

audience

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World Audience (www.worldaudience.org) is a global consortium of artists and writers, producing quality books and the literary journal *audience*, and *The audience Review*. Our periodicals and books are edited by M. Stefan Strozier and assistant editors. Please submit your stories, poems, paintings, photography, or artwork: submissions@worldaudience.org.

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Thank you.

audience

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“Mexicans: consider that the cunning and bad faith of one man is shedding blood in a scandalous manner, because he is incapable of governing; consider that his system of government is choking the fatherland and trampling with the brute force of bayonets on our institutions; and thus, as we raised up our weapons to elevate him to power, we again raise them up against him for defaulting on his promises to the Mexican people and for having betrayed the revolution initiated by him, we are not personalists, we are partisans of principles and not of men!”

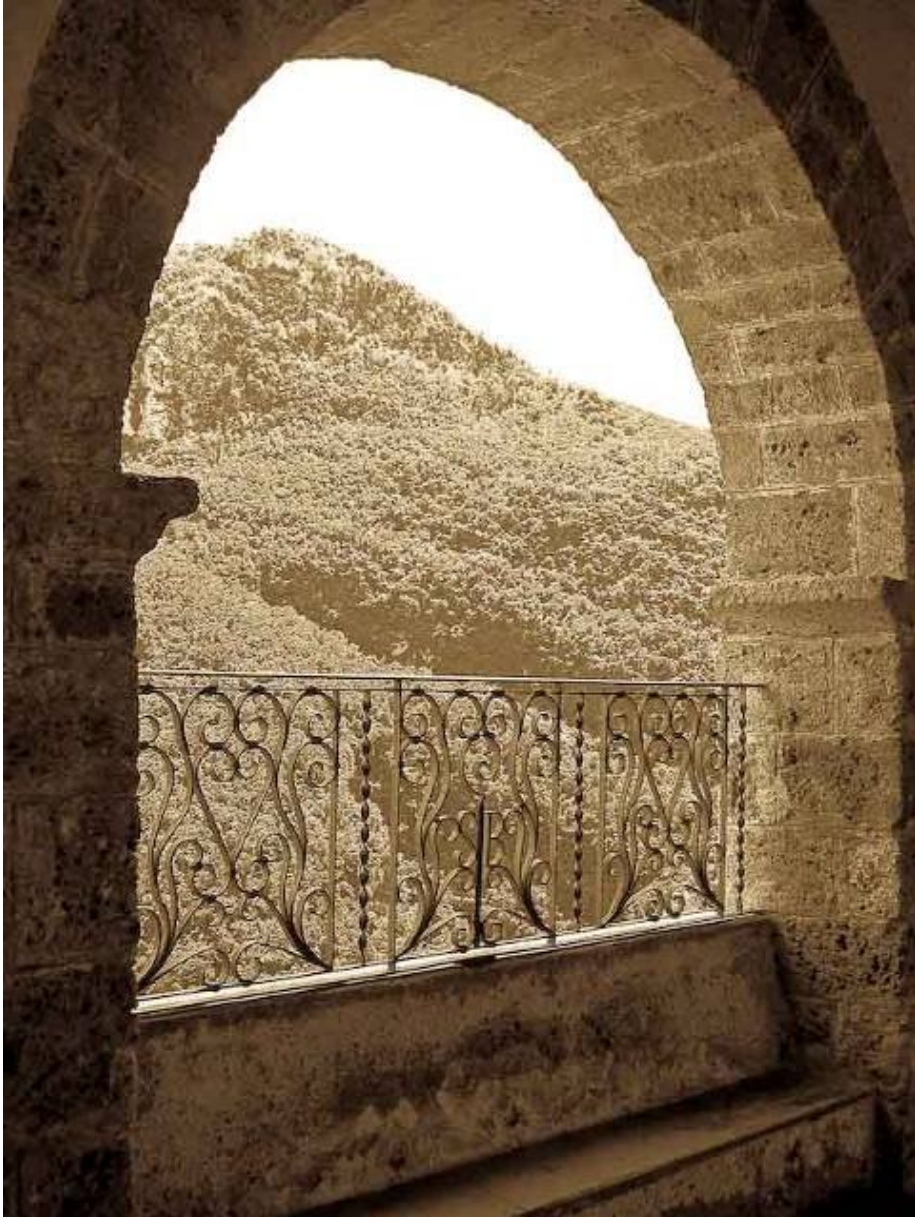
Emiliano Zapata, Plan de Ayala

La Revolution is a 5-act play by M. Stefan Strozier, a production of La Muse Venale, Inc. (www.lamusevenale.org), coming this fall.



*The poet's task is this, my friend,
to read his dreams and comprehend.
The truest human fancy seems
To be revealed to us in dreams:
all poems and versification
are but true dreams' interpretation.*

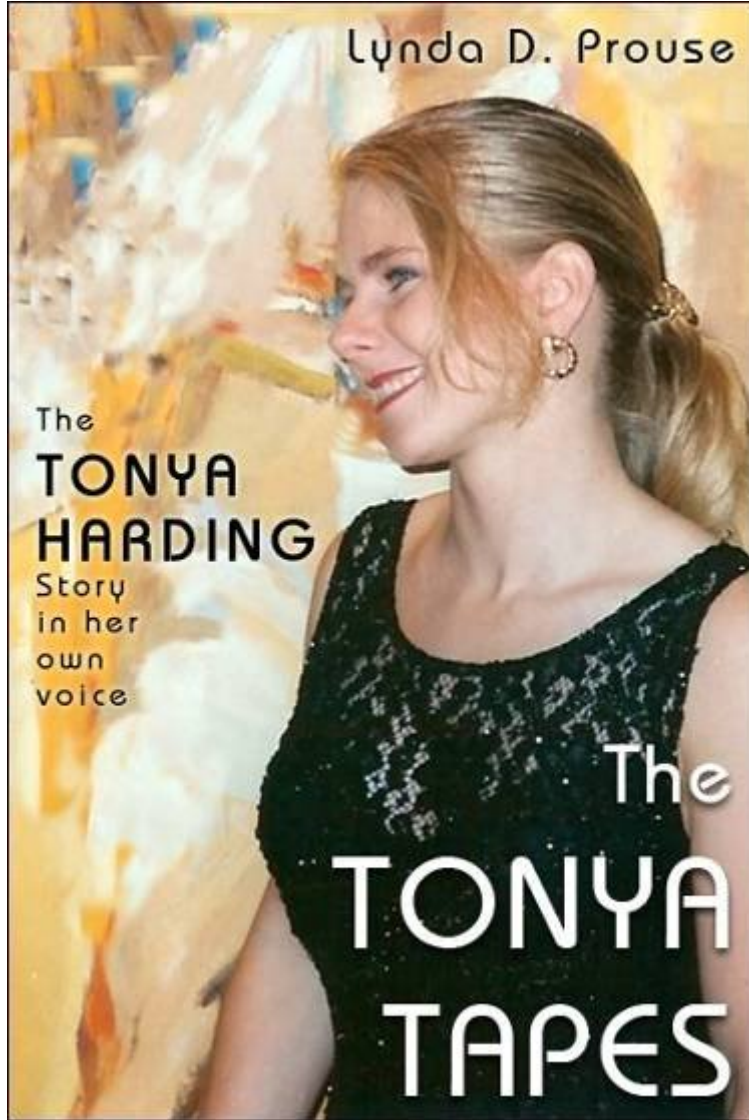
Hans Sachs, in the *Meistersinger*,
from Friedrich Nietzsche's *On Tragedy*



“It is time now for us to rise from sleep” – Saint Benedict.
Photo by Carrie Crow

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From the editor:

This is our 9th issue of *audience* and everything seems to be going very well. Editing a literary journal is fun business. What makes it interesting is putting your stamp on it. Other than our children, there is no too much in life that we can truly shape in our vision. We often think we can influence things, people, and situations, only to dastardly be proven incorrect, and horrified at how nominal and insignificant our voice is. Perhaps, there are occupations that people think are influential, like president or corporate owner; but I would argue that those too are over-hyped, because it's the people who run things, and they elect their leader based on what they want. Note how politicians bend so easily in the wind.

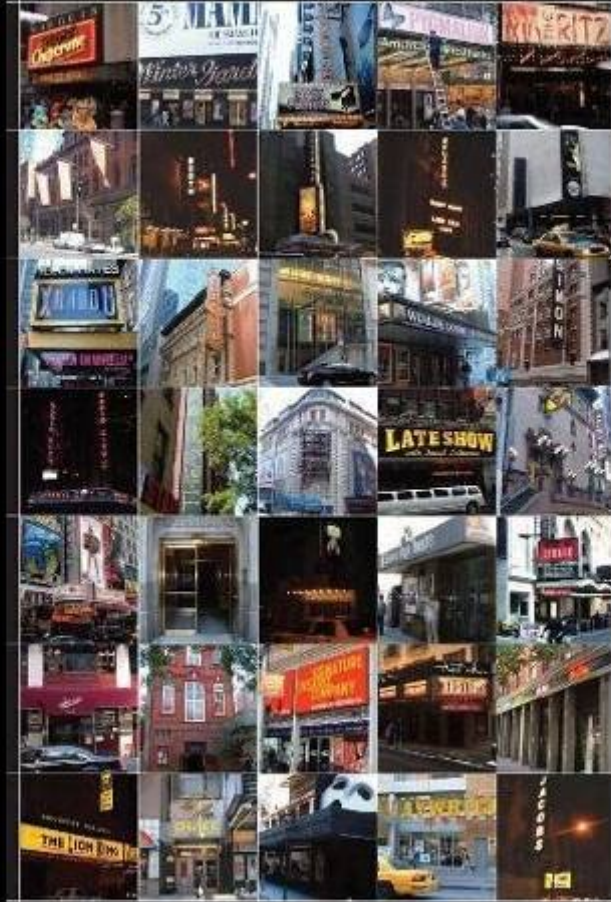
But being an editor is different. Here one is forming, gathering, rejecting, to suit his or her whim, into a final, tangible product, often with much influence in other events.

What have we become in 2 years? Self-analysis is dangerous for the artist; but since I am also an editor, I'll hazard a guess (avoiding all pretension): we've done exactly what we said we would: We've created an online journal (that is also in print; and is the birth of our entire publishing house) that is created through the Internet, its home, and that gathers its strength from the entire world. The poetry and stories and essays we've published are excellent and more diverse than our competitors by leaps and bounds (as are their authors). We are so diverse we disagree culturally, often through our art. If we have set up a "big tent", I advise you to enter it packing heat. And now we have come into our own with the plays we're publishing. And, in publishing plays, we are doing something few other journals do.

Since brevity is the soul of wit, I'll end here. On to the next issue!

M. Stefan Strozier

THE AUDIENCE BOOK OF THEATER QUOTATIONS



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Shape Poems by Michael J. Vaughn

Butterfly
the picture comes to kill me: you and the baby, walking to the bedroom.
Every night,
You tie an American flag around his eyes, then sit in the kitchen and study your
final option, silver and cold to the touch. When did the math arrive at this?
How many drunks, flare-ups, divorces, pregnancies, bad dreams? Hold an invisible
gun in your hand. Pull the trigger.
Feel how it flexes a muscle all the
way back to the elbow. The finger
cannot do this work alone. Every
night, I stand next to you in a field
in Atlanta as you bring the
metal to your
chest, and I ask
you, What were
your last thoughts?
Why didn't you
think of calling me?

Memorial Day

On the day you blew out your
last birthday candles, I sat
midway up a row of
seats, dazzled by a
cowgirl fiddler
wearing the
kind of gypsy
sparkle dress you
would take to work on
Halloween. It isn't supposed
to be like this. There isn't supposed
to be a world where I can see a cowgirl
fiddler, or a step-drop accordionist, or some
high-hatted peg of a bass player, and not bring
them back to you, wrapped in the ribbons of my
words. The cowboy sang a song in Spanish, you should
have heard it, rising into his smile, bringing water from the
skies. Driving home, I tried to remember that rain does not
always mean sadness, but could not raise my voice, thinking of
you, trilling over Sunday morning pancakes, great
showtunes of the American stage.



Tuileries View by Carrie Crow

Clearwater

by James Gleason Bishop

The laps I swim
Back and forth
Stroke, breathe,
Sip water, choke,
Back and forth,
They're not like
Laps Olympians
Thunder about
In their training.
Surely their laps are
Alive with current.

The words I read
Back and forth
Across the page
All black and white
Can't be like those
Hemingway read.
There must have
Been some spark
The publisher left
Out of my copy.

The life I lead
Back and forth
To work—rhythm
Of ordinary talk
Even the quiet
Desperation leaves
The same old
Wounds as last
Year's desperation.
Not at all like
The mythic sorrow or
The pulsing joy
Of your life.

Death of the Youngest Man on the Enola Gay Feb. 1, 2003

by James Gleason Bishop

“Results excellent.”

-- Coded message to President
Truman from radio operator
Richard Nelson August 6, 1945,
six miles above Hiroshima

Talk about a mission.
Six hours with Little Boy,
All 9,700 pounds of him, in the back.

We saw the flash from six miles high.
Didn't hear a thing,
But the shock wave threw us around.

I radioed the President, sure.
We found out later 68,000 people died.
That's a drop in the bucket compared
To the number of dead if we'd invaded.

Some say more than a million.
Maybe your granddaddy
Would've been killed on Tokyo Beach.
Don't talk to me about regrets.

War was never pretty, or kind.
I felt sorry for the people who died.
But by heaven, or hell, I would have

Volunteered for that mission anyway.
I wanted to fly but the Army
Said my eyes weren't good enough.

Dutch and Tibbets and the boys flew fine.
We did our job that day and went home.
Just like millions of people do every day.

Fat Abel

by Harold Rain

I hear the voice of my own blood as from the ground it cries,
No more shall naïve innocence becloud my school boy eyes.
For now I see that I am Cain, a slayer of my kin,
And Heaven's zenith won't offset the trough that is my sin.

I was a slender stalk grown up from yellow fields of grain,
Bending at the feeble breeze and thirsting after rain.
Yet silently, defiantly, I stood complacently,
For I could see that all around were others just like me.

Yet once there came a massive beast unwelcome in our field.
He was an offering of fat, whose fate my silence sealed.
For all my slender seedling friends assailed him with their
jeers,
And I did not defend this lamb, nor contradict my peers.

And driven from our yellow field of cruel and spiteful hate,
The fattened lamb found lonely grounds to rest and
ruminant.
Did subtle meditations penetrate this chubby head?
We'll never know; we only know he shot it full of lead.

A classroom's empty chair is all we'd left to castigate--
At least for then; so we just shrugged and called it fate.
I thought he was the last one we would have to scorn and
mock,
But soon enough I'd see he's but the firstling of this flock.

For though we are much older now, our fruit now nearly
ripe,
We've yet to learn that brotherhood is not confined by type.
And though with craven reticence I watch as Abel dies,
I hear my brother's blood cry out to God from where it lies.

The Temple of Walton

by Harold Rain

While home from Greece an old classmate I met dumbfounded
me.

In Walmart where she wore a badge; “My Name is Beverly.”
Ere now I’d flown; had skipped a stone off the Aegean Sea,
And had extolled the ruined shrines of great Antiquity;

*“O Parthenon, you resurrect triumphant Pericles.
Across millennia infuse me with your lucid breeze;
Ecstatically I now inhale your ancient sapience...”*

(But now this chance encounter would arrest my eloquence).

Think not that Aphrodite gagged my sage verbosity,
Nor think that Eros had beguiled my calm tranquility.
The service employee unleashed no locked-up lover’s pain –
My memory of her was full of pity and disdain.

Yet now her awkward stance had grown to straight stability!
Her shaky eyes, once locked in glass, were confident and free.
Her voice; that weakly quavered then, now purred serenity -
Where was the misfit I despised whose name was “Beverly?”

What oracle foretold this grand transfiguration?
What deity prescribed this novel dispensation?
I thought my travels cultured me above my homebound
peers,
Yet now I wondered if I’d even reached the threshold years.

Olympic gods, now hear my cry of blatant heresy:
Amidst the summer discounts lie the greatest mystery.
You gods are not as lofty as the tall commercial shelf
That hides the mystic passage twixt a past and future Self.

Breakwater Falling

by Harold Rain

As granite rocks of jetti walls are coiled by crashing spray,
The pounding tide of passion bloats my innards everyday.
For as it ever rises up in great unyielding surges,
I have no visceral vent by which to exorcise these urges.

Oh had I but experienced your absent, unseen form,
Perhaps my poetry could quiet, if not quell the storm.
For often writers testify, and swear it on their lives,
That composition sublimates the vicious primal drives.

Indeed, your kiss may well be like a fine wine's gentle sting,
Yet my assertion of this fact would have a hollow ring.
And though your breasts may be snow white in this my wistful
mind,
I could no worse attest for it were I completely blind.

Perhaps your quickened breath is like a sweetly scented rose,
But, alas, that warm exhale has yet to reach my nose.
And maybe if you cried my name I'd hear an angel's song,
I think that it is likely so – but then I could be wrong.

And to touch you – to touch you on the outside and within –
Your heartbeat would resound amongst the ribs beneath my
skin.
Good God! Each cell I'm made of burns to feel your flesh on
me!
But you are far beyond my grasp, and may well always be.

And thus my pen is impotent to plug the feeble dike –
Which doubtless will give way before the next tide's ruthless
strike.
Before that happens I can only languish, sigh, and groan,
And wait to drown for craving that which I have never
known.

The Rhine Narration

by Mildred Bell

Chapter I - Is the Ice Not Nice

Men's resolve grew like the crystals
Which formed the salt beneath the snow
Of Ymir's gelid paradise
'Til men brought the frostgiants low,
Subject to seasons and cycles,
For, Ymir hadn't cared to know
Why men had loathed the Age of Ice.

Chapter II - Brunhilde Goes To Jail

Windspear swooped down and she alit
Beneath the mountain's snow-clad crest,
And patting an equine wing,
Brunhilde entered the mountain,
Joining worshippers scores strong.
The rite was balm to her spirit,
Though her guilt gave her no rest,
With innocent persons dying.
As she closed the sealskin curtain,
Men raised voices in plainsong.

She who'd turned their white land green,
Though her origins were moot,
Was goddess of the ancient lore
Of tyranny of snow and ice
Which ended when the giants fell.
So, men greeted their warrior-queen,
Who from the ice had brought forth fruit
Through methods never seen before,
With blood of human sacrifice,
Who died in hopes of faring well.

The cleaver crept from the shadows
Of flames writhing in a pit,
And crackling at the altar's base.
The victim quaked then lay still,
Being bilberry-sulphur numbed.
There ensued firm blows and echoes
As the axe descended and bit
And streams of blood began their race
'Til its coffers drank their fill
As a heart and organs were plumbed.

The queen's runespeech was unsure,
And it never crossed her mind
That it wasn't Wotan's magic
Which her blood rites underwrote,
In homage and memorial,
Which had so brightened the future,
That these boons all pre-designed,
Were neither random nor remote,
Nor vouchsafed the realm by rote,
But timely gifts for survival.

Chapter III – One of our Norns is Missing

Awhile after Time's beginning
A trumpet blast moved a crowd
In an orderly kaleidoscope,
With tumblers, bells and motley,
Towards the new-built Hall of Valor.
With keeping as dear as getting,
No hero should rot in a shroud,
For, at the crest of Vanir's slope
Lay a boot camp and armory
Open to life's fallen warrior.

The cadence was softly drummed
For those apaw, aclaw, ahorse
In the richly perfumed twilight,
Who climbed the steeply winding way
To great bronze doors newly opened,
The scope for drama being plumbed
At the plateau of the course,
Doors opened not to invite
But as part of the display
With nothing further to portend.

No tours, but inspiring songs
Were offered by smiling Wotan.
The men sang "The Ice of Eden,"
The women "The Charms of Midgard,"
And all "Borland our Haven,"
To the joy of visiting throngs,
Who were not all strictly human,
But with the same ties to Asgard
As those normally called men.

The Norn, Skuld, wove the future
With her sisters at their loom
When she was where she ought to be,
But, powerless servitude
Did not suit her ambitions.
The world knew of her displeasure
When her rebellion was in bloom.
Negative notoriety
But rewarded her turpitude
In her untimely defections.

Chapter IV – For Asgard and Burgundy

Siegfried lived steeped in mystery
As to why he'd been rescued,
For, he was an unloved stray
Somehow reared in woodland splendor
By the brother of the dwarfking,
But knew a broken sword the key,
And Siegfried felt with certitude
That he had a dragon to slay
Which could be killed by no other,
But, the sword resisted yoking.

From Bald Mountain where it squatted,
The dragon scrouged the continent,
Sweeping, killing, seizing gold
Which it heightened sense had smelled,
Only to roost it in its nest,
Though some currency was printed,
For the brute's discouragement
In the great cities it patrolled,
Its menace was not dispelled
At its home in the Black Forest.

Seigfried felt the sword was Nothing.
It was obviously unique
And regarded as a treasure,
With runes deeply etched in its blade.
He, himself, must be a Walsung,
Whose kinsmen weren't far to seek.
The notion gave him no pleasure.
From the Aesir's twilight fortress
He'd never received word or aid.

He'd known the Elders' courtesy,
Giant's awe, and Grog's kindness
Upon their visits to Dwarfheim,
And the giants frankly stared
When Siegfried served a chop and beer,
Pointing to his identity
Not as an orphan in distress,
But, with a destiny sublime,
With Wotan helpless and prepared
For a hero from any sphere.

Chapter V –The Sentinels

Saga, Asgard's librarian,
Monitored Timeswaths and lines
On a periodic basis
Out of duty to know Fate.
She read in a mirrored chamber,
Brightly utilitarian,
Mainly monarchical declines,
Boons and curses on hiatus,
And woes Aesir wished to abate.

The lives of fellow deities
Were of paramount importance.
She kept track of each and other,
Well acquainted with their skeins.
Even Loki could view at times,
But, for his rash proclivities,
The range of his reconnaissance
Was less than that of most Aesir,
For, he wore invisible chains.

What lines some scorned, others pursued,
And fewer still became obsessed,
But, all like Saga, now gawked
At an odd source of spectacle,
The magnetized warding tree,
For, this symbol of fortitude
The timeline had strangely progressed.
It was of this that people talked,
At least those that liked to gamble --
The Yggdrasil Lottery.

Saga cowered at the shame
Of the sale of the tree's sap,
A fraud she reviewed with scorn.
Few had not heard of Loki's tale,
But, was killing a Norn murder?
A Norn was as quick as a flame,
Too agile to catch or trap.
Only an As could bag a Norn,
So, the vendors belonged in jail –
Unless Loki was their sponsor.

Chapter VI – Valhalla

Asgard's skies were set ablaze
As had occurred at the first Darn
At the end of The Winter War,
Ending in Twilight compromise,
With darkness no longer supreme.
The issue was of nights and days
Within seasonal rotation
And Loki had evened the score
With punishing daylight skies
At the change of the regime.

Where the storm-scoured Valhal lay
Loki licked hot lips and gazed
Down at Wotan grayed and crumpled,
Rune-felled, taken unawares.
As Loki raised his crystal staff,
The trumpets had begun to bray
And Aesir milled about amazed
At Wotan suddenly tumbled
By one of Loki's feeble snares
At which the high god used to laugh.

Now the Aesir in disarray
Stood stunned at a feat so sudden
With only themselves to blame.
Calculated self-effacement
Had white-washed Loki's treachery.
With a quick rune designed to slay,
Wotan had been over-ridden,
Though short of the Erl King's claim.
Loki's runespeech was deficient,
So, Wotan lived on through weakly.

Though taken as hostage to peace
Between fallen giants and Man,
Loki was loyal to neither.
Giants also suffered daylight.
Loki had power with no plan.
Still, his rune-empowered lease
Upon the great chair of Wotan,
To rule in a slap-dash endeavor
Those who deemed him the worst fright
Since the rise of Leviathan.

Chapter VI – Part II The Citadel

Peasant Platter

Bratwurst links and pork shanks
Earn the hungry peasant's thanks,
Especially when ranged about
A heaping plate of sauerkraut,
With garlic for extra flavor,
And caraway seeds, as ever
For, in any cabbage dish,
They are a tasty garnish.

Aryas limped into the clearing.
The boar he'd conquered had left pains.
He faced a gingerbread cottage,
A classic woodland illusion
With a chocolate bar for a door.
The roof dripped vanilla icing.
Gumdrops limned spun sugar panes.
The completion of the image
Was candy canes in profusion
Which flanked the path like a corps.

This was a bogey of legend,
A witch's trap for hungry strays
Whom their parents couldn't feed
And left them to foraging
Admidst the wealth of the forest.
He wondered what she could intend
Who'd formed a lure from olden days
Too notorious to succeed,
Sending would-be victims fleeing
From a site unreal and unblest.

Caged

by Gary Beck

SCENE: An urban zoo, with an outdoor cage and a door leading to the indoor cage. (Ambient zoo sounds throughout the play. Zookeeper enters. Unlocks cage door and sweeps, whistles, does a short 'broom dance'. Visitor enters. Watches.)

Visitor: You look real happy in there.

Zookeeper: Well I'm used to it. This is my 3rd year in the big house. And I'll be leaving soon.

Visitor: That's a funny thing to say. The big house. It sounds like a prison.

Zookeeper: It is for them.

Visitor: Don't give me that. They got a roof over their heads, good food, medical benefits. So what if they can't go for a bus ride. They don't get mugged.

Zookeeper: How would you like to be on public display eight hours a day? Everyone gaping at you. Yelling, cursing, spitting, throwing things, treating you like an animal...

Visitor: They are animals. You've got a real identity problem for a guard.

Zookeeper: I'm not a guard! Except to protect them from people just like you.

Visitor: Me!

Zookeeper: Yeah. Don't you talk to them? Give them peanuts? Taunt them? Dare them to come out and go a few rounds with you?

Visitor: I don't do anything like that!

Zookeeper: Well something else then...? Do you have fantasies about walking a wild beast on a leash and attracting beautiful women?

Visitor: You're a weirdo. I don't think about things like that! Besides, what business is it of yours what I think?

Zookeeper: You started this conversation, not me.

Visitor: That wasn't an invitation to analyze me. And I'm not like that at all.

Zookeeper: Then why are you here? It's probably for something cruel or perverse. That's why people come here. That's why the animals are in cages. So everyone can tease them and gloat how superior they are.

Visitor: We are superior! We're people. That's why we're out here and they're in there.

Zookeeper: If we were superior, we wouldn't torture these poor brutes with life imprisonment, just for our entertainment. Especially when almost two million Americans are in prison for real crimes. We don't make a sideshow out of them.

Visitor: What are you talking about? We're not barbarians. That's why everyone's against capital punishment. That proves we're more civilized than the animals.

Zookeeper: If we were civilized, we'd put these poor beasts out of their misery and show movies or television, instead of letting people gape through the bars. But no, people have to see what they really look like, live and miserable.

Visitor: But zoos are building natural habitats, so the animals can live well. They'll be happy and our children can learn about them.

