The Kleksograph

An international review of art and the subconscious

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THE KLEKSOGRAPH

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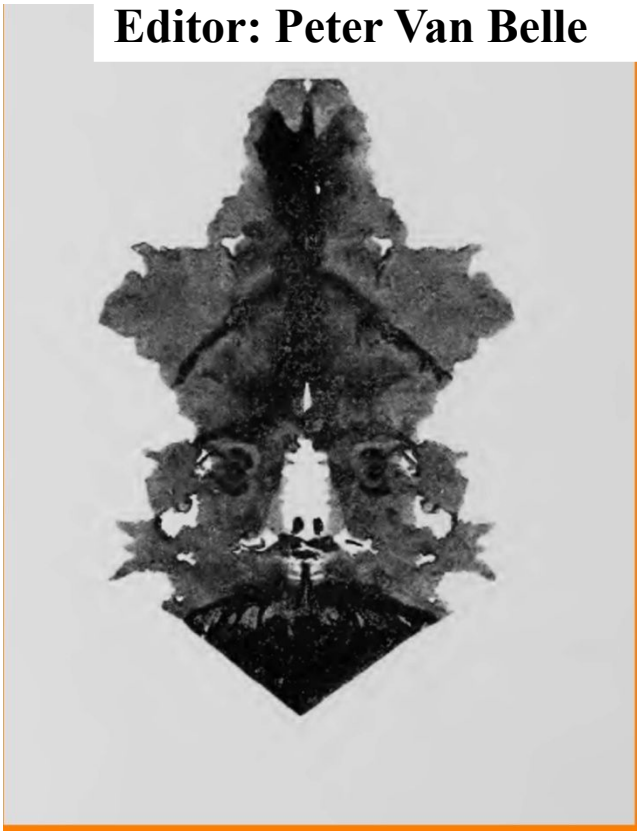

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In the mid-nineteenth century, Justinus Kerner, published his book of "Kleksographien". Later psychologists used similar ink blots as a means of accessing the subconscious of their patients. The Kleksograph is dedicated to exploring and celebrating the relationship between the subconscious and art.

Cover: Guardian of the Hermetic Temple by Peter Van Belle, 2025
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This magazine can be downloaded free from www.kleksograph.be

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Royal Rhodes

The Death of a Moth

At night in the deep part of August,
the air in the house becomes a warm soup
of cooking smells, laundry, and sweat.
The television emitted the one light,
black and white from poor reception,
crossed by a rigged antenna halo.
The volume was cranked up -- and static --
to cover the whine of a wobbling fan
and the fridge's motor, so loud
because it stood on uneven flooring.
The full bed where I stretched
made sounds like plastic, squeezed
and released -- a mattress on discount,
replacing one with depressions and ridges
exposing the tips of escaped springs.
Over the metal roof, rusted and lifting,
the stars of the belted Orion revolved.
And inside this awkward house parts
of the ceilings and walls gave solo
renditions of songs without names.
Just then, between the light and the dark,
a moth zigged and zagged slowly
before resting its V-shaped outline
on the glowing glass of the faulty TV,
its wings dusting like Satan's feather
the sparks of light turned into pictures.
Could it see figures as each of them moved?
Was it drawn to those untouchable bodies,
sound and motion from the distance of stars,
as the fan caught the dust on the wind it made?
The moth's camouflage markings were distinct,
like religious designs worn in a family rug,
hinting at some hidden life and heaven.
It could image in flight a visible soul,
eating away our woven, material body.
Or was it a soul escaping the devil's purse,
longing for mercy, to be crushed on the glass?

Alice Violett
Two Dreams

Wheeling my suitcase around the puddles on the front path and squinting through the persisting drizzle, I found the once bright blue door, and the rotting white latticed canopy that partially sheltered it, far less impressive than I had as a child. The huge plaster ‘Sea View Lodge’ scallop shell Phyllis and I had loved to run our fingers over no longer graced the entrance; instead, the hotel’s name was spelled out in 1970s municipal font on weathered metallic stickers.

I suspected the scrawny, rosewater-scented woman who opened the door was the daughter of Mrs Davey, the jolly proprietress we'd looked forward to seeing every year, but as the family must have hosted hundreds of guests over the past six decades, I doubted she’d remember me. The last time we’d met, I’d been 11 and she’d been in her late teens, and often out at secretarial college or with her friends – to Phyllis and I, she’d been the epitome of grown-up sophistication.

As I signed a cheque at the imposing oak check-in desk with ‘Judith French’ – I’d been divorced for more than 40 years, but didn’t miss my father’s name enough to bother changing it back – it became even clearer that the walnut-faced crone wasn’t the accommodating host of yesteryear.

'Breakfast is at eight o’clock, and dinner is at six-thirty sharp. If you aren’t intending to dine here tonight, I need to know now so I can tell Susan not to come in,’ she barked with a force that belied her diminutive form. ‘Please vacate your room by ten o’clock in the morning so Susan can clean it.’

Feeling reluctant to go back out into the rain, I confirmed I would be eating in, and began a long, slow ascent. Were these dingy, musty stairs truly the same ones Phyllis and I had raced down every morning for a week each summer, bursting with excitement for the beach? Tomorrow would be our final trip, a jar of ashes carefully nestled among my clothes in honour of my sister’s wish to be scattered in the sea where we’d been so happy as children.

Shouldering my way into a single-occupancy room under the eaves, I hoped Susan’s cooking was better than her cleaning. The dark, ornately carved headboard of the double bed that dominated the space needed more than a cursory dust, the tooth glass on the vanity sink was smeary, and cobwebs draped the deep frame of the solitary dormer window, through which all I could see and hear was the rain, which had worked itself back up to a steady splattering. It was a world away from the airy, well-

maintained family room on the first floor Mrs Davey had always allocated us. Phyllis and I would usually wake up first and creep past Mum and Dad's bed to the bay window, where the sight of the sparkling tide going in and out would keep us occupied until it was time to wash and dress.

At least, as there were no other guests, I had the bathroom off the top-floor landing all to myself. And, I thought as I levered myself onto the bed and took the TV remote from the scarred bedside table, it wasn't actually that uncomfortable…

I slipped into a dream I'd often had as a teenager. It had ceased when I left home, but had returned in earnest over the last few months, ever since the doctor had told Phyllis and I the treatments hadn't worked, and I'd started helping her get her affairs in order. Minor details differed each time, but there were invariably three discrete scenes.

In the first scene, I was standing in the entrance to the dining room of this very guesthouse. Mrs Davey was screaming and shouting words at Dad I couldn't make out as her daughter stood behind her, her normally immaculately pin-curled hair dishevelled and her face blotchy from crying. This always confounded me, because I had no memory of the former proprietress ever getting angry.

In the second scene, I was doing some homework at the little desk in my childhood bedroom when my mother came in, wearing her long tan coat and matching court shoes, and told me to look after Phyllis. I was indignant at this, as I'd taken my responsibility as a big sister very seriously for as long as I could remember.

Finally, I found myself downstairs in my childhood home, hovering beside the living-room door, trying to listen to the low adult voices on the other side without giving away my presence. As with the landlady's shouting, though, no matter how hard I concentrated, the words remained indistinct.

Like so many times before, I awoke at this point. On the TV, an unfamiliar young newsreader with a lilting regional accent was giving the headlines, and I realised I was late for dinner.

Neglecting to freshen up, I hastened downstairs, only to stop short when I spied, from overhead, Phyllis, leaving the premises through the front door in a navy coat and sturdy boots befitting the rain. Except – I scolded myself – Phyllis was gone. This woman, whose petite frame and iron-grey bob looked so much like my sister's from my vantage point, was probably Susan, having fulfilled her duty of cooking my evening meal.

This turned out to be a perfectly serviceable plate of baked salmon with steamed vegetables, followed by a slice of microwaved shop-bought apple crumble with custard, all served to me by my unsmiling host. Eating alone in the echoing room that had once been bustling with holidaymakers, I felt rather like a schoolchild suffering a punishment. It wasn't long before I was back in my room for the remainder of the evening, with just the TV and a book for company.

Perhaps due to my unfamiliar surroundings, or the strange enormity of the following day's task, after turning off the bedside lamp, I tossed and turned into the early hours. I must have nodded off eventually, though, or else I wouldn't have fallen back into the dream.

The familiar scenes were more fully fleshed-out than I remembered them ever being previously. I could hear some of the things Mrs Davey was shouting at Dad, unaware I'd come down from the room where Phyllis and I were supposed to be asleep: 'she's only 16!', and 'you've ruined her life!' and 'you're married with a beautiful wife and daughters, men like you disgust me!'

A subsequent, new scene of a silent night drive home, even though we still had two days left of our holiday, reminded me that the last time we came here – weeks before Mum died, and Dad, while still physically present, started to drift away from us – our visit was cut short for reasons I could never quite explain.

In the scene where Mum asked me to look after Phyllis, I realised I wasn't only unsettled because it was an unwelcome request, but because this was the first time she'd been out of bed, clean and dressed, for days, and there was something in her upbeat manner I found unnerving.

In the final scene, I could at last make out the words. Dad was sobbing – disturbing enough in itself – and talking with my uncle, his brother.

'I as good as killed her! How can I face the girls now?'

'She's the one who decided to step out in front of that car. Tell them was a tragic accident. They're too young to know what really happened.'

Gerry Fabian
Canicular Women

escape to an air-conditioned bar
where they sip wine coolers
and adjust sun spotted make-up.

I walk in
soaked t-shirt,
sweat stained hat,
open scratch cuts
and a sunburn from hell.
“An ice cold beer. Please.”

One of the women smiles.

Annie Bell
After the Show

A Dublin hotel room.
Tea and chocolate
enjoyed in bed,

watching TV.
Room begins to spin.
Vertigo?

Skin tingles:
flesh and vision disappear
in pixels.

Out of body, yet in it.
Dreaming, yet present.
Extreme panic alongside total calm.

“I think I’m dying,” I tell you.
“I think I’m dying too,” you say.
Weird.

Window checked - no nuclear radiation.
News checked - no EMP.
Confused.

Fighting the madness,
our mutual connection
keeps reality in sight.

“I think we’ve been drugged,” you say.
It makes sense,
but how?

A quest to reception for help
route planned, bags packed,
navigating trippy corridors with mad heads

Hands melt into wall.
Mind forgets body.
You pull me back.

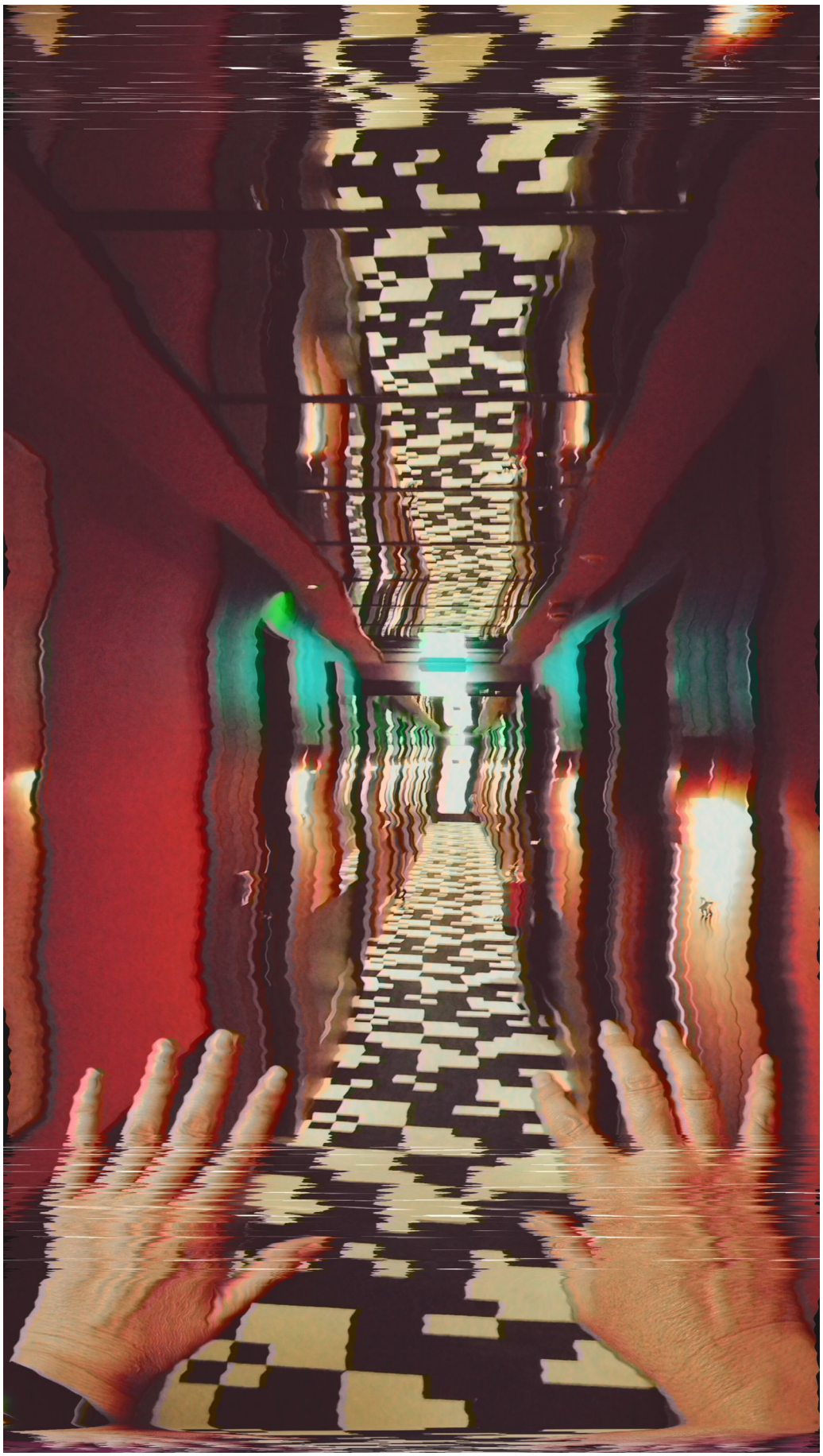
Receptionists listen
Ambulance is called.
Back to the room.

