The Externalist:
A Journal of Perspectives

nonfiction

Tom Sullivan

fiction

Kathie Giorgio

poetry

Laurie Kuntz
Jéanpaul Ferro
David Chorlton

FIRST ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

Issue 7
April 2008

The Externalist: A Journal of Perspectives
Issue 7, April 2008

Table of Contents

A Note from the Editor		3
Editor's Choice		
Missing	*Jennifer Weathers*	4
Literature		
What Happened to Our Government?: Reflections from a Common Citizen	*Dr. Parker Wilson*	5
Brief Bridges	*Joe Paddock*	12
a broken w	*Caryl Klein Sills*	13
Teenage Failures in Magic	*Donny Wankan*	24
Chain of Events	*Kathie Giorgio*	25
24/7	*Jéanpaul Ferro*	27
At hand's reach	*Mariana Dietl*	28
Ode to My Jeep – and Waterboarding	*Ed Bennett*	38
Three Poems	*Ruth Goring*	39-40
I Could Be One, But No One Will Tell Me *Photo: Zero Decree by O.P.W. Fredericks*	*Tom Sullivan*	41
Two Poems	*Laurie Kuntz*	46-7
A Mother's Love *Photo: Dappled Stone Throne by O.P.W. Fredericks*	*O.P.W. Fredericks*	48
Little Bighorn	*Claudia Putnam*	54
A Few Things I Learned at Randall-Shane	*Francine Marie Tolf*	55
Ecorealism	*David Chorlton*	62
Follies of a Sane Man on a Cold Night	*Luke Evans*	63
Gut Reaction		67
Contributor's Notes		68

Editor

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A Note from the Editor

A year has passed since I sat down at my computer and asked, "How do you put together a journal, anyway?" Since that first issue, we've published nonfiction about bulimia, military life, racism, familial abandonment, and life in the sixties; fiction about the death of a child, gender expectations in marriage, religious controversies, food allergies in education, and political satire; and poetry from and about social issues across the United States and the world. A short story published here was recognized on "Best of the Net 2007." And the submissions are still coming in.

This issue takes a slightly different approach than past issues with stories, poems, and nonfiction that focus on the effect of the outward world—societal standards and deviations—on the individual. Never before have we had so much difficulty deciding on an Editor's Choice piece. Kathie Giorgio's short story "Chain of Events" is so well-written and thought-provoking that I read it four times before I added it to the online version. Tom Sullivan's essay "I Could Be One, But No One Will Tell Me" could become a popular staple of those times we're reading aloud to visitors and stands as perhaps the most humorous piece we've ever had the opportunity to publish. Poetry in this issue crosses the entire gamut of externalist thought. In the end, we decided upon the one piece that we never thought we would see: the externalist love poem. We included more experimental styles this issue, including Caryl Klein Sills' short story "a broken w" which exemplifies how important form is to content. We also introduce in this issue a new section for reader response, "Gut Reaction." We actively encourage submissions to this new section.

In the coming year, we're looking at new ways to promote literature. May 24th and 25th, I will be serving as a panelist for PRESS: a cross-cultural literary conference. This year's theme for their conference is "Activism and the Avant Garde." We are considering methods to include more media on the site, as well as ways to reach a larger audience. We thank you for accompanying us this far, and hope to see you as we continue the journey.

L.

Editors' Choice

Editor's Appreciation

Until reading this month's Editor's Choice, I hadn't thought anyone could pull off the externalist love poem. Jennifer Weathers proved me wrong--always an exciting experience. In "Missing," Weathers intertwines the relationship of two people amidst war and violence. Violence itself becomes a metaphor for love which "takes more / hate than any man has in his heart." The narrated experience sets the tone for loneliness and fear while subtly hinting that some dispassion might be preferable. We include this poem as Editor's Choice because Weathers so skillfully combines the personal with the global. Because this poems exemplifies looking beyond the self and into the realm of *other*.

by Jennifer Weathers

Missing

To write love poetry was to be
in love, and this image of her
breasts and easily bruised
skin like a fallen apricot tore
at his mind as the cityscape of Ljubljana
pierced the sky when they took her.
The inaccuracies of love are
misinterpreted in the thick carpet
of military caravans and the sound
of sirens a melted song that hung
in the air, heard only
by the pigeons left
to brave the streets, as lonely
as the bed without her body
holding her side down, the blankets
free to will themselves
into another existence, another hemisphere
where he could not follow. To write
love poetry, he knows, it takes more
hate than any man has in his heart,
like coins in his pocket:
more than enough for one man.

What Happened To Our Government?:
Reflections From A Common Citizen

by Dr. Parker Wilson

In 2006, I was considering leaving the United States in favor of either Canada or England. I was considering this not because I had developed a disdain for my people, my culture, or my homeland; I was considering expatriating because I had developed a deep disdain for my government. In 2004, we had elected, for the second time, a dead-behind-the-eyes, war hawk who was clearly involved in deceit and was escalating extended international aggression with no regard for the consent of his own people or the opinion of the world community. In 2005, 1,836 of my fellow citizens lost their lives because of both hurricane Katrina and the federal government's nearly complete apathy and lack of aid to the region in the aftermath. In 2006, we were spending close to five billion dollars a month in Iraq, all while our own people floundered within an increasingly inadequate education system, a distinct lack of quality health care, a crumbling infrastructure, and a cooling economy. As a newly graduated doctor of clinical psychology, my own circumstances were less than ideal as well. I was (and still am) buried in student loan debt, I had no health insurance, the climate crisis had only escalated and had been almost entirely unaddressed, and I saw our government mindlessly re-enacting certain aspects of the Vietnam War (complete with a re-enactment of much of the materialism, cronyism, and corruption of the Nixon administration).

> *"...the country was like a piece of dry oak paneling hit with a bullet – we were violently splintered and divided almost irreparably."*

Gore Vidal calls our country "the United States of Amnesia." In reflecting on the Bush administration, and then comparing it to the Nixon administration, I must conclude that Mr. Vidal might have a point. In 1970 we had been mired down in an unwise and exceedingly expensive war for several years. Despite having promised to end the Vietnam war during his 1968 run for the White House, Nixon had, in fact, only escalated it. He even expanded the fighting into Cambodia. The military-industrial complex (the same one that Eisenhower had warned us about upon leaving the White House in 1960) was gorging itself at the expense of both the US national

economy, and the lives of American and Vietnamese citizens. The cost of the Vietnam war (both in dollars and in human spirit) had dragged us downward into a social and spiritual crisis the likes of which this country had never seen. After Kent State in 1970, the country was like a piece of dry oak paneling hit with a bullet – we were violently splintered and divided almost irreparably.

Does this sound at all familiar?

As the government borrowed more money to pay for the ongoing, disastrous Vietnam debacle, our international trade advantages quickly dried up, our international alliances became strained, and the national unemployment figures ran high. After Nixon took us off the gold standard (in part so he could print more money instead of having to borrow all of it), national inflation began to rise. This act was also the birth of the modern national deficit, which today is topping out at around nine trillion dollars (the majority of it being debt incurred through the various "wars," including the cold war, we have fought over the last thirty years). When Watergate was finally exposed, and Nixon resigned in disgrace, the entire country experienced a profound betrayal. As the facts of Nixon's administration came to light, he was proven to be a corrupt criminal, and, as a culture, we are still struggling to remove that knife from our collective back. A deeply insecure man by most accounts, Nixon had almost single handedly destroyed the goodwill and faith of the American people in their own government. Even after the profoundly suspicious and intensely demoralizing assassinations of JFK, Martin Luther King Jr., and RFK, it was Watergate and Nixon's resignation in 1974 that was the final, disgraceful nail in the coffin of our civic trust. Even many hard-line Republicans, who had given Nixon the benefit of the doubt in 1972, were now angry and disoriented. It was the near-death of American hope, and it marked the beginning of widespread apathy and the end of our day to day psychological belief in the integrity of American politics. Our culture went into collective mourning. We also began a deep descent into the beginnings of an economic depression the likes of which had not been seen since 1929.

Again, do you see any general similarities between 1974 and 2008?

