners of his mouth sag loosely into a frown as he forms the words with his lips. "Carl, I told you I shouldn't have gone through with it. Now look at me." Carl tries to answer but can't; static and the murmur of women's voices fill his throat like water.

**Carl is awakened by another hand, grabbing his shoulder and** pressing its fingers into his flesh. He opens his eyes to darkness and the sound of weeping.

“Carl, wake up. Oh Carl. For the love of God.”

He turns to see the terror in Diane’s face, which, bathed in moonlight, is all shadows and prominences. The glistening whites of her tear-soaked eyes inspire a wave of love and pity and regret that tugs at his groggy heart, and he puts a hand to her wet cheek. Her unbrushed hair and reddened face make her look strangely youthful.

“He’s in here Carl, oh God,” she hisses. “He’s in here.”

Carl turns to see a black mass, the coyote turned man, hunched over the dresser in the corner, taking tools that clink in his hand and glimmer in the darkness to the safe in the bottom cabinet.

“Hurry hurry hurry Carl!” is all his wife can say. He can see the man kick away some laundry in his path, his muddy boot on his wife’s underthings. He sees his worn leather wallet, empty on the floor like a deflated carcass. Without getting up, Carl reaches into the top drawer of his bedside table, fumbles past old balled up tissues and tubes of various kinds of medicated creams until he feels the angular metal of his father’s pistol, hears it scratch against the wood of the drawer as he pulls it into his grasp. No, he had not gotten rid of it as his daughter requested. It had been there all along. And yes, it had always been loaded, all through Sandy’s childhood. Nobody had touched it since Bernard’s brother Phil got ahold of it when he was drunk and shot the Petersons’ cat back in 1983.

And now it is at the end of Carl’s firmly extended arm, the trigger beneath his sweaty finger. He has gotten up, been moving silently in the shadows, and the man has remained hunched in the corner, working at the safe.

Carl tries to speak but only inhales sharply, and the man drops his tools and rises slowly to his feet. When he turns around, Carl sees no fear in the man’s shadowy face. Just the glint of his teeth, and his belt buckle, the shape of his hair: ratty and long past his shoulders.

The man grabs Carl’s wrist, circles his hand around the bone, twists it suddenly, moves his hand through his palm almost as if they were doing some kind of elaborate handshake. And then Carl’s hand

is empty, his clammy fingers still twisted into the same helpless shape, the object they gripped no longer there.

He is looking into the barrel of his father's Webley, the muzzle a hexagon of darkness before him.

Carl's wife can only scream, "Oh, let him go! Please please please! Let him go!"

*Let who go? Who should let who go?* Carl wants to know.

"Don't be stupid, old man," the intruder says. "I'll kill you." His voice is surprisingly flat and casual, no trace of gruffness or accent.

Carl believes him. The man gestures toward the bed with the gun, and Carl steps back until the edge of the bed hits him at the backs of his knees and he melts into his wife's arms, which lock firmly around his trembling body.

And then it's over. The man leaves. Beneath the flesh of Diane's arm Carl catches one last glimpse of the lower half of him: his pockets bulging with cash and jewelry, his father's gun tucked into the waist of his pants.

As soon as he's gone, Diane relaxes into a torrent of tears and they hold each other, watching through the bedroom window as the man darts across the lawn and out of his vision as the light turns from grey to pink and like clockwork, the birds under the air conditioner start their flapping.

**"Come, stay with us," Sandy had pleaded, "at least until the police get this sorted out."**

"Yeah, you don't want to mess with these guys," Brian had added. "He could come back if he thinks you're an easy target. They do that. As if you were his piggy bank. Disgusting." He said this while shaking his head and looking down, putting one hand on his hip.

But Carl was immovable, even to the pleas of his wife, who finally went to stay with her daughter, begging him to follow when he'd gotten his head straight. "He's still in shock," she explained to everyone.

Now, in the empty house, Carl sits on the back porch with a coffee mug half full of whiskey. *They will have gone to bed by now*, he thinks. *They were expecting me by dinner and now they will have given up*. He exhales smoke into the fluorescent lamp and looks out into the darkness.