We purge while we wait.
Heads clear,
slowly.

Paramedics arrive.
No judgement - just kindness,
and reassurance we'll be fine.

But the mystery remains.
We ask over and over:
how did this happen?

Our eyes settle
on the hotel kettle
and we wonder.



Corridor, by Annie Bell, 2025

Geoffrey Heptonstall
Beyond

One

The dog yarled and yelped, its body arched until it collapsed on the ground, all life expired at last. The Commander had lingered over this one, first a wound, then another until the kill. There was so much blood. That was sure to attract others looking for something to eat. They were all like that, selfish and savage. Their eyes were pitiless. Their teeth tore into the flesh of any creature they found.

That was one reason why there were no beggars now in the city. The streets were quiet at night. There was a curfew of course. Few dared go out in the dark unless protected and armed, like the patrols. Anyone without a safe pass was removed at once. But there were so few out that these days the patrols were often bored. Hunting down the dogs was a way of passing the time. Even commanders went out hunting.

Some patrollers spoke of the old days when all manner of undesirables were removed. At first there were so many. As well as beggars and stray children, there were rebels. The rebels were always a problem, even now. Old patrollers laughed when they spoke of the innocents caught up in events they could not understand. There were people visiting friends or looking for food. That was their explanation, and it was likely to be true. But innocence was a crime when survival depended on cunning. All personnel without a safe pass were removed.

It had to be. This was the city of survivors. This was London.

Two

Beneath the city streets there was another city. That was the one Lyman wondered about. Beneath the city lay not only the ancient springs and subterranean rivers, but the passages where trains once travelled. Then there were the cellars as cool as mountains in the heat of summer. Then there were the drains. A city cannot function without systems both of water and wastage.

Then there was the other city. In basement rooms alternative visions of life were dreamed. In cellar bars people search for the palliatives of love or drunken oblivion. In the vaults of a ruined church the discarded of society sought the company of their own kind.

Or so Lyman imagined. It was difficult to know exactly what was happening under his feet. Something was happening. There were rumours of abandoned tunnels where things happened. He could not be sure about anything he heard. It was all in darkness.

On the surface Lyman lived in an intimate city. Of course there were those who drifted through his quarter, lingering for a while before moving on who knows where. But anyone who established roots was likely to acquire a reputation, if only at a distance. Strangers sometimes became people he recognized. Even if he never spoke to them they were people he knew by sight. Something of their lives revealed itself when they passed by in the street. That was true even in the city at large. There was that intimate sense of enclosure Lyman had known all his life in London. He had never known anywhere else.

Someone he noticed one day was a young woman of exceptional elegance. Not only was she rich, she was well-connected. She stepped delicately out of an expensive car. She nodded to her driver who saluted. Accompanying the young woman was a maid. She smiled fondly at the maid. There were so few cars that the sight of one always aroused interest. People stared, but patrollers moved them on. A patroller escorted the young woman across Piccadilly to Fortnum's where armed guards saluted her as she stepped inside the opening door.

It did not take long for Lyman to learn who she was. Many people seemed to know. Her father was in government. Hers was a life of such rare privilege. She had no say in government, of course, but she had power. There was no thought of her ever doing any work she did not care to do. Everything was easy for her. Everyone obeyed her. Lyman was intrigued by her. Of course he was intrigued. There was a fascination, not entirely negative, at the sight of such privilege. He had known only shortages and limitations all his life. Some of the older ones could remember other times, but it was unwise to speak of them. Citizens were to think ourselves lucky they were living in London and not out in one of the desolate regions beyond the wire.

Three

There were traces of alcohol and cocaine. She had been killed by a bullet in the back of the head, like the victim of an execution. There were bruises and cuts to her body, like the victim of torture. This was no lover's quarrel that had got out of hand. This was no crime of frustrated passion. The woman had been murdered deliberately and carefully. The death itself would have been instantaneous, but the preliminary was likely to have been prolonged, painful and terrifying. She had died distraught in mind and destroyed in spirit. No-one saw or heard it happen. Or if anyone did, no-one intervened. She was abandoned as if she were nothing.

Slaves have no rights. They have nothing except their servitude, like a prison sentence without hope of remission. All talk of work and money had vanished. The enticing promises soon were seen clearly as cynical lies. And in some basement or high tower of a big city a woman, no more than twenty, was visited by men whose desires were universal in the pain and fear they engendered. She was punished for being pretty. She was punished for being poor.

Service, as it was called in law, was permitted for those who had no identity papers. They were put to work. There was a shortage of workers, so many having disappeared. Some had died, of course. Epidemics had been commonplace until quite recently.
It was said that many of the servers had been brought to the city for the purpose of working. Others came looking for a better life. Life outside the city was said to be worse than life within the wire. Londoners loved their city, even though life had been harsh for so many years.
Patroller Palfreman found her in an empty cellar. The door was locked so that no dog could reach her before the patrols. She would be found eventually, her killers knew. They wanted her to be found. The story of her murder would spread if not as news then by rumour. Others would be warned. Her killers wanted others to be warned.
Looking at her, Palfreman felt moved. He had seen many things, but death had not lost its terror for him. He was not one of those who shot dogs for the thrill of watching them die. He was not one of those who enjoyed the power his uniform gave him. He had been known, though only by himself, to have looked the other way when a stray child ran through the alleys. He had no taste for killing children.
He had no taste for killing any living creature. This beautiful young woman, how could anyone remove her? What had she done that was held to need such punishment? She had tried to escape. That was the most likely cause. Beyond the wire at the city's edge was another world. It was said to be savage. Its very wildness was its attraction to servers making a bid for freedom.

Four

Patroller Palfreman lived on the same block as Lyman did. The two men knew each other to say hello to, but nothing more. It was never wise to say too much. To confide in a patroller, even an innocent confidence, was to invite trouble. That could mean removal. Spies and terrorists operated everywhere. London was notorious for them.
'It all started way back,' people said. 'In those days the whole island was one country. Of course after independence we thought things would improve, but rebels caused trouble. It's only now things are back the way they should be. You ought to think yourself lucky, young man.' So many times Lyman had heard this. The same sentiments, the same phrases were brought out repeatedly to stress how lucky the young were to be living in a London that was clean and decent at last.
Palfreman lingered for a moment when they passed on the staircase. He wanted to speak but not where voices echo in the stairwell. He invited Lyman in for a cup of tea. "We're neighbours. We ought to get to know each other," he said.
Lyman saw at once that it was more than that. Palfreman had something to tell him. He could not imagine what it could be. Then he began the fear the worst. Perhaps Palfreman was going to tip him off that an arrest was imminent. Or perhaps he was going to probe into Lyman's loyalty to London. There was a motive behind his

sudden, surprising act of friendliness. Patrollers of all people had a motive in everything they did. It was in their nature.
A server was cleaning the concrete stairs. She was making her way slowly up every flight. She worked meticulously without a break. It had to be clean before curfew or she would be punished. A public whipping was the usual punishment. A crowd always gathered to cheer. Nobody thought of the suffering. It was a diversion in a life that had few entertainments.
Palfreman's apartment had a blue lamp, indicating he was a patroller. His primary responsibility was the neighbourhood, but often he was called out elsewhere. There was no-one else at home. "It's quiet," he said. "The kids make such a noise"'
"It's the curfew"' Lyman said.
"Necessary, though," Palfreman insisted. He waited for a response. Lyman said nothing. The two men drank tea. Palfreman had milk which he kept cool in a bucket of cold water. There was no sugar, not even for a patroller. "There was a nasty case yesterday," Palfreman said. "A server girl murdered. Pretty she was, too."
"I expect she tried to escape."
"Very likely the case," Palfreman agreed. "Probably not in London long. They come in from out there, you know, the regions. They don't know city ways. They soon learn, though. They soon learn."
"The murderer? Any ideas?" Lyman asked.
"No. It's routine. We record it, but there's not much we can do, not for a server. I mean, who cares?"
"It's not easy for them," Lyman said, regretting what he said immediately. He could not let down his guard, for he was sure Palfreman had a purpose in talking. There was something he had to say. Or there was something he wanted Lyman to say. Lyman did not dare say anything.
"It's not easy for any of us," Palfreman replied. "Do you know about history? I do."
Palfreman began a narrative of what had happened. Lyman knew something, of course, but not everything. 'Back in the olden days London was part of a country, the whole island. You knew that? Well, we got our independence. There was a lot of fighting with rebel armies. They spread terror, trying to prevent us from taking back our city from the undesirables. We were second-class then, no better than servers. The undesirables had control. Can you imagine what it was like? Filth everywhere, not clean like now it is.
"It was the Chief's grandfather who sorted things out. He was a good, brave, honest man. He set up the patrols. Made it all official. Gave us powers. Before that it was civil war – rebels versus vigilantes. The patrols stopped all that. They did things, but they got it all sorted. And that's something to be proud of.
"The job isn't finished yet. The farms have to be patrolled, for example. One time they were all just grass and trees. Waste of good space. Hyde Farm was lying idle. Now look at the food it produces. And it takes some working. That's when the first servers came in – to work the farms. It had to be done or we'd have starved. Look at

us now, a self-sufficient city. Look down there. That would have been just grass once. Now there's pigs and chickens. Same everywhere. The lucky ones have gardens."
Lyman knew about the lucky ones. They were members of the Capital Nation Party. There was no other way of gaining privileges. The young woman he saw in Piccadilly, her privileges all came from Capital. She was not a member herself, of course, but her father surely was. If he was in government he was sure to have been the son of a Capital Nation Party member. That was how it worked. They were lucky.
"I feel sorry for the servers," Palfreman continued, his voice more animated now. "They were told they'd have lives of luxury compared with life beyond the wire. It's not true. You should see…." He stopped in mid-sentence. Palfreman glanced nervously at the door as if someone behind it were listening.
"You've been beyond the wire?" Lyman asked, incredulous. Only senior members of Capital went out, and always by air. There were a few planes, all belonging to City Hall.
"No, I never said that. It's a lie," Palfreman retorted, hot and angry. He feared what Lyman would say in public. On the other hand, the word of a patroller always was accepted as evidence. Lyman had no future if Palfreman spoke to anyone. One of the farms would have another server worked until he had no strength left in him.
"I'm proud of living in London," Lyman said. "Who'd want to live out there? Who'd want to go? I can't imagine anyone going. I mean, all this talk about freedom doesn't mean anything, does it? There aren't free cities out there, are there? This is freedom, the freedom of being a Londoner." He hoped that would calm the situation. It was his hope to assure Palfreman before I left his apartment. Then he might apply for a transfer to another block if I could think up a good reason. Surely he could think of something?
"There is freedom." Palfreman said quietly, his mood changing. "There is freedom. You know there is. I can tell by the way you say it."
Lyman was only half listening. He was thinking of Governor Moulton's beautiful daughter.