Without trying to be unduly provocative, the American public can fairly be compared to a woman caught up in the cycle of domestic violence. We "love" our abuser – the US government. He is charismatic and charming, and, despite the wounds inflicted time and time again, when the "honeymoon period" arrives, we run back into the arms of more betrayal. All it really takes is the political and social equivalent of a bouquet of roses, an apology, some

candle lit conversation, and a bit of hand holding. A little wine, just for romantic intoxication, never hurts either. For the American public, our flowers, wine, and candle light are nothing more than political rhetoric, dogma, fundamentalism, and nationalism (usually in the guise of "patriotism"). We love the illusions of certainty, absolute truth, and strength that the abusers project. We never slow down long enough to really observe and analyze the situation. We never seem to create mental balance or clarity about it. Thus we are abused again. We have become the perpetual victims of our own naiveté; our own apparent need to over-simplify the world. We are like children trying to learn basic lessons through the hearing of extreme, nonsensical stories. Like children, we believe in the reality of these fairy tales. This works fine for most human beings until they about turn six years old… then it stops working.

"For the American public, our flowers, wine, and candle light are nothing more than political rhetoric, dogma, fundamentalism, and nationalism (usually in the guise of "patriotism")."

Why do we do this? Why do we believe in dogma, and extreme political rhetoric? Our politicians, at least until this year, have always known that they need to keep their message extremely simple, and one dimensional for the American public. They need to present situations in black and white; they need to make us believe that fundamentalism and polarization are the only real ways of understanding the world and getting things done. We, as Americans, have never clearly understood that certainty, and absolute truths are simply illusions. In fact, we are very invested in believing the opposite. Get a politician off the record, and he will likely tell you as much. The American public (and therefore the vast majority of our politicians) have never fully realized that the world does not exist in terms of black and white, American and un-American, or even any absolute standard of right and wrong. The world exists in relativity - a complex, interdependent context - thus certainty and absolute truth are simply dangerous fictions that lead to deeply unwise and harmful words and actions.

Here is one example of relativity from conventional physics. If I threw out some balls onto a pool table, and then asked sixteen people to place themselves at different angles around the table and draw their perspectives of the table freehand – what do you think would happen? I would get sixteen different representations of the same objects in space and time. Which one of these representations would be "true" and "certain?" Which

one would be "right," and which would be "wrong?" Would any of these sixteen drawings contain some absolute truth or certainty about the pool table? Of course not. Do we really believe that "truth" and "certainty" in politics (or for that matter – religion) work any differently? Asking the question "what is right and what is wrong" regarding American domestic and foreign policy is to ask the wrong question. Perhaps there is no absolute right and wrong, perhaps, there is only what is useful and what is detrimental given any unique set of contexts and circumstances.

Political rhetoric, fundamentalism, and dogma are the creators and the foundation of the illusions of certainty and absolute truth. Like the domestic abuser, to create the illusions of certainty and absolute truth, a politician need only appear strong, concerned, humble, yet charismatic – "presidential," if you will – in order to win us over. We seem to swallow these illusions whenever they are fed to us. Dogma, extremism, and fundamentalism created the illusions of absolute truth, certainty, and righteousness for Roosevelt, Emperor Hirohito, Churchill, Hitler, and Stalin. Dogma, rhetoric, and fundamentalism also create the illusions of certainty and truth for both our current President and Osama Bin Ladin. The illusions of truth and certainty are framed in fundamental rhetoric like "evil doers," "evil empire," "the Great Satan," and "we walk on the side of truth, liberty, and freedom." These terms, in and of themselves, are both meaningless and divisive.

To create usefulness, our leaders and politicians must become psychologically sophisticated and skillful. The usefulness of psychological equanimity sees that there is no ultimate and absolute "right and wrong." Equanimity sees that both sides of a dispute can easily get mired down and locked into a perception that "God and truth are on our side." From this polarized, myopic, and illusory perspective of certainty and righteousness, tremendous devastation almost always arises. When I find myself in conflict with you and, furthermore, when I believe that "God is on my side" in this conflict, and so do you, then war has already begun. This was the case six thousand years ago, and it is the case today.

How can you label someone an "enemy" and truly believe in the permanence and certainty of that label? Have you ever had an "enemy" that eventually, somehow, became a "friend?" Have you ever had a "friend" that eventually, somehow, became an "enemy?" In our day to day lives, we can see the impermanence of these labels. In 1776 and 1812, Britain was our deadliest enemy, and we warred against them with every fiber in our collective being. For over a century now, Britain has been our closest ally. In the 1940's Japan and Germany

"The people we, in this moment, call friend and enemy are fundamentally the same."

were enemies, for decades now they have been allies. In the 1980's, during their struggle against the Soviets, Al-Qaeda was funded and supplied in part by the CIA. They were our "friends." Not even twenty years later, they suddenly and brutally attacked us, and we labeled them as our "deadliest enemies." And again, we believe in the absolute and permanent reality of whatever the most current label might be. The same is true for Manuel Noriega, Saddam Hussein, and at least a dozen other petty dictators and war lords that the US has covertly supported, and then (often overtly) fought against over the last fifty years. Such labels of friend and enemy (and our naïve belief in their absolute, independent, and permanent reality) inspire only increased ignorance, polarization, dogma, fundamentalism, and armed conflict. As a country, we continue to spiral down into this abyss. When will we wake up? When will we see that our labels are not permanent, independent, and absolute, but transitory, interdependent, and contextual? When we will begin to see the nature of our labels clearly, when will we begin to work with them, transcend them; when will we learn to cultivate courage and psychological and spiritual sophistication? To deeply realize the impermanence and interdependence of our labels, and then to bring this insight to bear on our perceptions of the world - this would make us wiser and so much more skillful in the creation and execution of domestic and foreign policy. This is true because it would require us to slow down and deeply listen to the perspectives of the rest of the world – "friends," "enemies," and "strangers" alike.

To deeply understand the transitory nature of the labels of "friend" and "enemy" would mandate a psychological understanding that, fundamentally, there is no difference between the people we label as "friend," and the people we label as "enemy." The people we, in this moment, call friend and enemy are fundamentally the same. Moreover, those labels will often switch themselves around with time.

We as a people have to begin to genuinely see that there are more similarities between us as human beings then there are differences. Whether we label other people as "friend," "enemy," or "stranger," all human beings on Earth want only to be happy, and free of suffering. This is true for Americans, members of Al-Qaeda, Iraqis, Nigerians, English, North Koreans, Chinese, Russians, Buddhists, Hindus, and the Cardinals of the Catholic Church. Moreover, we, like everyone else on the planet,

despite wanting only happiness and freedom from suffering, somehow seem to create increasing levels of anger, blame, greed, and conflict. To deeply ask ourselves how this happens, over and over again, is to ask an important question. To explore other, more useful perspectives besides polarized rhetoric, extremism, dogma, and fundamentalism is to become more skillful, sophisticated, and mindful. In short, Americans must sit down with those we currently label as our "enemies" and deeply listen, with a compassionate and open heart, in an attempt to understand and connect with the validity of their perspectives. We must have the courage to search our own minds and actions for the ways in which we have participated in the creation of dogma, extremism, and war. When we are on the outs with a friend or a family member in our personal lives, this is the way back. Can it be any different on a national and international level? Only in this way will we become more sophisticated as a civilization. Only by having the courage to lead in this way will be become a great nation again.

When I've made these points in the past, I often received some angry feedback. Usually I am accused of being unpatriotic – as if deeply questioning and criticizing the belief systems and actions of the American government is somehow un-American. Such accusations are simply absurd and they have never bothered me much. I have long realized that sometimes the duty of a true patriot is to protect his country and his people from their own government.

Aside from the usual and facile accusations of a lack of patriotism on my part, some of the more valid concerns about my positions seemed to center around a fear that if the American government develops psychological equanimity and compassion, if it learns to sit down, listen, and converse with its "enemies," America will somehow become a door mat for those same "enemies." In essence, it is a concern that equanimity (and its resulting increase in compassion) is nothing more than "hippy-dippy" appeasement. This seems to be a valid concern, so let's explore it a little bit.

If we develop a deep perception of the impermanence of our labels of "friend" and "enemy," if we truly learn to see through the eyes or our "enemies," can we really fail to become wiser and more skillful in the creation and execution of domestic and foreign policy? In fact, the cultivation of psychological equanimity tends to bend one's mind and heart increasingly towards compassion and mental clarity. Do we really believe that this would make us the unwitting doormat for less sophisticated nations? When you deeply realize the similarities between

all human beings, then you deeply realize your interconnectedness to all of them. How could you become anything but clear, energized, and wise? Isn't such psychological equanimity the very ground upon which Christ's teaching of "love your enemy as you love yourself" rests? How else could you love an enemy that deeply, except to see that the very label of "enemy" and "loved one" are themselves simply impermanent, interdependent, and ultimately illusory? Could the teachings of the historical Buddha and Christ be so very wise on a personal level, but then be disastrous when applied on a national and international level?