"I'm not leaving my own goddamn house," he had told them, the suddenness of his elevated temper startling Sandy, who looked at him not with the fear he could once so easily evoke, but with pity. Like parents look at their children when their concerns are things children couldn't possibly understand.

"Daddy, it's just for the night. Shouldn't you be with your family at a time like this? Wouldn't you feel safer?"

*It doesn't matter*, Carl thinks now. *I hope he does come back*.

He grabs the flashlight from its hook and moves from the chair to the porch steps. He sits there, shining it out onto the lawn, moving it in quick figure eights, illuminating flashes of grass and Tommy's swing set and the trees, their branches heavy and lush in the late August humidity.

Then he sees shifting in the hydrangea bush; he hears snorting and pawing at dirt. And then stillness, the two reflective eyes hovering in the darkness.

Carl turns the flashlight off and steps out onto the grass.



# **After Rilke**

**Richard Deming**

Once, the summer seemed an unending,  
    an unspoken syllable  
but now it lays shadows across sundials  
and the wind steps from the field grass.

Your throat, because of the slow pollen, begins to close  
and the voice is no longer recognizably  
    your own.

    In the arbor,

last fruits swell and bend their branches;  
the sun offers a few final days of light,  
before hurrying apples and grapes to one more ripening and  
    then, one day soon, the sweetness of heavy wine.

It's time.

Whoever now has no home will build no more,  
as things will become other things, like a translation that forgets,  
word for pallid word,  
    how rivers flow only one way.

Whoever is now alone will remain so,  
    and, being alone, will wake each day into a dread quiet.  
        Some times the eyes  
        open in a foreign place and to  
read or write long letters  
        is a geometry  
for sleeplessly wandering streets and alleyways  
    late into the night  
        as leaves rasp across asphalt.

# **The Uncanny John Phillip Sousa**

*When everybody knows  
your name*

**John Sousa**

**John Philip Sousa** (November 6, 1854–March 6, 1932) was an American composer and conductor of the late Romantic era known particularly for American military and patriotic marches. Because of his mastery of march composition and resultant prominence, he is known as “The March King.” In public he was typically referenced by his full name.

—Wikipedia

**When my father was a boy, if someone asked him if he was** related to John Philip Sousa, he would either tell the truth—“No”—and feel like he let the questioner down, or he would lie. “Oh yeah,” he’d say. “He was my grandfather’s cousin twice removed.” As my father got older, and depending on the audience, he’d say, “All Portagees are related, aren’t they?” or, “Not technically, but Aunt Gloria was kind of a marching band groupie, and one time backstage in aught-six he signed her tits after the show. That practically makes me his nephew.” Eventually he decided that if he ever had a son, he would name him John Philip.

Now, every so often, I get asked about my name. Or someone makes a comment like, “Strike up the band!” The other day at a bookstore, I handed the clerk my discount card and he said, “Well, well, well. Are we feeling fit to beat the band today?” I don’t even know what this means, but the inevitable follow-up—“I bet you hear that all the time”—I’m well prepared for.

I don’t hear it *all* the time. But I’ve heard it enough in thirty-six years that I’ve come up with a classification system for the types of people who ask me about my name. In order of frequency, those people most likely to comment on my name when they first meet me are:

- Band geeks
- Veterans

- Patriots
- Older Americans
- Trivia buffs
- Hostile liberals
- Prominent politicians
- Confused obstetricians
- People who think my name is Francis Scott Key

These categories frequently overlap, except in the case of the confused obstetrician, although she may or may not count as a hostile liberal. “Is that like the famous, raging anti-Semite Sousa?” she asked me. This was by far the most upsetting thing anybody has ever asked me about my name. At the time, I was working as a research assistant for the chair of the Jewish Studies department at UC Santa Cruz, so I asked him if he had ever heard that John Philip Sousa was an anti-Semite, and he hadn’t. I did a little research. Google searches of “John Philip Sousa + anti-Semitism” and “John Philip Sousa + Jews” were conducted. A neo-Nazi group in Ohio set some anti-Semitic lyrics to “Stars and Stripes Forever.” A Jewish Community Center, also in Ohio, was staging a revival of Sousa’s comic opera “El Capitan.” An article in a coffee table book about John Philip Sousa said that there was one subject his band members were forbidden to discuss: religion. “That means he probably had Jewish musicians in his band, and he was sensitive to that,” said my boss, and he thanked me for looking it up. (This turns out to be true, that he had Jewish musicians in his band: His favorite soprano, Estelle Liebling, was Jewish.) I never brought it up with the obstetrician again, and she didn’t bring it up either, but she did help my wife deliver, via caesarian section, my daughter Lily Dian, so I forgave her.