Five

"Many things are necessary," said the Commander, "but some things disturb me. I have feelings."
The Commander was looking directly at her. His look was bold. No-one except her parents ever had dared to be so direct. It was rude, but she was powerless against a rising star of the security forces. All she could do was look away (which she did) or outstare him (for which she lacked the nerve).
She knew that he was rising rapidly or else would not be in a position to lunch at such a restaurant at this. If he was not a member of Capital already he soon would be.

Privileged as she was, she understood the dangers of crossing a powerful man. Even her father's influence was not limitless.
"As a lady," the Commander continued, "you have feelings, of course. Ladies are sensitive, delicate creatures. Sadly, you can never be a citizen in the way a man can be, but the presence of a lady is always welcome."
Miss Moulton had been introduced to the Commander by a mutual friend. Her gloved hand had taken his, and she had bowed graciously. Her education had not been wasted. All those hours of etiquette, dancing, music, sewing, cookery, painting, archery and, of course, moral teaching had paid their dividends. Miss Moulton knew how to behave. She was exquisite in style and voice and manner. She knew when to laugh and when to keep silent. She knew how to laugh, quietly and politely. She knew to be neither too bold, nor too diffident. Shyness was accepted. It was encouraged in the naturally shy if they were not too withdrawn.
Miss Moulton rarely asked questions except on certain practical matters, and for polite conversation. Of public affairs she knew nothing. Her days were filled with shopping, lunches, afternoons at the theatre or concert hall and evenings dining or dancing. (Official cars were able to break the curfew of course.) She read little, having been taught no more than the essentials of reading. She enjoyed fashion magazines. Her maid, Stella, read to her.
Wherever Miss Moulton was her maid accompanied her. They were inseparable. The Commander observed as much to Miss Moulton in a whisper that carried its tone of firmness. "Stella is my maid," Miss Moulton replied. "I would be simply lost without her." The Commander said nothing more.
It was the saying of nothing more that disturbed Miss Moulton. Very little disturbed her life, but the Commander's look had penetrated beneath the silk-lined carapace that encompassed her. He had seen her, watched her, and noted many things about her. He had seen the adoring looks, the shared laughter, the brushing of hand against waist and hip. Lovers betray themselves, especially when they are innocent.
"It has been most pleasant to talk to you, Miss Moulton," the Commander said before returning to his table. "Perhaps I may be permitted to speak with you further. Our new flood defences? You have seen them? They are worth seeing. I would be honoured to escort you, with a chaperone of course." He gave Stella a glance. Then he bowed and took his leave.
"He's dangerous," Stella whispered. "I don't like him, Miss."
"Nor do I, Stella." Miss Moulton never had experienced fear before. She never had experienced anything deeply, except love. This was truly alarming. It was as if she had returned home to find her house in ruins. Miss Moulton's life was changing. Life was not secure any more.
London was secure no more. Miss Moulton was driven through streets that appeared to be the same as before, but they were not the same. She had the absurd feeling that she was being driven through a city that was all facades without anything of substance behind. Did people who think such things go mad? She wondered. Was she going mad? Was that how madness started?

People who rebelled were mad, weren't they? People who tried to go beyond the wire, people who went underground: they were all mad. Madness she knew to be a terrible sickness, like perversion and all the other undesirable qualities that Capital had eradicated.
Of course innocent love was not mad or perverse. It was a natural intimacy. All the young ladies were intimate with their maids, Miss Moulton was sure. It was so sweet it could not be considered the least undesirable.
"How do you spell undesirable?" Miss Moulton once had asked.
"There is no need for you to know," came the reply.
Miss Moulton had accepted the answer without question. Now, suddenly, she was not so sure. What could it mean?

Six

"I'll tell you what I mean by freedom. I went underground. I had to," Palfreman explained. "It was after one of the floods. This was a while ago, mind. We had more floods then. The Chief's got it sorted now."
"And freedom?" Lyman asked.
'"Yes, freedom, "Palfreman continued. "Well, like I say, we had to go down into the old tunnels. There was an entrance at Covent Garden. At the rear of a Security Office was a long stairway down. This was kept secret. Very steep steps, as I recall. We went down to check out things. There was water, of course, so each of us had an inflatable dinghy. We followed the captain through the tunnels, all in darkness but for our torches. We went along for what seemed like miles, but was very likely not so long.
"There were rats. You heard them scurrying in the water. I'd have shot any I'd seen. The stench was disgusting, believe me. I've smelt some stenches, but this was foul. We had oxygen. And, I thought, we're going to need it.
'"Anyway, on we went. But as time passed I realized the others were out of sight. Then I came to a point where the tunnel divided into two. I could see nothing and hear nothing. I had to guess. Well, it seemed natural to turn to the left. So that's the way I went. Needless to say I never saw the others.
"After a time the water receded, and I found I could walk which I did. Believe me I did not like what was happening. We'd been through a few stations for the trains that used to run. I reached Piccadilly. That was the name. So at least I knew where I was.
"I climbed up onto the platform and walked through where it said EXIT. I thought I might be able to get up onto street level somehow. I found some metal stairs. Walking up I was sure I could hear voices – singing, music. Well, that didn't seem likely, but that was what I heard."
Palfreman paused. He had taken someone into his confidence. He had not betrayed any secrets, yet Lyman felt it was a confession. Palfreman wanted to tell Lyman something. Perhaps it was more than he dared say out loud.

It was growing dark. Soon they would hear the sirens sound for the start of the curfew. Citizens were told the curfew brought security. Most citizens accepted it. They had no choice. Dissent could mean years of servitude.
“I shouldn’t be telling you this,” Palfreman continued.
“Perhaps you are testing my loyalty?” Lyman nearly suggested. Had he said this the conversation would have ended there, and no further confession was going to reach him. What he actually said encouraged Palfreman: “I need to know what you have to say.”
“Why?’”Palfreman looked concerned.
“Because I wonder what happens underground.”
‘”I can tell you: lots of things that shouldn’t happen go on down there. I couldn’t believe what I saw in Piccadilly. There was a crack in the wall. I looked in on – well, I’d sooner not say. But I recognized high-ups in our force there. There were woman, you know, wearing next-to-nothing. A lot was going on. I couldn’t believe it. My eyes were opened. That’s all I can say.”
“No.’”Lyman said, “you can say more.”
“All right,”Palfreman said after a long pause. “I’ve been down a few times. I found a way through. The tunnels only go so far, but there’s deserted tracks. You’ll find undesirables there, but, remember, I have a gun. And this uniform. They left me alone.
“I found there was a way under the wire. They didn’t know about it. They still don’t. There’s very likely to be a few secret ways. I’ve been out more than once. That’s as much as I’m prepared to say.’”
“What’s it like? I need to know. I need to see it for myself.”

Seven

“I met with Commander Ford,’ Governor Moulton said. ‘I believe you know him. You really ought to see more of him, a most charming young man, and a rising star in the Patrol Force. Of course I think his ultimate role will be something in government.”
“I don’t like him, Daddy.”
“Nonsense. This isn’t a matter you can decide on your own, darling. Don’t be silly.”
“But my life is here with you and Mummy. And Stella is so good to me.”
“Ah yes, the maid. Commander Ford – David – was quite right: that maid doesn’t know her place. That’s very bad, very bad. David is observant, you see. He has a sharp eye. Good judgement. A most admirable young man. Yes.”

Eight

“What is freedom?” Miss Moulton asked.
“Freedom?” the Commander repeated. He looked surprised, the surprise turning to vexation. He had not expected such a question from so well-brought-up a lady. It was not a topic of polite conversation. “I am surprised you ask.”
‘”Forgive me, Commander,” Miss Moulton replied. “I ought not to have been so direct. I am unaccustomed to asking such questions and to discussing such matters.”
The Commander said nothing. It was the silent pause that Miss Mouton found so disconcerting. She suppressed the wish to look at her maid for reassurance. She was astute enough to fear the Commander’s watchful eye on her. He trusted no-one. It was his role to trust no-one. Stella was the other side of the glass, acting as chaperone. The Captain glanced in her direction, but Miss Moulton stared straight ahead. She knew of course that a single glance would betray her.
“I am interested why you asked such a question,” the Commander continued when Miss Moulton hope the question would be forgotten. The Commander was a man with a habit not to forget.
“I really don’t know,” Miss Moulton said cautiously. She did not dare look the Commander in the eye. “I suppose my idea of freedom is to be content. And I am content with my life.”
“One day you shall marry.”
“Then I am certain to be more content.”
“Yet you spoke of freedom?” the Commander persisted.
“It was the wrong word, Commander.”
“On the contrary, it was an admirable word, Miss Moulton. Freedom is what we have in our city if by freedom we mean peace, security and good order. It is what I mean by freedom.”
“That is what I meant too, Commander,” Miss Moulton said, smiling sweetly and adopting a warmer, more trusting tone. She hoped to deflect his suspicion and to disarm his doubts about her.
“One day you shall marry.” The Commander’s gaze became a penetrating stare if only for a few seconds.
A server cleared away the remains of the lunch as the Commander suggested they walk onto the terrace overlooking the garden. Servers were tending the flowers. They did not look up to the terrace. They did not dare. “A garden needs a woman’s touch,” the Commander said.2‘I appreciate my garden of course, but I feel it lacks the directing hand of a lady.”
A server came from the house with champagne for the Commander and Moulton. The server tripped, spilling a little of the champagne. ‘You stupid woman!’ the Commander shouted, striking the server so hard she fell backwards, the glasses slipping from the tray and smashing, the tray clattering on the stone of the terrace. The Commander stepped over the server as if she were an inanimate obstacle. As he did so he apologized to Miss Moulton, promising to have the server whipped.

Inside the house again the Commander recovered his composure. He was profuse with further apologies. He was angry with the server, and he was angry with himself for losing his temper. He blamed the server.
“Where do these wretches come from?” he said. “Somewhere in a Godforsaken waste out there. It really is too much. They have no sense of civilized values except what has been drilled into them. I despise every one of them. Servers! Never trust a server. Never.” The Commander involuntarily glanced in Stella’s direction. ‘They may seem loyal and trustworthy. Oh yes. But they’ll betray you in the end.’
“Perhaps I have been more fortunate than you,” Commander,’ Miss Moulton replied.
“Perhaps I am more perceptive, Miss Moulton. It is my duty to watch, to observe, to note things that others may miss. I have not risen this far with my eyes closed. I know what I see.”
“And what do you see, Commander?”
“I see an enchantingly beautiful young woman.”
“Anything more?”
“Yes. I see a future where there are two doors. One door opens into happiness.2
“And the other?”
‘”Ah, that is a door that must remain forever closed to decent society.” The Commander paused to glance out of the window. He could not bear to look at Miss Moulton. ‘It has been my work to see that door open The Commander went over to the window. The day was dull and overcast.
“It is my duty to detain certain individuals. I need not say more except that I confess I have a favourite. He is something of a pet. I’m rather fond of him, although he is a terror. Eric is his name. Now, he has been waiting trial for some time. I am reluctant to send him to trial because I have grown so attached to him. I find causes for delay. And in the mean time I allow him certain privileges. He is so lonely, you see. He had a companion. It was someone I had need to detain. Her choice was life as a server of the lower rank, or life with Eric. She chose Eric. That pleased him. He always approached her with enthusiasm. Perhaps too eagerly. Her health was not of the best. She found life with Eric quite exhausting Eventually she died. Poor Eric was so upset. And now he is lonely again. I find that quite distressing.”
The Commander turned to look Miss Moulton in the eye. Her composure was intact. She betrayed no emotion, a fact the Commander found interesting. In his eyes it condemned her, as Stella, if not Miss Moulton herself, could see. If she could hide her feelings so well what hidden feelings might she have? What was she thinking of the Commander? He needed to know.
“The traitors are the ones I despise. You know who the traitors are? The ones who look for another door. There is no other door. There is no way out.” The Commander held his emotions in check, but only just. There was a disturbing depth of anger now in every syllable, every gesture. ‘The choice, my dear Miss Moulton, is between happiness – which for a young lady is marriage – or Eric – which is unthinkable. Surely you agree?”
“You would not condemn someone you loved, Commander?”