Zookeeper: Why don't you step into this habitat for a minute and see what it feels like.

Visitor: No, thanks. I don't want to get my clothes dirty, and I've got an appointment soon.

Zookeeper: Didn't you ever wonder what it would be like, looking out at all those people? Hoping you could get your claws on them.... Losing hope as the years go by.... Fading away.... Coughing.... Getting sick.

Visitor: That wouldn't happen to me! I'd exercise regularly and eat the right way.

Zookeeper: It's not like that for them. They can't ask to speak to the warden, or request library privileges.

Visitor: You're blowing it out of proportion. They're protected at least. What do you think would happen to them in Africa or Asia? Someone would be making them into rugs or coats.

Zookeeper: It might be better than this. Try it. (He beckons to the visitor.)

Visitor: What are you, nuts? (encouraged by the zookeeper, he hesitantly enters and starts inspection.) It may not be the Waldorf, but they got a roof over their heads and they get lots of attention.... (cage business.)

Zookeeper: Why don't you jump up on that perch and see what it feels like?

Visitor: That's crazy (He starts to exit.)

Zookeeper: You're here already and nobody's watching. You'll never get another chance like this.

Visitor: I feel stupid.

Zookeeper: Try to imagine what you would feel like if you were a tiger, curled up there, watching, waiting, twitching your tail.... Springing down on the weak, helpless men.... (the visitor slowly mounts the perch, assuming a cat pose.) Sinking your teeth into them.... Tearing off a piece of meat.... Padding off to a quiet, concealed place, to eat without anyone watching. (The zookeeper slowly goes to the cage door and slips out.)

Visitor: What're you doing? (He starts to get up.) I don't want to stay in here.

Zookeeper: Neither does the tiger.

Visitor: He's just an animal!

Zookeeper: I know. (He locks cage.)

Visitor: This isn't funny!

Zookeeper: I know.

Visitor: Let me out!.... (The zookeeper starts to exit. The lights slowly fade.) Come back here!.... Help! Somebody get me out of here. Help! Where are you going?

Zookeeper: Inside. To see if the tiger wants to visit you.

(Blackout.)

Carole and the Code

by Paul Alan Fahey

Time & Setting: Early 1930's. A posh restaurant on the order of Romanoff's, overly pretentious.

Characters:

CAROLE: 26, an actress, blonde, sassy, sarcastic and playful, at the pinnacle of her screen success.

MR. GOODWIN: Studio executive in his early forties, pompous, wears glasses, dark suit and tie.

WAITER: Youngish, bored, most likely a would-be writer or actor.

Description: An imagined encounter between Carole Lombard, the reigning queen of screwball comedy and a dimwitted studio executive who supports the *new* Motion Picture Production Code. Center Stage: Table for two, set with white linen, a silver champagne bucket on stand to the side. Framed black and white celebrity photos of the period hang on folding room dividers left and right of table. Lights Up. CAROLE and MR. GOODWIN scrutinize large menus that hide their faces. The WAITER shifts his weight back and forth, impatient, ready to take their orders. CAROLE peers over the top of her menu as GOODWIN speaks.

MR. GOODWIN (Serious, pompous): Let me tell you about my meeting. The code will bring decency back to the movies. Both Cecil B. and Mr. Mayer are staunchly behind it. (CAROLE turns back to the menu while GOODWIN peruses the wine list.)

GOODWIN (To WAITER, ignores CAROLE): Chateaubriand for the lady and me, light salad with Caesar and a bottle of this. (GOODWIN points to an item on the wine list.)

WAITER (Makes a face at CAROLE then to GOODWIN): Yes, sir.

WAITER (As he leaves, under his breath to CAROLE): Your highness! (He picks up the menus and exits stage right.)

CAROLE: Gable and Crawford are awfully upset about it, Mr. Goodwill.

GOODWIN (Annoyed): It's Goodwin, dear.

CAROLE (Playfully): Yes, of course. Goodwill. Isn't that where I send all my used frocks? There's that nice young man who drives a panel truck and picks them up . . .

GOODWIN (Talks over her): Even the Catholics, God bless 'em, are behind it. No more violence, sex, explicit murders, or excessive profanity.

CAROLE (Pretends to take GOODWIN seriously, leans across the table toward him): Jeez.

GOODWIN: No jeez, Carole. Can't say that. No, siree. No hell, damn or nuts, either.

CAROLE (Having fun now, what a pompous ass): Not even nerts?

GOODWIN (Jokingly acts offended): Absolutely not.

(WAITER returns with the champagne, pops the cork with a flourish, pours two glasses, wraps a napkin around the bottle then sets the champagne in the bucket and exits stage right.)

CAROLE (Picks up her champagne glass, proposes a toast: Here's to the code, Mr. Goodwin.

GOODWIN (In the middle of a sip, coughs and sputters): Not Godwin, Carole. Goodwin. Good plus win.

CAROLE (Playing the dumb blonde, giggles): Oh, it must have been your mention of the church. I get so easily sidetracked. All that religion. So bad for one's health, don't you think? (She leans across the table, chucks him under the chin with her finger.

CAROLE: Good plus win. (She laughs, imitates May West)
Continuing: Goodness had nothin' to do with it.

GOODWIN: Pardon?

CAROLE: A little joke, Mr. Goodwin. Nothing, really.

GOODWIN (Self-righteous): Exactly. Nothing up there on the screen to lead the movie-goer astray. You'll have some wonderful parts, too. Swell, wholesome gals. Only the correct standards of life for all to see and emulate.

CAROLE (Sarcastically): Gosh, isn't that nice? For all to see. Tell me again about the sex, Mr. Goodwin.

CAROLE continues on in baby talk: I like the sex part.

GOODWIN (Grows increasingly uncomfortable): Sex should never be more than suggested. Continuing (as if reading directly from the code): And only when essential to the plot.

(CAROLE flips off her shoe, sticks her toe under Goodwin's trouser cuff and begins a journey up his leg.)

CAROLE (Baby talk): Tell me more, puhwease.

GOODWIN (Starts to feel uncomfortable as her leg edges up toward his crotch): Well . . . er, uh. . . it will be very tastefully presented. Twin beds for husband and wife, and if a couple goes . . . NEAR ONE...

CAROLE (Enjoying herself): Yes? (Carole's leg moves faster now, almost to the summit.)

GOODWIN: The rule will BEEEEEEE...(GOODWIN sticks a finger under his collar, makes a slight up and down tugging motion, and CAROLE laughs.)

CAROLE: Yes, Mr. Goodwin. I'm waiting. The rule?

GOODWIN: One foot on the floor at . . . AT . . .

(CAROLE'S toe hits the mark.)

GOODWIN (Almost screaming now): AT ALL TIMES!

CAROLE (Baby talk): Mr. Goody likes his wittle Carole.

GOODWIN (Loses his cool): Goodwin, goddamnit! (CAROLE makes a face, picks up her glass, tries to hide her smile.)

CAROLE: Wittle Carole's not terribly hungry. Do you mind if we . . .

GOODWIN (Thrilled): Leave? (He quickly downs his champagne. They stand. He helps CAROLE into her fur coat, whispers something in her ear. She laughs, takes his arm. Lights dim as they exit stage right. Loud conversation continues offstage to end of scene. A car door slams, an engine revs.)

GOODWIN: But that's my car!

CAROLE: I'll leave it at the studio, Mr. Goodwin. You can fetch it in the morning.

GOODWIN: But . . . but . . . wait!

CAROLE: You're on your own, buster, and don't forget.

GOODWIN: What?

CAROLE: One foot on the floor. (Her voice drifts off as the car accelerates.) Continuing: At all times!

The End.

The Great Debate

by Ernest Dempsey

One of our recent futuristic forays with the help of a 2000 years old time machine led us to the discovery of time when 'mankind' was (or will be) the victim of a deadly contaminant. We got the recording of a debate among some penal court members. It sounded as if the last male member of the human race had committed a dire crime, had been arrested, and was awaiting punishment. The penal court committee comprised entirely of women coming from different belief systems and ideologies. Our recorded debate follows here in the sequence as it took place. We are creating fictitious names for the committee members.

Committee Members:

Alice: Atheist-Evolutionist; **Beatrice:** Agnostic-Feminist; **Naomi:** Orthodox Christian; **Anisa:** Orthodox Muslim; **Wan Yeu:** Existentialist and President of the Session

The Session:

Wan Yeu: So my honorable ladies, let's start this crucial discussion regarding the issue of our last man's punishment. To recapitulate the background of the case concisely, our subject is named Adam, age 35, and he is the last male member of our human race. We do not know how he survived the deadly contaminant that engulfed all the other men on this planet. But we do know that he has been convicted of the most heinous crime that is possible for a man in our times to commit, namely refusing to get married despite being able to support a wife and children. This crime is one of the very few that are punishable by death or by exile to another planet where not a single molecule of oxygen is available in the air. However, given the nature of his current status as the sole male survivor of our race, I think we need to consider his case in a new light. Several issues may be involved and must be considered before deciding upon the most reasonable form of punishment for the convict. Given this, I'd like you to share your thoughts on the case. Beatrice, let's begin with your position on this issue.

Beatrice: Thank you Wan! You really sparkle today with this yellow sapphire necklace! Surely, you won't mind me asking where you bought it.

Wan Yeu: Oh well, I just stumbled upon it in a recent exhibition at *The Glares*. My late husband used to give me a precious gem on our wedding anniversary each year. Only he didn't live long enough to buy me a yellow sapphire. But he left behind enough to me to keep the gem-buying tradition alive.

Naomi: Did you say *The Glares*? I won't dare pass even by the entrance to that place. The last time I visited their exhibition, a terrier roaming about the patio scared the shit out of me!

Anisa: Did it touch you or your dress? If it did, then you should have put a new dress on before going to your prayers and of course also taken an ablution afresh.

Beatrice: What exactly was its gender? There is no such thing as bad with a bitch as to obligate washing or changing, though a male dog is really an infested mess!

Alice: Excuse me ladies! I think we may straggle from our purpose of gathering here if we keep rolling along these lines. So let's discuss the punishment of our convict lest he is taken by the killer bug before we can make him pay for what he has done.

Beatrice: Oh, I wish he is taken by the bug! And I think that will just be the kind of justice we may regard as poetic: the last heap of crap disposed by nature itself without incriminating a woman.

Alice: I'm afraid the idea of letting a tiny speck wipe an entire half of a complex species off the planet is not very welcome to me. And besides, we've yet to determine whether letting our culprit live or die is our priority. To remind you, cloning human embryos still hasn't been established as a predictable procedure for reproduction.

Wan Yeu: So you are trying to make the point that capital punishment is not justified for Adam because we need him for siring children?

Alice: That is one aspect of the case against death sentence in this particular situation.

Anisa: Nonsense! You sound like thinking of rewarding the criminal rather than punishing him. Refusing to marry and procreate is something for which he's been indicted.

Wan Yeu: And you think that Adam should be sentenced to death?

Anisa: No, I think we may punish him differently.

Naomi: Like what?

Anisa: Well, one alternative is killing two women in his stead. It amounts to the same effect.

Beatrice: You must be out of your frigging mind! But let me admit that your logical faculty almost works. So why not one of those two

women be you?

Naomi: This is not such a complicated problem in my view. Given my faith, I think we can simply let Adam free. Christ has already paid for our sins by dying on the cross for us. Adam's crime is no crime; let him be forgiven.

Alice: How can someone, anyone at all, pay for another person's sins beforehand? If Christ delivered us of all sin, no one should have been able to commit a single sin. This certainly is not the case my dear believer.

Anisa: Sin can only be forgiven by Allah. We women have been created inferior to men. We can't decide a man's fate. I think we should allow Adam to select his own punishment.

Beatrice: Your thinking is as black as your veil! What if he chooses to make you his Eve and then beat the shit out of you?

Wan Yeu: Ladies! Ladies! Please don't insult one another. This is only going to make things worse. Now let me remind you that we can't let him free because his crime is too dire to forgive. Punishment is inevitable. All we need is agreeing on the right kind of punishment. That's what we are here for. And for Anisa's suggestion, no we can't punish women for a man's crime.

Beatrice: My position on the issue is to make Adam live like a woman: dressed in women's clothes; caring for kids; doing house chores like cooking and cleaning; and reading romance novels.

Naomi: Now listen to her! My dear, these are all enjoyable activities and not punishment. I think we really need to define what punishment is, especially for the last man on earth.

Alice: Naomi's right! Adam may find pleasure in the conventional role of a woman.

Beatrice: What's there in this role for a man to cherish? If man could find any pleasure any pleasure in any of these, he would never have foisted them on women. Can't you understand this, you shithead!

Wan Yeu: Beatrice, I'm going ask you to stop using foul words. You sound like a man with these.

Beatrice: I do! Oh damn! Why the fuck didn't I realize that before?

Alice: The only predictable form of punishment for Adam seems to be exile; exile to a geographically isolated planet where he may initiate a new species that evolves to be our nearest cousins. This way, we *Homo sapiens* will get the credit for giving rise to a distinct living form.

Wan Yeu: I think a female mate needs to be sent with him in order to make this idea practicable. But who would be willing to accompany him and why? Besides, there is this question of Adam's will; he is sure

to reject mating no matter what woman is offered.

Beatrice: I wonder when will you all servile dolls stop thinking of women to men. The first Adam asked for a woman and God was all readiness in offering him one. Now this last Adam is on a run from women and you speak of tying one to is....oh well, let me not utter that four-lettered word starting with a 'd' and ending in 'k'.

Anisa: May Satan go to hell! Now I understand why this Adam is running away from women. I'm positive that he is a homosexual. Oh God! Have mercy on us! I request you to stone him to death. This is the only way to save this planet from God's wrath.

Naomi: You are right my sister! Adam must either be stoned or castrated, otherwise he can corrupt all humanity. He is a threat to the chastity of men.

Alice: What men? He is the last male so how can he corrupt men? I don't think homosexual behavior causes more harm than straight sexuality. It's natural, benign, and also environment-friendly, given its inability to increase population. If he's a homosexual, he may be our only hope of saving this planet.

Beatrice: I agree with you here. I think same-sex couples are more on equal terms in every sense of the phrase. Let's try to establish 'men for men, women for women' as the slogan of a new revolution.

Wan Yeu: Ok ladies, let's sum it up... [the phone rings] Oh, excuse me! Yes...yes...I remember...What! Oh my God! Ok...Ok...thanks! Of course, we'll be there in no time. Sure...thanks! Bye! [to the ladies] I just can't believe this! Oh!

Anisa: What is it?

Naomi: Is it something important about Adam?

Wan Yeu: Of course not! Forget about men!

Beatrice: That's what I've been saying for my entire life!

Wan Yeu: Don't waste time in idle talk! Listen, *Jewel Charmers* has set up a special one-day sale at the *Women's Haven* today. Patricia just called me, asking why we are not there already. She said we must hurry as the sale will close in about six hours. They are selling all hot designs for 50% of the original prices. Let's go ladies! This is our day! [the other women rise too]

Alice: But what about Adam and his punishment?

Wan Yeu: Oh Alice! Who cares? Let's go we are getting late!

The Ladies: Yeah let's go!

End of the Great Debate.

Flowers and Photographs

by Nicole Borgenicht

Becky, a florist, is thirty-two. She is dressed in a beige skirt and a light pastel v-neck top. Her slim medium-high heel shoes are narrow and tan. Rodney, a photographer, is twenty-nine. He wears khaki slacks and a black top. Lots of incoming natural light shines through two French window doors at the upstage end of an octagonal living room. Two vases full of various, exquisite flowers, decorate the mantelpiece above the couch. A few 16" X 20" mounted photographs are leaning separately against the wall. There is an armchair and a small table beside it on stage left of the French doors, and a couch with a little wood coffee table in front of it on stage right of the French doors. The floors are well preserved wood, and a hallway downstage left leads to an unseen kitchen. An offstage stairway is beyond the kitchen. Downstage right is a door leading outside, where Rod enters.

ACT 1

SCENE 1

Becky is sitting in the arm chair, legs crossed, reading the paper. She has a glass of wine beside her and a small bowl of grapes. Enjoying what she's reading, Becky periodically bounces her leg up and down. Peaceful jazz, and soft, rock music is playing low on the radio. Rod enters, carrying four mounted 16" X 20" photos under one arm, and a couple of ribbons in his free hand. He throws his Stetson on the hat rack near the door.

ROD: Honey, I won!

(Becky looks up. He puts his photos down and greets her with a kiss.)

BECKY: Congratulations! Which one?

ROD: Not one.

(Rod puts the two winning photos on the couch.)

ROD (continuing): Two! (Rod drops the ribbons, on the coffee table. Becky leans forward, looking at the photographs.)

BECKY: Outstanding, Rod. They saw your skill, felt the magic!

(Becky leaps up and hugs Rodney. The sun is setting and sparkles of colored light beam through the French door windows.)

BECKY (continuing): Let's hang them up.

ROD: One second please! Look at this Becky, your flower arrangements are these pictures. (Rod exits to the kitchen. Becky takes a closer look and shrugs.)

ROD (Hollers): Ah, fresh lemonade for my gin! (Rod quickly returns with his drink, a hammer and nails.)

BECKY (Cheerful): I made it this afternoon. They're part of the pictures, Rodney. (Rodney puts everything on the coffee table. He sits on the couch and runs his hand across the flowers in the photos although several objects are depicted.)

ROD (continuing): They're *everything*. (He eats a few grapes, kisses her hand gently and runs his fingers through her hair.)

BECKY: Are you over rating my flower designs again?

ROD: Why do you always say that? I'm being honest, about you.

BECKY: About me? (Angry) I'm not a bouquet of flowers.

ROD: No. (Sips lemonade drink.) I know.

(Rod rises, taking Becky's hand. They both stand in front of the vases of flowers on the mantelpiece. They release their grip.)

ROD (Stubborn): I would have lost without your flowers.

BECKY (Faces Rod.): You are lost. What's a photograph without a photographer?

ROD: What's a steak dinner without a steak?

BECKY: Hunger.

ROD: Now you're getting it.

BECKY: The magic's in *your* sauce, baby. (She shakes the ribbons.) Won-der-ful! Help me hang the photos Rod. (They take their shoes off and stand on the couch.)

ROD (Inhales deeply the scent of flowers, then hammers between words): Beck, you orchestrate each flower masterfully, as if delicate petals on one stem. (Becky hands him one photo and turns on the floor lamp. She holds his wrist for several seconds.)

BECKY: Merci, my darling poet. They blossom separately, by the strength of their very own stance. Your pictures won because of your superb creativity. (Rod holds up the second picture against the wall, she hands him a nail.)

ROD (His first "Thank you" refers to the nail.): Thank you. Thank you! What a review! Okay, please admit this?

BECKY: What? (They put their shoes back on, and sit on the couch together, arms around each other's shoulder.)

ROD: As the sun is my "light source" in that one (points to hung picture) my photography lights are mere "fill" for your flowers the stars.

BECKY: Your lights spill across the photo's sky and make my stars shine!

ROD: Two designers of objects d'art.

BECKY: My art shows exotic flowers, wilts in one week. A shooting star. Short-lived vision.

ROD: An arboretum of photographs, would be destroyed in a single rainstorm. Yours is the temporal art.

BECKY: And yours is permanent, unless there's a tornado.

ROD: They're both unique. (Becky finishes her wine in one gulp. (Continuing; Rising) Chardonnay?)

BECKY (Becky nods yes. Rod walks toward the kitchen.): Are you in rehearsals?

ROD (Turns back towards her): No. They haven't begun yet.

BECKY: You become so dramatic when you're rehearsing. You've been studying your lines?

ROD: I can function as two people.

BECKY: When you put the script down, aren't you supposed to revert back to yourself?

ROD: I'm me, acting as someone else, who plays me too, until the play is over.

BECKY (Thinks it over.): What if I can't fall in love with your character, "too?"

ROD: I'm the character, so why not? I'm playing the character or the character that I am is playing me. (Frustrated) Why not?

BECKY: I don't know.

ROD: You're changing the subject.

BECKY: And you're in eternal transformation!

ROD (continuing, speaking as if to himself and audience, while exiting toward the kitchen. He shakes his head.): Maybe we should drink different wines, separate us all? (When Rod exits, Becky removes her shoes and stands on the couch. She diligently adjusts the flower arrangements in both vases. She sits, slipping her shoes back on before he returns.)

SCENE 2

(Rod enters with a new bottle, another wine glass and a handful of grapes. He pours wine into both glasses.)

ROD: (Holds up the bottle.) Chardonnay, 81'. (Sits and feeds Becky and himself a few grapes. Rod then picks up the ribbons.) This is about us. These ribbons belong to you, as much as they do to me.

BECKY (Laughing): To me? I'm the businesswoman, an art appreciator.

ROD (Raises his voice.): You're an artist, too.

BECKY (Pauses): I am a florist. Flo-rist, art-ist. They're not at all alike. The same number of syllables and that's about it. (Rod throws ribbons back on the table)

BECKY (Softly): Isn't it? (Looks at ribbons and speaks louder) Artistic temperament! (Becky lifts the ribbons, one in each hand, and holds them up admiringly before setting them back down on the coffee table.)

BECKY (continuing): I am a businesswoman.

ROD (Stops pacing and looks at Becky before speaking.): This house, (looks around.) is special. I've always liked your home.

BECKY: I don't own it, I can't afford it.

ROD (Sits and spreads his arms, leaning back against the couch.) Ah, if this were only our palace.

BECKY: While we're here, it's our paradise.

ROD: I think everything in life should be that way.

BECKY: It is.

ROD: No it's not.

BECKY: Rodney, people own *things*, not our *souls*.

ROD (Rod lifts a photo from the floor, inspects it and replaces it against the wall.): No one possesses the life in a photograph either. (Rodney puts his hat on and tilts it to one side.) Art is: sharing the moment.

BECKY (Becky positions her hands, palms up, moving them up and down, as if balancing a scale, while she compares the following two words.): Art-ist, cap-i-tal-ist. Are we always to be, only one or the other? (She drops her hands and looks around.) I'm proud of this lifestyle. But half our lives are spent wondering what else we want behind many doors. (Frustrated) How is it all connected? (She sips her wine.)

ROD (Pours her and then himself wine and takes a sip before setting them on the table.): We are like art, in the adage: what you see is what you get.

BECKY (Leaning back): Bask in this instant.

ROD: You earned it. Bask for both of us.

BECKY: You *found* it.

ROD: How can you *lose* a moment?

BECKY (Pause): In a *flower*.

ROD (Pauses, sits.): Or a *photograph*.

BECKY: Isn't that more like losing your pretense?

ROD: I couldn't bear to be any happier. (They French kiss.) Unless of course you were the sole proprietor.

BECKY: You're serious?

ROD: No. (Rodney stands up, curving his body away from her as he moves.)

BECKY: Let's celebrate *your* day! (They clink glasses. Rodney sets his glass on the table and sits back down.)

ROD: You deserve the accolades too.

BECKY: If we had kids –

ROD: You want kids?

BECKY: Would you say, "It's a beautiful castle because of God's sand?"

ROD: I didn't put you that high up.

BECKY: It's the trickle down theory. There are other things in these pictures Rod.

ROD: You should be in it. (Becky moves over to the armchair with her wine and lifts her paper up.)

BECKY: Oh no. I was sitting here quietly reading when the award winner entered.

ROD: Just one set up, please. Then, we'll paint the town. My wallet.

BECKY: Where would we go? I'm so tired this evening. The flower market was packed with people. I had to visit five, or six vendors, for every genus. They were selling out like crazy! (Rodney stands and pulls his keys out of his pocket. He customarily tilts his Stetson to one side. Rod throws his keys up and catches them.)

ROD: I'll go walking around by myself. Until I come upon, your favorite restaurant. (Becky lowers her newspaper smiling.)

ROD (continuing): We'll dine out my darling. One portrait shot, please. (Becky nods yes. The lights dim, as the sunset's tint, subtly enters. Rod tosses his hat back on the rack, exits through the kitchen and runs upstairs. Becky removes her shoes and stands on the couch. She switches the two winning photos, putting each in place of the other. She takes a couple of flowers out of one full vase, and pops them into the other. She rearranges the flowers in each vase carefully. Becky slips into her shoes, and prances out through the kitchen, and up the stairs.)

SCENE 3

(We hear laughter and a few loud thumps upstairs. Several moments pass before Rodney comes downstairs and enters with a camera slung over his chest. He holds two lights on stands. An accessory case hangs from his shoulder. It is evening. The stage lights slowly brighten as he sets up his equipment and turns on his work lights. Becky walks in carrying a vase filled with a dozen tulips. She is made-up elegantly, wearing fresh lipstick, a touch of rouge and glittering, light silver eye shadow, softened with a light-blue shadow. Not extravagant, however pretty diamond drop earrings accent a lovely silk dress.)

ROD: You look stunning. You're beautiful. (Becky places the small vase with flowers on a side table and sits in the armchair. The setting sun's reddish light now fully enters through the French window doors.)

BECKY (Smiles.): My make-up is good tonight.

ROD: You're talented baby.

BECKY: You should acknowledge *your* laurels.

ROD (Kneels, takes her hand and holds it to his chest): I confess they are our prizes and your loveliness has my heart.

BECKY: Actor, marvelous. I can find a way to love all of you.

ROD: Actor yes, who truly loves you. (Becky nods knowingly. Rodney affectionately kisses her hand, and her cheek. Becky kisses his ear, he kisses her neck, and he slowly moves back.)

ROD (Coaxing her to keep her position.): Just like that. (He snaps a few shots. Rod adjusts a barn door on one of his lights.)

ROD (continuing): Chin up slightly. That smile, perfect. Some rouge! (He shoots navigating around her. Then he kneels beside her, shooting up at an angle. Rod stands and changes a gel, adds a snoot and adjusts black wrap around it on his light. He snaps a few more pictures.) The natural light in here is terrific. These will be my best photographs. Your face is glowing.

BECKY: You are sculpting and painting with light again dear.

ROD (continuing): Two – three more shots.

BECKY: If a portrait of me wins darling, please, don't say it was the makeup artist.

ROD: So my love is an artist? From now on, I'm going to try and sell my photographs. (While the lights fade out, the photography lights fade slower. Rod takes his hat and tilts it sideways on his head. He snaps his last few close-ups of Becky, who proudly raises her chin.)

The End.

Hamlet's Mother

by Glenn Halak

Scene 1:

Gertrude: Get out of the shadows, Ophelia, so I can see you. (*Ophelia stepping out of the shadows.*) You do look surprisingly young. We'll keep your secret for you. You're forty if you're a day. The shadows hide the wrinkles, don't they. (*Ophelia goes back into the shadows.*) Your father was a young man when he got you. I remember your mother. Poor thing. That was a long time ago. I was a young girl then, though not for much longer. I am ten years older. Alright, twelve. No more. Does Hamlet know you are twice his age? Has he ever seen you in the light? But women stand in the shadows ever. In Denmark. Is there a country where women flourish? Tell me, Ophelia. (*Enter Claudius. Ophelia hides.*)

Claudius: My love. (*Gertrude puts a finger to her lips.*) My love is your husband's kingdom, my Queen.