I guess it’s a good thing my father’s last name wasn’t Wagner. Although, if it had been, I probably wouldn’t have been named after Richard Wagner; the most likely candidate would have been the actor Robert Wagner, star of my grandmother Mabel’s favorite

show, *Hart to Hart*. That show debuted after I was born, but Robert Wagner was still pretty famous in 1974; my dad would have known him as the jewel thief from *The Pink Panther*. Incidentally, Robert Wagner starred in the 1952 feature *Stars and Stripes Forever*, playing the fictitious Willie Little, a member of Sousa's band, who in the film has invented the sousaphone.

My father wanted to be able to answer "yes" when he was asked if he was related to John Philip Sousa and he wanted this to be the truth. The story he told made me a punch line to his favorite joke: "So now, when someone asks me if I'm related to John Philip Sousa, I say, 'Yes. He's my son.'"<sup>1</sup> If I were present when he told this story, I'd laugh along with everyone else, and get my head patted by the nice old ladies or whomever, and act grateful to be part of my dad's running comedy show.

Maybe that's what drew me to stand-up comedy. I took a class during the winter quarter of 2005 at UC Santa Cruz through the theatre department. When I sat down to write my first bit, I decided to see if I could make my name as funny as my dad always tried to make it. My first set started like this:

Hi, I'm John Sousa. And yes, before you ask, my middle name is Phillip. My dad always said he named me after John Philip Sousa so I'd be famous, but all it's really gotten me is a couple drunken hookups with chicks who used to be in band, and three or four tuba-playing stalkers. The worst part about the stalkers was I had to move all the time. They would show up at 2:00 in morning to serenade me with the oom-pah part of "The Washington Post March" under my window. My landlords hated that. On the other hand, if I ever got into trouble, I could whip out my sousaphone, and the stalkers came running to battle me out of a jam.

<sup>1</sup> His best punch line—"I'd love to, honey, but I don't think my asshole can take another biscuit"—I didn't hear until I was a teenager.

The professor's evaluation said that my "first stand-up was very interesting. I thought his material was smart and funny, but it wasn't quite connecting with the audience." No shit. The only line that got a laugh from anyone besides him was "whip out my sousaphone." I got a B+. My performance improved dramatically with a shift in material.

Not only that, but there was only one true statement in my set, the part about my dad saying I'd be famous because I already had a famous name. "Someday, Johnny, you could run for Congress."<sup>2</sup> He's actually said this more than once. "You're already famous!"

But John Philip Sousa is not *that* famous, and people are easily confused. "I bet you were born in the dawn's early light," they say, or something else that references "The Star Spangled Banner." Unfortunately, trivia is very important to me, so I can't just let it slide. "No, Francis Scott Key wrote that," I say, and once, I got this retort: "Um, no *you're* wrong. He wrote *The Great Gatsby*. *You* wrote the national anthem."

The celebrity-name angle backfired on my father completely with the advent of the internet. On Google, I'm completely and totally anonymous. Try it. "John Sousa" gets you 344,000 hits, the first 50 of which (I got bored clicking "Next" after this) are for the composer. "John Phillip Sousa" gets mocked by the search engine's auto-correct: "Did you mean: john *philip* sousa?" It then proceeds to give you more links with the corrected name. It's the italics that hurt the most: *You* don't exist, but here is some useful information about a composer of marches. I'd like to take a moment here and thank my mother for the extra "l" in my Phillip. If she was going to carry me for nine months, she'd be damned if she would have no say whatsoever in naming me. So now I'm the uncanny John Phillip Sousa; almost, but not quite famous, creepy and in need of correction. I'm the March King of Uncanny Valley, leading a band of Real Dolls made up like clowns, carrying

<sup>2</sup> This is the plot of the 1992 Eddie Murphy movie *The Distinguished Gentleman*. Murphy plays a con man who wins a special election for Congress when the current occupant—who has the same name as him—dies. It sucks.