“If that person were a traitor, yes. I could not love her. I could not love a traitor.2
“Nor could I, Commander,” Miss Moulton said almost too boldly. The heavy air of danger hung in the room so strongly that Miss Moulton’s composure was beginning to break.
The Commander smiled. “A slow death is a terrible thing to witness. Better to put to put it out of its misery than to watch its agony. And then there is the effect on the traitor’s family. They would be ruined. Nothing could save them from disgrace. Think of that, Miss Moulton. Think of the misery a foolish choice can make.”
“And love is the cure for misery?”
“Precisely, Miss Moulton. Love is what a young woman wishes for. A well-furnished home, a dutiful husband, adorable children – what more could she want? That is the freedom we offer. It is the only freedom there can be.” The Commander’s gaze moved from insistence to insolence, all the while seeking to strip Miss Moulton of her defences, her dignity. These she clung to with a tenacity so determined that the Commander had to admit temporary defeat.
It was only temporary. This was not the end. Miss Moulton understood the choices before her. There was no way of resisting the Commander’s power. One way or another he was determined. The ways he offered were unthinkable.
“Oh, one last thing,” the Commander said pointing contemptuously at Stella. “That maid of yours – I strongly advise you to dismiss her. We can find work for her. There is always work for servers.”
“And why would I dismiss my maid?”
“Because I ask this of you. Because I order you. I do not like the look of her. She is a bad influence. That is my reason. I do not have to offer a reason, but out of respect for you I have done so.”

Nine

“Palfreman?” The Captain said, looking puzzled. “Palfreman? What sort of a name is that?”
“I don’t know, sir.”
“Hmm. Not English, is it?”
“My family’s been here for many generations.”
“You have the papers? You see, I know things have got slack, very slack. It’s my job to tighten things up. Undesirable attitudes, undesirable behaviour – can’t have those at all. It’s the same with undesirable people.” The Captain stared at Palfreman all the while. His gaze was searching for any sign of fear or confusion or insolence. The Captain was ever alert to the possibility that even within the ranks of his own force there may have been undesirable elements creeping in.
“I agree, sir,” Palfreman replied.

“Of course you agree. I’d reduce you to nothing if for one moment I suspected you disagreed.” The Captain’s steady gaze turned to contemptuous sneer. “It’s not your place to tell me you agree. It’s your place to obey without question.”’
“Sir”’ Palfreman stiffened himself and saluted.
“That’s better.2 The Captain stood up to walk round his desk so that he could be very close to Palfreman. “You disgust me, you filthy, fucking little piece of lower-class shit. Just look at you. All you’ll ever be is a Patroller. Your voice, your manner, your look – they’re all wrong. You’re not officer material. I’m surprised they even let you in at all. Why did they do that, do you think? I’ll tell you why. They needed types like you, the sort who might know undesirables. We need to know what you know. That’s the only reason you’re in the force, Palfreman. You’re here to guide us to undesirables. You’re more likely to come across them than I am. I only see when they’re captive. You see them. They walk past you. They live near you. They even talk to you. Isn’t that right, Palfreman? They talk to you. Of course it’s right. You can give me names. Give me a name, Palfreman. Give me a name of an undesirable neighbour. Just one name. It doesn’t matter who. All we need is a name.”
The sweat on Palfreman’s face betrayed his fear of his Captain. He hoped it did not betray his knowledge. “I’ll be more vigilant, sir,” he said.
“Of course you will. And at the end of the week you will give me a name and a few details. It must be someone you know because someone you know is an undesirable. That neighbour of yours, for example, the one you talk to. Is he trustworthy, do you think? If you have the slightest suspicion you must say so. Talk to him again. Ask him a few questions. Then let me know what was said.”
Palfreman wondered how much the Captain knew. He suspected it was quite a lot. There was something knowing about the Captain’s gaze. His eyes were cold behind the smile. He had not reached his position without understanding people, especially in their weaknesses. He had seen some weakness in Palfreman. Perhaps he had guessed much of what was going through Palfreman’s mind. There was something not quite right. The Captain was certain of that.
Palfreman supposed someone had reported seeing Lyman and him in conversation more than once? Perhaps a server seeking some privileges had reported it? Servers were silent and subservient. Their resistance was to watch as surely as the Captain watched.
Or perhaps it was simply the change in Palfreman’s appearance? There surely was some change, something Palfreman was unable to disguise. Subtle differences had betrayed him to those he worked with, those he had once considered friends. But now he had only one friend. And many enemies.

Ten

It was worse than Lyman expected. He had anticipated foul smells in dark tunnels. He could not have imagined the stench and filth they were going through. Palfreman asked him if he was sure he wanted go on. Of course Lyman agreed.
The choice was limited. For Palfreman there was no choice. Ever since he disappeared in the tunnels he had fallen under suspicion. That he had lost his way was acceptable. What aroused suspicion was the time he took in finding his way back. His superiors had guessed something close to the truth. London was not for the curious. It was a city that survived by every citizen knowing his place, his duty and his loyalty. The women survived by deference to the citizens. The servers survived by labour and obedience.
Palfreman had seen his wife, and even his children also, look at him in a different way. Someone had spoken to them. If that were the case then it was only a matter of time before his arrest. Once they were suspicious they found the evidence. That was how the justice system worked.
“I can picture in my mind another London. Like in olden days. They always tell you about the plagues and the poverty, the crime gangs and the filthy goings-on. Well, that’s as may be, but I can picture it another way somehow,” Palfreman confided in Lyman the day they made their preparations to leave.
What Palfreman knew for certain, having seen it for himself, was that life beyond the wire was not wild and savage. He had walked through green pastures, and he had met kindly people. When they spoke they smiled. Their questions were innocently curious. At first Palfreman was alarmed. Then he came to accept this ease and freedom as natural. This, he thought, is how London could be.
One day he heard a dog bark in the distance. It ran up to him, panting excitedly. Palfreman reached for his gun, but the dog simply stopped before him with its large, friendly eyes. Palfreman put the gun away and reached down to stroke the dog, something he had never done before. The dog wagged its tail and went home. That was the moment that decided everything.
There were certain markers that Palfreman had placed as guides. He had come to know his way through the tunnels. He had discovered a hidden way down at Old Street. It was part of his regular patrol. At the end of the month his patrol route was due to change. He guessed that would be the occasion of his arrest. ‘They’ll take you, too,’ he told Lyman.
Their plan was elaborate. It had to be. The danger of being followed was strong. Palfreman secured supplies with false documentation that would be discovered within days. Once they were down there was no going up again. ‘We can find other cities’, Palfreman said. ‘People talk of them out there.’
Of course the alarm sounded as they entered they went down. They had minutes to and no more to disappear into the labyrinth. Palfreman had prepared for this by laying a false trail in anticipation. There was every chance the Patrol would be fooled for

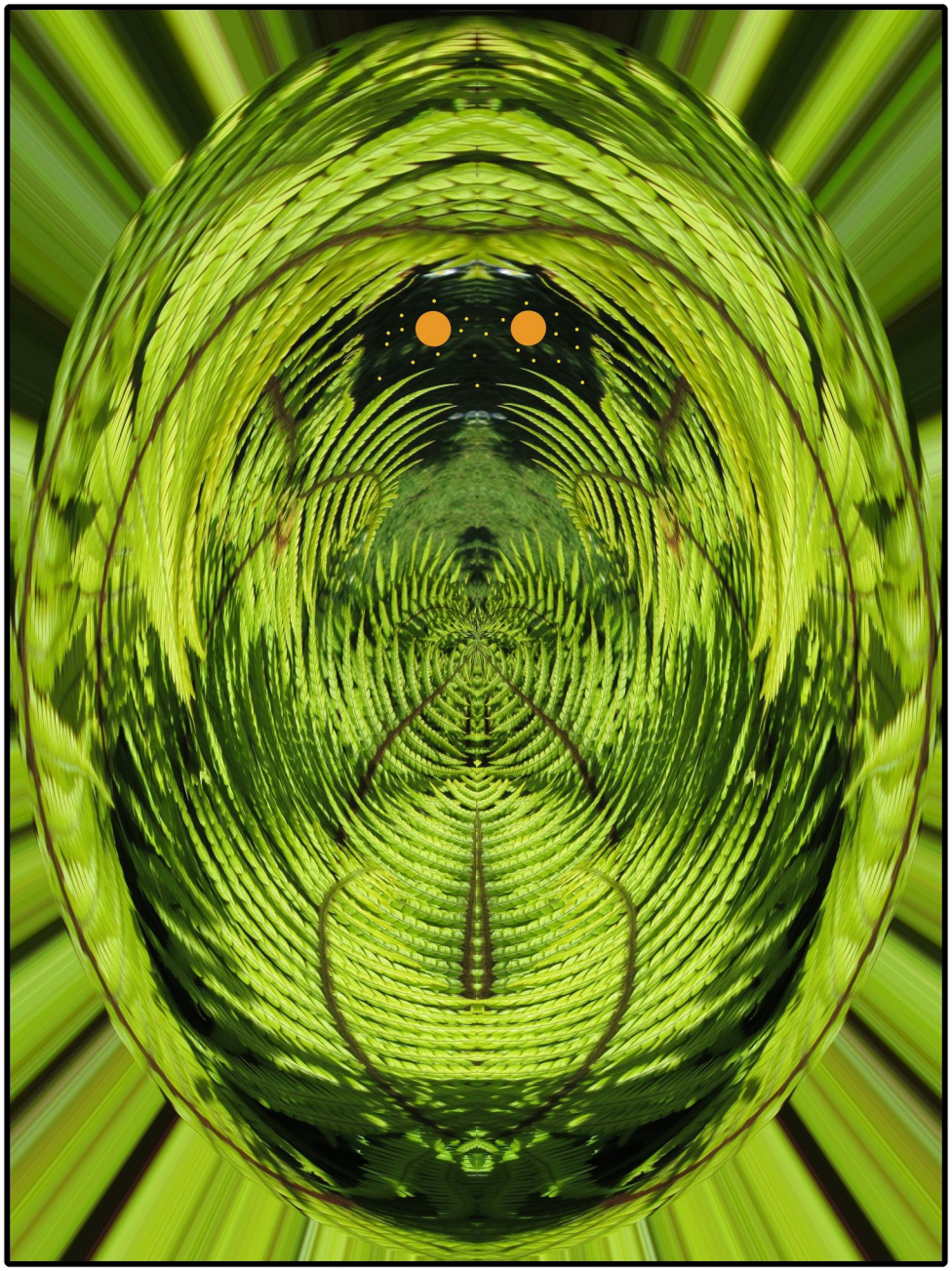
long enough to ensure their escape. The tunnel he hoped to lead them down was one of the most dangerous. There'd be a battle with armed undesirables.
Palfreman and Lyman could hear terrible noise in the far distance. It sounded as an echo from hell. At times the noise seemed close. The worst sight was to see a body floating in the water.
Later on the deserted track there was a group of vagrants, ragged and filthy, grouped round a fire. Palfreman gave them food and drink he had brought for such an encounter. He gave them the supplies without saying a word.
Lyman followed Palfreman's lead. For a time he had feared the escape plan was a ploy to trap him. But he soon learned to trust Palfreman. It was Lyman's own courage he was uncertain about. This was the most serious act he had undertaken in his life. He was leaving London. He had grown up believing that all life was here, that there was nothing beyond the wire. Soon he was going to see the truth as he walked through green pastures and spoke to people who smiled.
There was one last encounter before they reached freedom. Along the track Lyman noticed something in the long grass. At first it looked no more than discarded paper. But then he noticed it was clean and elegantly patterned. It was not paper, but a silk scarf recently lost. Perhaps it was a thief's booty. Or perhaps someone rich had come this way only an hour or so before them. Lyman picked up the scarf. The expensive scent lingered. He was sure he recognized it. He was sure he knew whose scarf it was.

Alan Murphy

Trellises

Alan Murphy

Chlorophilia



Alan Murphy
The Epicure

Hazlewood, his face as round
as blushing buttocks, gestures
to the epicure that lurks
in us all. We soon succumb.
Slumber follows louche capers
drenched in booze. The naked bum
of Eros as good as smirks,
lewd Liliaceous pastures
distracting us from death's hound.

Next day, alas, you've wine flu
from the flushed consternation;
your soul that soared now slouches
towards Bedlam, peachy cheeked
Daniel gone, chased by a bare.
You're wan, cadaverous, peaked,
reduced to probing pouches,
wide and deep. But - damnation! -
there's no (epi)cure for you.

Sam Barbee
Marquee

Bulbs outline seductive titles.
Illuminated grid's alchemy transforms
white glare to golden panorama. Bright
shower buzz. Documentary, art film,
or slasher chic? Let critics decide.

A film I've longed to see, quest bolstered
by insomnia. I succumb to opaque darkness.
A magical crescent of the moon I knew—
last phase before lunacy. Widescreen
wonder, and popcorn pledge.