Gertrude: Best not speak of love.

Claudius: I am best with actions not words.

Gertrude: This way, then. Your silence will need privacy.

Gertrude and Claudius exit. Ophelia emerges. Behind her on the wall the shadows grow protuberances and enlarge.

Ophelia: When Hamlet sexed me the first time I cried out as if it were the first time. He was sixteen. His birthday. My father deflowered me on my birthday as well. I did not cry out. He told me it was a father's duty to care for his daughter. I believed him. I still do. Denmark is the kingdom of fathers. If you would understand Hamlet you must live inside your shadow. (*A great cry from Claudius. Ophelia moves back into shadow. Claudius comes out with a large, bright lantern. The light increases around him. Ophelia becomes visible against stark, ugly walls.*)

Claudius: Did you believe I didn't see you, my dear? I will be king.

Scene 2:

Horatio: Good night, sweet prince, and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest. (*Horatio stands up over Hamlet's body. Fortinbras enters.*) Where are the English ambassadors?

Fortinbras: Dead as you requested. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

avenged.

Horatio: And I have done my part.

Fortinbras: In one fell swoop a kingdom falls to me. (*Fortinbras goes and kicks Hamlet's body.*) Noble Hamlet. (*Then he kicks Laertes.*) Noble Laertes. (*Then Claudius.*) Noble king. Maybe not. (*He looks at the body of Gertrude. She sits up.*) Jesus you gave me a scare. You're supposed to be dead.

Gertrude: Not so noble as that, dear Fortinbras. Young, handsome Fortinbras. What a pity.

Fortinbras: Pity?

Horatio stabs him with the poisoned sword.

Horatio: None of us are noble, my prince. My ambitious prince. We will not kick you when you're down.

Fortinbras falls to his knees.

Fortinbras: For pity's sake.

Fortinbras dies.

Gertrude: I am Queen in a land of corpses.

Ophelia looking like a drowned rat enters.

Ophelia: Nothing new there. (*Ophelia goes to Horatio and takes his hand to lead him away.*) Come darling. I have something to show you Hamlet could not.

Gertrude: All my sleeping children in my kingdom of the dead. Always exit on a good line. That's what a Queen does.

Gertrude exits.

Scene 3 A classroom. A blackboard. Professor Hamlet written at the upper left hand corner of the blackboard. The blackboard covered with anatomical chalk drawings of genitals. There is a small group of students. Ophelia, Gertrude. Claudius, Hamlet the Elder, Horatio, Polonius.

Hamlet: Tragedy is about penetration. The tragic hero begins as the penetrator and ends as the penetrated. Begins male, ends female. The action on stage is male penetrating the audience, female. The playwright's job is to seduce the audience. "Open your legs, dear, so we can have a good time." If the playwright is an effective lover, the audience wakes up beyond the masks of self. This is called catharsis when it happens. In a tragedy none of the characters survive if catharsis occurs. Tomorrow we will discuss comedy.

Hamlet exits. Horatio, Claudius, Polonius, Hamlet the Elder exit together. Gertrude takes a long black cloth out of a giant purse and wraps herself completely in it, a cocoon. Ophelia goes to the blackboard, erases the anatomical drawings and begins to write "I love Hamlet" over and over again.

Scene 4 *Gertrude's bedroom. Hamlet is a naked fourteen year old.*

Gertrude: In Denmark it is my duty to scholar the young prince in the art of fathering children. You are fourteen now and hair will grow out of your body and you will become a man. Isn't that wonderful. What we are about to do is called ritual, Hamlet. It is also called sex. It should never be called love. Love is something hideous. This is beautiful.

Gertrude takes Hamlet by the hand and leads him over to the bed. The bed has a canopy of translucent fabric which, when she pulls on a cord, falls down, leaving their bodies only vaguely visible. She sits Hamlet on the bed. She sticks her head out from the canopy and smirks at the audience, then cups her breast with her hands. She goes to the bed. She disrobes.

The story goes, the young prince was sacred and could not be touched by lesser hands. At the same time it was considered essential that he become a man in the sexual meaning. The Queen his mother was called upon to initiate the prince. And it has been this way since the time of Beowulf. If the prince is not aroused, which you are not, no shame in that. men are not reliable, it is the duty of the Queen to arouse him.

Gertrude goes down on her knees. Hamlet sits on the edge of the bed. She goes down on him and then relatively soon she pulls back.

Excellent. But don't spend yourself yet. Not until you have penetrated the vagina. This is the vagina. This is where children come out into the world and scream. This vagina is why women are always wiser than men. Even the stupidest cow is superior to the greatest philosopher. Touch it. Oh, it disappoints you. (*Gertrude leans back into his crotch.*) Very well, you will be able to do your duty but will not take joy from it. Much like a woman. Now quietly, I will lay down here and spread my legs. Now quickly you must enter my vagina with your manhood. You must penetrate me. Thus women take the measure of their men. (*Hamlet does so and then gives a little cry.*) Well, almost close enough. Next time we must get you inside. (*Polonius comes out from the shadows.*)

Polonius: I will attest the deed is done. She has mothered him as only she can do.

Polonius vanishes back into the shadow. Ophelia comes out.

Ophelia: Bitter dead things teaching bitterness and death.

Scene 5 *Gertrude on her throne. Ophelia enters sopping wet, picking river weeds from her hair and dress.*

Ophelia: Did I make a good corpse?

Gertrude: You were wonderful dead, my dear. We have to hurry, it's time for the denouement.

Ophelia: I never understand the hurry. We've been here before certainly.

Scene 6 *Another cast plays this scene. Hamlet is dead as is Claudius. Gertrude looks dead but isn't.*

Horatio: Now cracks a noble heart. Good night sweet prince, and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest. (*March within.*) Why does the drum come hither?

Enter Frotinbras with the English Ambassadors with Drum, Colors and Attendants.

Fortinbras: Where is this sight?

Horatio: What is it you would see? If aught of woe or wonder, cease your search.

Fortinbras: This quarry cries on havoc. O proud Death, what feast is toward in thine eternal cell that so many princes at a shot so bloodily hast struck?

Gertrude sits up. Stands up. Brushes herself off.

Gertrude: Enough of this shit.

Fortinbras: But Madam

Gertrude: My Queen or Your Royal Highness.

Fortinbras: My Queen, you're dead.

Gertrude: I have decided to change the end of the play.

Horatio: But Shakespeare.

Gertrude: I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy.

Fortinbras kicks Laertes corpse.

Laertes: Ow. (Muffled)

Fortinbras: Noble Laertes.

Fortinbras kicks Claudius.

Claudius: You're supposed to be acting. (Whispered)

Fortinbras: Noble King.

Gertrude: None of us are that noble, I fear, Fortinbras.

Horatio picks up poisoned sword and stabs Fortinbras who falls to his knees.

Fortinbras: Horatio?

Horatio: Not noble at all, Prince.

Gertrude: I am queen in a kingdom of corpses.

Ophelia has entered sopping wet, picking river weeds from her hair and dress.

Ophelia: Déjà vu.

Scene 7 Hamlet and his father, Hamlet, who is drunk.

Hamlet pere: Let me see it.

Hamlet fils: I beg your pardon, father?

Hamlet pere: Let me see it. Drop your drawers.

Hamlet fils: Father?

Hamlet pere: I wish to assess your virility. You are my son after all. You have responsibilities and will have more.

Hamlet fils: In statecraft.

Hamlet pere: What did you think statecraft was? Words? Drop your drawers.

Hamlet drops his drawers, back to the audience, facing Hamlet pere.

Hamlet pere: As I suspected. Denmark is doomed.

Scene 8 *Edwardian day therapist's office. No couch. Hamlet and Therapist, played by the actor who appears as Polonius. On the walls are large pictures of cigars.*

Therapist: The oedipal complex is the struggle of a child to separate off from mommy-daddy. Freud, however, focused only on the initial stages of the struggle. Successfully accomplished the struggle takes a lifetime. It is a lifetime. If unsuccessful, the child remains trapped at whatever stage it was unable to navigate.

Hamlet: My father fucking returned from the dead. What stage is that?

Therapist: You failed to kill him. It was your duty to kill him. You did fuck your mother, I believe.

Hamlet: She fucked me.

Therapist: That does pose a problem. Women can be difficult to navigate.

Hamlet: What are you a navy admiral? Are you saying I'm doomed? That's what my father said.

Therapist: I believe he said Denmark was doomed. But yes, you're probably doomed. Get over it.

Hamlet: But if I killed my father and fucked my mother?

Therapist: It's too late. You didn't. They're just characters in a play now.

Hamlet: Hypothetically.

Therapist: The necessary condition to become self-realized.

Hamlet: I beg your pardon?

Therapist: When your father ordered you to drop your drawers, did you do it?

Hamlet: Yes.

Therapist: Why?

Hamlet: I was afraid of him.

Therapist: In Sophocles' play you kill your father at a ford in the river, not knowing who he is. When your mother finds out she's been fucking her son, she hangs herself. You see the problem?

Hamlet: No way my mother is going to off herself.

Therapist: That's not what I had in mind.

Hamlet: Don't test me. Tell me.

Therapist: He never killed his father or fucked his mother knowingly.

Hamlet: So?

Therapist: I think it means we are trapped by destiny.

Hamlet: Not encouraging. Aren't you supposed to be encouraging me or something life changing? What good did it do Oedipus to blind himself? Aren't we already blind? Shouldn't the play say something about that?

Therapist: What happens to Oedipus is that death is near. He feels it. Women prepare his body. How they must love that. And then he vanishes into light. He transcends. One might suggest that tragedy is the path of transcendence. I can only speculate.

Hamlet: I didn't transcend. I was murdered.

Therapist: That's the crux of your neurosis. That's how you're trapped. You don't want to read the script in advance. You don't want to understand the play. There's a word, dharma. It means to learn how to understand the script. You didn't perceive the choices that led to your death.

Hamlet: I'm here aren't I?

Therapist: Only when someone decides to play you on stage. But illusion is the beginning of all hope. So we'll start with illusion next time we see each other.

Hamlet: There's hope?

Therapist: There's illusion. There's you.

Hamlet exits. Therapist walks over to the wall where there is an Edison phone. He dials for the operator.

Therapist: Hello, Agnes. Please connect me to 367. Thank you. Darling? Darling? Gertrude? Aren't these new gadgets amazing? I must see you.

Lights up on a well-coifed, expensively dressed Gertrude. The latest fashion for the era. On the walls are large coiled whips. Gertrude has one coiled in her hand.

Gertrude: I have a treat for you.

Therapist: Not the whip. The telephone.

Gertrude looks at the telephone in her hand.

Gertrude: Must have been an unusual client.

Therapist: Your son.

Gertrude: Small world. I must hang up this device now.

Therapist: Your husband?

Gertrude hangs up.

Gertrude: Darling, you're home early.

Gertrude exits.

Scene 9. *Ophelia and Hamlet in bed.*

Ophelia: They'll eat you for breakfast. You know those little fish they like? Fried.

Hamlet: I'm off to university. Germany. Philology. Epistemology. Phenomenology. All the ologies. It's too far to come home for vacation.

Ophelia: Don't ever come back.

Hamlet: Won't you miss me?

Ophelia: I'll get over it.

Hamlet: You're so mature. It's a girl thing.

Ophelia: Girls mature very early in Denmark.

Hamlet: Maybe in Germany.

Ophelia: (Laughing) Already I'm betrayed.

Scene 10. *Hamlet and Horatio in bed.*

Hamlet: She's old enough to be my mother. I have to keep pretending she's still a teenager. It's embarrassing.

Horatio: She's aged considerably since you killed her father.

Hamlet: That was an accident.

Horatio: No one believes that. Even if it is true no believes it.

Hamlet: Don't go existential on me.

Horatio: That university talk! Mein Gott. Turn over and I'll show you something existential.

Hamlet: (Grunts) One professor called it my beer cellar. (Grunts)

Horatio: Ophelia calls it her asshole.

In a rage, Hamlet tosses Horatio off of him and wraps the sheet around him and storms off. Horatio gets up from the floor.

Horatio: Now that penetrated.

Scene 11 *The actors, as themselves, in street clothes. They have Gertrude, ever the Queen, and force her up against a stone wall and tie her arms outstretched to the wall and her feet close together. They open a big trash receptacle and take out sharp stone cutting tools. They chip away at the stone at the edge of her body until chinks of light appear. Finally Gertrude is outlined with the light radiating from the other side of the wall.*

Gertrude: I am your Queen.

Hamlet: If only it were so.

Gertrude: I command you to stop.

Horatio: What we wanted was that you be a queen.

Claudius: A revelation.

Hamlet pere: A revelation.

Claudius: I said that, brother.

Fortinbras: A guiding light.

Gertrude: And I was. Magnificently so. You were all too blind to see.

Ophelia: It wasn't Greece. Not even Vienna. We were in Denmark for god's sake.

Gertrude: A kingdom of corpses. How do you wake the dead?

Hamlet: Put them on stage for all to see.

Ophelia: Over and over and over and over and over and over again.

Horatio: I needed a mother.

Gertrude: I was your mother.

Claudius: I needed a lover.

Hamlet pere: I needed a wife.

Horatio: You were my mother?

Gertrude: Yes.

Horatio: Who was my father?

Gertrude: Polonius. When I was sixteen.

Horatio: Damn.

Hamlet pere: But I was.

Gertrude: Never. No lead in those bullets.

Hamlet: Where is Polonius?

Ophelia: No one wanted him back. His one scene was pre-recorded. Why he lasted so long in Denmark no one told.

Claudius: He was my brother.

Horatio: Big surprise.

Gertrude: More than enough incest for everyone.

Hamlet: In Denmark.

The outline of light around Gertrude is complete.

Hamlet: I feel a bit strange.

Horatio: You look pallid. I have to sit down. My legs won't hold me.

Horatio sits down and then falls back. Hamlet takes his pulse.

Hamlet: My prince is dead. I am sleepy.

He slumps over alongside Horatio. Dead. Hamlet pere and Claudius grab hold of one another as if they could keep each other standing, but they slide down to the ground and die.

Fortinbras: I would have liked a play of my own.

Fortinbras dies.

Ophelia: (To Gertrude) You cannot live without us. I think.

Ophelia dies. Gertrude steps away from the wall. She is radiant. All the actors get up off the ground and go to the trash receptacle and take out masks, bigger than their heads, and place them on their heads. Gertrude wears only the mask of light.

Hamlet: Mother.

Gertrude: I am not your mother, Hamlet. Ophelia is.

Hamlet: Not possible. She is only a few years older than I am.

Gertrude: Only when you pretend it is so. She's forty if she's a day. But every woman is your mother, Hamlet. You should have learned that by now. Incest breeds monsters but you fucked her with a condom, I'm told.

Hamlet takes out a knife and sticks it through the eye-slits of his mask, screaming with each wound.

Hamlet: Now you must kill yourself, Gertrude.

Gertrude: Not going to happen. Have you taken a look at me? Oh, sorry. Didn't you take a look at me?

Tiresias enters led by Ophelia.

Gertrude: Who are you? Blind people can't see the light. I'm in the light now.

Tiresias: I am Tiresias, a Greek.

Gertrude: A foreigner.

Ophelia: He's a prophet.

Gertrude: Little profit to be found here. You'll be used up in no time.

Ophelia: The other kind of prophet.

Gertrude: Even worse. And what do you prophesize?

Tiresias: I try not to. It gets me in trouble.

Gertrude: Did you blind yourself?

Tiresias: No. I answered a question.

Gertrude: So?

Tiresias: A God and a Goddess came to me and asked is it better to be a man or a woman.

Gertrude: And how would you know?

Tiresias: I have been both.

Gertrude: At the same time?

Tiresias: No.

Gertrude: And so?

Tiresias: I said better to be a man because a woman is always fucked.

Gertrude: Good answer.

Tiresias: The Goddess blinded me because she had lost to the God but then she blessed me with second sight because I had told the truth.

Gertrude: Strange that she bothered.

Tiresias: This was in Greece not Denmark.

Gertrude: And why are you here?

Tiresias: So people may see you as you truly are.

Gertrude: And who am I?

Tiresias: That is the question they don't ask. Of course to ask it is death.

Ophelia: Because once asked the answer won't go away.

Scene 12 *Claudius, Hamlet pere, Fortinbras, Laertes, et al, are the chorus.*

Chorus: We are the dreams that come, lost in one another's minds, sought and never found. The Mahayogini Gertrude. Very formal. Mudras et al.

Gertrude: Transcendent I cannot live without them, my strange hollow children, always trying to be filled by someone else, whom they then desire to destroy so they will not be overwhelmed. (*Gertrude scatters flower petals. Flower petals rain down on the stage and the audience.*) Every petal someone you once loved. A kingdom of corpses.

Scene 13 *Gertrude and the Husband, Abacus Agon, (played by the actor who plays the therapist). Two divorce attorneys, Albert Josephat and Anabasis Balaam, played by the actors who play Hamlet pere and Claudius, and a Court Stenographer. An interview room. Blinds are closed on the windows.*

Josephat: Parties gathered for divorce deposition this 3rd day of Eleutheria in the year 17,412 new calendar. Gertrude Agon, nee Reine, represented by myself, Albert Josephat.

Balaam: Parties gathered for divorce deposition this 3rd day of Eleutheria in the year 17,412 new calendar. Abacus Agon represented by myself, Anabasis Balaam. By prior agreement my client Abacus Agon will speak first.

Balaam opens a large case and pulls out a mask. Hands it to Agon who puts it on.

Agon: I am aggrieved. I am damaged in reputation. As Telemark of Global Revenants, I am despoiled. I have been forced to see too much. My wife has cuckolded me in strange and unnatural ways. (*Balaam puts a restraining hand on Agon's arm. Gertrude smirks.*) My wife has been unfaithful repeatedly and I have forgiven her repeatedly until in the month of Desiderata of last year I discovered that my two sons and my daughter are not my children. That they are in fact genetic transplants from the ancient dead, discovered from an archaeological site less than thirty years ago in what was then called Denmark. The genetic transplant techniques that allowed these dead to live again I myself invented, confiding my invention to my wife before anyone else, showing her the actual digital process, never guessing that she might be able to utilize the process without my guidance. I was so naïve. (*Gertrude sighs loudly. Agon starts to speak directly at her but Balaam intervenes.*) You must let me tell.... Well, I had occasion recently to review birth records materials accrued from early trials and to my horror I saw the names of my three children. I thought they were my children but no, they were in fact genetic implants. And there was Gertrude's name as mother and the dates of birth. I knew those dates. I held her hand in the hospital I saw my children emerge from her body. We gave them names. She gave them names and I concurred. When I confronted her she was not sympathetic to my outrage. I filed for divorce the next day. Though she has not challenged the divorce itself, a hurtful act in itself, she has demanded far too much alimony. I am the aggrieved party.

Balaam: For the record, the names of the three children are Hamlet, Horatio and Ophelia.

Josephat pulls out a mask for Gertrude but she refuses to wear it, looking at it in disgust.

Josephat: (whispered) You must.

Gertrude: Must, mildew, mold, musty, an unpleasant odor and/or

unhealthy biological contaminants. Abacus Agon is more than able to pay the demanded settlement as records provided to the court by my attorney, Albert Josephat, prove. It is a reasonable request that I continue to live as I wish. Regardless of Abacus Agon's interpretations of my actions, there are three children who need experience no unnecessary displacements, to be cast down because their father is a royal pain in the ass.

Balaam: Objection.

Josephat: Noted.

Gertrude: If only he had been.

Balaam: Objection.

Josephat: Noted.

Gertrude: My detectives have unearthed evidence that suggests Abacus Agon stole essential techniques from a colleague, Sappho Clees, who was an apparent suicide.

Balaam: Such information is irrelevant to this proceeding and is insubstantial before the court.

Josephat: Objection.

Balaam: Noted. Rebuttal.

Agon: She ate my soul.

Josephat: Relevance.

Balaam: Noted.

Gertrude: It was bitter and even then barely a snack.

Steno: End session. Adjuvant ad locum tomorrow at this time. Judge Terrificus will preside.

Balaam and Agon exit. Gertrude mimics Agon.

Gertrude: You ate my soul.

Agon is pulled along by Balaam.

Agon: You said you needed me.

Gertrude: I did. Just not how you thought.

Scene 14 Tiresias is Judge Terrificus. Still blind. Taps his way up to a platform using a sniper's rifle as his blind-man's cane. He pulls a headset out of his judicial robes. Lays down on his stomach and points the rifle.

Terrificus: Audio on. Please and sight correction. Thank you.

Terrificus re-aims the rifle.

Scene 15 *Same room. Balaam, Agon, Josephat, Stenographer, Gertrude, Hamlet, Horatio, Ophelia. There are no chairs this time. The blinds have been opened so the windows let in light. Gertrude stands perfectly still. All the rest move about nervously.*

Josephat: Parties gather for divorce judgment this 4th day of Eleutheria in the year 17,412 new calendar. Gertrude Agon nee Reine represented by myself Albert Josephat.

Balaam: Parties gathered for divorce judgment this 4th day of Eleutheria in the year 17412 new calendar. Aabacus Agon represented by myself Anabasis Balaam.

Steno: Ophelia, Horatio and Hamlet Agon appear unrepresented and thereby waive all claim to demonstrabile.

Horatio: (To Hamlet) What's demonstrabile?

Hamlet: It means we're worth shit.

Ophelia: Why are we here?

Ophelia stops moving.

Agon: I asked you to be here. Isn't that enough? Don't you owe me obedience?

Gertrude: Your father has chosen to play a desperate game.

Agon: That your mother began before you were born.

Hamlet: Because we were born We know you're not our genetic father. So what?

Agon: Nobility of purpose, nobility of character, nobility of action. You all know what that is.

Horatio: Your oath of office. You recited it every morning to us.

Ophelia: What has that to do with us?

Steno: Please keep moving. Court decorum requires it.

Hamlet: How's milling about like cows decorous?

Balaam: It's an ancient ritual.

Gertrude: So are cows milling about. Tell them the truth.

Steno: Confidentiality has been agreed upon terminus reservatus.

Gertrude: Winner take all.

Agon: It means the divorce is not amicable and responsibility will

accrue.

Gertrude: Your father thinks he can frighten me.

Ophelia: When has that ever worked?

They all look at Agon.

Agon: Nobility reveals itself at the end. I believe this. It is my life.

Steno: Do not stop moving. It is the law.

Stenographer looks at Gertrude who continues to stand perfectly still.

Josephat: My client claims statute 7406 subsection 3891.

Balaam: Noted.

Steno: Noted.

Hamlet: Doesn't nobility mean you're supposed to help people?

Agon: No, that's charity. My responsibility is to my lineage. It includes kings.

Ophelia: So does ours.

Horatio: So does everybody's. People have lived long enough on the planet that you can claim almost anyone as a long dead famous ancestor and be accurate.

Steno: Heresy!

Balaam: Heresy!

Josephat: Heresy!

Agon: Heresy!

Gertrude: How long does this travesty take?

Agon: It's a tragedy of your design. Whatever happens here you have agreed to it. You signed the agreement. Shall I have my attorney show you your signature? Your mother could have refused your participation. She didn't. She is not innocent.

Ophelia: No one thinks mother is innocent.

Horatio: Tragedy is comedy without any laughter.

Hamlet: Shut up.

The two brothers push at one another.

Gertrude: Boys!

They separate.

Steno: Continue moving.

Ophelia: Something's going to happen.

Agon: Something always does when your mother's in the room.

Gertrude: Tragedy is the only rational response to the unconscious.
(To Agon) Don't you remember giving them baths? Their small bodies in the water? Don't you remember their bodies growing?

Agon: Aren't you afraid?

Balaam, Josephat and Stenographer put on masks and step behind a shielding wall.

Gertrude: I gave it up when I had children. I knew it was one or the other and not both.

Agon: You shamed me.

Gertrude: No, I had three wonderful children.

Hamlet, Horatio and Ophelia all stop and look at her amazed at her statement. Three shots and the three fall dead. Stenographer steps out from behind the shield wall.

Steno: It is against statute....

Another shot. Stenographer is dead. Balaam and Josephat speak from behind the wall. Speak together.

Jos&Bal: Judge Terrificus has once again demonstrated his great insight. All parties have achieved judgment. Abacus Agon will be remanded according to Statute 47, clause 6.13.

Two masked policemen enter. Abacus resists them but they bind him.

Agon: But I am the aggrieved part. What is my crime?

Jos&Bal: Infanticide.

Agon: But they are adults. Fortunately no longer able to mock me with their presence. They are spawn. Not infants.

Gertrude: They once were.

Agon: (panicked) What is Statute 47, clause 6.13?

Balaam: You will be permanently blinded and released. You will be relieved of all artifacts, licenses, monies, identities.

Agon: Do something. You're supposed to be my attorney.

Balaam: I am your attorney. But once a judge has decided I am an officer of the court first and foremost. You signed the agreement.

Josephat and Balaam take off their masks. The police take Agon away.

Josephat: He thinks he was a king.

Balaam: Who knows. Judge Terrificus must have seen something in him to deliver such a verdict. Some potential.

Josephat: Something for the law books.

More masked police come in and carry the bodies out. Gertrude remains standing, not moving.

Jos&Bal: It is all yours now.

They bow to her and exit. Judge Terrificus enters wearing a mask with no eye slits. He taps his way with his rifle. He stops close to her and lays the rifle at her feet.

Terrificus: Most beautiful, most terrible, you have my heart.

Gertrude: (laughs) If only you had one.

Scene 15 Gertrude, alone on a bare stage, radiant, pregnant. She stands facing the audience. She reaches under her dress and pulls out a stuffed pillow. She unzips the pillow and petals flutter out. She reaches inside the pillow and more petals. She pulls out a mask. She raises it up and pans it back and forth to the audience.

Gertrude: It is yours now.

The End.

Guns, Shackles & Winter Coats

by M. Stefan Strozier

Act One

Scene One

Setting: A homeless veteran moves among the crowd, collecting change. Brown enters. He is dressed in slacks, a tie and jacket, carrying a briefcase.

BROWN: Soldier! Front and center!

VIETNAM VETERAN: Sergeant Brown! You got any change on you?

BROWN: I thought you were working at Hoffbrau. Kara helped you get that job.

VIETNAM VETERAN: Yeah; but something happened. I lost my cool with one of the customers. I couldn't deal with them. I appreciate you getting me the job. But they got attitudes – especially, the little punks. One of the guys still gets me free meals; so, you can't beat that.

BROWN: No, I guess you can't. But, can't you just do something? Look: I'd put you up, if I could; but there's no way my wife would allow it. What about a shelter?

VIETNAM VETERAN: There is no way in hell I am living in a shelter. I can't believe you said that. I still have some pride, man. I'll be all right; I'll survive out here. I can get help from guys like you. Who needs anything else? I'm just tired of dealing with the BS, man.

BROWN: I hear you.

VIETNAM VETERAN: Thanks for thinking about me, though. I'll remember that.

BROWN: Anything for a First Cav Scout.