"Equanimity and its resulting compassion and wisdom do not guarantee that we will never be violated or taken advantage of; to think that would be as naïve as believing that 'God is on our side.'"

After you learn to transcend such over-simplified dualities of "friend" and "enemy" for a larger, more sophisticated, interdependent reality – then compassion and wisdom have begun in earnest. Equanimity and its resulting compassion and wisdom do not guarantee that we will never be violated or taken advantage of; to think that would be as naïve as believing that "God is on our side." Equanimity, compassion, and wisdom simply make it more likely that we will not make bad situations (which will inevitably arise) worse by heaping additional dogma, rhetoric, fundamentalism, and harmful actions onto them.

In 2007, I decided to stay in my country of origin. Despite its flaws and problems, America is my home, and I love the philosophical and spiritual foundations this country was built upon. I saw that I had become polarized by my own belief in the absolute reality of the labels and judgments I had superimposed upon America. I believed in the absolute and permanent reality of my disappointments, and this transformed them into cynicism and apathy. One day, not long ago, I remembered that I knew, from my own experience as a man, that individual human transformation is possible. And if individual human transformation is possible, then cultural and finally political transformation must also be possible. I decided not to give up and turn my back. I decided to cultivate faith in and to become a small part of what might become that greater cultural and political transformation. In short, I decided to hope again.

by Joe Paddock

Brief Bridges

Out from tribal wombs, following
an imprinted script, great migrations
of peoples have flowed over the surface
of our shrinking planet, carrying
with them their stories, contained
in the groaning and yelping cages
of their ten thousand languages.

We ever hope to find a sweeter place
in which to come to rest, led mostly
by mother-memories. Mostly, we die
along the way. We are subplots, cameos
within the great story. We suffer history
in the flesh. Our lives are links and bridges.

Here, Swedes and Germans, Irish
and a few Finns thought to create
a new Eden, a green place where the apple
could be eaten. There was a moment here
something like their dream, abandoned
as we move on, enter new frontiers
through sky and lens and screen, our bodies
and beings brief bridges over which
the advancing horde will tread.

a broken w

by Caryl Klein Sills

From: doug@newmail.com
To: jbrister4037256892@ars.com; small@midstate.edu; fht@santashelpers.org
Date: Tue 7/18/2001 10:45PM
Subject: J. Adam Johnson

Dear Mr. Brister, Dr. Small, and Mr. Tobin,
J. Adam Johnson has applied to our firm and listed you as a character reference. Will you please let me know whether or not you recommend him? Thanks so much for your time.
Douglas M. Silverman, VP Operations
Pulse, Inc.

From: small@midstate.edu
To: doug@newmail.com
Date: Wed 7/19/2001 11:00AM
Subject: Reference

Mr. Silverman,
I haven't a clue who J. Adam Johnson is. How did you get my e-mail address? And, by the way, you asked a question without a question mark.
Cynthia L. Small, Ph.D.

From: doug@newmail.com
To: small@midstate.edu
Date: Wed 7/19/2001 6:05PM
Subject: Reference

Dear Dr. Small,
Thank you for your quick response. J. Adam Johnson listed you as a character reference on his application form with this e-mail address. He identified you as one of his past professors at Midstate. That's all I know. Maybe you know him as whatever the J stands for.
Douglas Silverman

From: ellensmall6@hotwire.com
To: small@midstate.edu
Date: Thu 7/20/2001 11:10AM
Subject: hello

Hi it's me. your father says I need to learn more about computers, onlyhis teaching me is not working so hot. Can you come over next weeekend maybe. What's a cookie? PS I haven't typed anything since I worked for your uncle Ben at his shoe sstore before you were born. i'm using the same 2 finger hunt-and-peck method butI loved my Underwood am I having fun yet?
Luv u
Mom

ps2 can you believ I have my own email address!

From: small@midstate.edu
To: ellensmall6@hotwire.com
Date: Thu 7/20/2001 3:50PM
Subject: I'm proud of you!

Welcome to the new century, Mom. Of course I'll come by this weekend. Sunday about 11? If you feel in the mood to make your famous zucchini soup for lunch I
wouldn't mind. You don't need to worry about cookies yet. Just stop reading whatever computer book you picked up—we should talk before you start trying anything fancy. And that goes for Dad too…

Love you both back.

Cynthia

From: small@midstate.edu
To: doug@newmail.com
Date: Thu 7/20/2001 4:01PM
Subject: Who are you?

Mr. Silverman,

Why is your e-mail a newmail address? It doesn't sound like a legitimate business. What's the job this Johnson person is applying for? Sometimes students ask if I'll serve as a reference for them and I often say yes. However, it's impossible to remember all their names over time. I have sixty or seventy students each semester. Perhaps J. Adam can contact me and remind me who he is.

Cynthia Small

From: small@midstate.edu
To: carolees@hunsiger.org
Date: Thu 7/20/2001 4:08PM
Subject: Stuff

Hi sis - Some guy is asking me to recommend some other guy named J.Adam Johnson.
I don't remember him at all—student, faculty, janitor—nada. Do you think it's come kind
of scam? By-the-way, MOM SENT ME AN E-MAIL! You too? I think it's cute.
However, Dad may have unleashed a dangerous weapon. Beware of guilt by instant
message.

Cyn

From: ds@pulsemonitor.com
To: small@midstate.edu
Date: Fri 7/21/2001 10:20AM
Subject: Who am I?

Dear Dr. Small,

My firm is Pulse, Inc. We monitor pacemakers. You know, people with heart problems who have a pacemaker implanted and then they call us and we monitor their heart rates over the phone. Things can get very hectic sometimes so I work from home after hours. This is from the office with my business e-mail address. Ok? Anyway, J. Adam is applying for a job as a technician. My problem is that only one of the other two references got back to me. If I don't get a second positive reference, I can't recommend we hire him. And I rather like him. Personable, clean-cut, sense of humor. We train so that's no big deal. Think—are you sure you don't remember him? Have a nice weekend.

Doug Silverman

From: small@midstate.edu
To: ds@pulsemonitor.com
Date: Fri 7/21/2001 2:26PM
Subject: Who are you?

Mr. Silverman,

I'm thinking. But how do I know you're legit? You're not listed in the phone book.

Cynthia Small

From: maddogmikee17@startupmail.com
To: small@midstate.edu
Date: Fri 7/21 7:00PM
Subject: Mom

Hey Cyn, Mom e-mailed me. So hat am I supposed to do? hat does she ant? Am I supposed to rite like a letter thing back? I'm going to illiamsburg for the eekend with Elsie the girl from the fitness center—I told you. Nice body, nice personality. hat does Mom ant from me? PS—sorry ho this reads but my double u popped off and I haven't found it yet. And the key is stuck, I think I dripped something.

From: carolees@hunsiger.org
To: small@midstate.edu
Date: Sat 7/22/2001 10:47AM
Subject: [no subject]

Cyn: There are a lot of whackos out there. Be cautious. What else is new? I feel so out of it in LA. But I really do love it here. I miss you all of course, but my graphic design business is going good and I'm dating a few nice guys. Nothing serious or likely to become serious but that's how I want it right now. I still have nightmares about Warren and the divorce won't be final for another five weeks. But, hey, I feel good and I feel positive about where my life is going. I guess you're going to get the heat from Mom now…she has enough sense to lay off me for awhile. She'll do her grandstand stuff about everyone she knows has grandchildren blah blah blah. How are Mike and his fabulous new girlfriend Greta these days? He told me she may be the real thing. Ha Ha HA. As if Mr. play-the-field-for-all-it's-worth would even be able to notice the real thing. But it's you I worry about. Living so close to Mom and Dad she's got to be driving you nutsy about getting married. At least all I need worry about is an occasional e-mail. So things are going good? Be in touch—love you..

Carolee

From: ds@pulsemonitor.com
To: small@midstate.edu
Date: Mon 7/24/2001 9:30AM
Subject: Who I am redux

Dear Dr. Small,

Yes, Pulse, Inc. is listed. Remember, the new phone books have two separate sections for business and residential. I thought only my mother still got confused. And we're listed on every online directory of health services as well. Anyway, attached is a business letter we send to prospective referring physicians. We–I–are/am legit!

Douglas Silverman

From: ds@pulsemonitor.com
To: small@midstate.edu
Date: Mon 7/24/2001 9:31AM
Subject: Oops

I think I forgot to attach the attachment. Sometimes things get crazy around here. That's why we need more help—like J. Adam. I'll try again.