My hands reach through blackness
to taste sprouts of salt, of butter. Prime
hunger's grip, appetite answered...
money shot, unanimous smiles.
Cheesy revelation oversteps imagination.

Soda straw. X-rated whisper—
nothing blushing. Pretense betrayed
in the lonesome last frame.
House lights, lobby lights.
Streetlights home.

Sam Barbee
Victory Story

Sullen at my friend's funeral, I pose behind the family.
Through doxology and decree, but resist Amens,
even with eternity's possibility in the balance.
I consider prayer a vacuum requiring more than it gives.

I'm certain my friend would have preferred a celebration
with wine and gaudy streamers swirled by afternoon breeze.
To be unpretentious, shall I refuse the wafer pressed
as victory, or swallow its bargain of convenient amnesty.

Through my indiscretions, I hear a question…
Did he win, or lose? Shall we sluff death's decay?
Strive for more than farewell toast and ring
of keys to heaven's golden gates?

I want to honor the dignity salvation deserves.
Stand eager to sample redemption's sweet light.
Even in a neutral posture, a sinner cannot squash
dependency on deliverance. With wits seduced,

I have failed grace. My sad option now:
dagger in hand, I will slice the soft fruit crowned
with gnats. Flatten slivers between my palms
to savor the immortal halves. Today's graveside,

I hold a square of soggy sod to toss into the pit,
and whisper…I'm still here, buddy. First, I clap my hands
twice to commence a medley of my friend's favorite ballads—
poorly sung by attendees, but with alto's by heavenly hosts.

David Ryan

St Christine quells the immolation of her sexploitation

Pauline Barbieri
Aloneness

Only a fool would walk along Second Avenue to Eighty Sixth Street in Manhattan, at midnight but loneliness invites danger to the point of lunacy - I am guilty.

The Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim, the Museum of Natural History know me well, and they know how loneliness was my companion and tempted me to trigger off the alarm systems, just to prove my existence in that silent world.

Central Park too must have sensed my forlorn state as I walked home alone along her dangerous byways, inviting a resident attacker to challenge my existence, if only for a moment.

Fifth Avenue signals glamour in merchandise but for me, with pockets full of loneliness, unable to afford the solid gold toothpick for the man who has everything - money - or the lack of it - only accentuated loneliness.

Sentimentality hangs loosely around the rim of one's cup of loneliness - I took an expensive cab ride to Greenwich Village to see an old movie in the hope that something from my past would comfort me and this spendthrift action would help to lighten the weight of being alone and vulnerable.

Occasionally, I met a fellow sufferer. A tramp stopped me on a midnight stroll back to my apartment. He asked me for a dime. Risking being mugged, or worse, I opened my bag and gave him a dollar. "Here, have this on me!' I said. 'God Bless the British', was his reply on hearing my accent. This cheerful spark of humanity kept me going for a long time.

Broadway, streets of excitement and possible romance. A sparkling dancehall beckoned me, invited me to find someone to relieve my anguish at being alone on a Saturday night. Danger lurked behind every smart suit and slick hairstyle but

loneliness makes one a gambler and the game is risky, especially in New York, at that Bacchanalian hour.

Physically trying to lose oneself is another game in the art of overcoming such isolation. A trip on the subway to anywhere....a blood-stained shirt faced me as I hopped onto the first train. Armed police stood guard at each end of the carriage. I detected the outline of a gun in the pocket of a man standing opposite me, seconds before I felt the cool, silk-like touch of a knife blade rest against my throat - for one moment I forgot I was lonely.

All these experiences gained from Uptown New York drove me down to see how low life could be Downtown, in the Bowery. This part of Manhattan is transformed by clouds of drug-smoke puffing, transforming and clinging to wall paper on some dilapidated buildings and the wallpaper had also resigned itself to death and slowly unfurled into the squalor. Glistening-backed cockroaches and slimy-skinned rats are the constant companions of the lonely down there. They dart in and out of the rubble as they know that loneliness induces a stupor, which is caged in, and offers no danger.

Solitude drove me to a shady bar and the offer of a Martini in the company of three dubious characters who, whilst still tossing around the idea for their next heist, headed for the kitchen of the bar to measure the exact cut-off for the shot-gun, which one of them had lifted nonchalantly out of an old battered suitcase.

I continued to drift around that God-forsaken metropolis desperately searching for something to transform the loneliness which had been forged from its steel heart.

What then is aloneness? it is being alone in a city where neon lights shock, police cars roar through the night, ambulance alarms signal imminent death, gun-shots resound in abandoned alleys, dogs bark nervously and nightclub music drowns the night where fear oozes out of the sewers, rears up, expands, splits the skyscraper walls and ascends to the top of the Empire State Building and thrives.

Craig Kirchner
Night

It is still, dark, as close to nothing
as it can be, it's a sign,
harder times are coming,
time is always catching up.
I'm as old now as my ancestors
waiting in the shadows,
welcoming me to happy hour
where I'll fall off the wagon.

Nothing is moving except body parts,
eyes blinking, hand twitching,
tongue pushing hard against the teeth,
heart pounding in anticipation.
There is no telling how bad it will be,
or if the earth will swallow me up
before the next Armageddon.

The silence sets the stage, tinnitus
closes in, nothing else is the same,
all-encompassing, spray through the ears,
like the hiss of gas leaking,
or when the AC used to come on
and push a chill across the apartment.
Morning will see some movement,
the sun changes the color of the tent to tan.

There will be neighbors up waiting to
use the john, walking dogs,
old coffee grounds attempting to become brew.
There will be the background noise
of the militias moving on the bridge.
The sentries will change shifts,
and the wind will come and clean the still
and the stench, as it always does.

Fear, by Hugo Steiner

Craig Kirchner
Friday

In an older version, Friday's child is full of woe,
I was born on Friday, the 14th - they are seen
by sailors as unlucky to start a journey on.
The HMS Friday launched on a Friday,
never to be seen again - because it never existed.

Jewish sabbath begins at sunset, as a kid,
Catholics abstained from meat and alcohol,
everybody ate fish and nobody quit drinking.
Black Friday has become a big thing and was always
what I thought Good Friday should be called.

Many first dates, shower, check the breath, the cash,
the outfit. Have the arm go to sleep draped over
her shoulder, trying to figure out what to do.
My first successful dry hump was a Friday evening,
we were early teen and broke up the next day.

Wrote a short story 'Bad Friday' about being chased
by a pack of wild dogs, at 3 AM, alone, tripping
on blotter acid on a deserted road in Frederick, Md.
This was as full of woe as I can remember,
other than deaths in the family and all.

Eloped on a Friday, just the two of us, married
in the courthouse, unknown clerk and witness,
cost seven dollars and your parents mental state of mind,
drove to Downingtown for the most unremarkable
honeymoon there has maybe ever been.

My next Friday birthday will be in 2028, I'll be 79,
and probably thinking more about what day I'll go
out, then blowing out candles. A Friday would
be good, mourn the weekend, like the big guy
but no nails, and no big stone rolling away.

Rachilde
The Hermetic Castle (translation by Peter Van Belle)

Rachilde (Marguerite Emery) started writing stories when she was twelve. She adopted her pseudonym when she was fifteen because her parents disapproved of her writings. She moved to Paris and her first novels became a sensation, especially her erotic novel Monsieur Vénus. Together with her husband she started the avant-garde journal Mercure de France in which she championed the works of many an up-and-coming writer, such as Colette.

This story is about longing and disappointment, but also how our longings shape our perceptions.

I've known two old women whose last words were: "I don't belong here. This isn't where I'm supposed to die." One was a farmer from Limousin, very poor, a bit mad, whose main quirk was the constant need for locomotion. She dreamt of a place where things'd be better for her, where she could live forever. Not knowing of such a place, besides, not realizing it didn't exist but inside her head, she'd often say: "Ah, how unfortunate are those that have no country of their own!" She died with a stubborn gesture meaning "out there".

The other, Countess Beaumont-Landry, though sensible enough, spent whole days pining for the house of her dreams. For her, this house wasn't some sentimental phrase from childhood. It was a real abode, somewhere in Sweden or Ireland, in a gray setting, she said, where pigeons have to be mourning. She defined nothing, hoped for nothing. Paintings nor engravings gave any indications of its existence, but she was certain the house was somewhere out there, and that her true home, for her, a pampered socialite, was in that modest place of rest. When she sank into her final agony, she clasped the hands of her handmaiden, and murmured in an anxious voice:

"I'm not at home here! No, this is not where I'm supposed to be."

As much as there's a kindred soul which one seeks beyond the disappointments and crimes of love, shouldn't there also be a kindred land, without which no happiness is possible, without which one cannot die in peace?

How many melancholy tourists have said with moist eyes full of regret: "I've seen a place in passing, the place where I want to live, but I've already forgotten where it is! I've forgotten its name. I don't even recall how its sky looked …"

How many famous explorers have found themselves suddenly attracted to a mysterious sight, across seas and deserts, a land for them alone, of which they hold an image so worn that it seems the memory of an ancient stamp they admired in childhood.

And there are places you have to visit, where you encounter the wound reserved for you through the ages. There's the forest that haunts you from afar. Where you'll be suspended from a familiar tree, its branches reaching for you behind all

illustration by Peter Van Belle

twilit windows. There's the lake, abandoned at the bottom of a wild valley, the pond, green, bristling with dark undergrowth, in which you throw yourself, happy in the knowledge you have found your grave, and one unlike all others. Our footfalls have been determined through eternity, but we don't take them on the day of our choosing. Our parents move, flee, come back in vain, looking for a definitive place to stay, so much so we have to teach ourselves through all sorts of dangers to provide ourselves a solemn intuition, and to fly, as on wings, to a country that holds, in a wheat field or deserted road, the mystic roots of our personality.

Often, ecstatic once we reach this land, we see it recoil at once, melt away, evaporate. It flees from us, abandons us, for a reason never explained, no doubt because it is too frightening. We realize we'll never reach it; the Promised Land has been snatched from us forever.

And now I truthfully want to tell you about these chimeric lands, which I have met on my route.

It was in Franche-Comte, on a sunny day, when visiting a large melancholy estate near the village of Roquemont, in the little hamlet of Suse. We'd just scaled the summit of a hill, called the Bear's Tooth, because of its bizarre notched appearance. We rested, spread-eagled on a rust-colored greensward that smelled of burning hair. The mother, Madame Téard, her son, Albert Téard, and I were feeling very hot. We'd fallen silent, having exhausted our supplies of banal Parisian stories. At this height, on this plateau swept by desiccating breezes, our well of vulgar conversation had dried up. No longer did we seek to drown out the echoes of the village which resounded in its religious silence of a Calvary hill.

My friend had first presented, for my inspection, their house, the garden, the vineyard. From different viewpoints they'd shown me the landmarks: the place where Albert had shot a huge rabbit the year before, a crossroads that still bore marks of the Prussians, a path along which, in certain winters, rapacious wolves descended from the forest. Later, bit by bit, we quietened down, seized by a respect for this enveloping panorama. We looked around, almost without seeing.

On the horizon, not that far though, stood a huge rock on top of a hill, a sister to ours. And on it were the distinct ruins of a medieval castle merging with the rocks around it. It formed a dramatic backdrop to the fairly happy picture of the village of Suse, huddled around its naive bell tower, and the vineyards, where peasants in smocks, their women in bright dresses, were scattered. The castle looked ominous, imperious. It was impossible not to consider it the most interesting landmark around. Yet no one had spoken of it.

Albert murmured languidly: "… we also have some caves with fossils and flint tools. We'll take you there in a while. You'll have seen everything then."

"What do you mean 'seen everything'?" I said, raising myself on one elbow, "And what about the ruins over there?"

"Eh, what ruins?" Madame Téard asked in suprise.

I looked at it and pointed. Albert Téard laughed.

“Ah, those ruins! Perhaps, yes, but even more likely, no. From our place, on a rainy day, it’s just a simple rock, but on a sunny day, when the cloud shadows move across its face, one sometimes sees an old castle without an entrance. Oh, don’t get taken in by this trick of the light.”

“You’re pulling my leg?”

I stared at the castle until it gave me a headache.

“No, it’s the rock that’s pulling your leg.” Albert replied. “There’s no mention of it in the annals of Franche-Comte. Our peasants, not given to jokes, claim never to have seen it, either on sunny or rainy days. For me, I can only see it vaguely, because I’ve known for a while what it is.”