Moog synthesizers and didgeridoos and musical saws, playing “Stars and Stripes Forever” backward, revealing the hidden Satanic message imploring you to sniff glue.

**I’ve only had one truly negative personal interaction with**

someone about my name, with someone who knew exactly who John Philip Sousa was and exactly why he *hated* him and, by extension, hated me. My freshman year at UC Santa Cruz, I was given a work-study grant by financial aid. I went for a job interview at the newly constructed science library. My interviewer quickly turned to into an interrogator: “So. Hmmm,” he said, peering at me over his wire-rimmed glasses. “Are you a fan of marching music?” This was his opening question, and it sounded like an accusation. Not “What makes you want to work in a library?” or “So, tell me a little about yourself, what kind of research are you interested in?” I was used to people commenting upon and asking about my name, but nobody had ever been hostile before. And this guy obviously knew what my name was before he scheduled the interview. Was he just trying to mess with me? Was he forced to interview all of the work-study candidates, and therefore decided to take out his frustrations with an unfeeling bureaucracy on me, a confused eighteen-year-old freshman?

“It’s not like I own a bunch of CDs,” I said, “But it’s okay, I guess, around the Fourth of July.”

“Well, I’m not a fan,” he spat. “It’s the soundtrack to American imperialism. It’s everything that’s disgusting about America: militarism, jingoism, old men in stupid hats riding around in toy little airplane cars.” I know there’s something about Santa Cruz that attracts the worst kind of self-righteous scold, the type of person for whom everything is a political act, including what a parent names his child. But what did he have against the Shriners? Did he hate Jerry’s Kids, too? It’s not like my name was Ronald Reagan or Pete Wilson.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The reviled (at UCSC) former governor of California from 1991 to 1999, not the late San Francisco newscaster.

I did meet Pete Wilson, once, the summer after that first year in college. Two weeks before my nineteenth birthday, my friend invited me to go with him to a Republican barbecue fundraiser in Orinda, California. Governor Wilson was going to be making an appearance. Not having anything better to do, and with my friend's assurances that I wouldn't have to actually donate my own money to the GOP, I checked the barbecue out. I had no way of knowing this at the time, but that barbecue turned out to be good practice for living with my grandmother three years later, after she'd been diagnosed with Alzheimer's: I had the same conversation, over and over again. Some variation on, "Wow, Santa Cruz? That's really liberal, isn't it?" As this quickly became tedious, I began to change my answers I every time I heard this question from someone new.

I said things like, "Yeah, well, it's pretty cool, because the president of the College Republicans and the president of College Democrats both live on my floor, so it makes for some great debates in the lounge." Republicans feel hugely persecuted on college campuses; they can't figure out why people find talk about "undeserving, minority-welfare-mama-affirmative-action hires" offensive, so when they hear that their side is well-represented in a place like UCSC, they're ecstatic. What I didn't say is that my roommate and I had stolen the "Bush/Quayle '92" sticker from said College Republican's door and defaced it to read "Lick Bush '92." But by the end of the barbecue, I was full-on playing the part: "Tell me about it," I'd say, rolling my eyes. "They say they want justice and equality, but what they really want to do is give my hard-earned tax dollars to illegal aliens so they can buy Cadillacs, and perform abortions on American flags while speaking any language but English. I mean, it's even worse than you think." I'd have thought that, being Republicans, my name would have come up, especially since the name tag I was wearing said "John Sousa" on it. But it didn't; they were more interested in kicking liberal ass and taking liberal names. I was disappointed, until I met the governor.

I almost blew it though, because the GOP is the party of under-age binge drinking. There was an open bar serving Henry Weinhard's ale, which contributed greatly to my conservative Republican play-acting shtick. Nobody asked me for my ID, they just kept serving me up. Governor Wilson's speech lasted two beers. He spoke about how he had been a Marine, and that the Marine Corps had a motto, "A few good men," and how he needed the good people of California to send him a "a few more good men" in Sacramento, so he could lower taxes and kick out the Mexicans and end affirmative action.<sup>4</sup> After he was done, he shook some hands, and my friend and I were taken by a member of his advance team to be introduced.