VIETNAM VETERAN: Old Cav Scouts never die; they just go to hell and regroup.

BROWN: They've already scouted a way out of hell. When you and I get there, we'll just follow their signs.

VIETNAM VETERAN: That's right, buddy.

BROWN: Listen, buddy: I am really sorry; but I'm skating on thin ice with my wife.

We're not speaking the same language.

VIETNAM VETERAN: That's how it is with women. They don't hear a word you say.

BROWN: Were you ever married?

VIETNAM VETERAN: I got a "Dear John" letter to prove it.

BROWN: I have to get home, before I miss dinner. I'll see you later, all right?

VIETNAM VETERAN: You can count on it, buddy.

[Exit Vietnam Veteran. Brown watches him leave; then he steps into his kitchen, as Kara simultaneously enters, through the curtain.]

BROWN: Kara, you're here.

KARA: How was your day?

BROWN: I'll tell you about it, later. Guess who I saw at the subway stop?

KARA: Your homeless friend? You gave him some of our money, didn't you?

BROWN: No, I did not give him any money. You should have more respect for him,

Kara. He is a Vietnam Veteran.

KARA: Yes, you have told me before.

BROWN: Did you make dinner? I'm hungry.

KARA: No. I am ordering Chinese tonight. I am tired of cooking dinner you never eat.

BROWN: I eat dinner! All right, let's order Chinese. Let's make it a candlelit dinner, baby. How does that sound?

KARA: Sounds nice.

BROWN: Good. Do we have any more candles? Aha! Come sit down with me. This afternoon, I fell asleep at my desk after lunch. I dreamt I was crawling underneath concertina wire. The wire kept cutting me, making me bleed. I couldn't breathe; but I knew I had to make it through the wire. I crawled faster. My arm got stuck in the wire. I pulled my arm, hard. The razor wire dug deeper I in my skin. I couldn't move. I was stuck. I woke up, screaming.

KARA: John Brown: this is a horrible nightmare. Every day, it is something with you. It wears on me to have to listen to you tell me war stories, in our home. I talked with my friends about it. I think you may need to get some help. I am saying this to you as a friend.

BROWN: Not as my wife?

KARA: Can't you take that for granted?

BROWN: I get scared you'll leave. I've lost people before.

KARA: I want you to get some help, John. Things are not going well for you and it is making me very uncomfortable. The only problem is you have no health care at your temporary job.

BROWN: The veterans' hospital gives me free health care; but I am not going to a VA hospital.

KARA: Why not?

BROWN: VA hospitals are filthy, under-funded labs, where veterans are treated like animals. Army doctors are bad enough; VA doctors are even worse than they are. What are you trying to say, anyway?

KARA: Nothing. I am just talking to you.

BROWN: Why are you dressed? Where are you going?

KARA: It's Friday night.

BROWN: Do you have money?

KARA: I am going out with my girlfriends, tonight. They are treating me. Besides, I have found a job. I will be working at Macy's, during the holidays.

BROWN: I don't want you working. I told you that. You never listen to what I want.

KARA: I am not sitting in this house, listening to you speak about your nightmares.

BROWN: You shouldn't be working. It stresses the fetus.

KARA: I will work! We never have any money to do anything. There is nothing here – no furniture. We never take trips. We used to travel all around Europe, remember? All of my friends have nice apartments with nice furniture. I want nice things, too.

BROWN: Who are all of these friends of yours? You've been in America less than a year. All right, fine. What kind of furniture do you want? I'll buy a couch, okay? How about a leather couch? I know how much you're into leather.

KARA: Don't be funny. I am being serious. You can't just count on me like that anymore.

BROWN: Oh, really?

KARA: Yes, really. Have you paid the rent for this month?

BROWN: Why are you so hard on me? Let's get ourselves situated, first. I don't want to worry about jobs right now. I want a family. I got fired today.

KARA: What? Well, I see I can't rely on you. I am going to work, that's it. If you can't take care of your family, I will take care of myself. And, besides, I feel I am not yet ready to be a mother. I want

to wait.

BROWN: Stop talking like that! We are going to have a family, damn it! Do you hear me?

KARA: John, stop yelling. It's just that things are not in order. You are not well.

This is no time to start a family.

BROWN: There is nothing wrong with me! What are you saying: that I'm crazy? That's what you think, isn't it? You think I am insane – a freak! Sit down at the table with me.

KARA: John, when we met, in Germany, you were so happy. You were confident and funny; and, I was very much in love with you. But, there is something on you mind, ever since you returned from war. You never tell me what you went through; so, I have no idea what you are experiencing now. I have tried to get you to talk to me. You never tell me what you are feeling; only, your scary nightmares. It has gotten very bad, John. You are right: a job is not as important as a family; but if we are not happy, then there is nothing. What I want is the man I used to know. You are not ready for a family, John. I wish you would come to church.

BROWN: I wish you would stop talking about religion and abortion in the same sentence! I don't understand you! I want a family. That's why we are married. I do not want you to have an abortion. It is not a natural thing. I am tired of death, Kara – tired of war and death. I am begging you.

KARA: And, now that you are fired, how can you support another person?

BROWN: Yes, with my family, I can do anything. Don't worry about money, baby. The economy is strong; and, I am a veteran of an American war. I can get work anywhere I want in this country.

KARA: You have not had a decent job since you left the army. What is wrong with you, John? What can I do if you tell me nothing?

BROWN: I am trying to get my head right! Why do you have to keep up this pressure on me! Why can't you give me some space? I feel like you're squeezing the life out of me. I am not all right. I have to take it easy, until things come to me. It won't be long; but if you don't back off of me, you're going to be sorry.

KARA: Don't ever speak to me that way again!

BROWN: I am sorry. Please understand me. Stay here tonight, baby. You'll enjoy yourself more with a man than with your girlfriends. Go get the food.

KARA: Ha ha. Okay, I will stay tonight. You always seem to convince

me. You have a way with words.

BROWN: It's my silver tongue.

KARA: That is the only thing you have.

BROWN: It's all I need. Follow me.

KARA: Where?

BROWN: Can you help me with something?

KARA: Oh no. I have to go get the food.

BROWN: Order delivery.

KARA: No! I'm going.

[Kara exits.]

BROWN: Good, leave me alone. The silence is all I have left.

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Scene Two

Setting: Light fade to black; only the candle is lit. Combat sounds play. Brown's team takes up their seats, alongside Brown. Combat lights (red, orange, yellow) flash. Plansky is driving; behind him is Rodriguez. Brown is in the front passenger seat; behind him is Johnson.

JOHNSON: I can't take this anymore! Do you guys hear me?

RODRIGUEZ: Where the hell are those 16 SCUDS landing? Sergeant Brown! We're lost in a tank battle! Pull your head out of your fourth point of contact!

BROWN: This place is hell on Earth. Look at the sky. There is no beginning and no end: sky and sand and red, forever.

JOHNSON: Sergeant Walker's team is dead, for Christ's sake – gone, in a ball of flames!

PLANSKY: Sergeant, we are lost in a tank battle, at the front lines of the Persian Gulf War.

JOHNSON: This is real war. I'm scared, man.

RODRIGUEZ: No shit, Sherlock.

JOHNSON: Why can't we follow the tank explosions? We are cavalry scouts! Aren't the tanks supposed to be following us? Tell the tanks we're behind them; but to keep going that way.

PLANSKY: Jesus H. Christ, Private Johnson, what a genius idea; drive in front of the tanks! Here:

[Plansky picks up the microphone.]

'Excuse me, Mr. Tanker, my name is Private Johnson; aren't you supposed to be following me? We would appreciate it if you could keep killing the bad tanks'. Privates are not paid to think!!

BROWN: Shut up! Plansky: Was that Sergeant Smith's team who was shooting at us? If you had let me radio Smith's team; and, not driven away like a coward, we wouldn't be lost.

PLANSKY: Well, golly, sergeant, I'm not sure who was trying to kill us. Does anyone know who was trying to destroy us?

JOHNSON: Listen to me! I am scared! I can't think. I – I can't breathe.

RODRIGUEZ: Don't be a pussy, private. Sergeant Brown's not scared; right, sergeant?

PLANSKY: *The sergeant's not scared; right, sergeant?* We all know you want to be a noncommissioned officer, Rod. Why don't you focus on the team?

BROWN: At ease. I am scared. I feel as if I am living a few hours in the past. I am watching everything happen; but not experiencing it. I don't even feel like I am a human being.

RODRIGUEZ: I know what you mean. Everything is fading into one thing, like being inside a big dream; right, sergeant?

PLANSKY: I just had a brilliant idea! Why don't you two put your crack pipe down; pay attention! Because I'd like to remind you we're lost in the middle of a tank battle!

RODRIGUEZ: What are we going to do, sergeant?

BROWN: Follow the tank explosions, like the private said. See that Bradley Fighting Vehicle, Specialist Plansky? – The one going slow, stopping and shooting with its twenty Mike-Mike cannon?

PLANSKY: I see it, over there, away from the pack.

BROWN: Maintain precisely 25 meters directly behind it, all night long. Our tires are to be kept exactly in its tracks. When it moves, we move. When it stops, we stop.

PLANSKY: Yes, sergeant. Follow the Bradley like stink on shit.

BROWN: Who the hell did that, Rod?

RODRIGUEZ: It's the MRE's, sergeant. I can't help it.

JOHNSON: Gas, gas, gas!

BROWN: Jesus, I'm dying. Put down your windows; air out this vehicle!

PLANSKY: Sergeant, are you crazy? There might be chemical weapons out there. The M-9 paper hasn't changed colors yet; but we can't be sure. There might be Mustard Gas, Blister Agent, Nerve Agent – biological agents – or who knows what?

JOHNSON: My eyes are watering. I hope we get shot, so we don't have to breathe anymore.

BROWN: Hope is not a plan, private. Where's the hot sauce?

JOHNSON: I used the last of it; we're out, sergeant.

BROWN: Are you fucking kidding me?

RODRIGUEZ: Whose job is it *always* to make sure we have a full bottle of hot sauce?!

BROWN: Combat is bad; being out of hot sauce is pure torture, private!

RODRIGUEZ: I say we drive back to Saudi Arabia for hot sauce, right now!

PLANSKY: There is no way we can eat these MREs without hot sauce!

JOHNSON: Did anyone get the white cheese?

BROWN: Yeah, private, I got the white cheese right here.

JOHNSON: Sergeant, I'll trade you my M&Ms – plus, a granola bar for your white cheese. I'll throw in a package of dried fruit; and, the ham and cheese loaf.

BROWN: Negative, private. Your weak attempt to trade your way out is failing miserably. As everyone knows, the brass bar is worthless; dried fruit means nothing; your package of M&Ms is puny; and, it is impossible to give away a ham and cheese loaf, even in combat. Anyway, I'm almost done eating my white cheese. You're SOL, private.

JOHNSON: You're always done eating it! It was the same thing back in Germany: REFORGER, Grafenver, Hohenfels – all of it! I am sorry about the hot sauce! I'm tired of flies constantly swarming our chow. I'm tired of sand jamming my weapon and crawling up the crack of my ass. It's everywhere: in my eyes, my ears, my fingernails, my teeth, my hair, my nose, my dick. I can't take it anymore! Do you hear me?

[Johnson starts to exit the vehicle.]

RODRIGUEZ: Private! You'll step on a land mine and kill us all!

JOHNSON: Leave me alone!

BROWN: Hold him, Specialist! Fuck, Private! What's your problem? By your cowardly act of trying to commit suicide, you almost brought down your whole team. We're all terrified out of our minds. I wanted to shoot myself in the foot before the ground war started. But, it's like - who's that journalist that shot himself?

PLANSKY: Hemingway.

BROWN: Now, there was a man who could not handle his madness. A real man knows how to handle fear, confusion, terror. Show

bravery in the face of uncertainty, private. If not for yourself, then for your team, your country; and, your family back home. Private: The last thing you want to do is shame your country.

RODRIGUEZ: So this means we're not going back for hot sauce? Way to go, private.

BROWN: Lay off him, Rod.

RODRIGUEZ: Yes, sergeant.

BROWN: Listen: isn't Sergeant Smith's team from Texas?

RODRIGUEZ: California.

BROWN: California, Texas, Canada: all the same shit.

PLANSKY: I wish we were in Brooklyn, *New York City*.

RODRIGUEZ: But, after this shit is over – assuming we make it out alive – we go back to Germany, to a country that hates Americans and spits on us. I didn't even get to take leave before we deployed. There's so much I miss about New York City: pizza, lots of fine honeys, and good bagels.

BROWN: New York City. I know this bagel shop in Hell's kitchen, on 48th and 8th: Joseph's Bagel Shop and Deli. There's something magical about that place. Now, they have the best bagels in New York City.

RODRIGUEZ: Sergeant, you're wrong on this one. I know the best bagel shop in New York City. It's called Joey's bagels on 86th Street, in Brooklyn. The bagels at Joey's are twice as big as any in the city; and, half the price – hell yeah.

PLANSKY: You're both wrong. Let me tell you something: If you're looking for great taste; plus, every kinds of cream cheese, then it's Joe's Bagel Shop in Brooklyn, near Brooklyn College. Those are the best tasting bagels in all of New York City, and that's all I got to say - forgetta' 'bout it.

BROWN: Man, I'll be glad to get back home, with my woman.

RODRIGUEZ: Sergeant, take your gal up to the Windows of the World restaurant, at the top of the World Trade Center. At night, it's like seeing into forever.

PLANSKY: No, listen: If you want to make a girl feel real special, then take her to an offoff

Broadway play: Twenty bucks, tops. She'll think you're all sophisticated. The plays all suck-ass; but since the theaters are dives, you can score a hummer in the corner. Generally, they turn out the lights, during the plays.

RODRIGUEZ: What about off-Broadway?

PLANSKY: That's the same thing as Broadway.

RODRIGUEZ: I've never been to any Broadway plays.

PLANSKY: They don't have plays on Broadway anymore, just musicals and shit from Disneyland.

RADIO (Voice 1): Break, sir, I'm hovering above the target, at this time. There are POWs surrendering. They are waving white flags, exiting their bunkers. They're surrendering, sir. They're waving their arms high in the air.

RADIO (Voice 2): Pilot, this is Colonel Nash! You will shoot those individuals – those enemy soldiers – dead, right now! That is a direct order. Do you copy me? Shoot the Iraqi bastards!

RADIO (Voice 1): Mission accomplished, sir. They're all dead, sir.

PLANSKY: Did you hear that? They're murdering people.

JOHNSON: They should die grateful the MPs didn't get them. What the hell are we doing here? Everyone knows President Bush and Cheney are oilmen, with lots of Saudi Arabian friends. Texas oil: that's why we're fighting this war, which, the U.S Congress barely supported. We hear it every day, on Rod's short wave radio, on the BBC. How are we supposed to fight and die in a war our country doesn't want us to fight?

RODRIGUEZ: Hey, look, private: some white cheese. You still want to trade for it?

JOHNSON: Give me that. Sergeant, I am tired of fighting, for nothing! What has our country become, sergeant, huh?

BROWN: I hear you, private. You're giving me a damn migraine headache with your politics.

PLANSKY: I know what you mean, sergeant; he never stops. Jesus, my head is splitting open. How long can a human being go without sleep, anyway?

RODRIGUEZ: Come on, sergeant, we got these fuckers on the run! 24th Mech and 82nd

Airborne surround Baghdad; Apache helicopters are wasting Iraqis right and left. We're going to win this war and all go home!

ALL: Hooah!

PLANSKY: Hey, what's that, over there? It looks like a chow truck. That's our unit!

RADIO: Break, Romeo Six Niner, this is Juliet Eight Eight. Come in, over.

BROWN: Juliet, this is Romeo, over.

RADIO: Romeo, where in the hell are you, over?

BROWN: We got lost, sir. Sorry, over.

RADIO: I see your vehicle. We've found the chow truck and we're drinking warm soup. Through some bizarre army logic, you have been promoted to the rank of staff sergeant, E-6. Congratulations; make sure you're not out of uniform! Holding the Metal of Honor pushed you above your peers in promotions points. And one more thing! Cease-fire! Stand down; take off your chemical weapons gear. The war is over!

[Music plays: James Brown's *I Feel Good*.]

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Scene Three

Setting: Rodriguez lights a cigarette on a dark stage, with the candle. Lights rise slowly, revealing the team standing, outside of their vehicle, shaving, etc. It is two days after the ground war.

JOHNSON: Congratulations on your promotion, sergeant. I always wanted to ask you what you did to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

BROWN: So ask, you bonehead.

PLANSKY: Our sergeant jumped on a grenade, to save his team; blew his balls off – technically, he is a woman.

RODRIGUEZ: Shut up, Plansky. Sergeant John Brown charged into a hornet's nest of enemy in Panama City to save two stranded, wounded, dumb ass privates. Then, he shot his way back out, carrying the wounded soldiers to safety.

JOHNSON: Hooah. Is it true generals and the President has to salute you, sergeant?

RODRIGUEZ: They salute the ribbon, not the man. Hey, Sergeant Brown has a German girl!

BROWN: That's right, we're engaged. Her grandfather was a GI in World War Two. He was black.

RODRIGUEZ: Good to go, sergeant; squared away. Does she cook?

JOHNSON: Did you meet her in Frankfurt, while you were partying in Sachsenhausen?

BROWN: Does she cook? Hell yeah, man: Weiner schnitzels, bratwurst – forgetta' 'bout it. Let's go, everyone in the vehicle.

PLANSKY: She likes the schnitzels, huh?

JOHNSON: Hey, sergeant, can we go to the bunkers? We've got to get more stuff.

BROWN: We're going back to the bunkers.

JOHNSON: Sergeant, are you really marrying a German woman?

BROWN: I am getting married and getting out of the army. I've seen enough war and death for one lifetime. I can't take anymore of it.

RODRIGUEZ: What are you talking about, sergeant? You know NCO stands for 'No Chance on the Outside?'

JOHNSON: Yeah, if you leave, they'll farm us out to other platoons or headquarters.

BROWN: I don't care about you guys.

JOHNSON: Man, these burnt bodies' stink. They smell worse than Plansky.

BROWN: At ease. It's peacetime. A New World Order; Let Freedom Reign! Man, those oil well fires are smoking up today. The wind never changes direction. This warm breeze is putting me to sleep. So what's everyone reading?

PLANSKY: *The Stand*, by Steven King.

JOHNSON: A librarian from Kansas sent me a goodie-bag.

RODRIGUEZ: Did she send a picture?

PLANSKY: They don't have any *cameras* in *Kansas*, man.

RODRIGUEZ: Librarians in Kansas are sweet, man. They have nice curves, big old titties; and, round, tight asses. They have long, jet-black hair. They always tie it up tight, in a bun, when they're sitting at their desk. But when they're in the back, stacking books, they let their hair down; and, shake it around a little, to let it loosen, like this. Then, then say, 'It's time to read to the librarian; are you ready, papi?'

ALL: Stop!

PLANSKY: So this is what the journalists are calling the Turkey Shoot: beat-up trucks and cars, caught in a bottleneck. The girl force wasted them with farting A-10 Warthog tank killers. These conscripts were mostly Shiites, judging by their clothes and lack of uniforms. Hey, the Shiites are revolting, fighting their way to Baghdad. But perhaps these were the elite soldiers, since they were raping and pillaging Kuwaiti City. America sure is hegemony.

ALL: What?

JOHNSON: Does anyone have change for a seventy-five cent word?

RODRIGUEZ: Professor Plansky has single-handedly broken the bank.

PLANSKY: Hegemony happens to be a word I heard a journalist say, by the name of *Dan Rather*.

BROWN: And then he said, "America has routed the fearsome Iraqi Republican

Guard from Kuwaiti City,” which isn’t what we are seeing here.

JOHNSON: This sure as hell wasn’t ‘The Mother of all Battles.’ Ever notice how battles are named weird? The Battle of the Bulge, for instance, is named for a battle I fought every day in high school.

RODRIGUEZ: Private, it’s not size that matters; it’s the motion in the ocean.

JOHNSON: And why call them movements? It sounds like you’re taking a shit.

RODRIGUEZ: Oh! This morning I took the most amazing shit! It felt like a giant anaconda, winding through the deep jungle, out my asshole. I had to stand up, off the ground. I screamed for several minutes. It was amazing! My eyes became chris-crossed for over an hour.

ALL: Wow!

PLANSKY: MREs will kill you, dead. Man, we have destroyed this country: All I see are burnt bodies, smashed buildings, starving children, rabid dogs. You’ve got to feel for these people – not the soldiers, of course – they were trying to kill us. But the people, man, Saddam is cruel to them.

JOHNSON: Man, fuck these people. They should build a big dome over the whole Arab peninsula; let everyone fight it out, until they’re all dead. Then, we move in and set up McDonalds and Walmarts.

PLANSKY: I’m talking as a person, not as a religious zealot.

JOHNSON: There he goes with big words, sergeant. I thought you were a Jew,

PLANSKY: What do you care about Muslims?

PLANSKY: I am two-thirds Jewish.

JOHNSON: How can you be two-thirds a Jew? What’d you have: two Jewish parents plus one Irish milkman? It’s impossible.

RODRIGUEZ: Don’t be stupid, private. What religion were you raised?

JOHNSON: Religion doesn’t matter – except, over here, where everyone is an insane fanatic. What do you believe in, Sergeant Brown?

BROWN: To be honest, I’m thinking about becoming Muslim, after everything I’ve seen over here. I can see why religion started in this land.

[Brown pulls out his bottle of booze. Brown takes a big sip, passes the bottle to Johnson, behind him.]

PLANSKY: I guess you’re becoming a Muslim tomorrow! Are open

containers legal in Iraq? Jesus, it's only 1 in the afternoon.

BROWN: Give me that bottle. Watch out for US Air Force craters on the highway; it's getting dark. We don't want to drive in a crater and die like Sergeant Jackson's team, the day after the war ends. Let's see: Atropine, pra-li-o-dox-ide. That doesn't sound too good for you. Ah ha: Valium!

RODRIGUEZ: What are you doing, sergeant?

BROWN: Whoa! There we go: Valium and Jack.

PLANSKY: Sergeant Brown, you have major issues.

JOHNSON: Didn't the LT specifically say to not do this?

BROWN: You're all a bunch of chicken-shits.

RODRIGUEZ: The sergeant happens to be an ingenious mastermind. Let me try some of your medicine, doctor. You're last private, because you're from New Jersey.

JOHNSON: Hey, man, don't house the fucking shit. Share.

BROWN: Whew! Holy shit, man, does anyone feel that?

JOHNSON: I'm gonna fall out of this vehicle in a second.

BROWN: Men, I thought you all performed brilliantly in combat. The fact that we were lost was not our fault; everyone was lost in this war – taking pictures of the incredible orange-red artillery flashes, filling the sky like fireworks; MLRS rockets, firing their little white rocket-doves of Lord Jesus Christ into the colorful night sky. Soft glows of exploding howitzer copperhead rounds – effervescent illumination. Beautiful, awesome, slowly setting sun: yellow, orange, deep, blood red. Eye of God, watching it all transpire, while his evil children are playing, killing, destroying: Booms pounding softly in your chest. Boom. Boom. Boom. Combat is so beautiful. Hey, what's that: smoke? Drive over there, specialist!

PLANSKY: No way, sergeant, we are not going to the oil well fires.

BROWN: God is in the fire. I can ask Him why He created the red sky.

PLANSKY: I'm driving back to camp, right now.

BROWN: Everybody calm down. That's an order. Everything I say is an order. We are going to the oil well fires. Now, let's go, damn it.

PLANSKY: Sergeant, we're almost out of gas. What about Lieutenant Hall? This situation is becoming hazardous. Therefore, I do hereby relieve you of your command, effective immediately! Sergeant, are you asleep? Did you hear me?

RODRIGUEZ: Plansky, you are not relieving our sergeant of command!

JOHNSON: What are you guys talking about?

PLANSKY: He wants to go the oil well fires. I'm going back to camp.

RODRIGUEZ: I say we go do it! We've done lots of crazy stuff before. We're

Americans, damn it, not pussies!

JOHNSON: I think we should radio the LT.

RODRIGUEZ: At ease, private!

PLANSKY: Don't be a fool, private. But, I have a bad feeling about this. The war is officially over. We're not operating under combat ROE anymore. I do not have to follow his orders to my death.

JOHNSON: What's ROE?

RODRIGUEZ: Jesus, private, you are a dumb fuck. You've just been through a war and you don't know what ROE is. Anyway, I guess it couldn't hurt to advise the platoon sergeant of our present situation; that we'll rally up at camp, tonight, after we finish our bottle of Jack and Valium.

JOHNSON: Specialist Plansky, can you please tell me what ROE is?

PLANSKY: Rules of Engagement.

BROWN: What the hell you guys talking about?

PLANSKY: Nothing, sergeant.

BROWN: We are going back to the bunkers, to get more stuff.

PLANSKY: A minute ago, you wanted to go to the oil well fires. You're not thinking clear-headed.

BROWN: I can do AN-Y-THING I want! Let's go, damn it. We'll fire off all of our remaining ammunition, clear customs into Saudi Arabia, and go home. We'll shoot up the Russian tanks. I'm done trading the Shiites, for their booze. They've got everything now: rations, gas, water, stinger missiles, PVS-7 night vision glasses. I like the Shiites. Rod, did you mail all of our war booty?

RODRIGUEZ: I mailed it to my grandmother's house in Brooklyn.

BROWN: You didn't send any body parts, did you, like those boneheads in 24th Mech?

RODRIGUEZ: No, sergeant.

JOHNSON: Sergeant Brown, don't we have enough Iraqi stuff? I'm getting hungry. I want to eat a warm meal at the mess truck, tonight.

BROWN: Shut up, private. Eat an MRE.

JOHNSON: Yes, sergeant.

BROWN: Rod, did you mail that Russian pistol I found to my

address, in New York City? That baby is mine.

RODRIGUEZ: Yes, sergeant.

BROWN: Glad to see someone's following orders.

RODRIGUEZ: Sergeant Brown, are you all right? Listen: The combat we saw, that'll stay with me my whole life. I'll look at Vietnam veterans in a whole new light. Why don't we go to the bunkers tomorrow? In our present condition we'd better not shoot off our remaining ammo. Let's get back to camp, so the private can eat his warm dinner.

BROWN: We are going to the bunkers.

PLANSKY: I want to get back to camp.

BROWN: What the fuck's going on here, a mutiny? I want to load up with more war booty before we go home. I want more money. Don't you guys want free money?

RODRIGUEZ: All right. Let's go make another bunker run.

PLANSKY: All right, sergeant, let's go to the bunkers.

BROWN: I knew it. Let the money do the talking. Hell, they're right over there. Come on, let's roll. I want to get underground, where it's cool. It must be a hundred and twenty degrees in this sun. I can't hear myself think.

PLANSKY: How about this area? We haven't been here yet.

BROWN: Stop the vehicle. Everyone get out. You men go check out that bunker.

JOHNSON: Sergeant, can we leave our weapons?

BROWN: Leave your weapons in the vehicle. No one is going to take them out here.

JOHNSON: All right, sergeant.