Madame Téard, a sensible old lady, whispered: “Me, I’ve often tried to imagine the castle, but I haven’t been able to conjure up a single turret.”

Well,” I murmured. “We could take a look at it.”

Téard’s mother smiled.

“So you want to try the Rascal’s Caper?”

“What’s that? Some legend?”

“No, a banal story. A conscript, on a bet, tried to steal eggs from a buzzard’s nest up there, just before joining his regiment. It was foggy the morning he tried it, and he tumbled from your castle all the way down to his cabin. He didn’t find any eggs, but found himself in jail when he finally met his captain. He’d bound his wounds and had therefore missed the morning roll call, the idiot.”

I contemplated the magic castle. A fog surrounded the hill festooned with junipers and beech copses. One could dream of hidden waters in the depths of its dungeons, and at a distance its stone glistened like a lizard’s skin. At the building’s foundation was a swell with a parapet, seemingly man-made. It seemed one could just walk over to it; I couldn’t understand my friends’ disdain.

“Agreed, we’ll go there.” Téard said mockingly.

We set off the following morning, Madame Téard in tow, carrying a well-stocked basket. She said the journey would take longer than we expected.

Having traversed fields and vineyards for about an hour, we reached a gravelly slope of a hill with a fold in its center, throwing its thick and cold shadow across a hamlet of five or six decrepit hovels. Here and there were people: men arranging barrels without yelling or swearing, women cradling their children without singing.

Perhaps I was having a vision of this dormant village, because my companions made no remarks as we traversed this shadowy place. Madame Téard, however, trying to buy some milk, saw people didn’t respond to her. She said in an irritated voice: “They’re like that over here.”

The old lady settled down at the edge of a primitive wash house where a spring gurgled through wooden pipes; she began dipping bottles into the water for the return trip and wished us a pleasant climb. Although I told myself that this was now a pleasant excursion, not a conquest, I was downbeat. The feudal rock now lay hidden behind ordinary boulders; the silence of the hamlet gripped me. The romantic vision of the day before was transforming into a ridiculous trap, and I trembled as if already

the victim of a terrible injustice. Téard, stoically, pointed out that our gaiters were sturdy and urged me to be patient because of the inextricable brambles we would have to cross:

“You wanted this,” he added.

Heading straight for the castle had seemed childishly easy, but with each moment, it became like a battle. Despite our efforts, we began to deviate. Ravines filled with mud, thorns and rocks made us turn away. We were prostrated by curtains of wild rose and brambles, brushwood, further concealing the ruins from us, and when a clearing, under the branches, allowed us to glimpse them, our eyes met an enormous wall, a completely smooth wall. The dungeons, the battlements, the parapet, had been completely swallowed up by this wall oozing with humidity, and all that remained facing us was a silent, blind facade, the menacing facade par excellence, the hermetic facade. We sat down, halfway up the slope, completely out of breath, on a tree trunk.

“Well,” Téard said, wiping his brow, “isn’t this just annoying.”

“We have to find a shortcut. I want to touch the stone with my hands.”

So we were off again, heads held high, eyes worried. Téard was feverish again, and he confessed to me that he didn't really know the truth about this damned rock. Long ago, people could have dug quarries into the hill; perhaps they had tried to build something in the rock itself, and no doubt they had given up because of the hardness of the granite. Only, if there really is something up there, how had they reached the summit? How had they scaled the bottom of this wall, so smooth it gleamed?

“With ladders?”

"Come on! It's the conscript's caper! The boy had taken along knotted ropes and crampons. He set up ladders, sometimes to the east, sometimes to the west; we could see him from below struggling like a devil, and he was no drunker than I was. Still, it ended in a mad tumble. A plunge into the spring, headfirst!... No!...We'd need a balloon!…”

When we reached the foundations of the castle, our nostrils inhaling the acrid scent of the green moss that covered them like velvet, we weren’t even halfway up; we no longer conceived anything of the whole edifice, and the details we saw led our imagination astray, causing the most stupid conjectures.

“Let’s turn back,” I cried.

One of us went west, the other east. We were to meet under what I called the parapet. To get there, I clung to shrubs and tufts of grass. The ground was extremely slippery, stones tumbled between my legs and rolled down to the spring where the wine for the collation was cooling. You could hear the stones leaping from ditch to ditch, hitting rocks, and then falling into the foliage like dead birds. The earth crumbled beneath my feet, trickling in heavy streams, full of a quantity of shiny brown flakes that resembled the scales of a gigantic antediluvian fish. The lush greenery left a sticky sap in your hand, and you breathed in, next to the moss, a rotten smell.

When I raised my head, I found the imposing outline of this monument without door or window, and my gaze, desperately rising, could not catch a single rough spot in the stone, nor on a single flower. The rock, always the rock, gleaming, oozing, without a crack, without a hole. And up there, very high, in the light, the silver-winged buzzards hovered slowly, with the gait of tranquil swimmers abandoning themselves to the calm waves of a blue ocean. There are hours when the pure air intoxicates you, makes you forget the mundane aspects of things. For a second, it seemed almost natural to have a balloon!

To enter that castle, which existed the moment I set eyes on it. To enter this mysterious cathedral, where someone was destined to be waiting for me. Yes, I had to reach it one day! I had to touch those colossal walls with my poor, powerless hands. Hammer on the granite to call out the people in there who I needed to deliver. And I would put my ear to it, scrutinize the inexorable hardness of this natural pyramid to discern any signal of reply.

All wild places cause hallucinations and sudden delusions of grandeur. On a mountain top, nothing stops you from thinking you're a king.

With my gaiter, I touched the top of a poplar, and far below I saw Madame Téard sleeping under her white, red-lined parasol. Madame Téard, the size of as a ladybug with a pink head!... Well, then? Why wasn't the drawbridge lowered? Finally, vertigo overcame me, and, with my eyes furiously closed, I turned back.

Under the parapet, Téard was examining a mark in the stone. This excited us for a moment. It looked like the mark of an iron ring, one of those rings they drive into docks to moor ships. For a good fifteen minutes, we stayed there, hanging by the strength of our fingernails above the chasm, studying this faint vestige of humanity, and we had to conclude that a pebble, emerging from its sandstone socket like a pit emerging from a ripe fruit, had probably made this ring mark. We had to go back down. We moved away, each of us deeply absorbed, with the unhappy faces of individuals who were refused entry because they were not well dressed. All along the descent we had terrible accidents. I fell into a ditch full of thorns, and Téard stepped on a viper.

Below, Madame Téard, awake, was watching us, her face distraught, her arms in the air: a stray dog had raided the food basket; the wine bottles, rattled by the eddies of the spring, were lost. We still had bread, but bread already gnawed, covered in saliva.

Téard, disappointed, laughed angrily. His mother lamented, I no longer dared to say anything. The sun was setting; we quickly went home for dinner.

During the meal, as the window was open onto a marvelous horizon of flames and gold, I let out a cry of anger, pointing at the distant hill. Over there... over there, a diabolical play of purple lights, violet shadows, made the ruins of the feudal castle reappear. I could see more clearly than ever the dungeons, the parapet, the battlements; and, more formidably than ever, stood, in the blood of the dying day, the hermetic castle, the unknown homeland that tugged at my heart!

Michael Brownstein
Diagnostics

My daughter came into the world an old soul,
hard pressed but pliable, thick plywood,
hot chocolate.

She kept secret the months she felt unbalanced,
the strings on her kora loosening, her shakaree
degrading at its chest.

We have too many dogs, a furrow cat
that depends on us for food and water,
other wild animals.

Six months pregnant, unable to sleep,
the pain in her breast an angry lump,
she went for help.

They gave her a lot of blood work,
x rays, and cut into her for a biopsy:
everything inconclusive.

The hospital called for a second opinion,
her pain growing fists with strong fingers.
They called her back.

I need to remember how to write in rhymes
listen to a song that can absorbs me,
dance without stumbling.

She told us it's hard for her to get out of a chair,
food goes through her as if it's lightning,
too tired to sleep.

Nothing is good anymore, her muscles gagging
her face losing weight, and when she walks,
she rests every ten yards

I go outside to a blue sky with a curl of clouds,
sampa grass wagging its long tails in the soft wind,
sunlight distracts me.

Suddenly I am in her body taking a misstep,
falling, the glass tea pot in my hand jumps away.
It does not fracture .

It is stronger than me

Gary Bolick
Five Reflections Off a Single Lake Face

I.

"Nature fucks up, too, you know," he said, squatting, before launching into a freestanding backflip. He stuck the landing, and smiled as he let out a long, foghorn fart. Continuing, he said,

"Seriously!" just take us–humans, modern man: homo sapiens, just a cosmic joke, with no punch line. Seriously, wait, hear me out. A moment ago, we were just twisting, turning, stopping and starting, lurching one way or the other. For thousands of years, we were just a pinball careening off one bumper slamming–pop-pow–into another. No replays, no bonus points, no choice from any of the prize racks–zilch. Nature just kept feeding quarters into the slot and was getting nothing. Us? Just about to take an evolutionary powder–disappear.

"Then it was like some Pale Rider stranger shows up, you know the type, real quiet, but instead of hard-steely and angry, he's kinda geeky and starts fiddlin' with the dials, rebooting the hard-drive, and then boy-howdy, things start speeding up.

"Huh? What? No, numb nuts! It's a process, not an actual person. See all of this? Changing–slower than a sundial, but it's still evolving. Nah, no shittin'."

He dropped to the ground and struck a salute-to-the-sunrise pose, then stretched out into a full hurdler's stretch, his entire body, arms, legs and head level with the ground, then said,

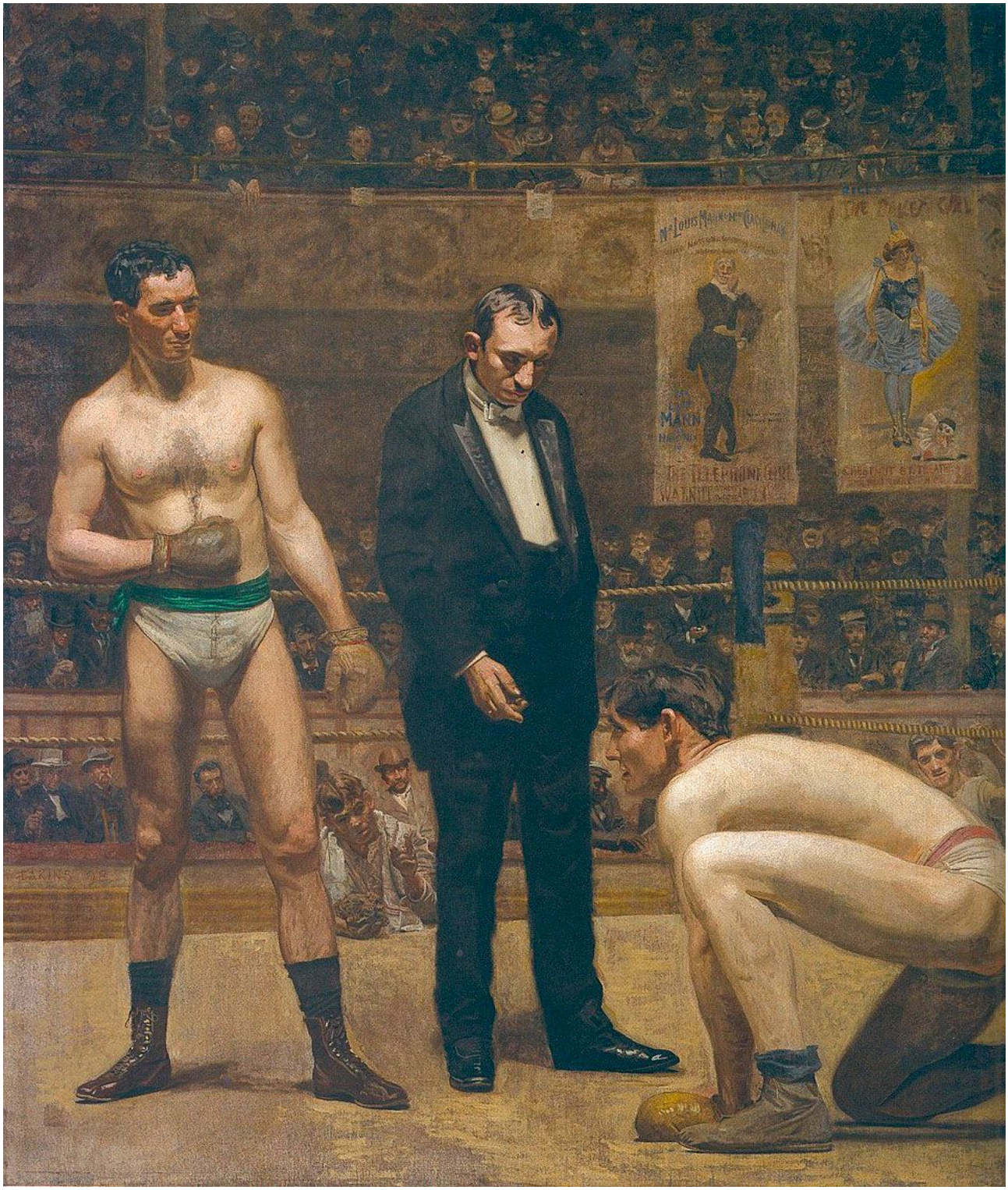
"That's what I'm drivin' at–it, nature got restless, went into its two-minute offense. Yeah, no one's ever figured it out. Real short, wink-of-an-eye period when that Pale Rider just ups and grabs one part of us, and wait! I'm callin an audible, let's talk cars."