"Governor, these young men would like to meet you, sir," the handler said, as Governor Wilson walked up. My friend, who had run for the city council as soon as he turned eighteen, and who fancied himself an up-and-comer in the Contra Costa County Republican Party, attempted to convey his professionalism and ambition to the governor as he shook his hand. I stood there swaying drunkenly, squinting my eyes to try to bring the governor into focus.

I felt almost guilty as the governor looked right past my friend, at my name tag, and said, "John, that's a great name you got there, son."

"Thanks, Governor," I said, trying my best to stand straight up as I gave him my best firm handshake. "My middle name's even 'Phillip.'"

"That's great, son," the governor said, and hustled past us, jumping into his idling limousine to be whisked away to another fundraiser.

### **For a long time I hated my name. I chafed under what I**

perceived to be expectations of greatness, which I attributed to my name. When people said things like, "That's a great name, son,"

<sup>4</sup> These last two were implied by that fact that he was Pete Wilson.

what I heard was “*Don’t fuck it up,*” like I had to earn the right to be named after such a great American. It was never my name—I was only borrowing it, trying to both fill the shoes of a mythical patriotic musician and legitimize my father’s relationship to the name. It’s not necessarily that I didn’t crave attention. I did and I still do. I was a class clown, an athlete, and I would never have taken that stand up comedy class if I didn’t want to get up in front of a group of people and have them laugh at me. But I hated that this one thing, my name, attracted attention whether I wanted it or not. I had no control over it.

On the first day of school there was always a good chance I’d become the catalyst for an impromptu civics lesson. “Hmm, John Sousa,” my teacher might say. “Is your middle name Philip?” followed by an explanation of who and what John Philip Sousa was. “Maybe on Veteran’s Day, John, you could bring in some John Philip Sousa music for show-and-tell”—like I could just reach into my dad’s eight-track collection, between Janis Joplin and Journey, and pull out John Philip’s Greatest Hits. Starting in fourth grade, I played the viola, and whenever there was a performance the orchestra leader couldn’t help but introduce me by my full name, even though I’d ask him or her not to. This attention embarrassed me, because I felt like once it was announced to a group of strangers that my name was John Phillip Sousa, they no longer saw me. They were now seeing John Philip Sousa, the ghost of a national treasure.

In trying to take ownership of my name I internalized my father’s joke. Even though I thought it was stupid, I still repeated it every time someone brought up my name. My senior year in high school I had a girlfriend whose mother had little use for me. One day, I was at her house and met some of my girlfriend’s extended family. I got the standard “Is your middle name Philip?” questions; my girlfriend’s mom jumped in and just made up her own story about how I got my name. “Well, his mom’s an artist, you know, real *creative*, and she wanted something to reflect that creativity.” This woman, who usually showed me nothing but veiled (and sometimes

not-so-veiled) contempt, hijacked the story of how I was named with ease.

“Actually, my dad’s a musician,” I said, “and everyone used to ask him if he was related to John Philip Sousa.” I went through the story; the punch line killed.

When her brother was done laughing, my girlfriend’s mom deadpanned through gritted teeth, “Well, I like my version better.”

### **What is the best thing about being named John Phillip Sousa?**

My birthday is June 27, which is exactly seven days before July 4. This week is almost exactly six months from the week between Christmas Day and New Year’s Day. Starting around Memorial Day, you hear patriotic music, which, depending on where you live, gets more and more noticeable the closer you get to the Fourth of July. And most of the patriotic music in the canon was written by John Philip Sousa, because it was made to be played by a band in parade formation. It’s kind of like how you start hearing Christmas music around Thanksgiving, except that most light-rock-less-talk radio stations don’t adopt an all-patriotic-music format for a whole month. So for the week between my birthday and July 4, probably because I’m actively looking for it, it seems like everywhere I go I hear one of the marches. Then, at the Fourth of July parade, and in the bandstand at the park where I watch fireworks, it’s extremely likely that I will hear at least one John Philip Sousa march. And as the opening bars to “Stars and Stripes Forever” ring out, I see the shower of sparks overhead, and I hear the boom of exploding rockets, I pretend that it’s all for me.