Douglas Silverman

From: small@midstate.edu
To: maddogmikee17@startup.com
Date: Mon 7/24/2001 10:02AM
Subject: Hi

Yes, Mike, you have a broken "w." It's very annoying, especially when you use so many "w" words. You never mentioned Elsie. What happened to Greta? Is this a sex thing or a potential *real* relationship? E-mail Mom in between phone calls whenever the mood strikes you, but at least once a week. She'll get a kick out of it. Doesn't have to be anything important. I don't recommend mentioning Elsie or she'll start calling catering services again. How's the weather in DC? Go buy a new "w"!

Cyn

From: small@midstate.edu
To: ds@pulsemonitor.com
Date: Mon 7/24/2001 10:04AM
Subject: Sorry

Dear Mr. Silverman,

Okay. So I went through my grade books for the last five years and I don't find anyone named J. Adam Johnson. There's a Jody Johnson but I'm sure she's a she. So I can't help you. Actually, I feel badly that I can't help J. Adam, but I just don't recall him at all. By the way, your business correspondence is somewhat casual. I'm intrigued.

CS

From: doug@newmail.com
To: small@midstate.edu
Date: Mon 7/24/2001 8:15PM
Subject: Thanks

Dear Cynthia,

I hope you don't mind my getting on a first name basis. You're a nice person. You tried. Meanwhile, I heard back from the second reference so J. Adam's in. And actually J. Adam is/was Jody and that's precisely why he uses an initial only. Everyone thinks Jody's a girl's name. But he's definitely not a she. And even though you don't remember him, he remembers you. You're mid-thirties, unattached, good-looking, smart. That's what he said. So…I have an MBA from Kellogg at Northwestern, I'm 36, and I'm straight and single. Maybe we could meet for a drink sometime. I'm in Newark, not more than 45-50 minutes from Midstate. Something in between could be good. I'll ask around the office if anyone is familiar with Port Glenn or Tankassee. Looking forward to your response.

Doug

From: ellensmall6@hotwire.com
To: carolees@hunsiger.com
Date: Tue 7/25/2001 11:44 AM
Subject: News

Hi sweetheart. Sally Mazur is engaged. I thought you would want to know ssince you were such good friends with her older sister Marge a plain Jane—can't hold a candle to you and Cynthia. Warren calls me sometimes and I tell him how happy you are in LA. i hope I'm telling him the truth. He sounds so sad. But sweeetheart I know you did the rightthing.Your happiness and Mike and Cynthia's is all that matters too dad and me. so e-mail me back. I love mail and I love you.

Mom

From: small@midstate.edu
To: doug@newmail.com
Date: Tue 7/25/2001 2:25PM
Subject: Thanks but no thanks

You know, Doug. You're a really nice person, too. I mean, going to bat for J. Adam. But this is beginning to sound too much like a NY Post headline. Like "E-mail Serial Killer Stalks East Coast," or maybe just "E-mail Fraud Bilks Naïve Older Women." Who needs it? So have a good life.

CS

From: ellensmall6@hotwire.com
To: carolees@hunsiger.com; maddogmikee17@startupmail.com
Date: Tue 7/25/2001 2:31PM
Subject: [no subject]

Cynthia came by this weekend. She was very helpful and I think i have the hang of this. I can e-mail both of you at once or cc you. isn't that dopey. cc stands fro carbon copy. Do you even know what carbon paper is or maybe was? Why do old habiits die hard.. Well Sarah Bishop just had her fifth and sixth grandchildren.You remember Gloria Bishop. She maried a lawyer from Atlanta lasst year. Now she has TWINS. Isn't that nice. i miss you both but you'll come for Thanksgiving? Dad sends his love too.

Luv, luv, luv ……..Mom

Ps I have to learn to type all over again, computers are diferent. Dad says theres a spell checker. i'm going to try it when he shows me how.

From: carolees@hunsiger.com
To: small@midstate.edu
Date: Tue 7/25/2001 7:03 PM
Subject: Mom

Cyn: I assume Mom gave you the Gloria glad news too. I can't believe she's starting on me again. And my divorce isn't even final! I heard from Mike too. So who the hell is Elsie? I'm still on Greta. Mike has a broken key. I'll bet it's deliberate. No w—can't
type will you marry me or I want to get married or when should we have the wedding.
Yikes!

Carolee

From: carolees@hunsiger.com
To: maddogmikee17@startupmail.com
Date: Wed 7/26/2001 7:47PM
Subject: New girl in town?

Hi bro: I'm still on Greta. Who the hell is Elsie? Cyn called last night and said you two did a weekend thing. You met her on adjacent treadmills or is Cyn just being sarcastic? C'mon baby brother. Cyn never asks any good questions but you can tell me. I won't blab to Mom and Dad—besides they're tired of trying to remember the name of your girl of the month. Just kidding. Love you madly –

Carolee

From: doug@newmail.com
To: small@midstate.edu
Date: Wed 7/26/2001 8:11PM
Subject: References ---- Mine

Dear Cynthia,

We have a mutual friend—other than J. Adam who by the way is turning out to be a crackerjack technician and a great guy. Dave Reilly from Rutgers. You went to grad school with him and he did undergrad with me. He'll tell you whatever you want to know. His e-mail is dreilly@rutgerscamden.edu. I see him and his wife at least once a month and he even suggested we make it a foursome whenever you say. I took the liberty of looking you up on Midstate's home page. English Prof., specialty is Modern British and Gender Studies. Fall term you're going to teach a seminar on Virginia Woolf and a British Lit survey. J. Adam tells me not to give up, you're worth pursuing. So what about it? A friendly drink or cup of coffee or dinner? You say when.

Hopefully, Doug

From: small@midstate.edu
To: carolees@hunsiger.com; maddogmikee17@startupmail.com
Date: Thu 7/27/2001 9:42AM
Subject: Dad

I had dinner with Mom and Dad last night and Dad looked rather gray—for lack of a better word. He says he feels fine but he's going to see Dr. Winters next week for a thorough checkup. He says he's just tired all the time although nothing hurts. I don't mean to worry you. Like he says, it's probably just old age creeping in. But Mom and I were firm; he needs to get checked out. Don't say anything—he gets testy if he thinks we're all talking about him behind his back. But maybe you'll want to call and just chat with him. I'll keep you posted. Hope all is well...

Cyn

From: small@midstate.edu
To: carolees@hunsiger.com
Date: Thu 7/27/2001 9:56AM
Subject: Doug

Hi sis—I'm up for advice. I met this guy on e-mail. Now don't panic—it isn't what it sounds like. He got my name from a former student who gave me for a reference. Remember—I mentioned it last week. Anyhow, the student recommended me back—for a date. So Doug has been asking me to meet him for a drink or something. We do have a mutual friend but I feel jerky asking Dave about Doug. I still count Dave as a friend but don't see him very often. For sure, if I ask him about Doug, it'll get back to Doug, and he won't stop pestering me. I haven't a clue what he looks like, but he's well educated, 36, and has a good job.

What do you think?

Cyn

From: doug@newmail.com
To: small@midstate
Date: Thu 7/27/2001 11:05PM
Subject: Are you out there?

Dear Cynthia,

I hope I haven't heard from you because you're too busy to get together right now. That's ok. But if you're having second thoughts, let me tell you more about me. I grew up in Lake Placid, NY where my Dad managed a resort hotel—a fairly classy place actually in the days before LP became fairly classy. Anyhow, I did a lot of skiing in winter and sailing in summer. Both competitive. I majored in Business Management at Rutgers and then went to Northwestern as I told you. I have a younger sister who lives in Toronto and has two kids. My parents are still in LP and Dad is involved in some condos and resort properties. He keeps asking me to join him back there, but I like what I do and where I do it. I live in Westfield, by the way. Newark has spruced up its city center but it's not quite gentrified yet. I still like grass and trees and being able to walk the dog at night and feel pretty comfortable while doing it. Dave tells me you're a cat person but that's ok. My folks always had both when we were growing up and it was great. Just so I don't sound too homespun and hokey, my main hobby right now is a Yamaha Midnight Venturer. Liquid-cooled 1300 cc V-4 pumping out 98 ponies of shaft-driven power, polished fins and chromed forks, audio/CB switchgear and front and rear speakers. She's a beaut, this is a serious bike. I belong to a club in Westfield that tools out to the country on a regular basis. You'd love our trips – wind in your hair (that is if you have long hair that falls beneath the helmet, do you?) I love the wild side of cycling but I'm pretty conservative when it comes to speed and safety. Not to worry. Please e-mail me back. I'm really looking forward to meeting you.