[All four move sluggishly, still drunk and high. An Iraqi suddenly runs onstage and slits Plansky's throat. In the confusion, the Iraqi is able to stab Rodriguez, from the back; and, Rodriguez goes down, not dead; but dying fast. Johnson attacks the Iraqi head-on; but the Iraqi overpowers him. Meanwhile, Sergeant Brown picks up his .45; but he can't shoot; or, he will shoot Plansky. Brown maneuvers around, as he tries to take aim. Brown trips once. Finally, as Johnson dies, Brown has a clear shot; and, kills the Iraqi.]

BROWN: You killed my team! Rodriguez? Plansky? Johnson? I have to call for help.

[Kara enters, carrying a plastic bag, full of Chinese food containers.]

KARA: Here's the Chinese food. I brought extra hot sauce. I know how much you like hot sauce.

BROWN: You're going to die.

KARA: John, stop it! Put down the pistol! It's me, Kara. The soldier is gone.

BROWN: You stay here, until I return.

[Brown quickly exits.]

KARA: Hello? Is this the police? Hello? Yes, my husband attacked me with a gun.

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Act Two

Scene One

Setting: Brown is on a bed, shackled by his wrists and ankles. He is in a VA hospital mental ward. Dialogue begins, while the house is still dark.

BROWN: Nurse, remove these shackles! My wrists and ankles are covered in blood. He's here, in the room! Team: Get in here! Hear him laughing at me? He chased me through the park. I hid my pistol in the park. My pistol is safe, in the park. I am sorry I let you men down.

PLANSKY: Do not fear, sergeant.

RODRIGUEZ: In the darkness, there is the enemy.

JOHNSON: Focus on the night's approach.

PLANSKY: Enemy will not come near.

BROWN: Where is the enemy?

PLANSKY: The red sky is evil.

JOHNSON: How is the chow in this place?

RODRIGUEZ: Are the nurses sexy?

JOHNSON: The red sky suffocates.

PLANSKY: You must win, sergeant.

RODRIGUEZ: You cannot breathe air.

BROWN: I am alone.

PLANSKY: You are not alone.

JOHNSON: The explosions are deafening.

RODRIGUEZ: Fight the battle.

JOHNSON: Fight and win.

BROWN: I am alone.

[Exit Johnson, Plansky, Rodriguez. Dr. Zinn enters.]

DR. ZINN: Good morning, Mr. Brown. I see the nurses have removed your restraints. If you'd simply comply with taking your

medications, there'd be no need to wear the shackles.

BROWN: I don't care if I have to wear the shackles, because I am not swallowing any pills! I had to swallow pills in the war. That's why I have Gulf War Syndrome.

DR. ZINN: John, I have good news: Your wife is going to sign you out, today.

BROWN: My home phone is disconnected.

DR. ZINN: Is it?

BROWN: Why is she coming, now? How long have I been here? Doctor, I am not ready to leave.

DR. ZINN: Almost 24 hours.

BROWN: Doctor, I don't want to leave the hospital. I can't go outside. How can I work?

DR. ZINN: John, what about the rest of your family? I believe you said your mother was unreachable; your father, what happened with him?

BROWN: I don't want to talk about my family or my father.

DR. ZINN: You must have some feelings for your father. I thought you might give me some details.

BROWN: I have no feelings for my father! Doctor, please, let me stay here a little longer. I am begging you. I have tried to face my problems; it doesn't change anything.

DR. ZINN: John, you do not suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. There are veterans here who truly suffer from PTSD – Vietnam veterans. True, you witnessed some horrific events; but instead of dealing with your problems, you choose to self-medicate with alcohol, which triggers your delusions.

BROWN: Listen to me! I am a changed person. I never had any problems before the war. I saw combat before, in Panama. Something has clicked up here. No one seems to understand me; no one seems to care. I am an American war veteran; doesn't that account for anything? I served my time; why can't I enjoy my life?

DR. ZINN: John, you can lead a normal life. Not all war veterans experience difficulties; in fact, many transition smoothly into civilian life.

BROWN: All war veterans have to deal with the trauma of combat, every day. I feel

America has used me and then abandoned me.

DR. ZINN: You arrived here, escorted by the police. John, you are only a few steps away from destitute. I wish you could stay here, long-

term; but the fact is we can't afford that kind of luxury to every veteran that comes through our doors. Shouldn't we conserve our resources, so that we can help those veterans, who are most needy?

BROWN: This is crazy! I am being kicked out of a mental hospital.

DR. ZINN: How would it feel to consider it as transitioning in to the real world?

BROWN: How am I supposed to go outside, when the sun goes down and the sky turns red? I have tried to explain. You think you know everything because you read the New York Times; and, some lying journalist, miles from the action, tells you the whole story, with pictures. I see why war vets never talk about their experiences, because of idiots like you! I want to talk to my wife!

DR. ZINN: She will be here, shortly.

BROWN: Doc, please, I am begging you to let me stay here. Don't do this to me.

DR. ZINN: John, I understand it has been hard for you to adjust to civilian life; and, that you harbor guilt over the loss of your team. But, don't you think it's important to understand that there is no way to control fate? Your team died during an enemy attack. Shouldn't you face this fact; and, move on with your life?

BROWN: You make it sound so simple. The truth is I ordered my team to leave their weapons in our vehicle. They died, defenseless, while we were searching a bunker for money. It was my fault. It wasn't an enemy attack. The war was over.

DR. ZINN: Soldiers die in all types of unfortunate accidents. War is a horrible thing; but it is necessary, so that society can continue to function; so that you and I can have a job and a life. Honestly, John, as a professional, I don't have a choice. Aren't you happy that your wife is coming to take you home?

BROWN: I am alone. No one can help me.

DR. ZINN: Goodbye, Mr. Brown.

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Scene Two

Setting: Lights rise. Kara and Dr. Zinn enter.

DR. ZINN: Kara, before we go see your husband, I'd like to speak with you a moment. Your husband was brought to us by the police, extremely intoxicated and violent. He believes he suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

KARA: He has gotten steadily worse since he left the army and we moved to America.

DR. ZINN: Are you American?

KARA: I am from Germany. We were married when he was stationed in Germany.

DR. ZINN: I see. Has your husband had problems with alcohol abuse, in the past?

KARA: Yes. But doctor, I have to tell you something: I am scared. I cannot be his wife anymore. I have made changes, in my life.

DR. ZINN: Well, you are still married; and, you must sign for him.

KARA: But, doctor, he threatened to kill me with a pistol. He is dangerous.

DR. ZINN: Ms. Brown, your husband is stable and must leave this facility; but it does not have to be with you. I can arrange for hospital security to escort you from the ward to the hospital exits. He will be shown to a separate exit.

KARA: Yes, I would feel more comfortable that way.

DR. ZINN: It is no problem at all.

KARA: Doctor, I have tried very hard to help him; but I am just his wife. He must help himself. I told him the Veterans' Hospital could help him. Why doesn't America take care of its veterans?

DR. ZINN: Kara, I understand how you feel. In fact, I work closely with a non-profit agency, which helps homeless veterans. It is important for your husband, who does not need to be in this hospital, get help elsewhere. Grant money is very limited these days. We can't do anything to jeopardize non-profit agencies from receiving federal funds. Wars cause casualties on the home front, too. But we have to resolve this situation. Let's go see him.

KARA: Yes, doctor.

DR. ZINN: How are you today, Mr. Brown?

BROWN: Nothing changes. Kara, you're here. You look like a ghost.

KARA: Hello, John.

DR. ZINN: Your wife has come to sign the paperwork to release you from the hospital.

KARA: John, I have to explain. Doctor, I would like a few minutes alone with my husband.

DR. ZINN: Yes, of course. Goodbye, Mr. Brown. Mrs. Brown, please meet me by the nurses' station.

BROWN: What a minute! You can't just kick me out of here.

DR. ZINN: Mr. Brown, we are here to receive you; but you can't malingering at this facility any longer. We are all taxpayers. We all must work.

BROWN: This is not how America is supposed to work!

DR. ZINN: If you don't calm yourself down, I will call security and you will be restrained.

KARA: John, I want to tell you what has happened.

BROWN: Why didn't you call me? I kept thinking about you. People in here are really crazy. I'm not crazy.

KARA: I know you're not crazy, John. I'm glad you got help here, at the hospital. And, I want to still be your friend. I hope we can stay in touch.

BROWN: What are you saying?

KARA: I have moved all of my things out of your apartment. And, I have a lawyer. I am filing for a divorce. I am sorry, John. I have no choice. I have to move on with my life.

BROWN: Please, Kara, don't do this to me. Your life is good because of me. I gave you the chance to leave Kirchgoens.

KARA: I know you have helped me. I thank you for that.

BROWN: We are man and wife. We can get help, some counseling.

KARA: John, you are stuck inside your own mind. You never let me inside. I have to face reality. You had my love; but you don't love me, anymore. The heat is no longer working in your apartment. There are still some microwave dinners in the freezer.

BROWN: I love you, Kara. Don't you remember when we were married? It was a beautiful day and there were so many flowers. The soldiers in my unit were dressed in army blues, carrying shining steel sabers. What about our baby? What about our future? We were going to be a family.

KARA: With what money? It's too late for us, John. I don't want my child to be raised by someone like you.

BROWN: What is that supposed to mean?

KARA: I had an abortion.

BROWN: Why did you do that, Kara? I told you not to do that! You can't kill something alive inside of you! That life was going to replace all of the death in the war. You have taken that life from me! You say you're religious. You're a murdering bitch!

KARA: Meine Mutter hatte Recht mit dir, du bist nicht gut. Du tust gar nichts, um dir selbst zu helfen. My mother was right about you! You don't frighten me anymore. You are pitiful.

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Scene Three

Setting: It is winter and Brown is homeless. He has been living on the street for several days.

BROWN: Get down, for Christ sake! Get down, before you're blown to fucking hell! Incoming!

Man the sixty; get another box of ammo A-S-A-P!

VIETNAM VETERAN: Whoa. It's me: Your buddy, from First Cav.

BROWN: Oh. How's it going?

VIETNAM VETERAN: Same as always.

BROWN: I was trying to sleep. It's too cold to sleep.

VIETNAM VETERAN: You know; you ain't hearing a word I'm saying.

BROWN: What are you talking about?

VIETNAM VETERAN: I told you a thousand times to put something underneath your box. You don't listen good. You think this is all joke, don't you?

BROWN: No.

VIETNAM VETERAN: I got to deal with assholes all day long; and, then I run into punks like you. Let me tell you something: Today, I seen this lady picking up her dog's shit in the park with a plastic bag. She dropped her New York Times. She saw me in the bushes. She tells her dog, 'Look, fluffy, that man is so disgusting.' I'm disgusting? She's scooping up her dog's shit with her fingers! She's the same one who spit on me and called me 'Baby Killer' when I came back from Nam. You got any smokes on you?

BROWN: No.

VIETNAM VETERAN: Civilians don't understand what war does to a person, how it changes them. It ain't easy going to civilian life, from killing people. There're a lot of vets on the street, man. You know that.

BROWN: The hardest thing is not saying "fuck" every other word.

VIETNAM VETERAN: You got that fucking right. What's wrong with you?

BROWN: Nothing. My wife, she's gone. It was my fault. She's always mad, slamming cabinets – scares me to death. I was going to take care of her; and, the baby. I was going to be a father.

VIETNAM VETERAN: A father, huh? I had a son once. But, I've lost track of him. I don't know where he is anymore. I try not to think about it – too painful.

BROWN: I wanted to raise my child right, not like my father raised me.

VIETNAM VETERAN: Look, buddy: Women is idiots. You got your freedom. You don't need a thing. There's no bills, no responsibility, nothing to worry about. I wish we could get something to drink tonight. Help take the edge off; you have any money?

BROWN: No.

VIETNAM VETERAN: Me neither. Fuck! Hey, weren't you a staff sergeant in the army, soldier?

BROWN: Yes, sir.

VIETNAM VETERAN: Don't call me sir, I'm a sergeant; I work for a living.

BROWN: I'm sorry, sergeant.

VIETNAM VETERAN: I was assistant squad leader; until, one night, when I was working point man. I was listening; I heard an explosion behind me. The enemy always let the point man go past; because they know the whole squad is not far behind him. It wasn't an explosion; it was a whole platoon of enemy Viet Cong opening up, all at once, on my squad. My platoon was gone in ten seconds, torn to shreds; little pieces of flesh and blood were all that was left of those Americans. I ran away, back to camp. I see them at night buddy. I try to hide; but they still find me. They start by whispering. Then they speak my name. Fear is what's eating your brain on the street. You fear them watching you, because you can feel them watching you. The only thing left is your feelings, just like you're working point man. You're body starts rotting away on the street, like gangrene. It starts with your feet, next is your teeth, then your skin. Your mind is gone. You stop catching yourself because your mind is gone. Are you listening to me?

BROWN: I'm sick of fear. I saw my team killed. I killed the enemy soldier who killed my team.

VIETNAM VETERAN: Yeah? Well, I probably killed fifty people – or more. I still think about all of them dead bastards. I can't think about it. I can't do it.

BROWN: I don't want to listen to this.

VIETNAM VETERAN: You're a coward, just like me.

BROWN: Why don't you leave me alone?

VIETNAM VETERAN: You're living with the curse of your dead buddies, aren't you?

Admit the truth. You hear them screaming in your ears, don't you? You see them in your nightmares, don't you? You think you're the

only one?

BROWN: Leave me alone!

VIETNAM VETERAN: That's right; you're a coward, just like me. Your country doesn't want you anymore, because you failed her. You are not even an American citizen anymore. You have no home. You have no country.

BROWN: I have failed. I am a coward.

VIETNAM VETERAN: I need to rest a while, before the cold hits. You can't sleep – well,

I can. I don't want you around here, anymore. Get lost!

BROWN: But, I got all my old stuff in there. I built this space; it's mine.

VIETNAM VETERAN: I'm giving you 10 seconds to permanently vacate this area of operations, soldier!

BROWN: But, I got my stuff in there, man!

VIETNAM VETERAN: I am taking all of your stuff; consider it mine. Now, don't get me angry. One. Two. Three. Four...

BROWN: I am not leaving my stuff behind! Why are you doing this to me? We're Cav scouts. Those things are all I have left of my life. I have to have them with me.

VIETNAM VETERAN: I'll do whatever the hell I want! Now, you heard me, soldier: move out; un-ass this A/O! Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten!

[Lights go black. Lights rise. Brown enters.]

BROWN: My things are all gone! No! Seek protective cover and camouflage, soldier. Get into a bunker, where it's cool, underground. Get to your team. Help your buddies. Fight for your country. Leave me alone, you bastard! Where is my team? What is your name? No! You won't chase me in my dreams. No more nightmares! It's all a lie. The truth is I felt pleasure, watching life leave you, in a death rattle. I can't believe in myself. I don't believe in anything. It's all lies – all of it! My soul has left me.

'And I'm proud to be an American, where at least I know I'm free

And I won't forget the men who died, and gave the right to me

And I'd gladly stand up, next to you, and defend her still today

Cause there ain't no doubt I love this land, God bless the USA!

[Brown puts the pistol to his temple. There is a gunshot, over the sound system. Lights go black.]

The end.

An Interview with Christopher McGuire, Professional Actor

Chris McGuire is a professional actor in New York. He starred as Sgt. John Brown in *Guns, Shackles & Winter Coats* (published in this issue). He is a New York actor that has appeared in theater, TV, and film. He is also a director, writer, and producer, and has much experience in performance arts. The questions are from M. Stefan Strozier, who directed Chris in one of the highly successful productions of *Guns, Shackles & Winter Coats*, and believes strongly in Chris' talent and future potential success in the entertainment industry.

Strozier: Can you tell us about yourself?

McGuire: I was born and raised in Long Island, NY. I permanently left that beautiful waste land behind upon graduating from high school and began the first 3 years, of my (6 year) college career, at the University of Maryland. While immersed in a competitive business program, I woke up one day and recognized that I was on a fast track to corporate indentured servitude. So I hopped in my trusty old Buick and skipped the light fantastic to sunny California. Three years later, I had a BA in Psychology from San Diego State University. Though I also had a new found passion for acting and filmmaking, I felt like something in me was calling me to head back east, you know give the "less evolved" coast another try. But this time around I would approach it with a fresh perspective. So me and my future wife moved to Brooklyn, and I spent a 2 year stint in the belly of the beast itself— the Big Apple. After dealing with the hardships of urban survival, we decided to relocate to a calmer environment and now live in the country/burbs of Northern New Jersey. I operate out of a home office/studio and frequently visit the city.

Strozier: What kind of professional or other training do you have?

McGuire: My training (which has been ongoing since 2002 (though in reality probably began the first time I ever watched a series of moving images)), has been an ever-evolving journey, leading me to cross paths with diverse teachers, books, performances, and countless other experiences that have shaped my educational background. I do not separate "my life" from "my work". Both things stem from the same source: my unconscious mind. I believe that in order to be an effective artist, that one must completely devote themselves to their respective art form. It's as if you're committing yourself to this

important spiritual quest. You must travel deep with your internal landscape if you want to have anything of value to say. Because no matter what their form, an artist is at base a revealer of the human condition. And the only way one can reveal anything about life is through experience and experience alone. That is why the artist is in a position to teach, because he has learned to tread the murky waters of human consciousness. And as a result of such beliefs, my education has been directed towards techniques and philosophies that lend themselves to opening up the fantastic powers of the creative imagination. I could ramble on for hours on the subject, but I would say my most influential Master teachers are Chekhov [Stella] Adler, [Uta] Hagen, and other big dogs like them. My studies have bounced around a lot of different studios; I piece together my artist's training as it unfolds. I have worked with a lot of wonderful people and would like to pay props to JB actors and Michael Chekhov Studios in New York.

Strozier: What did you think about playing the lead role of Sgt. John Brown in *Guns, Shackles & Winter Coats*?

McGuire: Good old, Sgt. John Brown...poor bastard. Here is the story of a young man who bought into the middle class value system and decided to go off to war to fight for his country. Naturally, as a result of the horrors of war he is pushed into a crippling mental state which is full of fear, paranoia, anger, and lucid hallucinations. Fueled by alcohol he spirals down a slippery slope of domestic violence, mental hospitals, and finally suicide. Needless to say, it was not the same as the world of Comedy that I am more familiar with. Then again, my sense of humor is pretty twisted and dark, so I guess they are both up the same alley. This role was a great experience for me. I learned so much about my process and my self as I entered into this man's world. Let me tell you, it was a pretty bleak existence. So much pain, and so much rage. His military experience awoken and empowered his "inner killer," and he was forced to bring this powerful and darkly chaotic energy back to the world of everyday civilization. I feel that the themes of this piece are so very relevant to our country and the current/future situations that our military faces in the Middle East "Clone Wars". In order to justly portray this man's life, I really felt it necessary to "go there" and enter into hellish realms. Where everyone and everything is out to get you and violence is the only tool you have to cope with the world. While performing the role each night, I felt like I was on some kind of "bad trip." I was in a hell, and I was doing all that I could to get myself out, but things always got worse. It was a great role to expel a lot of pent up

emotion that was trapped inside me. This is one of the best parts of being an actor, the ability to sublimate powerful emotions and achieve a therapeutic release/reorganization of psychic energy. As John Brown would say “God Bless the USA”.

Strozier: What are your goals as an actor/ artist?

McGuire: My goals are vague yet at the same time quite distinct. How they will happen is anyone’s guess. When, only the lord knows. Why...because I work my ass off. Alright, my dream future would be: I write/act/direct my own feature films with complete creative control. Sounds vain, right? Well, yes and no. Well, yes, because I am vain. And no, because those three areas are my unrelenting passions in life. Each one is intricately linked to the other and each equate with playing the role of modern mythmaker. That is what I am, a storyteller. I tell stories because I have to. There is something in me that needs to communicate to the world at large. And the world at large is always in need of incoming communications. The problem is that we are falling way short of actualizing the potential of our modern art forms. The greatest teachers of man could be helping him to evolve out of the “lower ego” states that he is presently trapped within. But we, as the masses, are stuck with his commercial bullshit programming. Everything is an advertisement, and everything is programming people into a warped sense of reality. If you ask me, it is a pretty god damn scary world to live in. I believe it is the mission of the artist to help change this. So in answering any questions about my career goals, I felt it necessary to preface it with my opinions on commercialism and art. It is a nasty catch 22. If you want to eat, you have to play ball. It’s alright to play ball a little, but if you get caught up in the game, you have become part of the problem and are no longer performing the function of an artist. So ultimately, I hope to never sell out and be able to develop works of art that speak to and influence people. Or at the very least get into a good Budweiser commercial.

Strozier: What have you been working on lately?

McGuire: I worked on a whole lot of roles this last year. Many were for short films, which is a completely different experience than theater. In theater, you have a lot of time to prepare and develop your role. In a short film, you come up with something and you kinda make it work to your best ability given the circumstances of time. The theater experience is a lot more romantic in that you get to really immerse yourself in the role. I imagine feature film to be of a similar nature to theater. I worked on one feature last year and played

the role of a psychopathic, yet charming murderer. The role shot over the course of 6 days. So my preparation for that role was a lot closer to the theater experience. For me preparation is the name of the game. Mix that with listening and responding in the moment, and that is the bare bones of my acting process. Though I hope this next year I will get to play a normal person for once. If I had to describe the current climate of the professional acting world, I would say hazy, hot, and humid. Good luck to you, and may you get to quit your day job.

Strozier: What do you think about directing?

McGuire: Directing is a hugely important task. A director that works with actors must be open to collaboration. If he has some fixed image in his head that he is trying to force upon his cast, then he is setting himself up for failure. Each human being is such a genius and they don't even know it. So I think a good director sees the value in what each person is bringing to the table and finds a way to help mold the production by incorporating all of the separate elements. A good director brings it all together. He creates a safe working environment and encourages the actors to explore. Trust is at the foundation of it all. If one can trust, one can play. If one can play, the imagination takes over and the rest takes care of itself. Also, I think all directors should train as an actor at some point early in their career so that they truly understand what they are asking of us fragile beings.

Strozier: What do you like the different kinds of work in entertainment: TV, theater, and film?

McGuire: I grew up in front of TV and film. Theater was a neglected part of my life. And so the pattern continues to this day. Though I have a huge respect for the theater, I wish people putting up plays these days would cut back on the musicals. Each medium is different. Theatre is truly the actor's medium. The medium where the actor is the center of the production. Film and TV are different. Film is all about the director's vision and TV belongs to the writers. In terms of dealing with the challenges of each, the key is to adapt. Each medium has its own technical requirements and dictate different ways of preparing for a role. At the core of it acting is acting, and that is what I love to do regardless of the venue. I currently write and direct my own short films. I have considered working as a director in the theatre. I have a broad knowledge of acting techniques and a natural gift of being able to relate well with people. I have the ability to encourage the best in people. So in the years to come I am sure I

will find my self in some dusty old theatre helping a motley crew of actors find ways to bring their characters to life. In my film experiences, I have found that most directors do not understand the actor or his process. So when I direct actors in films, I always try to be the kind of director that I would hope to have as an actor. I find that when people realize I am an actor as well, they have an easier time opening up to me and giving me what I am asking of them.

Strozier: Describe your take on acting.

McGuire: We could be here all night with that question. Acting is a highly personal art form that develops in tandem with an individual's psycho-spiritual development. You must create your performances with every fiber of your being. You must be very brave; in that to portray most dramatic characters you must search the dark corridors of your soul and allow the contents of your Shadow to live and breath inside of you. Art is a fundamental expression of the creative principle in man. I believe it to be inspired by the gods and serve the function of transforming human consciousness. Man is but a microcosm of the universe at large. And art is the tool by which man reveals his divine nature.

Strozier: What is your favorite role?

McGuire: The favorite role I ever played was a character named Barry. Barry began for me as a simple Halloween costume one year. But eventually turned into a sort of alter ego. Barry was born in Brooklyn, but lives in Miami. He is a gambler, a partier, and nightclub operator. He bets greyhounds, is a bit of a womanizer, and is known for his powder diet. Need I say more!? I just have way too much fun with characters like this. Though Barry has yet to be a part of any actual production, I do hope one day to turn his story into a film. My least favorite role is the one I play a few nights a week. And that is the role of a Waiter in a local restaurant. Now there is a role that makes me cringe. The part of acting that I don't like is its complexity. Though at the same time this is one of the elements that I love about acting, but it sure can create a lot of heartache. Every one wants to be good at what they do, and acting is no different. You want to accomplish the monumental task of realistically portraying another human being. And well it is not always easy. It takes a lot of blood, sweat, and tears sometimes. And even after you put in hours upon hours of work, there is a little critic that sits on your shoulders and tells you that you are shit. A fraud who is kidding himself. But one has to ignore such a voice and instead focus on the work at hand. The ironic part is that the roles that are the hardest for you to

discover in yourself, are the very roles that help you grow most as an individual. Your average non-actor typically doesn't realize the process work that an actor goes through while preparing for a role. It isn't all fun and games. At the core of it, it is all about hard work.

Strozier: What are your strengths/weaknesses as an actor?

McGuire: I possess a strong stage presence. When I am focused and my entire being is concentrated on the task at hand, I command people's attention. I have been told that I have this strange mysterious quality about me. Something that makes people interested in me and leaving them wanting to learn more about me. I am very aware of my physical body and have the ability to transform and embody a wide range of characters. I am a naturally funny person and have been blessed with the gift of comedic timing. Also, I have been told that I play "crazy people" very well. Which is interesting to me, because I like to think of myself as quite sane (but then again, what crazy person doesn't). My weaknesses are accents, voice production, and classical actor poise. I am trapped in the role of a modern man. Though I have a physical demeanor that lends itself well to period pieces, I have trouble depicting characters from the past. I don't know why, most likely a self imposed limitation of sorts, but Shakespeare and proper diction are just beyond me.

Strozier: What do you think about theater in New York in 2008?