And I love it.

# The Winners Are...

*Three poems*

**Dennis Wilson, John Cubeta Zibluk,  
and Gabriella Brand**

*We are pleased to print here the winning poems from the 2011 New Haven Free Public Library Poetry Contest. Dennis Wilson, John Cubeta Zibluk, and Gabriella Brand won in the adult, youth, and elder categories, respectively.*

*—The Editors*

### **Searching, on a Winter's Day, for the Promise**

In Edgewood Park we find secrets worn thin by the wild gossip of  
Winter: layers of snow beneath the snow,  
Yellow perch under a frozen pond, the sunken moon behind a mist  
Of mica. Okay. From here we ply the frosted sidewalks to

Whalley and Winthrop: this corner Jamaican us crazy with its heat-welted  
Lean! Rastafarian philosophers and rabbis, an open-air barbecue in 30  
Degree weather with goat curried soup sugared breadfruit and Red  
Stripe in paper bags. Unfinished, freezing, we catch the B bus to

Chapel St. to warm ourselves inside Van Gogh's Night Café: cadmium  
Yellow hedged against the peak of stupor, gaslight curved  
Through the pant of prowling drunks. *Hey*, the guard warns us:  
*Don't get too close to that painting.* So we trudge down to the

Jungle to receive the joyful shoveling-out of nations: Ecuadorian Spanglish  
Speaking a streak of orange across the backs of our necks, reggaeton  
Blowing ragged through our hair, Haitian French winding like fingers  
Between our gloved fingers. Laughing, alive, we are hungry:  
Wooster Square? Fair Haven? Wherever the old country  
Rides its sweaty spices into the new, be that old country Italy or Nigeria,  
Turkey or Thailand or Tennessee. Full, but never satiated,  
We have the whole silver evening to walk from anywhere to

Anywhere: Saint Raphe's hard healings, the Trey, the Ville, Phelps gate,  
From rock to rock and sound to river. Toward midnight, we will arrive  
at this reckless conclusion: if the promise of a place comes down to bridged  
distances, let's just keep moving. With spring merely a breath away,

Let's always keep searching.

—Dennis Wilson

### **For Daniel, my Friend**

(written for a Tutsi survivor orphaned by the genocide in Rwanda)

Where is the Garden of Eden?  
Where are the Gates of War?  
All the times we looked away  
While you suffered more.  
My life is considered beautiful.  
I cringe at the thought of death.  
But mother earth's eyes grow grey and dull,  
and she shudders with each breath  
at the horror of pain and suffering,  
the evil of greed and wealth,  
the sounds of nations bickering  
and trust's decaying health.  
Our promise is forgotten;  
to help all those in need.  
While you know only pain and fear  
and see your loved ones bleed.  
The hatred, carnage and burning  
must stop so wounds may heal.  
From the devil we must turn  
and to light must kneel.  
Oh! Where is the Garden of Eden?  
Where are the Gates of War?  
Why do we still turn away?  
While you suffer more and more?

—John Cubeta Zibluk

## This Haven

Back when the river was lush with oyster,  
long before the *Hector* rounded the point,  
the first tribes understood the sanctity of promise.

Through season and tide, through harvest and flood,  
who knows how many oaths have been sworn or shattered  
between the red rocks of this land?

Think of the Sachem giving his nod,  
scratching his mark on the line next to Eaton's,  
expecting that strangers would honor their word.

Think of a colony anchored at the Meeting House,  
planting its hopes on nine new squares,  
trusting that the Maker would always provide.

Here, to this haven, dredged deep by courage,  
came scholar and merchant, mutineer and protector.  
Here, to this sanctuary, carved rich by immigrant,  
came artisan and craftsman, inventor and muse.

In time, the fame of the village rippled beyond harbor.  
In time, a city grew, mosaic-shaped and celebrated.

Who knows, tomorrow, what promises will be seeded  
in this still new shelter  
where each generation's covenant lies entwined with the next,  
broken and frayed, perfected and whole?

—Gabriella Brand



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