Doug

From: elsiehotrocks@newmail.com
To: maddogmikee17@startupmail.com
Date: Fri 7/28/2001 6:15AM
Subject: [no subject]

Mikee, i miss u. last wknd was fab. hows ur finger. i hope it isn't broken, I'd just luv a rematch sometime soon. i called my local tennis pro to slip in a few lessons so i'll be ready for u whenever. i really really really want to be ready for u. do u absolutely hav to wrk this hole wknd? i thought I'd see u sat nite at least.

Elsie

ps get that w fixed—i need a code machine to read u

From: maddogmikee17@startupmail.com
To: ellensmall6@hotwire.com
Date: Sat 7/29/2001 10:36AM
Subject: Hello

Mom, it's great that you do e-mail. Makes it so much easier (and cheaper) to be in touch. Everything here is fine. I've been spending long hours at the office but that's routine with us civil servants. Still have time to go Bay fishing occasionally. Have the blues been running near you? I'd love to join dad sometime on Cap Monty's "guaranteed best catch of the day total fishing experience." Boy those "past tense of are" the good ole days. Nothing terribly exciting going on at the State Department even though nobody ever believes me if I say it's mostly dull routine stuff that keeps me plugging. The girls tell me you plan for us all to be there for Thanksgiving. I can do that. Feel good. Love you. (It's not easy to do this minus a double u—but I'm obviously up for the challenge!)

Mike

From: maddogmikee17@startupmail.com
To: elsiehotrocks@newmail.com
Date: Sat 7/29/2001 11:00AM
Subject: Let's do it again

Elsie, I ordered a double u if it's all that important to everybody. And I'm ready for a rematch any time you name. Are you and me on for dinner next Friday? Sorry I have to put in the hours today and even Sun. But I'll call. This project is just too urgent to put off and think of the points I get for digging in and getting it together on personal time.

Mike

From: small@midstate.edu
To: doug@newmail.com
Date: Sat 7/29/2001 12:04PM
Subject: No means no

No means no.

From: small@midstate.edu
To: BooksNow@ars.com
Sat: 7/29/2001 12:08 PM
Subject: Desmonds' new book

I ordered Peter Desmond's new book, *Fear of Commitment and the Single Girl.* I received confirmation on my e-mail that it was shipped last Thursday. But I haven't received it yet. Please check it out.

Dr. Cynthia Small

From: carolees@hunsiger.com
To: small@midstate
Date: Sat 7/29/2001 4:02PM
Subject: Give Me A Break

Here's my advice, Cyn. Meet him for a drink in some very public place and take a closer look. Haven't you learned anything in the past thirty-something years? What if your friend whoever introduced you at a party? Wouldn't you at least talk to the guy and go out with him if he seemed interesting (and if he asked you)? Maybe you'd even ask *him*! The trouble with you is that you think too much—all that literary analysis is stuffing up your head and making you stuffy. React girl. Go for it! And get back to me soon how it goes.

Love you.
Carolee

From: small@midstate.edu
To: doug@newmail.com
Date: Mon 7/31/2001 10:17AM
Subject: [no subject]

Dear Doug,

Dave called me last night and said he and Beth want to get together with you and me next Wednesday night at Blatchley's in Port Glenn. I know I originally said no, but Dave can be very persuasive. Now I'm saying it's okay and I hope I'll see you there.

Cynthia

From: small@midstate.edu
To: carolees@hunsiger.com
Date: Mon 7/31/2001 10:20AM
Subject: So here's your break

Hi sis—I'm meeting my friends Dave and Beth with e-mail Doug Wednesday night. Wish me luck. I'll be in touch.

Cyn

From: ellensmall6@hotwire.com
To: small@midstate.edu; maddogmikee17@startupmail.com; carolees@hunsiger.com
Date: Tue 8/1/2001 10:16AM
Subject: A Family Wedding

Ednas youngest Carl the one who always had acne and bad breath doesn't any more. He's getting married just before Christmas in NY. I told Edna I'm expecting you all for Thanksgiving so I doubted if Carolee and Mike would be able to come back for the wedding but do think about it. I just love celebrating with my whole family. Carl's girl is local so maybe she'll have some single friends at the wedding you might like to meet. Anyway I have to end since I'm driving Dad to his checkup. They're going to give him some drops of something and they don't want him driving himself back home. Did you notice I used the spell checker? Next Dad's going to show me how to cut and paste – no scissors, no glue. Sounds like fun. Dad sends hugs. He loved talking to everybody last weekend but we agree email is faster and less expensive.

Love you all
Mom

From: small@midstate.edu
To: carolees@hunsiger.com; maddogmikee17@startupmail.com
Date: Tue 8/1/2001 7:29PM
Subject: Dad needs a pacemaker

Dad's going to the hospital next Monday to get a pacemaker inserted in his chest because his heart rate tends to be too slow. At least that's what I understand the simple version of this is. The pacemaker will kick in when his heartbeat falls below a certain rate. The doctor says the procedure is routine (but is anything ever just routine?) and he'll only be in the hospital overnight to check out that the pacemaker is working right. Mom asked me to email you—"it's faster and less expensive." I'm taking off from school to be with Mom. So don't worry. But, Mike, maybe you should drive up Sunday to be there Monday even though I really think this is not such a big deal. Still, it would be very comforting to Mom to have both of us there although I suspect Dad will be back to his usual busy, grumpy, busy self in no time. No need to stay past Tuesday. Carolee, you should call him. Forget what Mom said about cheap email.

Cyn

From: maddogmikee17@startupmail.com
To: elsiehotrocks@newmail.com
Date: Tues 8/1/2001 11:32PM
Subject: Family emergency

Elsie, It's fixed. wwwwwwwww! But meanwhile, I have to cancel this weekend. I just heard my father is seriously ill and I think I should drive up to Jersey to be with my mom. I may have to stay at least a week. Sorry, so sorry. Thanks for understanding.

Mike

From: ds@pulsemonitor.com
To: small@midstate.edu
Date: Thu 8/3/2001 9:03AM
Subject: A great time

Dear Cyn,

Thanks for a great time last night. I feel we really hit it off. Dave hasn't had such a good audience for his corny jokes in years. And like I said, ole J. Adam has excellent taste in women. I'll call you tonight after work, but I just had to say hello again right away.

Doug

From: maddogmikee17@startupmail.com
To: loisdempsey@kable.com
Date: Sun 8/6/2001 10:32 AM
Subject: Last Night and Next Weekend

Lois Lois Lois. Last night was spectacular. An 11 out of 10! I'm really really looking forward to next weekend. My dad's going to the hospital tomorrow to get a pacemaker. Although it doesn't sound very serious, my sisters think I should drive up tonight to be with my Mom. But I'll call you tomorrow and the next day and the next! I'll be back Wed. at the latest. We'll do something Wed. night. I've never been so bowled over by someone I just met. Please don't disappear on me. I couldn't bear it. See you as soon as I can.

Thinking of you, Mike

PS It isn't true that I string women along. Your friend Trudy is way out of line. You won't be sorry you trust me. I promise.

From: carolees@hunsiger.com
To: ellensmall6@hotwire.com
Date: Sun 8/6/2001 9:59PM
Subject: Good luck

Mom, great talking to you and Dad. I'll call Dad again in the hospital tomorrow night. My friend Shirley is a cardiovascular surgeon and she puts in pacemakers all the time. She says they're little miracle machines. I know Dad'll be fine so don't worry. Mike, and Cynthia will be there, and my love and good vibes will be there too. Love you all.

Carolee

From: beth&davereilly@whoopee.com
To: small@midstate.edu
Date: Thurs 8/10/2001 5:10PM
Subject: Hello

Glad to hear your dad is doing well, Cyn. And just as glad you and Doug have been hitting it off. You've seen him how many times already? I've never played matchmaker before. It feels great. Anyhow, enjoy the show Saturday. Doug told me he's got third row center. Only the best for you kiddo. See you soon.

Dave

From: small@midstate.edu
To carolees@hunsiger.com
Date: Thu 8/10/2001 10:46PM
Subject: Dad

Both Mom and Dad are handling this pacemaker thing very well so don't worry. Dad feels really good. I already told Mom I have a contact in North Jersey for pacemaker monitoring. Dad will be in Doug's perfect hands—which by the way are attached to perfect arms, perfect shoulders, and perfectly astonishing green eyes. The rest I'll be able to tell you about soon…I hope.