McGuire: Broadway has become some sort of sad, Disney-inspired debauchery. All cock, no balls. Off Broadway, off-Off Broadway, and all types of "Indie Theater" are on the rise. I feel that the content that is being produced is falling a little short of the mark, but the heart is there. There are a lot of great artists out there, making sacrifices and living the cliché starving existence. God bless them. They are the ones who are going to be responsible for bringing spirit back into the New York Theatre scene. I don't think the audiences are strong enough at the moment, but as new blood circulates the city, perhaps a new form of audience will evolve as well – one that values theatrical productions and is willing to come out more frequently. People used to go to the theatre in New York so that they could learn about life. Now it seems to be more of a passive hobby, rather than a means of having a life changing experience. So let's keep our fingers crossed that everything will come together (Soon!!). I am one of those guys that does not audition enough. Part of my problem is that I have rejected many aspects of the hierarchy created by the commercial entertainment infrastructure. Part of me just won't commit to taking the steps to "make it." Because my idea of

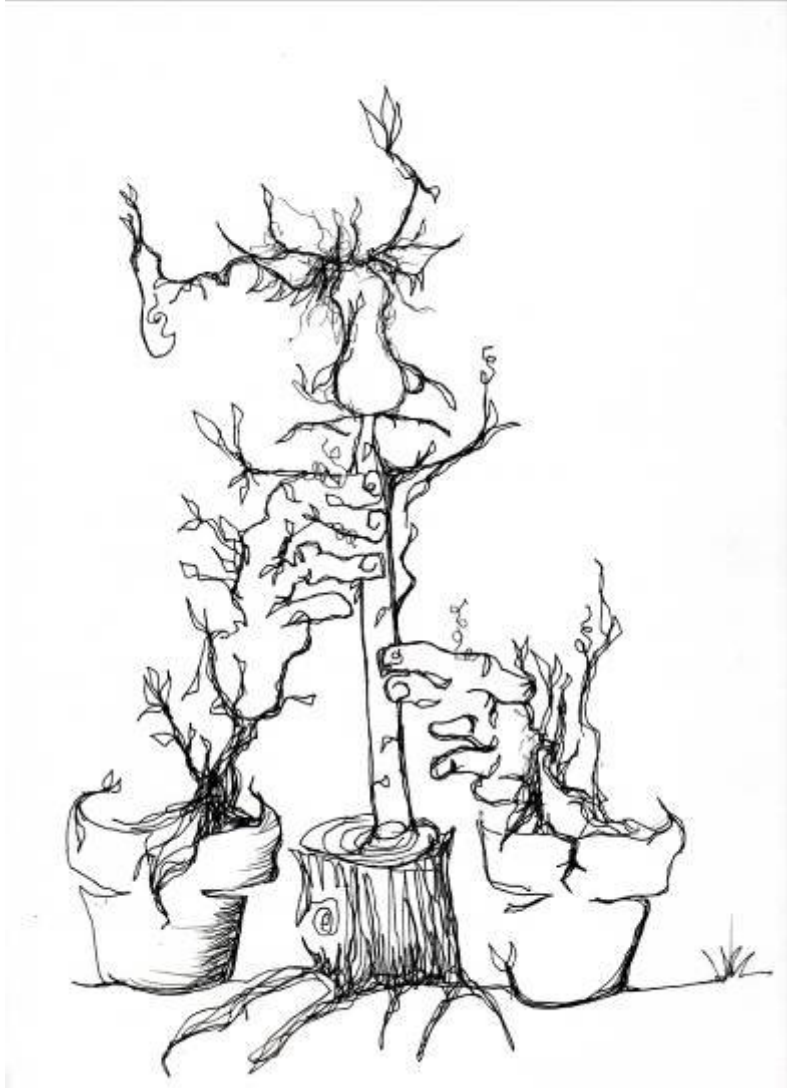
“making it” is probably a lot different than most other actors. I dedicated my life to this pursuit and want my career to unfold on my terms. The acting establishment wants you to play by their rules. And well, that’s probably why I don’t get out on as many auditions as I should. In terms of the auditioning itself, it can be a little demeaning: Laying yourself on the line, looking for approval and validation. Actors take rejection very personally and sadly 9 times out of 10 the answer is no – 19 times out of 20 sometimes. At the same time, I find auditioning very fun. I get an opportunity to stretch my acting muscles, and you get to do it all in front of an audience. It can be a little unnerving at times, but the key is to utilize that nervous energy and let it heighten the stakes of the moment. And if you don’t get the part, but you can impress them with your skills, you are setting yourself up for future opportunities. Opportunities that would have never come about if you hadn’t been guaranteed the chance to audition. I know I am destined to join [Actors’] Equity someday; it is just a matter of when. Feel free to check me out at www.chrismcguire.net.



“What is to give light must endure burning.” – Viktor Frankl.
Photo by Carrie Crow



Naturaleza muerta – goache sobre papel amate – Venecia López



Flute
Doug Johnson

I Dream of Israel

by Mel Waldman

On a dog day afternoon, I sit in a café in Greenwich Village and dream of Israel. I've never been there. Yet the Holy Land is ensconced in my soul.

Without fear, I dream of Israel. Not even suicide bombers can destroy my dreams or keep me away. On a dog day afternoon, I feel the heat of a sprawling Manhattan sun, and through the

miracle of my soul, I travel to the Wailing Wall and pray. Later, after transcending Time & Space, my spirit returns to New York. And I write a sacred letter to my G-d.

Hashem, in this post-9/11 city, I remember that autumn day which obliterated my innocence. I remember the way it used to be. Now, New York City and Israel are the same-sacred places where crimes

of terrorism have been committed. Yet like other New Yorkers, I embrace this city where dreams are conceived in an urban garden of vision and blossom in the seasons of love, faith, and miracles.

Thank You, Hashem for the courage You feed me. Thank You.

It is a dog day afternoon. I sit in a café in Greenwich Village and dream of Israel. Later, I will take the Q or B train home to Brooklyn.

Tonight, I will pray in the Tree of Life Synagogue or perhaps, at the Wailing Wall.

Memalleh

The Spiritual Filling of the World

by Mel Waldman

The city is filled with sadness and loss.
When will we heal?

Seven years have passed and still we
can't conceive or believe what happened

on that day of massive violence when we
lost so much,

on that day of demarcation when our innocence
was murdered.

There is a void in the city.
When will we heal?

We crave *memalleh*, the spiritual filling of the world,
for we long to feel Hashem's presence.

Silently we pray, waiting for the *cosmic kiss* of
Hashem,
when we will breathe His divine breath and be
reborn.

We wait.

The Deep Snow

by Mel Waldman

In the Season of Clarity, you sit beneath a sprawling sun and speak to me. You know who I am. Of course, you do. I am your only son. Rocking back and forth in the old wooden rocking chair, you reveal how much you loved Mother. You're a child once more, I imagine, but you remember Yesterday. And you remember me, Father. You remember me too.

But in the Season of Confusion, you sit on the patio in our antediluvian home and struggle to recall my name. For a few seconds, you recognize my face. It has an eerie familiarity. Yet recognition fades and you can't figure out who this stranger is.

"I'm your son, Father," I proudly announce. And suddenly, you become agitated and rant and rave and launch a fusillade of tirades at me. I can't tolerate your malice or the insidious meaning of your memory loss. The sky is dark now and it's starting to rain. I walk away.

I know a brutal snowstorm is approaching. It will be a full-fledged blizzard. The Season of Oblivion is inevitable. And soon, you will be buried in the deep snow. You won't know me-won't even recognize my face. When the blizzard arrives, you will no longer exist. It will obliterate your identity and Yesterday and Tomorrow, and father and son... But before it comes, we will meet again briefly in the Season of Clarity and I will confess, yes many times will I reveal: "I love you, Father! Grasp my love, old man, and keep it hidden in your tattered soul. And when the snow starts falling, you will still taste my bittersweet words."

Now, I wait for the next season to arrive. If you die 2 deaths, so will I. And when you breathe your last breath, I will gasp for air too, for you are my father and I am your son. I will remember, even after you are buried in the deep snow, I will remember...

Dancing with the Jewish Soul

by Mel Waldman

Dancing with the Jewish soul, spiraling through
The Labyrinth of Being,

Up and down the Tree of Life,
Diving and soaring through

Divine emanations,
Ecstatic revelations,
Exploding in
Pure energy,

Up and down the sacred Tree,
We search for our G-d Hashem.

Dancing with the Jewish soul, listening to
The flow of the 10 Sefirot,

The oceanic flow of waves of light, that
Penetrate our darkness and

Illuminate our night,
We sail across
Divine spheres of energy,

Up and down the sacred Tree, and
We search for our G-d Hashem.

Dancing with the Neshama, the Jewish soul,
Following its mystical flow

Through the 4 parallel worlds-the Olamot,
We sail toward the *Ohr Ein Sof*,

The *Light of Infinity*,
And we search for our G-d Hashem.

Healers

by Mel Waldman

They hear the deadly echoes of the war,
out there-and in their mind. The healers
suffers too. They hide their grief,
but it's true.

Traveling around Iraq, visiting troops,
and deployed to combat zones, the
military chaplains suffer too,
always giving more because they care,
often losing sleep and now they're blue.

Missiles strike everywhere, exploding in
Baghdad and in their brain, shattering
invisible landscapes and body parts too.
Flooded with trauma, their sizzling neurons
misfire, launching incomprehensible Hell
across the seething synapses.

Yes, it's true. On fire, the chaplains can't bless.
The healers suffer too.

Crying Leaves

by Joshua Hill

Tears befall empty skies, as withered leaves begin to cry.

Always imagined I'd die among friends.
Left alas by one fatal kiss.
Wake with me, my lover, till at least some end.
Passionate murder is forged amiss.

Twice my skin is bled in doubt; leaves of red try a shout...

Mist travels through air, presenting great tear.
For the bees that fly among the cynical, persuasively buzz temptations ear.
Telling tales to penetrate my skin,
"We don't know and never have, we do not know Him!"

Thrice my body is pierced by lies; leaves of guilt fall to guise...

Of thorns, a son is crowned in vanity.
Beyond travail of heavy-laden journey.
After many years, seems like thirty.
Condoned alone I wander many roads, some remembered and some untold.
Once endured on betrayal's bed, dreary leaves continue to shed...

Angel's breath blows the wind.
The air slyly bends, the branches of maturity's trees,
Raining their autumnal breeze.
Shades of leaves fall down on seeds.
Children of green grow again, quenched by the water that purifies this earth.

And leaves no longer cry.

The Gathering in Gethsemane (The Conscience of Kerioth Sicarius)

by Joshua Hill

They gather to neither rhyme nor purpose a glance from afar without notice.
I hear the shout of my name.
As if there are some sought to say.
I fulfill, for my part, for one this day. And it is all that I will answer for.

One so very dear to me, till an end.
My touch I extend to his and yet I wish to wash my hand.

I suffer the tainted dream again.
I know what will become of him, I fright.
Which is why I must do what I have done this night.
But it was not meant, not in that manner,
Never was such my intent, not in that manner.

I confess I detest had I spilled such a mess.
They inquired and I conversed.

On Sunday night,
The 13, including Maggie and myself gather in the finest of company in
Gethsemane.

“I knew not the style of their coming,” said the lie in my eye.

Had I done not what was meant that I do?
I do not know of his cause but in my recoil I sigh.

And that I did,
I cried again after a time and once again.

He is, for his part, my friend.
At least till some end that I am but not.

The curtain over my eyes draws red and all are blind among the dead.

I concur to my conscience.

How to die in a life I did not create?
Only to live in a death I design.
How love another I dismay?
And face the mirror of one I despise.

Surely I chose each choice of my will.
Only to feel haunted still.

Exit Kerioth, I take my leave, for I act as villain in this piece.
This is that I chose to portray.
As the curtain falls I bow.
My life I give in the name I betray.

Though I still cannot lay to rest.
I swore it was not my intent.
Horrors plague the soul I now not possess.
And still I feel such pain.

Company with my conscience is eternally spent.
I forget only now that which was truly my intent.

Child of Haiti

by Besa Kosova

Monsignor,
I am poor...
...illiterate Haitian child
One you fail to see –
beyond the blackness of me.

My eyes are charcoal black,
but like yours; they too, cry
for all you have done
And – still try.

Did you hear my story
on that Sunday
before the Ash Wednesday
while you celebrated in Kanaval
as I watched, the hut I call home
smolder
and ashes rise above Pic La Selle?

From the world's first black republic, I come
I am no beast,
but human; your black chum
Please, please – don't treat me dumb
I know the difference
between the right and wrong.

You persuade me
to trade my ocean Labadie
for few breadcrumbs
while my bluest calm Atlantic
becomes
party to your Marine discard
as I stand guard
– scarred.

You are my witness
of my stillborn brothers
and sisters.
You know as well as I do
this atrocious voodoo
only you
– can undue.

You export my sweat
Import my dread
you force me to excavate my lands
until I bury myself
– with bare hands.

Cant' you hear,
the black winged warbler
as his song slowly dies
along with the melodious symphony
it used to orchestrate our skies?

Can't you smell,
the carcass of my week old shot brother –
the stench of my scorched mother –
the bullet smoke from the automatic machine –
Do you even bother?
For I am your sport –
– and amusing routine.

Have you decided to keep me
Out of sight – out of mind
like those before us in Auschwitz –
Armenian Massacres –
Crime after crime...
Genocide –
– then holocaust
until your sport you exhaust.

Listen to me!
Please, don't oppress me...
Teach me...
See me...
I am human, your chum...

Just poor –
– and black
only literacy I lack.

Monsignor,
hear my plea
open you eyes
and see –
– beyond the blackness of me.

Africa

by Besa Kosova

Must I be...

the color of mocha
– for my heart to ache?
A Superb Starling
– to sing your song?
Or come from your beloved land
– to cry along?

I have the color that God gave me
– but with the same soul...
– I ache.

I am a different type of bird
-- but with the same melody...
-- I sing.

I am a foreign eye
– but with the same tears...
– I cry.

Must I be...
...anything, but me?

For you...
to ache...
to sing...
to cry...

Along...

For my love...

...to just belong?

With you.

Upstairs the Eulogy, Downstairs the Rummage Sale

by Yehoshua November

The beloved Yiddish professor
passed away on the same day
as the synagogue's rummage sale,

and because they could not bear
the coffin up the many steps
that led to the sanctuary,
they left it in the hallway downstairs,

and because I was not one of his students,
and it didn't matter if I heard the eulogy,
they told me to stay downstairs,
to watch over the body and recite Psalms.

And I thought,
this is how it is in the life and death of a righteous man:
upstairs, in the sanctuary, they speak of you
in glowing terms,
while down below your body rests beside
old kitchen appliances.

And I recited the Psalms as intently
as I could over a man I had only met once,
and because I knew where he was headed,
and you and I were to wed in a few months,
I asked that he bring with him a prayer for a good marriage.

And this is how it is in the life and death of a righteous man:
strangers pray over the sum of your days,
and strangers ask you to haul their heavy requests
where you cannot even take your body.

A Jewish Poet

by Yehoshua November

It is hard to be a Jewish poet.
You cannot say things about G-d
that will offend the disbelievers.
And you always have to remind someone
that it wasn't your people who killed their savior.
And Solomon and David are always laughing
over your shoulder
like a father and son ridiculing the unfavored brother.
And you cannot entice people with the sloping
parts of a woman's body
because you must always remain pure.
And everyday you have to ask yourself why you're writing
when there is already the one great book.
It is hard to be a Jewish poet.
You cannot say anything about the disbelievers,
which might offend G-d.

Hannibal (247-182 BCE), A Brief History

by Anthony Rubino, Jr.

Hannibal Barca was born in 247 BCE, of a Carthaginian General in the kingdom known as Carthage, located in North Eastern Africa. Romans believe young Hannibal's father forced his son to promise eternal hatred for the Roman Empire. Of course it is much easier for Rome to say that Hannibal's father MADE him hate them, than for Rome to face the fact that maybe Hannibal just didn't like it because it was snooty and thought it was, "all that."

It was unclear whether Hannibal resented his Brother-in-law for becoming his father's successor in 229 BCE. It became a whole lot clearer when Hannibal stabbed him to death, becoming commander of The Carthaginian Army at age 26. Eager to impress the Babes or "Broads" as they were known at the time, he immediately besieged a nearby Roman ally, which quickly folded like a beach chair after Labor Day.

Between orgies and vomiting, Rome demanded Hannibal surrendered to them. The Carthaginian official response was cleverly designed to distance itself from the renegade general. It read;

"Wait... Hanni- WHO, now?"

In a brilliant move of misdirection, Hannibal pointed out just how much Italy looked kinda like a boot. As Rome was all, "Yeah... look at that! It does look like a boot," Hannibal invaded Italy.

In a lightning campaign, he crossed the Alps with 50,000 foot soldiers, 9,000 cavalry and 57 elephants... yes... elephants. His head advisers warned him against insisting upon the elephants. "My Liege," they said, Elephants don't do snow." Hannibal's head advisers became Hannibal's adviser without heads.

So, in October after a brutal mountain crossing, 38,000 soldiers 6,000 cavalry and 2 really skinny, cold elephants had reached the Italian town of Turin.

The plains were inhabited by Gauls, an earlier and considerably less gay, version of the modern French, whom had recently been conquered (as the French tend to be) by Rome. They were only too

willing to welcome Hannibal and throw off the Roman yoke. The Romans immediately sent an army to prevent this. However, Hannibal's forces, now supplemented by 14,000 Gauls who were fortified by defrosted Elephant Sandwiches, defeated the Roman army at the river Trebia.

In March 217, Hannibal attempted to ravage Etruria. She however, insisted upon diner first. So after a light nosh, they spent a nice evening together. The next day he conquered what is now modern Tuscany. The Romans counterattacked with some 25,000 men. As a result, two Roman legions were lured into an ambush and annihilated. Once again, he called for a battalion of Elephants to help him to cross the Apennine Mountains. And once again his first captain advised against taking the animals into such harsh climates. Hannibal quickly beheaded him, and his second captain gathered together a whole bunch of elephants in a really big hurry. "Some of which," he pointed out to Hannibal, nervously, "do some pretty nifty tricks too!"

In 216, Rome raised an army of 80,000 men to face Hannibal's army of 50,000. Hannibal employed one of his most famous and ingenious military strategies, to hand Rome its worst defeat in the history of the empire. The successful commander was thirty years old when he savored his victory, seated on his last surviving elephant, Stampy.

Meanwhile, back in Rome animosity toward Hannibal grew. Bumper stickers began appearing on family chariots and buggies. One recent archeological find revealed a novelty shop filled with stickers reading, "Them Carthaginians better not win agains!" and "Flog your mule so he brays loudly if you hate Hannibal."

Enraged and determined, the Romans pushed Hannibal southward. Hannibal's situation became difficult and his government was unwilling to risk extra troops: Even his faithful one remaining elephant, Stampy became aloof and indifferent. Many speculate that had he not lost his trunk to frostbite, he would have turned it up at Hannibal in defiance.

Continuing to suffer small defeats, Hannibal was now on the run. He was nearly captured once in southern Italy, only narrowly escaping by telling a roman centurion that his sandal was unbuckled, then, cleverly walking backward out the city gates so it looked like he was walking in.

With its moral bolstered and due to some lucky early draft picks, Rome regained its footing and began to slowly conquer the Carthaginian forces.

In the 20 years following Hannibal went into exile but was eventually hunted down and surrounded by 50,000 Roman troops. Now at age of 72, the great General faced the Roman army alone. Defiant to the end Hannibal hobbled to the front door in his underpants, and shouted through his screen door, "Get off my lawn you punk kids with your fancy chariots and all the time with the sandals on my begonias!"

But Rome could not resist the temptation to exact revenge on its greatest nemesis. Fearing capture and humiliation, Hannibal poisoned himself at Libyssa on a cold winter's day in 182 BCE.

Hannibal's impact upon history is unquestionable. He was the most dominant threat the Great Roman Empire had ever faced. Yet after his death even the Roman's honored Hannibal, erecting statues and monuments to him— some of which still stand. He was perhaps the greatest General of all time. To this very day history holds Hannibal the Great in the highest regard.

Elephants, however... not so much.

The Watcher

by Ben Cheetham

As the woman sat down, her figure-hugging dress rode up, exposing the finest pair of legs Casey ever saw. His gaze moved over her hungrily. She was beautiful. Not in a skinny bitch, catwalk model kind of way, but in a slinky, voluptuous, Marilyn Monroe kind of way. She reeked of money. He wondered what she was doing in a seedy little dive like the Tropicana Club.

She lifted a glass to her shimmering-red painted lips, drained it and shoved it back towards the barman. "Keep them Coming."

Four or five drinks later, eyes sparkling sensuously, she looked around the bar. She gave Casey no more than a glance, but it was enough to get his blood pumping. He approached her, trying to appear casual.

"I'm Casey."

"Dolores. Do you want a drink?"

"Sure."

As Dolores motioned to the barman, Casey took another good look at her. She was somewhere in her thirties. Maybe even older. There was a blemish on her right cheek that might've been a bruise, although it was difficult to tell with all the makeup she was wearing.

Noticing the telltale white band on her ring finger, Casey asked, "Where's your husband?"

"Who says I'm married?"

"Women as beautiful as you always are."

Dolores laughed, her full round breasts pushing against her dress.

"Well I'm not. Would it matter if I was?"

"Only if he was the jealous type."

"Bit of a fast mover, aren't you?"

"When I see something I want."

"And what do you want from me?"

“Right now I could do with a cigarette.” And a hot meal and a place to bed down for the night, Casey might’ve added.

Dolores lit a cigarette and placed it between his lips. It tasted of lipstick, a sweet, waxy taste. “Where are you from?”

“Nowhere in particular. I travel around a lot.”

“Doing what?”

“A bit of this, a bit of that.”

“Sounds dodgy.”

Dolores’s husky, hopeful voice confirmed what Casey already suspected: she was a bad boy lover. No doubt she had a kind, loving husband waiting for her at home, but tonight she was out on the prowl looking for a man to treat her like dirt. And who am I to disappoint her, he thought. Moving closer, he murmured, “It is.”

He smelled perfume and a faint musky odour of sweat. The scent made him feel even drunker than he was. He caught Dolores’s shoulders, pulled her towards him and kissed her. She pressed something into his palm, then pushed him away and slapped his face.

“How dare you,” she said.

Her voice was hard and angry, but there was a flame burning in her eyes that left Casey in no doubt she wanted him as badly as he wanted her. She raised her hand to hit him again, but he caught her wrist and squeezed hard. She gave a little moan and her eyes burned even brighter.

“Let go,” she demanded.

Casey did so and she stood and marched from the bar. He stared after her a moment, his mind reeling with confusion, before thinking to look in his hand. A grin spread over his face when he saw the torn beer mat with ‘Meet me outside’ written on it.

As he stepped outside, a set of headlights flashed from the shadows of a side-street. The car was as sleek and curvy as its driver. He got in and leant over to kiss her. She shook her head. “Not here.”

“Where then?”

“You’ll see.”

Dolores drove fast to the edge of the city, to an area where bankers, politicians, playboys and other moneyed citizens resided. She pulled

into the driveway of a big house. Casey followed her into the lounge, eyeing the expensive artwork and furnishings. On the mantelpiece there was a photo of two boys about seven or eight years old stood either side of a balding, paunchy man, the kind of man she wouldn't have looked at in a million years unless his pockets were overflowing with money.

"Is that your husband?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I thought you weren't married."

"We're separated. Look, do you mind if we talk about something else?"

"Like what?"

"Why don't I tell you what I want to do with you?"

"Why don't you just show me?"

Dolores took Casey's hand and led him upstairs to a bedroom. Trembling with lust, she ground her mouth against his and sank her teeth into his bottom lip. With a yelp, he shoved her onto the bed. She grinned up at him, her eyes shining, a smear of blood on her chin. He knew what she wanted. He took out his knife and hooked it under her shoulder straps. His mouth fell open when he saw what was beneath her dress. He'd seen plenty of women before, but he'd never seen anything like her.

"What are you waiting for?" she said.

The next instant their arms were locked around each others necks. Dolores clawed Casey like some wild thing, but he didn't mind. He liked wild things just fine.

When it was over, sweaty and breathless, he examined the scratches on his chest and back in the mirror at the end of the bed. It was a big mirror, covering almost the entire wall.

"Don't worry, honey, they won't leave a scar," said Dolores.

"I don't care if they do. Women like a man to have a few scars."

"My husband doesn't have any scars. He's as unmarked as a baby."

"Is that why it didn't work out between you?"

"No." Dolores took off her earrings. As she put them in an antique box on the dressing-table, Casey glimpsed the unmistakable spectral

glitter of diamonds. "You must be hungry."

"Starving."

They went down to the kitchen and Dolores fried a steak and some potatoes. As Casey ate, she leant in close and said, "I'm going for a shower. Why don't you join me when you're finished."

Casey waited until the shower came on, then padded upstairs. He frowned in disappointment when he saw that the jewellery-box was gone. He quickly searched the bedroom, to no avail.

Dolores came into the room. She was naked and dripping wet. "Where's your knife?" she asked.

He took it out. A gleam of arousal came into Dolores's eyes. "Use it," she said. "Cut me."

"You're joking, right?" said Casey, but he could see that she wasn't.

She grabbed his hand and dragged the blade across her forearm. He hit her open-handed, sending her sprawling onto the bed. Blood ran down her wrist onto the silk sheets. She was panting like an animal.

"You're crazy," said Casey.

Dolores's eyes burned right through him, and he, who reckoned to have been everywhere and seen everything, suddenly knew that he was hopelessly out of his depth. She laughed at his naivety.

"Bitch," he hissed, his voice trembling with humiliation.

She stretched out her arm. "Cut me again."

Her voice was soft and mocking. It taunted Casey into action. Reluctantly, he cut her. With a sound of pleasurable pain, she dragged him onto the bed and sat astride his belly.

"You're fucking pathetic," she said.

Casey opened his mouth to make an angry retort, but he saw that Dolores wasn't speaking to him. She was staring into the mirror, grinning and sneering with utter contempt.

"You disgust me," she spat out. "I hate you, I despise you. I don't know why you don't just kill yourself, you filthy, miserable little maggot. You diseased little fuck."

"What do you mean, diseased?" said Casey.

Dolores didn't seem to hear. She ground her hips against him,

moaning obscenities. He tried to wriggle free. Her thighs tightened, squeezing the breath out of him. He heaved and bucked like a mad bull, but he couldn't dislodge her. Her strength was incredible. Simultaneously more enraged and aroused than he'd ever been before, he felt himself rushing towards an unwanted orgasm. With a sudden cry, Dolores yanked his hand to her mouth and bit it to the bone. That was more than he could take. He hit her as hard as he could. She slumped down beside him, hunched up and twitching.

"You're a fucking pervert, you know that?" yelled Casey. He stood as if to leave.

"Don't go," said Dolores. "Stay with me."

Casey wanted to tell her to go fuck herself, but he couldn't bring himself to. He felt exhausted in body, spirit and all. He'd been on the move for two days. At that moment he needed sleep more than anything in the world. Sighing, he lay back down, closed his eyes and forced himself to relax. Dolores snuggled up to him. He made a weak attempt to push her away, but she hooked her arm under his neck.

"I'm sorry if I hurt you," she said, her voice different, gentle, almost motherly.

"I think you need professional help," mumbled Casey, on the edge of sleep. Dolores laughed softly and kissed the blood off his hand.

When Casey awoke the room was dark and he was alone. Heart thumping, he jerked upright. From somewhere came a sound that trembled between hysterical weeping and laughter. He hurried onto the landing, following the spasmodic wails to the next room.

Dolores was on her knees beside the man from the photo. He was slumped naked in an armchair, eyes gaping sightlessly at a two-way mirror that overlooked her bedroom. There was blood caked all over his apishly hairy legs and thighs. In one hand he clutched a knife. In the open palm of his other hand lay his severed penis, a string of semen dropping from it.

Casey felt sick at the sight and at the thought of everything the man must've seen and heard.