He hopped up, and did a hand-stand, doing vertical push-ups as he continued.

"The dude puts in a new solenoid or something, goes to scratching his head, then grabs another wire and twists them together, saying, 'OK, why not? I'll try this, like he's hot-wiring a car. But you see, this time it's an imagined car. One he has always dreamt of, but could never find. Wants it so bad, you know just has to have it! So? He closes his eyes and then that son-of-a-bitch touches the wire to the starter solenoid, and what do you know? That piece of ass on four wheels just goes boom!"

With his last pushup he bounds back up to a standing position, smiles and says, "Second audible. Now we're back playing pinball. Lights go crazy. Bonus points and ten replays. Man running the arcade, you know the guy, the fucker with the week-old cigar butt in his mouth shakes his head, points up to the highest rack and growls, 'Your choice!'

"Check! Audible number three! Now forget the pinball, back to the cars. Understand now, the engine on that cherry of a car not only turns over, when he presses on the



Taking the Count, by Thomas Eakins

gas, it sounds like a Carroll Shelby hopped-up 427 V-8–growling. Pale Rider his own bad-self is real damned proud of himself. And he should be.
"Thing is, though, once he got that car–us–running, that son-bitch was afraid to turn it off, still wasn't sure exactly how he did it in the first place. Follow? Even nature gets scared–confused.
"It's like he–it–nature forgot which two wires were touched together. So, what's a fella gonna do? Just what you or I would do, just start backing up, inching our way towards the exit, look both ways–gone. So, we–modern man–has been left running, non-stop, since that original hot-wire start. No adjustments, tinkering, just running full bore, snorting, growling and complaining; but for what? And for who? Nothing and nobody. So?
"Yep! Bingo! Give this man another prize off the top shelf! We just make it up as we go. No chance we'll ever step outside of our own heads, 'cause we've lost all capacity to do so. That's what happens when you hot-wire a monkey. But, hey, what's the harm, right? So, ol' Pale Rider packs up his tool box and rides out. So, how 'bout . . .
"Us?"

He shook his head and smiled, then took off his clothes, walked out to the end of the rock ledge, closed his eyes, turned his head up to the sun, and for the next two minutes became a statue. As he allowed the early morning light to plate his nude body Aspen gold, I swore it was like he became an extension of the rock overhang. After those two minutes were spent, he walked back five steps, nodded his head at us, winked, then started running, then–jumped, screaming, "Odin!" as he disappeared out of sight. Dumbfounded, but curious, we all ran to look.

It was sixty-feet down to the lake. He tucked in his arms and legs in, then rolled over into a tight spinning ball as his body gained more and more speed. He was the white head of a comet streaking down through a pale blue morning sky. The sun? Reminded me of a dumbfounded cyclops watching, marveling, maybe even shedding a tear as he disappeared into the lake.

Me? I thought, no, check that. As he plummeted down, I saw what he was talking about. First and only time I saw then felt exactly what another man was experiencing as he took a step outside of himself and–us. Don't ask me how I know, but I'm pretty sure it was his energy leaping out and connecting to an electro-magnetic field as it was stabilizing. So, yeah he, for a brief instant–passed through me.
At first, I thought he was lost, the way he had been rambling and scatting on so. Watching him spin and drop, I realized that he had stretched his consciousness out, threaded it into pull and push of the landscape's gravity and motion. Pitched himself into the shared expression of a living moment as it unfolded and reacted to the water and the light. His energy seemed to be spreading out–everywhere.
Why do I say that? Well, as he continued to gain speed, dropping faster and faster towards the lake face, I caught a glimpse of what I believe he was seeing. The lake water, the forest, the sun, air and a wash of light racing out, then rolling in on itself,

all funneling in and through his/my eyes until he disappeared down and through the water. I was sure that he wasn't about to stop.
As he disappeared, I remembered our conversation from the night before. Sitting around the campfire, he described the "slip" of the light that makes up the expanding universe. No, not a place to dock your boat or losing your balance–falling down, but the lace type, what a woman wears.
"She's quite the vixen," he sighed, "teases, rarely offers herself up. Just a notion. What if I were to risk it all–everything. Turn a moment into a circular scream? Could I, should I ride forever in, through and out of myself into her sweet, tender loins?"

I swear it was a sonic bomb when his balled-up body hit the water.

"No, sir officer, sorry–ranger, that was the last time I, we, ah, all saw him. We spread out and walked two miles each way from this spot, figuring we'd find him floating, or on shore. Nothing."

II.

"I looked up in the sky for it–the sound, the explosion–the boom. Thought maybe there was an airbase, military. Figured some hot-shot decided to make the "heater jump," you know, go past Mach I, break the sound barrier. Nope. But my sister saw the whole thing.
"Darlene said she saw a guy take a running jump off the rock ledge across the lake. Balled himself up tight-as-tick, and went to spinning, swore she saw colors, like a prism catching and splitting-up the light. Sorry, not her–him, the dude, he was the prism. Funny, when I made that same point to Darlene, she give me the finger, kinda like your facial expression, the one you're flashing at me, right now. Seems, I have that effect on most people. She said she already knew that on account of,
"'I was the one who what saw it–asshole! Yeah, I know, I need to work on that, and well, sorry, where was I? Got it! Darlene said, it, well he was like some kind of magnet, but instead of metal shavings, he was drawing the light into and then pushing it all out himself, and all the while fallin' fearsome fast.
"Funny, strange thing, though, is that Darelene claimed that inside of her head it all slowed down. She said,
'I'd suddenly developed a third eye or something. Saw it all like a fixed picture, a photograph that was rolling over on itself. Time had stopped but the action was going on. And if that don't beat everything, I could see–me standing out there–watching it!'
"So, I wanted to laugh, but didn't dare. I could tell she was struggling and scared, so I just said, 'Go on.'
"She said, 'Him falling, hitting the water and the exploding sound made the lake face, the forest, the sky–rubbery, bend inside out. And I wanted to go inside there, somehow.'
"Yeah, I know! So, I smelled her breath and asked if she'd been back into the mushrooms. No, sir. Only thing Darlene had that morning was a cup of coffee.

“She said she felt like a little girl sitting in church, ‘The day deacon Shouse spoke in tongues. As he spoke, the air and the stained-glass windows answered. And we all just sat there and listened as the air, the streaming colors and Deacon Shouse pushed us all up and down, from light to dark back to the light, like we was in a well, yeah, that says it: like a well of new time.’
“Then we both heard a second sonic boom, looked up and nope–nothing, until I heard that son-of-a-bitch cackling. Scanned the lake face and there he was bobbing up and down, laughing, carp jumping up and over him while overhead the sky was thick with a swirl of redtail hawks. And him just a cackling while them hawks was swooping down trying to scoop up–dinner.
“’So fast,’ Darlene said, that it was all I could do to hear it. But once that note struck inside of me, I saw, felt something remarkably strange . . . new.’”

III.

Reminiscing about coming to bat against The Big Train: Walter Johnson, Ty Cobb was reputed to have said,

“It slows the heart and speeds up the mind. The first time I heard, yes, I never saw the ball, I was reminded of a letter I read from a survivor of the trenches, WWI. Why? It, the sound of the ball, reminded me of how they described reacting to the flight of bullets: dismantling and unnatural. Like the lead flying around them, that baseball’s sound bore into my gut like a sucker-punch, caught me totally unprepared. And that is why I thought of him: Alfie Campbell, a young man I read about on the train heading for our next game in Boston. Alfie Campbell was barely eighteen when he left the Hebrides to ‘end all wars,’ or so he, and all the other boys believed.

“It only took a few days before Alfie realized that the most consequential event in his life would be the quick, sure and invisible ending of his life. No one sees it, he wrote. And you only hear a hiss or a whisper of the bullet as it misses you. Yes, that particular piece of lead did not have your address etched onto its point.

“So, your ears, he wrote, become hyper-sensitive, draining off any and all purpose, use or need from the other four senses. You, or that is–the center of your mind develops a singular eye, a concerted focal point that gathers in all the sense and information of your collective senses and then sees in a way that bundles them all up into a single point.
“Soon, you begin to sense a smell, a taste, and an odd feel in the air that warns you of– change. Like the very substance of the air is being transformed into a messenger. Understand me now? That’s how I learned to duck!”

IV.

Duck, weave, dance . . . slide away from him as though he's shedding out the plague, then boom! Stick him with the jab! Watch him fall flat on the floor of the ring, then–farther still. Follow the vacancy in his eyes, the abyss replacing those twin sockets, follow him down until you as him are–swallowed whole.

The crowd hears it more than they see it, now joyous, as they wade along with you exchanging fear for the perfect expression of love. Yes, the crowd is now in love. With a single punch you have transformed a roiling, boiling, lump/mass of white noise into a symphony.

"I heard his jawbone implode. The ring and echo of it like a sonic boom . . . still echoes inside my head, only deeper now that I still have the frozen image of him dropping to the canvas and then the look, his blank stare–there!" he whispered to his date as she nodded and answered,

"Let's go. Fuck me in the backseat if you have to, but I just want it now."

V.

"It just went pow!" the old trucker said, smiling and laughing, 'Then another hissed and popped, but still no lurching or weaving, until they all began scatting–three of them–sounded like Ella, Satchmo and Cab Calloway in a flourish! Damn!

"Still, yes, OK, on me! I was the dumbass who took on ten thousand more pounds than this ol' rig is good for! Needed the money to climb out of the hole. Now? Deeper still, and I've got four blown tires and I'm dead in the desert with no signal on my cellphone.

"So, how did I escape? Started setting flares, knowing a smokey had to come by some time in the next eight hours. Popped in the "Jupiter" symphony, lit a roll, watched the sun slide down into the desert, then closed my eyes, drifted a little, then hitched onto the sun's journey down and through the bottom of my soul to talk to some fella who rose up out of the cactus and the mesquite. He was an old fella, I thought I knew, but he shook his head and claimed he was just passin' through, but did I know where to find the closest Toddle House.

"Old peckerwood said he had a hankerin' for some home fries. Batted my eyes twice to let the tumblers in the center of my head find a cozy slot, and well, then it hit me. I remembered the old man waxing rhapsodic over his first trip to Winston. Looking to land a job working the rolling machines in Factory No. 64.

"They said no, so he tied-one on and early the next morning, he stumbled out from under the branches of a weeping willow tree in Grace Court Park to look up, out and down Fourth Street as the swarming, suddenly scattering pod of headlights dove, sounded and returned home.

"And like some apparition on the moors, he saw the neon, the twin gossamer-clad waitresses holding steady the tray, supporting the flaming cup of joe and burger stacked impossibly high with all the right fixings.