Wish us all luck –

Cyn

Rethink, React, Respond!

Send your "Gut Reaction" to this or any other story or poem in this issue in 200 words or fewer to editor@theexternalist.com and it could appear in a future issue of *The Externalist*! Be sure to include 'Gut Reaction' as the subject header of your email. For more information, see our Submission Guidelines on the web site.

by Donny Wankan

Teenage Failures in Magic

Kotsina doll salt shaker
bobble eyes
yellow yarn legs
that wrap fingers
on right shoulder rhythms
pale spirits fall cold
left canceled

cooking her hair
into breakfast pancakes
the shape of her face
she coughs it back at the tickle

soldering her songs
into blood-smeared album covers
chanting spurts of her name
desire
the ones she wrote for me
white jets she'll never see

sacred symbol scribbles
unwilled sigils
of line and circle paragraphs
lacking a translator
this joke folklore
laughs hard-ons into legends
where Isis ritual virgins
toss wriggling drops
into warm, ancient bowls

teenage grimoires
of fairy tale spells
that only work, need
only work
on the one urn that catches them

Chain of Events

by Kathie Giorgio

"I'm only human," he whispered when she cried and bled...

He was a twelve-year old boy reading Nietzsche when the priest surprised him from behind after early morning mass. His parents insisted on this exercise as altar boy, although they hadn't seen the inside of a church since their son's baptism. The priest's furious initiation was a new and unthinkable aspect to the boy's religious education and to get himself through it, through the pain and the fear, he began to quote Nietzsche's mantra, over and over, through every thrust and withdrawal, "God is dead. God is dead. God is dead." As soon as he could, he struggled into his pants and then staggered out of the vestibule. He left the priest on his knees, praying into curved and shaking hands, "Forgive me, Father, I am only human." Trying to explain and define his experience, the boy repeated, Only human. Only human. It's the human condition.

He was fifteen when he flirted the girl next door into his bedroom, then insisted yes when she said no on his green and blue plaid bedspread. "I'm only human," he whispered when she cried and bled, leaving a stain in a stripe where the colors merged. She had dirty blonde hair which was really clean, plaited into a smooth and shiny rope that reached to her naked hips. He wound the braid around his wrist, jerking her head this way and that, like a jibbering puppet, as he took her again to see if virgins could bleed twice.

"It's the human condition," he stated at twenty-three as he dragged the sobbing barmaid into the alley behind Gary's Pub. She'd served him all night, her cleavage a vertical inviting smile every time she bent over him, offering a voluptuous view and a new frosty glass, the foamy head spilling over her fingers. She licked them. She had red fingernails. He expected her to reek of whiskey and beer and the sweat of prowling men, but there was only the lightness of Ivory soap and the softest flower of perfume.

"I'm only human!" he shouted at thirty-two as he tied the old woman stomach down on her kitchen table and took her like a dog. He lived up the street and she smiled at him from her porch every day as he walked to and from the bus stop. On this night, she asked him if he knew anything about fixing refrigerators. He said he did,

though the only thing he knew was that there was a little man named Yehudi who lived inside and turned the light on as the door was opened. The old woman's knees and hipbones creaked and popped, and the deep creases in her thighs rasped like sandpaper on wood. He stared at her refrigerator, its door hanging awry, the light burned out. He wondered what made Yehudi run away.

And "It's the human condition," he panted at forty-three as he pinned his startled and struggling new neighbor to her bed after an afternoon of gallantly introducing himself and unloading her boxes and furniture from the rental truck. Just before he offered to carry her dresser to her bedroom, they'd had a break of cherry slushies and barbecue potato chips, purchased from the Stop-N-Go at the corner, and an interesting discussion of Nietzsche. Great mind, she said, for a Nazi.

She tongued away the sock he stuffed between her lips. "Get off me!" she shrieked. "You Nazi! You think it's the human condition to be fucked?" She tried to bring her legs together, but he muscled them aside.

He paused for just a moment, looking directly at her face, recognizing the fear, the disgrace, the shame. "Yes," he said. Then he stared at his own reflection in her mirrored headboard, observed and noted the panoply of emotions scattering through his eyes, his mouth, the flushed skin of his cheeks. His emotions. Human emotions. Releasing them, impressing them against the warm body beneath him.

He wished he'd been Yehudi. He liked the idea of opening doors and bringing light. He used to think about that a lot, when he first read Nietzsche. Before the door closed. Before it was dark.

He looked down at his neighbor's grimacing face. Even as her mouth twisted, her eyes met his and seemed to ask. To plead. But he didn't know how to stop. He was, after all, only human. His hands began to shake and he curved them into the mattress. He wanted to pray, but God, after all, was dead.

by Jéanpaul Ferro

24/7

Everywhere the birds are singing sweetly,
plunging and rattling from branch to branch,

cardinals in the spring, blue jays in the fall,

shade moving and bending across the golden
forest floor like waves,

the steel gray sky brightening and darkening
like a blue color on television,

guns going off and people dying all around,

bombs creating widows, bullets deconstructing
orphans,

in the late evening light: the ghost of your face
in a store window from twenty years ago

—everywhere the same thing: 24/7.

At Hand's Reach

by Mariana Dietl

It is not my fault. It is not my fault that I have to do this.

Alfredo Scarbotto continued his search for a clean space among the rows of shops and apartment buildings lined up along Avenida Rivadavia; a spot where he was able to settle his run down body for a while.

It was a hot cloudless January afternoon, with few people on the streets. The sun was in flames. Alfredo's beaver-like skin felt prickly from toasting, especially his oversized forehead and the zone where a splintered nebulous beard had been growing undisturbed for more than three days, shading what could have been otherwise an attractive face. The thick-fingered hand that held a black fedora oozed with sweat; the hat's wool stuck to his damp palm. His stubby legs were stiff and swollen from dragging them all over the city, making his walk increasingly unsteady and down-trodden. His formless knees cracked every time he bent them, and his round feet were squashed inside the brown leather shoes his wife had given him two years before for Christmas. For work, Estela had said back then. You need good shoes to move around comfortably in the bank.

For work, Estela had said back then. You need good shoes to move around comfortably in the bank.

The comfort had lasted two weeks. And when it stopped it wasn't because of a failure in the shoes - they still were fine - but because he was discharged. Just like that, from one day to the next. After twelve years, nine months and six days of working there as a clerk. So in the end the shoes were worn to attend doomed interviews, linger in line to collect a useless unemployment check and walk distractedly around Barracas, his neighborhood for the past eighteen years, a locality he hated these days because it had become plagued by South American immigrants: those who, according to him, took jobs away from hard-working Argentine citizens, including his own.

It is not my fault. It is not my fault that I have to do this.

Alfredo trampled dizzily along the gray sidewalks that lined the sultry roads of downtown Buenos Aires, where the simplest act of walking was a hazardous adventure on its own due to the uneven asphalt patches, uncovered blind holes, stepped on dog dung and loose bare cables that had to be sorted along

the way. The decadent metropolis' manifold streets curved and soared like an enigmatic tango: they twisted, they turned, they overstepped, they encircled, they misled, they glided, they smeared, they vanished, they reappeared, they loved, they lost, they lived… Most of all: they lived.

Still, that early afternoon Alferdo Scarbotto's shoes weren't mimicking the sad tunes of an ardent Argentine ballad, nor of any other ballad, for that matter. They were sad, oh yes, but they weren't pursuing a melody.

It is not my fault. It is not my fault that I have to do this.

His feet scraped the pavement as if they were two oval pieces of sandpaper. Despair and exhaustion crawled all over his rusty eyes like a growing spider web. All he wanted was to find a place to lie down, set his hat on the floor beside him and forget about the world. He did not want to return home and be reminded that he had a family to feed, a job to find and an encampment of Peruvians and Bolivians lurching around him. His mind was as fed-up and drained as his body. If he could only stop thinking…

The hat was an inheritance from his wife's late grandfather. In the fifteen-plus years he'd had it, he had never worn it. He had kept it more as a souvenir, a token of remembrance, squeezed into a closet somewhere, not really knowing for what reason (surely not out of sentimentality - he had hardly known the old man, even though Estela told him her grandfather had explicitly stated numerous times that he wanted his only hat to go to Alfredo upon his demise, God knows why). On the other hand, nobody wore a hat these days, so he hadn't kept it out of convenience or for fashion reasons either; perhaps he just wanted to avoid finding himself one day in the situation of having to explain to Estela why he had got rid of it instead of saving it for a special occasion or for when the kids got older; yes, probably that was why he had kept it all these years). Now he had found an unexpected use for it.