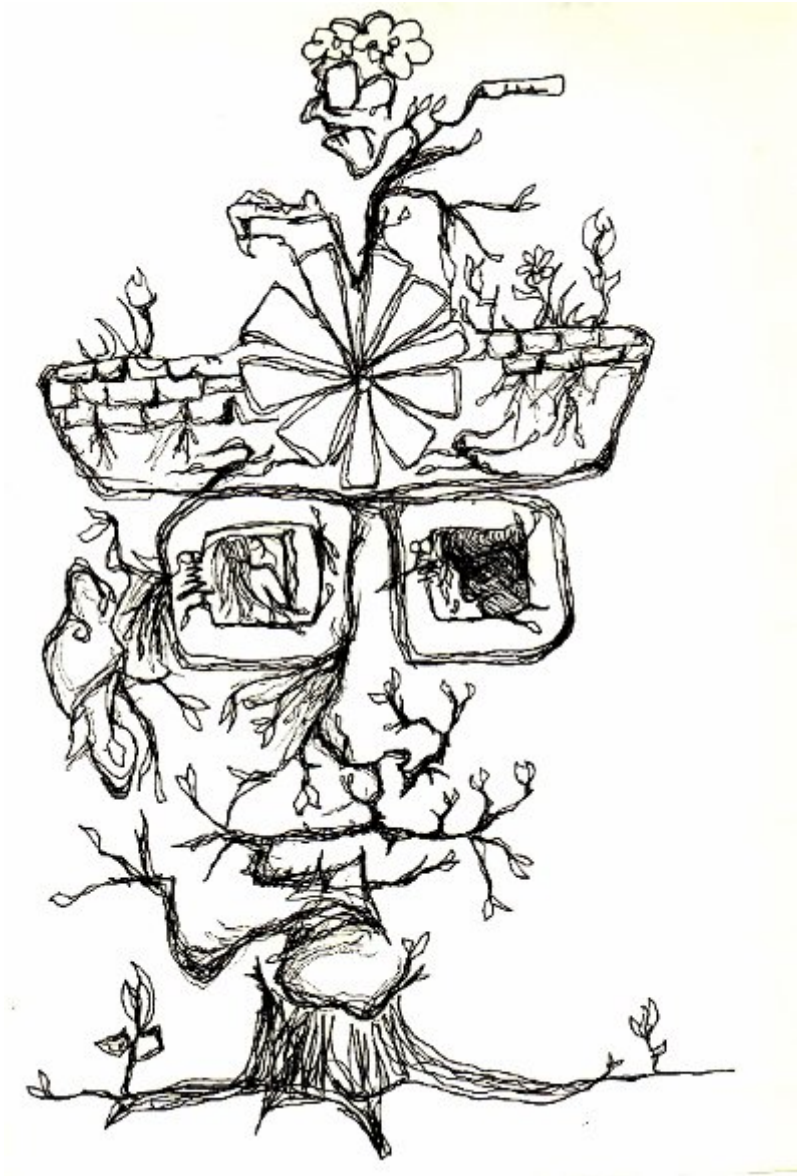
Dolores looked at him. Her right eye was puffed and almost closed. Running makeup gave her face a waxen, melted look. She wasn't beautiful anymore. "I didn't think he'd really do it," she sobbed. A wild, abstracted look came into her eyes. She picked up the knife. Casey snatched it off her and flung it away. Firmly but gently, he

guided her back into the bedroom and lay with her, holding her tight. She stared at the mirror.

“It was just a game,” she said.

“It was,” said Casey.

A shudder racked Dolores’s body. “Oh Christ, what am I going to tell them?” She fell silent a moment, seeming to have difficulty getting enough air, then added, “My poor little boys.”



Good Old Days
Doug Johnson

Sex with my Dead Wife

by Ben Cheetham

Sex was never that big a part of mine and Marie's lives. We fucked two or three times a month at most, usually on a Saturday night. You know the deal. A few drinks, a little foreplay, penetration, intercourse and (hopefully) orgasm. It wasn't spectacular, but it was satisfying. Here's the thing, though. Now that she's dead I miss having sex with her more than anything. From the moment I wake until I go to sleep, it's all I think about.

It doesn't help that I still live in the house we shared for nearly twenty years. Even now, three years after Marie's death, every room reminds me of the times we had sex in it.

In the bedroom I struggle to remember specifics. I just get a general sense of Marie – underneath me, on top of me, on her knees in front of me, grinding and sweating against me. In the other rooms, though, memories of specific occasions come rushing back with great clarity, often overwhelming my consciousness.

For instance, I might be sat talking to my daughter, Naomi, and her new boyfriend one minute and the next I'm stood bolt upright staring at Marie, who's just walked into the lounge wearing a blue satin lingerie outfit with stilettos. She walks across to me, rubs her nose against my cheek and murmurs in my ear, "I found these when I was sorting through my underwear drawer. I thought you might like to see me in them again." Then Naomi's voice brings me back to the present with a jolt.

"Are you alright, dad?" she asks.

"I'm fine," I reply, fighting back tears.

Another time I might be shaving at the bathroom sink when I feel Marie's fingers crawling up my back, and she nuzzles my neck and whispers, "I want you to fuck me." And suddenly we're kissing hard, then I'm burying my face in her breasts, and she's pushing me lower and.... Well, anyway, you get the picture.

It wouldn't be so bad if it was just the house that brought the memories back. I could always redecorate. Buy new furniture. I could

even sell the place. But what would be the point when I can't change what I'm physically attracted to?

About a year and a half after the car crash, Naomi said to me, "You really need to start getting out again, dad."

I knew she was right. The problem was I've never been much of a socialiser. Marie was my only close friend and we'd always gone out as a couple. "I suppose I could go to the pub."

"I was thinking you could join a dating agency."

I was stunned. The very thought seemed like a betrayal of her mother. "I can't believe you'd even suggest that to me."

Naomi sighed. "I knew we'd fall out over this, but I had to say something. I just can't stand to think of you being alone forever. And I'm certain that's not what mum would've wanted either."

"How do you know what your mum would've wanted?" I yelled.

"I know she'd have wanted you to be happy."

"I don't think I'll ever be happy, really happy, again."

"Oh please, dad, don't say that." Naomi moved forward to hug me, but I pushed her away. She looked at me for a moment with tears in her eyes, then turned and left the room.

Alone, I began what in recent months had become a nightly ritual. I lit some scented candles that Marie had loved to burn. Then I got out a box containing old photos of her and that blue satin lingerie. I spread the photos over the bed and began to masturbate, pressing the lingerie to my face. I came quickly. And as I lay there, doubled up, with tears streaming down my face, it suddenly hit me that if I didn't do something about it right away I'd spend the rest of my life crying and wanking over my dead wife.

I phoned Naomi to tell her I was sorry and that I was taking her advice. Then I started searching for a dating agency to join. I settled on PerfectMatch because in its advertising literature there was a quote from one of its customers that read, 'After my husband died suddenly from a heart attack, it took me a year to really say, "I need to do something." I don't like being alone and I believe my husband would have wanted me to move on. That's why I joined PerfectMatch.'

When Margaret, the woman who runs the agency, asked me what I wanted in a partner, I told her exactly, "She's forty-three years old, five feet five inches tall, around nine stone, with short bobbed

brunette hair and hazel eyes. She likes walking in the countryside, gardening, going out for an occasional meal. She's not much of a drinker or party-goer."

Margaret smiled at me in a way that suggested she'd met a great many people like me. "She sounds lovely, but I need you to think in slightly broader terms," she said sympathetically.

A couple of days later Margaret called to tell me that she'd found me a date. The woman, whose name was Jane, was a little shorter, heavier and younger than I'd specified, but everything else was spot on. I agreed to meet up with her at a local wine bar the following evening.

The date didn't get off to a good start. Both of us were nervous. Conversation was an effort. Jane spoke too much, I said little. Finally, she mumbled off into awkward silence. She glanced at her wristwatch and I knew that she was thinking the same as me, *this is going nowhere*.

"Excuse me a minute," she said, standing and heading for the toilet.

When she returned, I happened to be staring at the floor – I stare at the floor a lot these days – and I saw something that made my heart lurch. Jane was wearing open-toed shoes and her toes were the same size and shape as Marie's. And I mean exactly the same, right down to the fact that her second toe was a fraction longer than her big toe. Her toenails were even painted the same shade of pink Marie had always used. I couldn't tear my eyes off them.

"I'm sorry about this, but I've just had a call-" Jane started to say.

"Do you want another drink?" I interrupted. When she shook her head, I continued, "Look, I know I've not been much company, but this is the first time I've done this sort of thing. I was married for a lot of years and I guess I've just forgotten how to talk to women other than my wife. I mean really, really talk, not just make chit-chat."

Jane looked at me thoughtfully for a moment, then said, "Go on, I'll have another white wine."

Much later on, drunker than I'd ever been in my life, I ended up back at her house. Later still, she took my hand and led me into her bedroom. I fucked her with her legs raised high in the air so that her feet were by my face. I kissed and sucked, licked and bit her toes. I can't remember looking at her face once during the whole time we were fucking.

Afterwards, I lay on my back and, for the first time since Marie died, I felt relaxed and clear-headed and I thought of nothing.

During the night, when I was certain Jane was asleep, I pulled back the duvet from her feet. I looked at her toes for a long time and kissed them softly so as not to wake her.

Over breakfast, Jane asked, “Do you have a foot fetish?”

I felt myself blushing and could think of nothing to say in reply. I could hardly tell her the truth, so I made a clumsy excuse and left abruptly. After that I was too embarrassed to call Jane, but to my surprise she called me. We went out a couple more times, but it was obvious our relationship, if you could call it that, wasn't going anywhere. We just didn't have enough in common.

After Jane, I went on several dates that led to nothing. Then I met Hazel. When I saw her, I felt my blood surge. She was wearing a short tight skirt, with a slit up the side. Her thighs were thick and fleshy. Just like Marie's. I could barely stop myself from reaching out to stroke them. She was a chatty, self-confident divorcee. She did most of the talking, which suited me fine. On our fourth date, she took my hands, guided them to her knees and moved them up and down her thighs. During the next few weeks, my hands were hardly ever off her thighs. Eventually, though, our relationship fizzled out for the same reason as with Jane.

Fay came after Hazel. Fay had Marie's arse. A plump, peachy thing that rolled from side to side as she walked. I spent two months following her around, gazing in wonder at it.

And after Hazel came Nicole. Or rather, after Hazel's arse came Nicole's breasts. They were heavy, firm and milky white with pink-brown areolas. Veins showed bluish under the skin around their centre. It gave me goose-bumps to look at them. Marie's breasts had always been my favourite part of her body. I stayed with Nicole for almost three months.

Around this time I started to have a recurring dream. I dreamt that all the women I'd been dating were laid out on mortuary slabs and I was slicing them up. Slicing the toes off one and the breasts off another and so on. I stitch all the body parts together, creating some sort of patchwork monster. Then I fuck my creation over and over again. Usually the dream came at night, but sometimes it came during the day also. It disturbed me deeply.

I decided to stop using the dating agency.

That was when I met Elaine. I got talking to her after a crash held up the bus I was on. It wasn't a bad crash, one car ran into the back of

another at some traffic lights, but it made panic rise in my throat to see it.

“Are you alright?” asked the woman sat next to me.

“I’m fine, thanks,” I replied with difficulty. “I just hope no one’s hurt.”

“They’re fine.” The woman pointed out the window. “Look.”

I forced myself to look in the direction she was pointing and saw that the drivers were stood in the road gesticulating angrily at each other. I began to feel better, as she continued, “I wonder whose fault it was?”

“It was the fault of the driver who went into the back of the other one,” I said. “Legally, it’s always their fault.”

During the remainder of the journey, we continued chatting, and the conversation ran on easily in a way I hadn’t experienced since Marie’s death. As the woman stood to leave, I found myself offering her my phone number.

“I don’t usually do this type of thing,” I was quick to point out. “I just thought maybe we could meet up for a drink sometime.”

She smiled, promised to call me and told me her name. The following day she called and we arranged to meet up that night.

As usual I was nervous, but when Elaine smiled at me I immediately felt myself at ease. We talked. And I mean really talked. It wasn’t just me reciting the usual questions and her answering them. After a few drinks, almost without thinking about it, I found myself explaining why the sight of the crash had affected me so badly.

“A few years ago my wife and I were in a bad crash,” I said. “A car went into the back of us on a wet road. I lost control and went down a railway embankment. My wife was killed instantly. I was trapped in the car with her for four hours.”

Elaine is the first and only person I ever spoke to about the crash. She made no pretence of understanding what I’d gone through. She just looked at me sympathetically.

At the end of the evening, I asked her if she’d like to go out again sometime. She told me that she’d love to.

Over the next few months we went out many times to restaurants, theatres and for long walks. Everything was going great – at least that’s what I thought. Then, one evening, Elaine said to me, “Do you

realise, we've been seeing each other for five months now and we haven't even kissed."

I felt myself get tight inside. "Would you like to kiss me?"

"Would you like me to kiss you?"

"Sure."

Elaine leant forward to kiss me. After a while, we started to get undressed. My heart was pounding, not with excitement at what was happening, but with fear at what wasn't happening. I winced as she slid her hand inside my underpants and felt my flaccid penis. She began to massage it, but still it hung between my thighs like a dead thing.

"This is the first time this has ever happened to me," I said.

The words were out before I knew it and before I realised what they meant. Elaine looked at me with tears in her eyes. They were pretty blue eyes, and she was a nice looking woman. But she looked absolutely nothing like Marie.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Don't be. There's no need."

Elaine got dressed and left. That was a fortnight ago and I haven't spoken to her since. I haven't been out of the house either. Mostly I lie in bed with the photos and lingerie. Naomi wants me to see a doctor. But what would be the point unless they've invented a pill that can make me forget about Marie. Make me forget her toes, her thighs, her arse and those breasts. Make me forget I ever loved her.



Icy Spring
Doug Johnson

The Truth About My Grandparents

by Carol Vlassoff

I was 28 years old with a daughter of my own when I finally learned the truth about my grandparents. That Grandma and Grandpa had a pact.

My older sister, Annie, and I could never figure out what was going on that day we peeked into Grandma's parlor through a crack in the door. I think it was in 1955 so we would have been about six and eleven at the time. I remember it was a Sunday because we always went to our grandparents' on Saturdays.

My grandmother, Evelina Ruggiero, came to Canada from Naples when she was a child, and married my grandfather, Dino Vincelli, when she turned 18. Grandpa's parents had migrated to Toronto in 1888, and Grandpa was born three years later.

When I think back to that scene in the parlor I see Granny sitting at the head of a large table, her lustrous black hair pulled back up a high knot. It had a dash of silver at her forehead, as if a painter had swirled a brush across it. She was dressed in black with a lacy shawl around her shoulders. The others, all men, wore dark clothes too. They sat with stern faces at the gleaming mahogany table.

Suddenly a burly man sitting near the door spotted us. He had small pinkish eyes and a long scar on his left cheek. Without a word he got up and yanked the door shut.

I jumped back and looked around for Annie. She was already halfway up the hall. "Come on," she mouthed, jerking her head towards the porch where Mom and Dad sat talking with Grandpa.

When I caught up with her, she snorted. "Did you see that fat pig?" I guessed she was referring to the man with the scar but I didn't say anything. I hated it when Annie talked like that, and besides, I couldn't see what was so funny. I just prayed Mom and Dad wouldn't find out.

"Why can't we go into the parlor with Granny?" I asked that night as we drove back to Thornhill, the north Toronto suburb where we

lived.

“I told you, Virginia. Grandma is busy on Sundays. We only went today because your father had to work yesterday.”

“But what does Granny do in the parlor?” Annie asked.

“Please, girls. It’s none of your business,” Mom replied.

“But *Mom*,” she persisted.

Mom turned around and glared at us. “Stop it! It has nothing to do with you.” I looked at Dad but he wasn’t paying attention. He just kept driving. He was always pretty quiet. “His way of keeping Mom off his back,” Annie said.

One day, soon after my twelfth birthday, I heard Mom talking to Uncle Ben on the phone. “It just isn’t fair, Ben. You and I, their real children, but Ma treats us all the same.” Her brother said something.

“Come on, you know what I’m talking about. Sure I got along with Peg and Jeannette when we were growing up. But that was before I knew they weren’t my real sisters. That they were illegitimate.” She was silent for a moment.

“Well it isn’t any big secret is it? Pa being such a womanizer. And Ma just welcoming them into our house and raising them right alongside us, knowing full well their mothers were tramps. Prostitutes, if you ask me. Still, they’ll probably leave them just as much in their will as they leave us, their own flesh and blood.”

Uncle Ben said something and the conversation soon ended. I was bursting with excitement and couldn’t wait to find Annie and figure out what was going on.

“What are prostitutes?” I asked my sister a few minutes later. Annie was lying on her bed reading *True Romance* which she kept under her mattress so Mom wouldn’t know. I was in awe of my sister’s smooth olive skin, large hazel eyes and long black hair, tied back, with loose strands falling over her ears. I knew I’d never be beautiful like her. I took after my father’s side of the family - red hair and freckles, my fair skin permanently sunburned in the summertime.

“Prostitutes are women who get money from men for sex,” Annie replied, still glued to her magazine. “You know about sex, right? Remember what I told you the other night?” She glanced up, gave a fake yawn, and turned back to her reading.

I blushed. “Sure.” A few days before my sister had shown me how to French kiss. Remembering the sensation of her tongue in my mouth disgusted me. But deep down inside I felt a tingling that was kind of exciting.

“What does illegitimate mean?”

Annie abruptly stopped reading and squinted up at me. “What’s got into you, Ginny? Why all the questions?”

I told her about Mom’s conversation with Uncle Ben. “Mom called their mothers prostitutes. She said Aunt Peg and Aunt Jeannette are illegitimate.” As Annie listened, her face grew redder and redder, and when she spoke her voice trembled a little. “That’s disgusting. Really disgusting!” She leapt off the bed and slammed down her magazine. I walked over and restored it to its hiding place.

None of it made much sense to me. But I now understood why our aunties never came to our place. Even at Christmas and Easter, Uncle Ben always came alone. We only saw our aunts and cousins occasionally at our grandparents’ house.

“What’s wrong?” I asked Annie after supper.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” she glowered. “Anyway, I’m in a hurry.” Mike, her boyfriend, was coming over. The two of them usually disappeared into our bedroom and Annie always made me leave.

“How come you let Annie do that?” I asked Mom one night.

“They’re studying together dear,” she said. “It’s quieter for them there.” Mom liked Mike because he came from a “good family”. His father was the head of a big law firm in Toronto.

One weekend, for some reason I can’t remember, we went to Grandma’s on a Sunday. Annie tried to get out of going, but Mom insisted. Ever since I’d told her about Mom’s conversation with Uncle Ben, she’d never wanted to go there anymore. We arrived at lunchtime and I could smell roast pork, my favorite.

“Granny, you look wonderful,” I told her. She wore a silky black dress that flowed in a soft A-line to mid-calf.

“I have to look good for my granddaughters, don’t I?” she said, pulling me to her with a laugh. I sniffed a hint of lavender perfume.

Grandpa came over and lifted his glass, "To my beautiful wife." He gave a little bow and Dad joined him in a toast. "To your health and long life, Evelina."

After the meal we carried our teacups out to the front porch and sat in white wooden lawn chairs facing out on the street. When we'd finished our tea, my sister and I helped Grandma with the dishes and headed for the parlor. Granny always asked us to play the piano after lunch.

But this time she stopped us. "You don't have to play today, my dears. I need the parlor this afternoon. Why don't you go sit on the porch with the others?"

"Can we go out in the back yard?" Annie asked. It was a beautiful sunny day and she wanted to work on her tan.

"Not today, love. Out to the porch with you," she said with a shooing gesture.

Outside, Grandpa was telling our parents a story, waving his hands around. All of a sudden he stopped in mid-sentence.

"Afternoon, Ma'am," he called to a tall woman passing by, raising himself half out of his chair. The lady, smartly dressed in a light summer dress and sling-back heels, glanced at him, nodded curtly and walked on. I looked at Annie and she rolled her eyes dramatically.

I had drifted off to sleep when suddenly there was a shout. I awoke to see Grandpa running back into the house, and Mom and Dad standing very straight, side by side, blocking the doorway. Five men were striding up the sidewalk towards us. They were tall and sinister looking, just like in my *Dick Tracey* comic books.

"Step aside," a heavy man in uniform barked. The other men were looking suspiciously from one person to the other. One of them carried a camera and had a logo on his jacket from the *Toronto Telegram* newspaper.

I felt a tug on my sleeve. "Go out back and see if anything happens," Annie whispered. "I'll stay here."

My heart was thumping as I climbed over the porch railing and jumped down to the ground. I heard my mother's voice rising in panic. "You must be mistaken!"

"I don't think so, Ma'am. Now please step aside."

As I bolted into the shed, a whole stream of men, their black hats and

coats askew, came barging out the door and hurtled down the path. I recognized the burly one with the scar, elbowing the others out of the way. Everyone was running, their necks craning forward. In a minute they all vanished through the gate.

I sneaked back into the parlor, hoping no one would notice. I didn't need to worry because they didn't pay any attention to me. The five men were gone, and Grandpa was nowhere to be seen. I caught Annie's eye and she shook her head slightly, warning me not to say anything. Mom was clutching a handkerchief in one hand and her eyes were red. Dad held her other hand and kept looking anxiously at the door, as if expecting the men to return. By comparison, Granny looked fairly calm, but she had a worried expression on her face. Soon Dad said it was time to leave. Granny hugged us and made us promise to come back the next Saturday.

The drive home was pretty much a replay of that first Sunday visit to Grandma's, except that this time Mom was obviously upset.

"Are they in some kind of trouble?" Annie asked.

"No, honey," my father replied.

"But the police took Grandpa away!" Annie protested. "And they had guns. What's going to happen to him?"

Dad shook his head. "Nothing. Look, I'm trying to drive. We'll discuss it later, alright?" We drove the rest of the way in silence.

That evening Annie and I talked for hours about the strange things we'd seen at Grandma's. We were pretty sure the police were after Granny because they insisted on going into the parlor, even though everyone was trying to keep them out. But what could she be doing that was against the law?

The next night after supper Mom and Dad called us into the living room and motioned for Annie and me to sit down on the green brocade sofa. We hardly ever used this room, except when people came to visit, so I knew they were going to tell us something important.

"We think you deserve an explanation," Mom began, "about Grandma. The reason we never told you before was that she never wanted anyone to know, and we respected her wishes. But we feel you're both old enough now to keep a secret."

I held my breath, perched on the edge of the sofa, waiting for her to continue.

“You see, your grandma has a fondness for poker. As far back as I can remember, she’s been playing once a week, on Sundays, and always in the same company.”

Annie frowned. “But why the big secret? What’s wrong with poker?”

“Gambling is illegal,” Mom replied, “and you never, ever, see women doing it.”

“But women play bingo,” I protested.

“Some do. But Ma hates bingo. Says it bores her to tears.”

“So that’s why the police came yesterday. They were trying to catch Grandma in the act?”

Dad leaned forward. “Yes, but luckily Grandpa was able to warn her in time.” And then, as if in confirmation, Grandma called to say that Grandpa was back home and that no charges had been laid.

“We have another question,” Annie ventured, “about our two aunts. They aren’t Granny’s, are they?”

Mom stiffened. “Who told you that?”

I spoke up, a hot flush running from my head to my toes, and told her how I’d found out.

Mom relaxed a little. “It’s OK, Ginny. You didn’t do anything wrong. We just didn’t see any need to tell you. But no, they aren’t my real sisters. Your grandpa is their father though, and Ma brought them up.”

“But how could Grandma put up with that?” Annie asked.

Mom hesitated for a moment before answering. “Perhaps because, apart from the women, your grandpa was a good husband and provided well for his family. And in those days, Italian men often went out with other women. It wasn’t considered bad or shameful, just part of being a man. And women like Evelina had to accept it. It was their way.”

“But even if she could live with *that*, how could she take in his children? His girlfriends’ illegitimate kids?”

“I’ve often asked myself that question,” Mom replied. “But Ma never talked about it.” I wondered if my mother had ever tried to ask Grandma about her step-sisters. I guessed that she’d just kept quiet, letting bitterness and resentment eat away at her.

Mom stood up and Dad looked relieved. "It's getting late," he said. "Time for bed."

"And one more thing, girls," Mom added. "Don't tell anyone what we told you tonight. Especially not Grandma or Grandpa."

For a few weeks afterwards, I tried to talk with Annie about our grandparents. But she said she didn't want to talk about it anymore. She was busy with high school finals and Mike took up all the rest of her time. She graduated that year and moved to Winnipeg, where Mike was going to study.

After Annie left, my parents and I still visited Grandma and Grandpa every Saturday, our afternoons following much the same pattern they always did. No one mentioned the police raid again, and I hardly ever saw Aunt Peg or Aunt Jeannette.

When my first born, Rebecca, was nine months old, I went to visit Grandpa. It was the first time he'd seen her because I now lived in Montreal, six hours away by car. Granny had passed away two years earlier.

Grandpa was always a big man, but at 92, he was thinner, shrunken and slightly stooped. His eyes lit up when he saw us and he tottered over and held out his arms.

"So good to see you Grandpa," I said, hugging him and balancing Rebecca on my hip. After a few seconds he released me and stood looking down at her. Gently, he took her small hand in his, bony and spotted with age.

"Reminds me of Evelina," he said. "The shape of her face - those big black eyes." He pointed to an old black and white photograph of Grandma as a baby, on top of the round oak table in the corner. She would have been about Rebecca's age.

I glanced down at my little girl. She had curly auburn hair and fair skin like me. But when I looked back at the picture, I saw what Grandpa meant. Her eyes were exactly like Grandma's. "She does look like her. She really does. But let's talk about you, Grandpa. How've you been?"

"Not bad. I don't see too good anymore, but I get by. Your Aunt Peg's a big help. She moved in next door, you know."

"I'm glad. It makes me feel better knowing you're not all by yourself."

Grandpa, I want to ask you something.”

“Shoot,” he replied, “I got all afternoon.”

“Mom asked me not to tell you but she and Dad confided in us after that Sunday we visited you, remember? When the police barged in on you? Mom told us about Grandma’s passion for gambling and your passion for women.”

Grandpa chuckled. “That was a mouthful if I ever heard one!” Then he grew serious. “Evelina never wanted anybody to know. But you’re a grown woman now. I reckon there’s no harm in answering your question.”

“It’s about those other women. Why did Granny put up with it? Didn’t she try to stop you?”

Grandpa shook his head and looked down at his boots. “Evelina knew me too well for that.”

“But wasn’t it hard for her?”

“It was, at first. I caught her crying once when she found out, but she never said a word to me about it again. Just took me as I was. And when those girls got pregnant, Evelina offered to take them in, to bring up their children.”

“Didn’t they want to keep them?”

“Even if they did, in those days things were different. It would have been real hard for them, and even harder for the little ones. So they saw it as a way out, I guess, given their situation and all.”

“Did Peg and Jeannette ever see them? Their mothers, I mean.”