“And when he hoisted me up to recount his story, his lap was like a welcoming den, his breathing, the purr from an electric cat, whispering soft, low and insistent, so mother would never hear,
“‘Boy,’ he says, ‘only thing better than the Bermuda Triangle, that mysterious and wonderment, what sits between a woman’s legs is those spuds, sliced-thin, then fried golden.’
“Then there was the rap-tap-boom! Saw the trooper’s hat, his Billy-stick out, just a rap-tap-tapping–boom to wake me, shake me, and I looked out the window and the sun had legs, wings, eyes and arms in no particular order. Batted my eyes twice again, and I was out to the lake. Was ‘bout a month ago, saw this spinning top of a naked man after he done launched hisself off the rock ledge there at the lake.
“Our eyes met, they did. And the water under him was clear, but reflecting back a hard, burning-ball of sunlight. The air was suddenly spun from gold.
“His voice rode the undercarriage of his glance straight into my own eyes, before boring down–deeper, still, into the center of my head whispering, ‘Let go.’
“‘Yes, just let go and ride her slip out!’ he thought to himself as he took the final step before he jumped. Aloft, free and flying, the dense thicket of trees on the other side of the lake lined up like the alphabet letters posted over the blackboard in Miss M’s second grade class. Then, as he tucked in, closed himself into a tight ball, his line of sight froze–stopped to order and re-order the A-through-Z line of trees.
“‘It (?) was neither a time, nor a place, even the influence of his own thought felt awkward–counter-intuitive. He smiled, knowing, finally–I am outside my own head.
“‘Yes,’ he thought as his body flew, ‘just this one instant to fan out and hop a ride on her slip of expanding light. Just like the old man described it,
“More sucker-punch than thought, son. Cold that steals you away from yourself. Flying blind while you can’t even feel your hands, feet, back or even your head while the blinds below you–race past. It’s like each one of those ties is screaming out a warning, a solution or reciting a poem to hold you in place.

“The old timers called it ‘Sailin’ the blinds.’ When there was no room left up in the boxcars, you were exiled to ride underneath. So, you strap yourself in with your belt and watch the railroad ties, they would call blinds, rush past not three feet from you–death.

“It was so cold and loud and lonely, I knew it–for what it was–there and only there, a sort of manna and a fuel for purpose that has no reward. Still, suspended above death while desperately clutching onto a life that is doing its level best to throw you off like an annoying flea or fly, both are redeemed, recalibrated, even celebrated. It’s there, you begin to reverse the trip; rewire your senses/self to better navigate the fog and fretting floating around inside your head.
“Anyway, it was black and senseless, cold and dead quiet watching those blinds sail past, below me. It–they–forced me to reach back into a place where I was less than a bundle of nothingness crawling around inside of a head that was not quite formed as I rooted around to find a murmur and a light, a sense and a self to begin, to try and collect all the random and errant parts so that I could begin to build–me.

“It was strapped-up under that boxcar that the heater jumped. Light found a second gear. And whatever particle of my particular beam smoothed out into an endless wave where I touched the face of the desperate, cold and clinging idea of myself–alive and flying over the blinds–transported and redeemed in the stench and stream of wails, my own voice defiant there, and it was just . . . fine.”

Raymond Miller
Fame

It's not a goal, I suppose,
more like a corner or a throw-in,
but I wish I could be
in somebody else's poem.
It would be fame, of a sort,
though not the kind that should be sought;
it ought to happen by chance
and be in another's hand…

...unless it could be planned!

Can it be so hard
to locate a versifier?
An unsuspecting bard,
the type who won't enquire
into my raison d'etre
and ultimate designs.
I only want to get her
to let me in her lines.

Yes, I'd prefer a she,
I mean a poetess;
say, Carol Ann Duffy,
a name that will impress
when I drop it casually in company:
You know that kid who killed the goldfish?
That was me.

LB Sedlacek
Hostage #6

It seemed like the perfect way to travel. All expenses paid up front except for one dinner, two lunches and souvenirs. Tips were optional.

Cory Flowers settled in a middle seat. He wore a tan travel vest with extra secure pockets for his passport, cash, phone, and vacation pants so comfy and light and free from needing washing too often plus a light tee and sandals. He squeezed a ballcap on his head. It was red with a sports logo on it. It would be necessary for them (or whoever) to identify him later.

There were twelve of them plus the bus driver and the Tour Guide. And, they were all about to be taken hostage.

It was the third leg of the trip. A stop in historic Gallup, NM. An overnight stay in the western hotel famous for old movie stars staying one night or longer. They hadn't seen anything, but they'd been forced at gunpoint into one room and told to keep quiet, and each given a bottle of water and a pack of crackers. Cory ate his in one gulp, he knew what was coming next.

Bags over the head. Then a thump.

Everyone hit the floor except him and his partners. They pulled the last hostage, #6, left awake into the bathroom.

The questions began. "How much did you demand up front?" "Why didn't you send the copies?" "What happened to the royalties?"

Cory ripped the man's wallet from his jeans. Cory's younger and lankier assistant transferred all the cash the man had in his bank accounts and maxed all of his credit cards out in seconds.

Cory grinned. He gave a thumbs up.

Hostage #6 received no thumbs but instead got a thump to the head. Next, they tossed Keith Winters aka #6 into the bathtub. Cory's assistant drenched him with a cold shower leaving the tap running water into the tub.

Cory sniggered. He looked away.

His young assistant said, "Maybe he'll wake up in time to not drown."

Cory laughed. He started walking away. "Yeah, and if he does, maybe he can write about it."

Mark Eads
Spirals

I kept running up
or was I falling through?
The stairs turned to vapor,
yet the chasm never grew.

I buried my joy
in a well that breathed dust.
It coughed once at midnight,
then sealed itself shut.

I'm tethered to sky,
yet stitched through the floor—
the clouds feed me silence,
and the dirt wanted more.

I swam through mirrors,
each ripple a wound.
I drowned in the silver
yet wasn't consumed.

I never asked for a crown,
but it bloomed from my skin.
Thorns curled like questions
and anointed me within.

I was meant to be motion,
but they pinned me with names.
Hung words on my shoulders
and called them my shame.

I long to be adjective
a color, a phase.
But I live as a noun,
stagnant beneath the days.

They dressed me in gold,
then laughed in brown.
As if rust was a joke
and not a burial gown

What is a spiral,
but a mere circle breaking down?

Paul Murgatroyd
Stone the Crows!

When I turned 70, glossy salesmen sidled in through the letterbox with enticing, exciting offers of stair lifts, rise and recline chairs and ‘a better catheter experience.’

When I turned 75, Death in a black mac began flashing me, relentlessly, remorselessly. Death stalked the streets. Death invaded my home. Death even went on bloody holiday with me.

During a service in a crematorium I spotted a FIRE EXIT sign and wondered if they had had a bad furnace experience. Later on TV I watched the queen’s children gravely standing on guard around her coffin and wondered if they feared burglars.

In Sunderland it took a lifetime to pass a massive cemetery with endless rows of graves and a garden centre.

One day a big, fat pigeon lay dead on the lawn in my back garden, like a downed B-52 bomber. The next morning only a few feathers remained.

I saw that our local (award winning, 24/7, family run) funeral home offers a dignified Horse-drawn Carriage Cremation Package, and also for 300 pounds more a Motorbike Package, ‘to give your loved one a ride out in style,’ featuring a motorbike with a sidecar hearse to transport the stiff to the crem.

In Switzerland I heard that some genius had invented a suicide pod – you shut yourself in it, turn a switch and, hey presto, the oxygen is cut off. He was being prosecuted for breaking health and safety regulations.

In Barcelona Death took me to the Bar Bubo (with its black tablecloths, napkins, crockery and chairs) and bought me a coffee (black, of course).

When I laughed at all this, Death frowned.

So Death got someone in The Fat Ox to tell me about a man who shoved a section of gas pipe into his father’s grave and talked to him through it, and also a Japanese man who ate his father’s ashes ‘so he would live on in my heart.’

One bleak morning Death nudged me and pointed a bony finger at an ambulance parked outside a care home at 6.42.

Death also led me to a memorial bench on the sea front, with a fifth birthday card from mummy and daddy attached to it, along with a little teddy. Then he made me read the plaque: IN LOVING MEMORY OF PENNY DUNNE WHO SPREAD HAPPINESS AND LIGHT FOR TWO YEARS THREE MONTHS AND TEN DAYS. FOREVER OUR LITTLE ANGEL OF THE NORTH.

When I frowned at all this, Death smiled.

Then Death infiltrated my reading matter, whispering into my ear in bookshops, recommending his favourites.

Thanks to him I learned that the guillotine was invented because the use of the sword to decapitate had often proved inefficient, and in one case it had taken 27 strokes to sever the head from the body, and the condemned man was still conscious on receipt of the twentieth blow.

I discovered that in the First World War a Belgian family was hanged from a tree in mid-winter, the bodies froze and, when the wind swung them to and fro, they tinkled. And the SS set German Shepherds on a woman's 3-year-old daughter, who hid in a bush and wouldn't come out, so the dogs brought her out, bit by bit.

A study of the siege of Leningrad told me of tens of thousands of people who died of starvation and noted that some of them waited outside a labour ward for a woman to give birth, then rushed in and ate the placenta.

When I muttered: 'Please let me just die in my sleep,' Death laughed.

Now carrion crows silently mass on my roof.

CONTRIBUTORS

Royal Rhodes is a retired educator who taught classes in global religions and death & dying for almost forty years. His poetry and art collaborations have been published by The Catbird [on the Yadkin] Press in North Carolina. He lives in a small village in central Ohio.

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Sam Barbee has a new collection, Apertures of Voluptuous Force (2022, Redhawk Publishing). He has three previous poetry collections, including That Rain We Needed (2016, Press 53), which was a nominee for the Roanoke-Chowan Award as one of North Carolina's best poetry collections of 2016; and is a two-time Pushcart

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Poet, painter, agitator, **David Ryan** lives in Dungarvan. His poems have appeared in The Poetry Bus,The Blue Max, The Bread and Roses Anthology, Déise Voices, and the media pages of the Embassy of Palestine to Ireland. His art has been shown in numerous galleries in Ireland and published in The Waxed Lemon.

Pauline Barbieri was shortlisted for the Bridport Poetry Prize by the poet laureate, Sir Andrew Motion and twice for the Exeter Poetry Prize by Jo Shapcott and Lawrence Sail, respectively. She has had six collections of poetry published and was shortlisted for the Cinnamon Press Novel Awards for her book, 'Smoke and Gold'.

Craig Kirchner is retired and thinks of poetry as hobo art. He loves storytelling and the aesthetics of the paper and pen. He has had three poems nominated for the Pushcart, and has a book of poetry, Roomful of Navels. He houses 500 books in his office and about 400 poems in a folder on a laptop. These words tend to keep him straight. After a writing hiatus he was recently published in Poetry Quarterly, Decadent Review, New World Writing, Neologism, The Light Ekphrastic, Unlikely Stories, Wild Violet, Last Stanza, Unbroken, The Globe Review, Skinny, Your Impossible Voice, Fairfield Scribes, Spillwords, WitCraft, Bombfire, Ink in Thirds, Ginosko, Last Leaves, Literary Heist, The Blotter Magazine, Quail Bell , Variety Pack Ariel Chart, Lit Shark, Gas, Teach-Write, Cape Magazine, Scars, Yellow Mama, Rundelania, Flora Fiction, Young Ravens, Loud Coffee Press, Edge of Humanity, Carolina Muse, and the Journal of Expressive Writing and has work forthcoming in Valiant Scribe, Chiron Review, Sybil, Timalda’s Diary, Vine Leaf Press, Wise Owl, Moria, The Argyle, Same Faces, Floyd County Moonshine, Coneflower Café, Impspired, Borderless Crossings, Hamilton Stone Review, Kleksograph. Dark Winter, and The Main Street Rag.

Rachilde (1860-1953), a prolific French writer and editor of the avant-garde magazine Mercure de France. Supported the careers of many french Modernists, now largely forgotten.

Michael H. Brownstein has been widely published throughout the small and literary presses. His work has appeared in The Café Review, American Letters and Commentary, Skidrow Penthouse, Xavier Review, Hotel Amerika, Free Lunch, Meridian Anthology of Contemporary Poetry, The Pacific Review, Poetrysuperhighway.com and others. His latest volumes of poetry, A Slipknot to Somewhere Else (2018) and How Do We Create Love? (2019), were recently released (Cholla Needles Press)

Gary Bolick is a native of North Carolina, where he now lives with his wife Jill. He lived and studied in Paris and Dijon for a year and a half before graduating from Wake Forest.
At Wake he studied under and was mentored by Germaine Bree, who was very supportive of his writing and interests in surrealism and Carl Jung's work on the collective unconscious.
He has published five novels. Go to https://www.garybolick.com for information on his latest works: Store in a Cool, Dry Place and River Talk.

Ray Miller is a Socialist, Aston Villa supporter and faithful husband. Life's been a disappointment.

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After a long career as a professor of Classics (specialising in Latin literature) **Paul Murgatroyd** retired nine years ago and started writing novels and short stories. sixty-four of the latter have been published or accepted for publication, along with twenty poems in English and over one hundred of his Latin poems.

END OF ISSUE EIGHTEEN OF THE KLEKSOGRAPH