Every now and then a sticky hand – the one that wasn't holding the fedora – stretched sideways to reach for the steamy summer wall that ran parallel to his footsteps. The touch of moist cement would tempt him to halt and take a few breaths, and he would use that time to focus on what lay ahead.

One of these pauses took place at the corner of Entre Ríos and Rivadavia. He was glad to have reached Congreso, finally. He checked the two-*peso* wristwatch he had bought some time ago in Retiro Station, which amazingly still worked. 4:02PM. It had taken him about two hours to get there from

his home in Avenida Montes de Oca. With legs not as turgid and bloated as his he would probably have made it in an hour or less. He would rather have reached Palermo or Recoleta, where he assumed all the wealthy people were sipping cool ice-creams and having a good time, but in the state his body was in he knew this was impossible. Congreso would have to do. After all, there were some pretty good apartments and restaurants in the area. And *argentinos* with pockets full of cash. *Argentinos* willing to help a fellow citizen. *Argentinos* for whom ten *pesos* didn't make any difference. Whereas in his neighborhood they were all seedy junkie immigrants who either stole or starved or were in the process of moving out to the nearest *villa miseria* or railway station bench.

But then he remembered that he couldn't afford those luxuries anymore.

From where he stood, Alfredo spotted a dented oversize-mailbox-shaped magazine stand in the corner of Avenida de Mayo. His low brow ferrety eyes strained and started driving him towards it. But then he remembered that he couldn't afford those luxuries anymore. It had been months since he had leafed through the syrupy pages of *'Arquitectura + Diseño,'* his favorite magazine. And to think that until not so long ago he had believed that maybe, some day, who knows, he might be able to move with his family into one of the dream houses they showed from Palermo or San Isidro: one with lots of space, tons of rooms, imposing chandeliers, white polished walls and marble floors; one with ample beds and a huge garden crowded by neatly displayed flowerbeds of vibrant lilies and petunias.

Until he lost his job he had never thought twice before purchasing the current issue of *'Arquitectura + Diseño,'* together with a copy of *'Novias'* for his wife. Estela loved to choose bridal dresses, even though she had no excuse for wearing them. Most times Alfredo included in his purchase an edition of *'Genios'* or *'Anteojito'* for his three children to share among each other, and then had to restrain the monkeys from jumping on top of him and pulling out each other's hair whenever he showed up home with them. The boys would fight and cry to be the first to cut out its figurines and scribble over its texts even before they had chance to lay hands on the publication. Yet the girl, Dolores, the youngest, would always win by presenting her father with her most piteous face. The war didn't end there, though: they also battled for the surprises that came with them: disposable cameras, walkmans, compasses…

But now all of that was gone, vanished, vaporized, like every

hundred *peso* bill that had ever sneaked its way through Alfredo Scarbotto's hands; as every dream he ever had.

The few times he had tried to peep through the current issue of *'Arquitectura + Diseño'* in a kiosk he had never gone past page ten before the *kiosquero* told him to return it to the rack if he did not intend to buy it. Not that it mattered, frankly; he had stopped caring about those things. His interest in interior design had become a greasy *medialuna* that had lost its salty rich flavor and was now lying stale and ignored over a bar counter. On the other hand, his children were no longer attending school -they were supposed to be working as well -, so they didn't really need educational magazines anymore, and Estela was always so busy and tired from work that she no longer had time to enjoy '*Novias*', even if she had wanted to. Since she had started spending most nights at her employer's, they only saw each other on Saturdays, and those days all she wanted to do was sleep and watch TV, meaning that basically he was now responsible for the kids. Two weeks ago he had caught the ten year-old, Rómulo, smoking dope and drinking beer with friends on a building's doorstep, so from then onwards he was taking them more often to Estela's parents' in Avellaneda. At least there they had cousins to hang out with and were taken care of for a while. It also gave him more time to come up with ways of earning money, as he was supposed to be doing now.

Beneath the blaring four o'clock sun, Alfredo's flesh roasted. His bronze head glimmered, attracting every sunray as a metallic surface. He considered removing the faded amber blazer that clung to his shoulders, but decided against it: he didn't want to scare potential donors with the persistent yellow rings of onion that circled his underarms. Better be considered mad than a stinky tramp, he concluded.

Alfredo Scarbotto sighed and laid his back against the cool burgundy mosaic facade of an apartment. His sudden immobility brought forward a staggering rush of pain. Cramps invaded his meaty calves, knees and feet. It was as if they had remained in check while he walked so as to keep him going, only to assault him at full force as soon as he stopped, as soon as he gave up. He glimpsed at his digital watch and wiped his brow and neck with a handkerchief he kept in an inside pocket of his coat. By the time he finished drying himself the cloth was as soaked as if it had fallen into one of the patriotic fountains of the nearby Plaza de Mayo. As he was putting it away he noticed the landlord of the building – whom until then had been sitting comfortably in an air-conditioned lobby reading the paper -, approach him. Chubby, clad in a gray one-

piece uniform and keys dangling in his pocket as if from a Christmas tree, he drew closer with a self-assured and authoritative frown on his face.

Alfredo knew what this meant: he was upsetting the property's appearance, as if anybody cared on a Sunday boiling afternoon! Unwilling to argue, he straightened up and moved out before the other had chance to say a word and resumed his slow walking.

A few feet away he caught sight of a shadowy opening. A tin roof with uneven-spaced neon lights (which at the moment were switched off), and a golden flower bowl bursting with violets on either side set its boundaries. From afar Alfredo thought it could only be a hallucination: the small enclosure suddenly seemed to him the fanciest resort in the Caribbean, a pristine pool in the middle of a faraway desert.

In spite of the short distance involved, it took him a while to get there: not even his high-quality Argentine leather shoes had prevented watery blisters and sore flesh from taking over his calloused heels and soles.

The space proved to be the entrance of a movie theatre. Satisfied with the clean, well-kept basalt floor, Alfredo Scarbotto decided it was a good place to settle down. The fact that there was no porter or guard around made the prospect even more tempting. Hidden under the roof were a couple of glass-paneled doors which led to a large carpeted room beyond, yet to Alfredo's dismay they were locked. Several blood dripping letters were pasted to them. Alfredo read: 'From Hell'. "I don't need to watch a movie to experience that," he said out loud, laughing at himself while at the same time a little confused by the unexpected sound of his voice. He checked the week's schedule, posted to the left wall: 10:00AM, 12:30PM, 6:15PM, 10:00PM and Friday and Saturday 1:00AM. There were two hours left before the next show.

Bending suddenly in two he reached for his stomach, feigned a cough fit and in two seconds landed his wrinkled figure on the ground, beside one of the flower pots.

Thump. There it was. He had done it. The time: 4:20PM. Not bad. Not bad at all.

It is not my fault. It is not my fault that I have to do this.

After the day's rambling, Alfredo Scarbotto felt he had arrived at a king's bed: the hard granite was his fluffy bedspread; the wall where he rested his spine the silky cushions; the huge violet vase the goblet full of thick red wine resting on a marble nightstand. That's how good it felt. There was no more pain, and he had done it. With the little strength left he placed the crumpled black fedora

in front of him. Then he closed his eyes and rested.

Five minutes passed and to his pleasant surprise, no one came to force him away. Except for a deaf-mute avenue and a pot of violets, he was alone. Across the street was a furniture store, a *kiosko* and a *verdulería*. All of them closed. The choking bus fumes, histrionic horn blasts and impatient pedestrians which usually crowded this important artery of Buenos Aires seemed to have been evaporated by the scorching sun. For the hundredth time Alfredo wondered why he had chosen that day among all others to begin his new venture.

Around 4:30 a chunky young woman with waist-long hair, tight jeans and a top bearing most of her midriff approached him along the opposite sidewalk. She was hugging a thin dark-skinned man with unevenly grown hair and an extra-large pale blue and white stripped soccer T-shirt. A *Racing* fan. Alfredo had forgotten that *Racing* was playing against *Boca* at 8PM in *'La Bombonera'.* He would probably miss the match, although he didn't care. *River*, his team, was first in the ranking, so regardless who won they were champions.