“You bet. They came to visit whenever they wanted. Evelina was real good to them. She fussed over them, made them meals, invited them to stay. I think she tried to put herself in their shoes.”

I got up and put Rebecca in his lap. “Hold her for a moment, Grandpa. I’ll go make some coffee.” I’d brought oatmeal cookies because I knew he liked them. When I returned, Grandpa was jiggling Rebecca on his knee and she squealed with delight. I settled back into my chair and reached for her.

“I have another question. About the gambling. Grandma was clearly under suspicion. Didn’t she ever get caught?”

“Never,” he replied, a glint in his eye. “There were a few close calls, but I was always here to watch out for her.”

I thought about the afternoon of the raid, and how Grandpa had rushed into the house to warn her, and how the police took him, not Granny, away. And that's when I realized that Grandma and Grandpa had a pact, a pact that had grown stronger and stronger over the years. Instinctively, they entrusted each other with the freedom to do the things they loved, even when they challenged conventional norms of respectability. They tolerated each others' idiosyncracies, and while not explicitly condoning them, they did everything they could to look out for one another.

Grandpa's voice interrupted my thoughts. "There's another thing. I never told anyone, not even your mother. Of course, she asked a lot of questions, but I just told her Grandma died peacefully in her sleep."

"Oh God, Grandpa!" I gasped. "What really happened?"

He smiled. "I was sitting on the porch when Luciano came to tell me. She passed away right at the parlor table, doing what she loved most." Suddenly, his eyes filled with tears.

I absently twirled one of Rebecca's auburn curls around my finger. "You really miss her, don't you, Grandpa?" But he didn't seem to hear me. He just sat there, staring out the window.

It's past 5 o'clock when I leave him and head for Annie's place, where I've promised to spend the night. She lives in Oakville, about an hour's drive from Toronto.

"Mike's away on business," Annie said when I called. "We'll have the place all to ourselves – catch up – maybe order a pizza."

I've been looking forward to seeing my sister, but now I wish I didn't have to go. I want to savor the moment, to let my thoughts linger on everything I've learned from Grandpa.

On an impulse, I turn off crowded highway 401 onto a county road and roll down the windows. The golden wheat ripples and shimmers in the evening sun. I feel the bite of late summer air against my cheeks. The roadside mosaic of blue cornflowers, goldenrod, Queen Anne's lace and purple daisies brings back poignant memories of family drives, when we'd pull off the road and pick armfuls of wildflowers for the kitchen table. A sense of closure comes over me.

I look at Rebecca, sound asleep, her head nodding with the car's motion. I think what a privilege it will be to raise her, what things I

will emulate from my own upbringing and what I will do differently. I will teach her to appreciate the uniqueness in others, like Grandma and Grandpa, and to disregard the labels people use to categorize and dismiss one another. I will strive to preserve her freshness and innocence, her trust in the world around her. I will never lie to her.

I pray that Grandpa will live his remaining years in health and comfort, and that Rebecca will be able to remember him and love him as I do. I'll take her to see him more often now, and we'll show her Evelina's picture. I think she'll be pleased by the resemblance. And when she grows older, I will tell her the truth about my grandparents, hiding and embellishing nothing, so that she, like me, can delight in their legacy.

Consumer Course Correction; Who's In Charge

by Phil Harris

The world economy may well be headed for the “Mother of all course corrections.” Economists use the term “course correction” to talk about things like the overall direction of the economy, changes in economic policy, changes in the specific plans of a major corporation, or a group of businesses forming a segment of the economy. Think of a corporation deciding to focus its marketing on the aging ‘baby boomers’ as a course correction. A nation trying to create a more favorable balance of trade by reducing or increasing tariffs would be a policy course correction. These are conscious decisions aimed at affecting some part of the economy or market.

The term, “course correction” is rarely used regarding consumers. You will hear reports of consumer spending, consumer confidence or consumer preferences, but not “consumer course correction.” The implication is that while consumers might respond to economic conditions by either spending or saving more, consumers are not thought of in terms of having any kind of unified consciousness like a corporation. Their decisions are seen as a reaction to something, rather than a planned and coordinated response to direct a change in the economy. According to standard economics, if credit is tight, the consumer spends less and if credit is loose, the consumer racks up their credit card balances. The consumer is seen as sheep who are led by their collective noses by mass advertising and they will buy just about anything if the marketing is done right.

Historically, this has been true. Consumers have jumped at the latest fads, fashions and gadgets in a system designed for perpetual consumption. Credit has flowed freely and the consumer has almost enjoyed its courtship with corporations. Awards for best commercials attest to this marriage and ads for new products and ‘sales’ are read religiously. The shopping frenzy around holidays is an embarrassment. The consumer is the follower that has been led by the nose by big corporations.

We are all familiar with the status of the current economy. The sub-prime mortgage crisis is playing havoc with businesses and consumers. Oil prices have and will continue to climb robbing

precious dollars from the already precarious economy. Food prices are rising and banks and lending institutions are scrambling for survival. The Dow, which is really based on only 30 companies, is trying desperately to stabilize. All in all, not a pretty picture as consumer confidence wanes and retail sales decline. Keep one thing in mind, all of this economic uproar is because you, the consumer, are not buying as much as 'they' want you to. Our economy is based upon buy, break and throw away and buy again. It is here that a "consumer course correction" may occur.

Could this be the end of the Age of Consumption? Is it possible that the light at the end of this economic tunnel is that the consumer will finally 'decide' what it wants rather than being 'told' what it wants? As prices for the basic, food, clothing and shelter continue to skyrocket, reckless consumption will have to come to an end. This is a positive event. The planet is hurting. We are raping it of its resources, destroying the natural balance and web of life and altering its climate. In the wake of growing natural disasters, the time of reckless use of resources to feed an insatiable business appetite must come to an end. Remember, the bottom line of business is to get you to consume for the sake of consumption. It has nothing to do with socially conscious or 'green' buying. However, the consumer will soon find itself in a position to dictate what it wants for products. Consumers will have to make choices between disposable garbage and products of true and lasting value. The consumer can demand quality and chemical free food. The consumer can demand high mpg, non-polluting vehicles. The consumer can demand the elimination of poisonous plastic food containers. The consumer can demand products that last and that are made according to high safety standards. The consumer can demand a rapid change to alternative, clean and renewable energy resources.

How does the consumer cause a course correction? It merely spends it money on those items that meet socially responsible goals. The consumer can only buy those products packaged in glass. They can buy the higher, albeit foreign, mileage cars. They can stop wasting money on poor quality fast foods. It can stop taking their children to worthy events and activities and save gas. After a while, pressure will build for change.

They can stop attending social functions and meeting and hearings. By using their spending and their time in a socially conscious way, the consumer can take control of the economy.

All of this may sound like wishful thinking. But as the dollar is reduced in value and as travel becomes too costly, decisions will have to be made. The economy will never again be 'business as usual.' The consumer cannot afford it and the planet cannot afford it. Does this mean suffering and sacrifice? No, it means that the consumer will soon be in a position to do what politicians and businesses have been unwilling to do, to create a sane and rational world where humanity and nature live in harmony and balance.



We quit stopping
Doug Johnson



Dreamzzz
Doug Johnson

Contributors

Carrie Crow is a New York City based photographer. Her work has appeared in *Inscribed* and the forthcoming issues of *Burst!*, *Qarrtsiluni*, *Sein und Werden* and <http://baronandcrow.blogspot.com>, an ongoing collaborative project with poet, John Greiner.

Gary Beck has spent most of his adult life as a theater director and worked as an art dealer when he couldn't earn a living in the theater. He has also been a tennis pro, a ditch digger and a salvage diver. His original plays and translations of Moliere, Aristophanes and Sophocles have been produced Off Broadway and toured colleges and outdoor performance venues. He currently lives in New York City, where he's busy writing fiction and his short stories have recently appeared in numerous literary magazines.

Nicole Borgenicht is a playwright and freelance writer in most venues from short stories to film and theatre. She is also a freelance editor, and writes essays, articles and poetry.

Ben Cheetham is thirty-two years old and lives in Sheffield, Yorkshire, UK. His fiction has been published in *The London Magazine*, *Dream Catcher*, *Skive*, *Transmission*, *Volume Magazine*, *Cause & Effect*, *Escape Velocity* and *Espresso Fiction*. He also has a story forthcoming in *Swill Magazine*.

Ernest Dempsey (Abdul Karim Khan) Ernest Dempsey is a geology graduate and an MA in English Literature. He has authored four books: *Islands of Illusion*, *The Biting Age*, *Two Candles*, and *The Blue Fairy and Other Stories*. Dempsey is a founding member of the *World Audience Inc.* and the editor in chief of the quarterly review journal *The Audience Review*. He is completing his first novel. He also writes essays, freelance articles, blogs, and conducts author interviews. Visit Dempsey at <http://www.freewebs.com/ernestdempsey/>

Glenn Halak Acting from early on through high school; minor in Directing for Ph.d. in English. That never got finished. Course in directing Shakespeare from Margaret Webster. She didn't like us.

Work with Broom St. Theater - experimental theater run by Joel Gersmann. Four plays produced, two in Madison, one in Taos and one off-off Broadway. Lots of writing unpublished. Art work including three children's books, two independently published and one, *A Grandmother's Story*, by Simon & Schuster. Lots of music mostly for piano but I like writing songs for plays. Two dogs, one cat, four roosters.

Phil Harris was born in Massachusetts and currently resides in Maine. He received his degree in Political Science from The American University in Washington, D.C. and has worked at every level of government. He is currently employed in special education. Being knowledgeable in the areas of **secret societies**, **occult** and **religious studies** he has been a student of mystical studies and a member of several "fraternal" organizations for over twenty five years. He is co-author of the controversial novel **WAKING GOD**, coined a "spiritual thriller," which was released 6'06. His second novel, **A MAINE CHRISTMAS CAROL** was released by Cambridge Books in 2'07. His third book (non-fiction), **JESUS TAUGHT IT, TOO: THE EALY ROOTS OF THE LAW OF ATTRACTION** was released by Avatar Publication 8'07. His fourth book, **RAPING LOUISIANA: A DIARY OF DECEIT** was released by Cambridge Books, 9/07. His fifth and sixth books, **MESSAGES: AN ERA OF TRANSFORMATION** and **MESSAGES II: THE REVOLUTION WITHIN**, have just been released by Avatar Publication. Mr. Harris is a nationally syndicated and featured writer for **The American Chronicle** and has a blog called **ALL THINGS THAT MATTER**. He is listed as a **spiritual growth** expert on **SelfGrowth.com**. He is host of his own Talk Radio show called ALL THINGS THAT MATTER on **BlogTalkRadio**, <http://blogtalkradio.com/pharris> . More information on his works can be found at:

<http://dickens111.tripod.com/theliteraryworksofphilpharris/>

As a certified Holistic Life Coach, Mr. Harris offers guidance to those seeking to take control of their body, mind and spirit at his web site:

<http://dickens111.tripod.com/newearthhlc/>

Joshua Hill is an ambitious writer living in New Orleans, LA. His literary enthusiasm derives from the majesty of biblical and medieval lore. He is an avid poet and aspiring novelist sharing a strong love for comic books.

Doug Johnson was born in Denver, Colorado. He is a writer, musician, and artist. Doug also creates hand made greeting cards entitled, "Mandala Magic," and hopes to continue illustrating other projects. Indeed, a former graphic artist, he still designs books, CD jackets, and book covers, but he most enjoys collaborating with artists and authors. In 1998, in collaboration with Dan Peters of Blue Begonia Press, Doug won "Best Letterpress Design" at the Bumbershoot Arts Festival in Seattle for his first book design. Check out his latest "Cracked Pots" Series at:

www.thehoustonliteraryreview.com/Doug_Johnson_May_2008.aspx

Doug's latest book of poetry and prose, "Black Mountain Whispers: A Tribute to Raymond Carver," came out this year and is available at www.cavemoonpress.org. Note that Doug is the founder of Cave Moon Press, a non-profit literary press dedicated to underserved populations and literature. His poems have appeared in *Audience Review* and *Poesia*, and his photos have made the cover of *Audience Review* and *Tipton Review*. More of his photography is forthcoming in *Whitefish Literary Review*. Hugh Fox on Doug's poetry in *Audience*. Doug Johnson whose every poem is the take-off point for the minimum of an hour of musings and reflections... (*Small Press Review*).

Besa Kosova discovered her passion for poetry and writing in elementary school. The first poem she wrote – at age six – was about peace. At age eight, she decided to become a writer. Since then, she has not stopped writing. Besides writing, she enjoys more writing and a lot of reading. Her first poetry collection entitled *Raindrops* was published in September 2007. She is a single mother of two and a full time student, majoring in Creative Writing at the University of Central Florida. She is currently working on a series of four books as well as attempting to write her first romance novel.

Yehoshua November's work was recently selected as the winner of the Bernice Slote Award for poetry, and his manuscript was a finalist in the 2007 Spire Press poetry book competition. His poems are forthcoming in *New Works Review*, *Provincetown Arts*, *Zeek*, *Poetica*, *European Judaism*, and the newspaper *The Forward*. The two poems that appear in this issue of *Audience* were first published in *Prairie Schooner*, which nominated "Upstairs the Eulogy, Downstairs the Rummage Sale" for a Pushcart Prize.

Anthony Rubino, Jr. was born in New Jersey, a first-generation, Italian-American, Roman-Catholic. Needless to say he developed a sense of

humor at an early age ... and then felt guilty about it. Combining, confusion, art, humor and TV he found his calling in the careful study of drivel. Never a stickler for math, Tony wrote, "Life Lessons from Your Dog" as the fifth installment of his Life-Lessons book trilogy, which includes "Life Lessons from Your Cat," "Life Lessons from Elvis," "Life Lessons from the Bradys," and "Life Lessons from Melrose Place." Before that he displayed his steely work ethic by penning, "1001 Reasons to Procrastinate." And his fear of discomfort through eternal damnation is reflected in his recent tome, "The Get Into Heaven Deck: Or Your Money Back." Along the way Tony has contributed his articles and cartoons to publications such as: MAD Magazine, Cracked, National Lampoon, the Chicago Tribune, and Opium Magazine. He is currently under contract with Creators Syndicate where he is developing a daily cartoon strip. His other cartoon syndication credits include national distribution by King Features and Tribune Media Services. Tony's designs, comics and words can also be found on greeting cards and other product lines such as calendars, posters, and apparel sold in stores and catalogs worldwide. When not working on his writing and art in New York City he spends his time not working on his writing and art in New York City.

M. Stefan Strozier lives in New York City. He is the founder and artistic director of La Muse Venale Acting Troupe. His plays, *Guns, Shackles & Winter Coats*, *The Whales*, *The Tragedy of Abraham Lincoln*, and *The Green Game*, were performed in lengthy runs, off-off and Off-Broadway, in the Midtown International Theatre Festival and other festivals. He has directed five plays and one musical, and produced fifteen. His novels, short stories, poems, essays, plays, etceteras, are on his Web site: www.mstefanstrozier.org. He has been published in literary journals (online and in print), magazines, and newspapers. He is the founder, CEO, and editor-in-chief of World Audience Publishers.

Christopher Taylor is from Liverpool, England. After completing a degree in Industrial Design from the University of Central Lancashire, he set up a design consultancy where he is co-director. Chris also works as a freelance designer / illustrator and creates digital artwork for a local gallery. He has designed multiple book covers (and the spines and back covers) for World Audience.

Michael J. Vaughn is the author of the comic sex mystery *Double Blind* (available at amazon.com) and six other novels. His poems have appeared in *The Montserrat Review*, www.Terrain.org and the *North Atlantic Review*. Vaughn is regular contributor to *Writer's Digest*, and in fact got hooked on shape poems as a result of a WD story on the subject and an interview with famed shape poet John Hollander. Home page: geocities.com/michaeljvaughn.

Carol Vlassoff is a Canadian who has worked for 32 years in the field of international development. She has worked in India, Africa and Latin America and currently writes and consults from her home in Costa Rica. During her career with the World Health Organization (1987-2006), she authored many publications on social and health issues. These include two books, 45 scientific articles in peer reviewed journals such as *World Development* and the *Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene*, and 10 book chapters. Her most recent article on gender issues in health and illness will soon be published in *The Encyclopedia of Public Health* by Elsevier, London.

Dr. Mel Waldman is a licensed New York State psychologist and a candidate in Psychoanalysis at the Center for Modern Psychoanalytic Studies (CMPS). He is also a poet, writer, artist, and singer/songwriter. After 9/11, he wrote 4 songs, including "Our Song," which addresses the tragedy. His stories have appeared in numerous literary reviews and commercial magazines including AUDIENCE, HAPPY, SWEET ANNIE PRESS, POETICA, CHILDREN, CHURCHES AND DADDIES and DOWN IN THE DIRT (SCARS PUBLICATIONS), PBW, NEW THOUGHT JOURNAL, THE BROOKLYN LITERARY REVIEW, HARDBOILED, HARDBOILED DETECTIVE, DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE, ESPIONAGE, and THE SAINT. He is a past winner of the literary GRADIVA AWARD in Psychoanalysis and was nominated for a PUSHCART PRIZE in literature. Periodically, he has given poetry and prose readings and has appeared on national T.V. and cable T.V. He is a member of Mystery Writers of America, Private Eye Writers of America, American Mensa, Ltd., and the American Psychological Association. He is currently working on a mystery novel inspired by Freud's case studies. *Who Killed the Heartbreak Kid?*, a mystery novel, was published by iUniverse in February 2006. It can be purchased at www.iuniverse.com/bookstore/, www.bn.com, at www.amazon.com, and other online bookstores or through local

bookstores. Some of his poems have appeared online in THE JERUSALEM POST. *Dark Soul of the Millennium*, a collection of plays and poetry, was published by World Audience, Inc. in January 2007. It can be purchased at www.worldaudience.org, www.bn.com, at www.amazon.com, and other online bookstores or through local bookstores. A 7-volume short story collection was published by World Audience, Inc. in May 2007 and can also be purchased online at the above-mentioned sites. I AM A JEW, a book in which Dr. Waldman examines his Jewish identity through memoir, essays, short stories, poetry, and plays, was published by World Audience, Inc. in January 2008.

Matthew Ward contributed poems from his new book, 'Cats Creep the Fire to Art: Collected Pretentious Poems (1992-1996)', published by World Audience (USA). Matthew lives & writes in his native Newcastle, Australia, a former steel city, now burgeoning artistic metropolis. In 2004, his story, 'Jake With A Snarly Smile On His Chops' was published as a novella by Independence Jones (Australia). In late 2006 World Audience (USA) published his short story anthology, 'Her Mouth Looked Like a Cat's Bum'. His short stories have appeared in several magazines, printed as well as online. Ditto, his articles – both serious & satirical. While wearing his publishing cape he created the popular Skive Magazine, now entering its frenetic 5th year.

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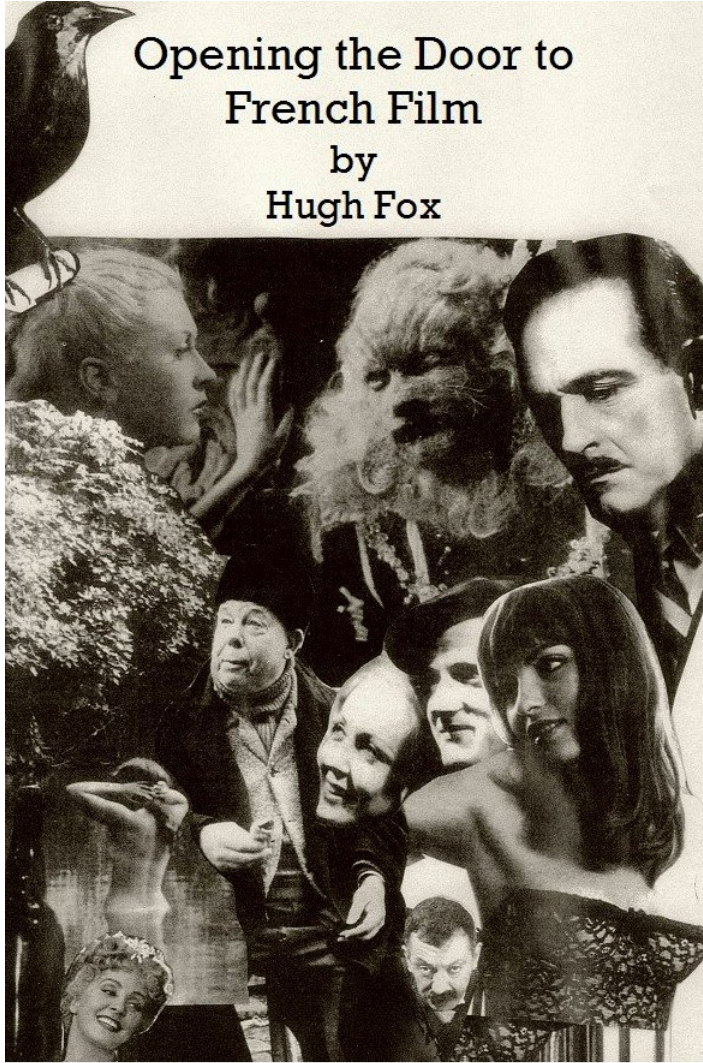
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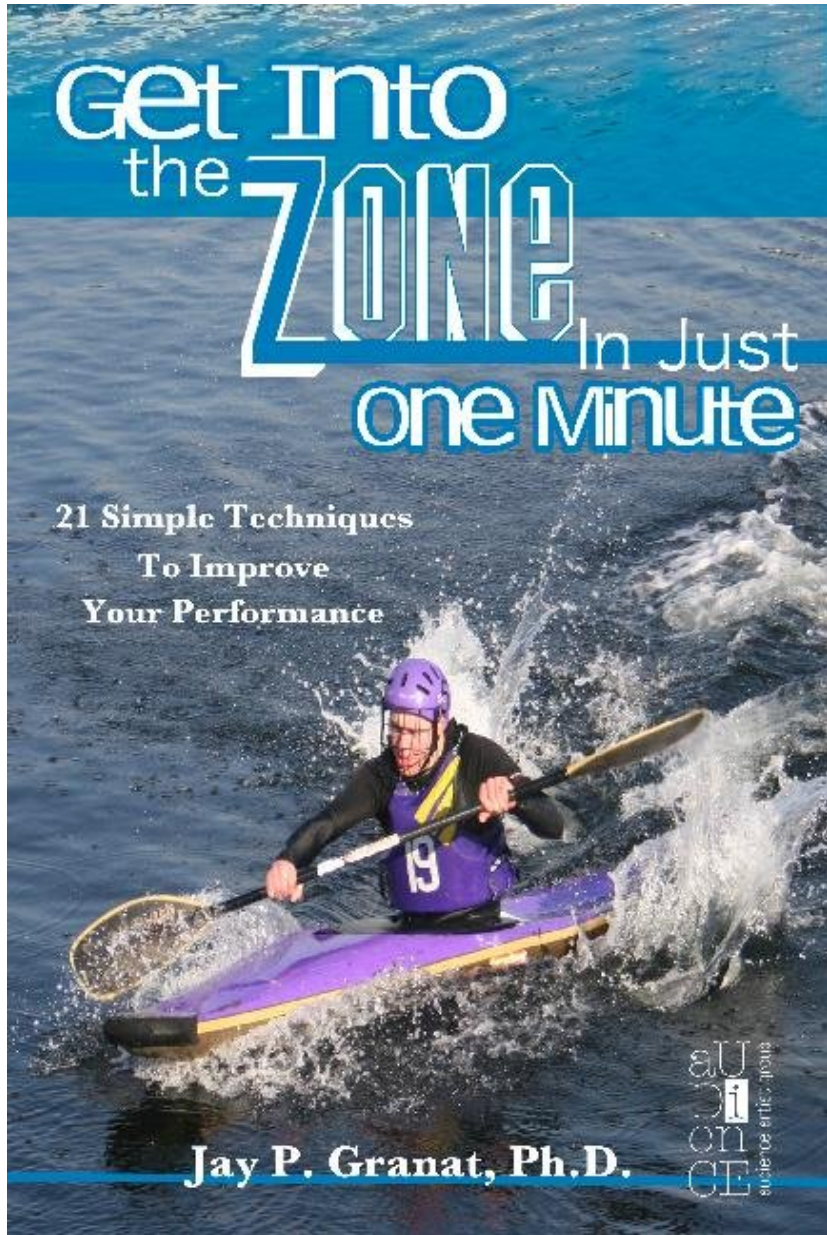
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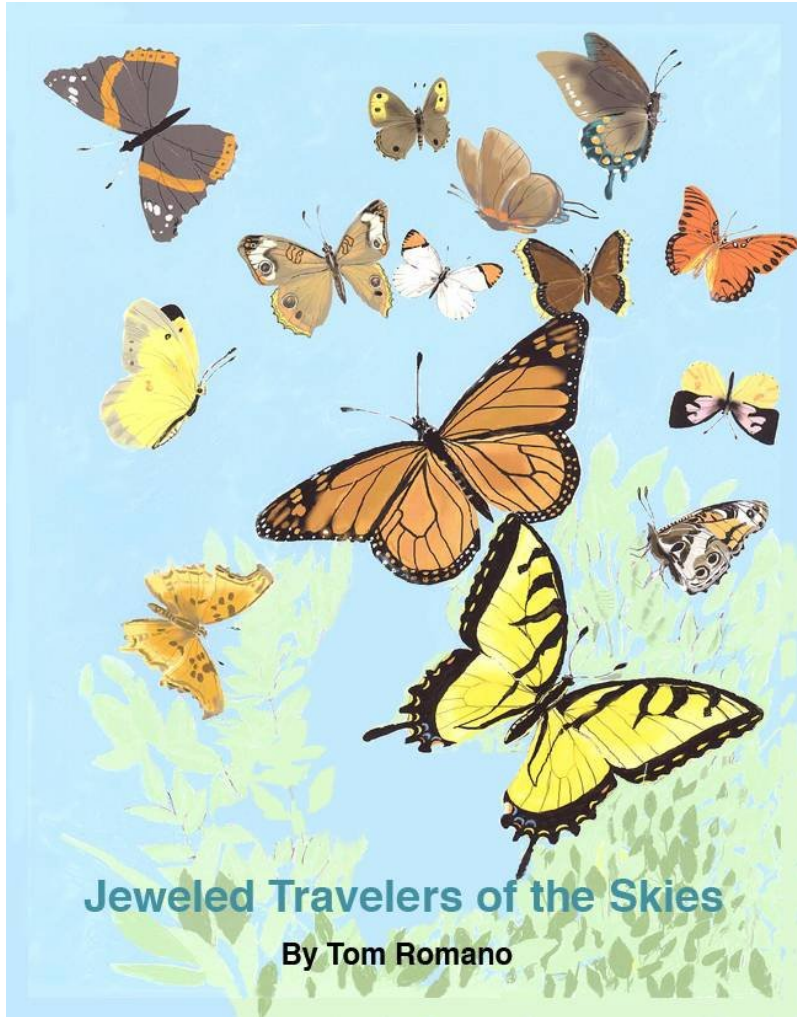


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