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The couple walked leisurely; they seemed to be enjoying the moment with each other. Alfredo wondered if they had jobs, if they had ever had to beg for money in the street. From their skin color - darker than his - and from their coarse unselfconscious attire, he could tell they weren't rich. In fact, they could even be immigrants. He looked closer. Agh! They follow me everywhere! Why don't they return to their countries? Don't they realize that the country's in the state it is in because of them?

Whenever thoughts like these came to the front of his mind he imagined himself as president. The first thing he saw himself doing was deporting all the *bolitas, peruanitos* and *paraguas* and handing over their jobs to *argentinos*, including those no Argentine wanted, such as those scrubbing slimy bathrooms in houses and restaurants as those in construction and factory lines. In fact, he wouldn't mind doing that himself. At least he wouldn't have to beg. Let immigrants beg for their food. Not *argentinos*. Not Alfredo Scarbotto.

He waited for the couple to disappear from his view. In the meantime he tried not to look at them, but found this impossible. His weary eyes

involuntarily took note of their smiles, their arms overlapping and the salsa contours of their feet. Filthy. Filthy immigrants. He wanted to mix among those who didn't know what to do with the bills bursting from their wallets, not among scum as those. He wished he were seated in one of the Parisian corners of Avenida Libertador, with their orled fillets and curled iron balconies, their cafés frequented by attractive middle-aged men with a few gray hairs on their temples who discussed polo and the beaches of the Mediterranean while they smoked Cuban cigars and unhurriedly savored *ron* or *piña colada,* as well as by lean suntanned women with short braless silk dresses and delicate gold chains who gossiped about other women and the best tennis instructors under a bright shaded parasol, their shiny latest model cars showing off in front of them in perfect harmony with the impeccable flowered sidewalk and broad avenue beyond. Congreso, with its cloistered parks and historical boulevards, its decrepit and dirty colonial buildings, seemed dreary and inappropriate in comparison.

Amid the deep thoughts released by Alfredo Scarbotto's sweaty mind, a man showed up. He was approaching him from the same sidewalk. His garments had no color, like Alfredo Scarbotto's, but unlike the latter the stranger was unusually tall. His face was covered with a mazy jungle-like brown beard. The wavy hairs on his face blended with the rest of his complexion. It was hard to distinguish any wrinkle, crease, or even his skin tone in it (let alone his eyes). It seemed like he had been bathing in mountains of dirt for several years; what was not dirt was hair. He had a bottle in his hand which he carelessly swung back and forth with one of his long, crane-like arms, as if he were mocking the swaying movements of a priest scattering incense. He moved clumsily and languidly as a giraffe, though there was also a certain air of gracefulness about him, an aristocratic demeanor. Alfredo wondered where he got it from. He didn't look like an immigrant. Immigrants were usually shorter, stockier, and had straight black hair. Could he be a beggar? he pondered, rather disturbed in spite of himself: though it hadn't been ten minutes since he had taken residence next to the golden flower pot, Alfredo believed he was legitimately entitled to the space.

The bedraggled fellow didn't seem to pay much attention to his surroundings, nor did he seem tired or anxious or appear at all disturbed that someone was inspecting him in detail. After circling the theatre's sheltered opening, he detained himself in the dribbly letters glued to the glass. He stared at them for a while and then continued to wander around the premises. It was clear he

was in no hurry, and was still swinging the bottle from side to side.

I should tell him to get the hell out of my place… Alfredo Scarbotto thought as he shifted to his right to gain a better view of the subject. He followed the bottle's wavering and soon began to feel hypnotized by its pendular flow. When the man swung the bottle backwards, Alfredo altered the position of his waist, chest and shoulder-box to the right; when, instead, he shove it violently forward, Alfredo hastily straightened and budged left.

An hour passed unnoticed, and still there was no one to be seen; no sound to rouse Alfredo from his trance. The drunkard – by then Alfredo was sure he was just a plain harmless *borracho* – had nestled himself over the flower vase at the other end of the movie house. This made Alfredo nervous, because he was squashing the violets. Yet aside from that, what impeded Alfredo from dozing off completely was the feculent smell the man emanated. It was a mixture of fish, urine, flatulence, alcohol, bad breath and sweat. Each of his inhalations recalled him of the other's presence. There was no escape. Although it was better that he did not fall asleep: a client could show up any moment now, and he wouldn't want the booze-junkie to steal it away from him. So in a bizarre sense the bearded man acted as guardian angel to Alfredo, forbidding him to succumb to the temptation of a much needed and desired nap. He was far from being the stereotypical pink-faced plump and innocent guardian angel, certainly, but he was a guardian angel nevertheless.

Alfredo Scarbotto checked his watch. Thirty-five minutes left until the movie started. Will anybody show up in this weather? He thought. He was starting to feel bored and worthless by now. The traffic light kept switching from red to yellow to green, then to yellow and red again, and so forth. Worthless.

He scrubbed his eyes and flattened his back. By then the sun didn't burn as badly as an hour earlier, although the air was still very warm and steamy, and the sky was as turquoise as ever. He was glad the shelter he had chosen was covered by a sunshade, otherwise he would have become a juicy steak by then.

The next half hour passed slowly, very slowly. Still no one showed up. From his spot he couldn't make out the wino anymore. Where had he gone? Alfredo decided to stand up and take a look. Pretending to show interest in the movie schedule he crossed the hall theater. While one eye observed the blood-spattered posters, the other scanned. It wasn't until several minutes later that he became aware of a familiar fetid stench and a monotonous heaving reverberation, both coming from the

same direction. He carried his gaze where his nose and ear pointed and saw him: he was snoring behind the pot of crushed violets. Most of his face and body were hidden between the wall and the vase, but he could still see a pair of petrol stained feet sticking out from the aperture. He wasn't as disappointed as he had expected to be, though. To start with, he never seriously believed the stinker had left. And secondly, watching someone more miserable than himself reminded him that life wasn't as bad or he such a loser as he was used to thinking.

His curiosity satisfied, he leant against one of the cool theatre sidewalls. His tight leather shoes had started to make his feet throb, he feared he would never be able to remove them, and if he ever did his feet would burst out like overheated beef *empanadas*.

Nonetheless, in spite of his aching shoes he managed to nod off a few minutes before being shaken by shuffling feet and loud voices. He straightened, checked his watch and scrubbed his eyes to make sure he wasn't dreaming. 6:01PM and indeed, people were lined up behind the ticket booth while others made their way through the now open glass-paneled doors; people laughing, talking, sucking lollipops and buying popcorn and soft drinks.

Alfredo panicked. Now what? A voice inside him said: *¡Vamos, che!,* just go to them and extend your hat. The rest is done for you. But then someone else took over and declared: It's not that easy. Consider it an art: it all depends on who you approach, when and how. Be choosy. And never forget to say thank you, even if they don't give you a dime, even if they answer you with despise. In other words, maintain your dignity under all circumstances.

In the hazy blue sky a thin moon could be dimly perceived. Soon enough it would be illuminating the muddy roads and wild expanses of rural land in the Pampas with hardly any disturbance; while in Buenos Aires, quite contrarily, it would have to compete against mad car lights, anxious neon signposts and the windows of low-life bars and restaurants. For now, however, the sun continued to occupy center stage. It sparkled with the vividness and extravagance only summer is able to offer.

He couldn't make up his mind. His heartbeat accelerated. His lacerated feet bulged and remained stuck to the ground. The only times he felt this way were before a job interview or a tough exam in school, and he hadn't had either of them for a while.

He shivered. The perspiration that had ceased to flow only minutes before resumed now with the force and volume of the Iguazú Falls. He reclined on the wall nearest to him,

the refrigerated wall he had leaned on a while back. Nobody seemed to acknowledge him. He seemed like an infiltrator, an invisible shadow who had unrightfully escaped from his tiny ghetto in Barracas. The indifference expressed by the bearers of carefully brushed hairs, fashionable sandals and soft clothes seemed to be telling him in cautious whispers to return where he belonged.

The lilium, jasmine and citrus fragrances that overtook the air made him conscious of his own stench. Until then he had thought it came solely from the drunkard (and who knows where he was among this crowd) but now he realized he also reeked, and perhaps just as badly. He imagined everyone falling silent all of a sudden and turning to him in disgust as they wondered how had he managed to infiltrate among them, and how dare he interrupt their enjoyment.

Alfredo Scarbotto suddenly wished he were near the inebriated fellow: at least in that way there would be two stinkers, instead of only one alienated and unprotected as he felt now. Besides, together the crowd would undoubtedly think his companion was the cause of the stench, not he. The other clearly looked like a *vagabundo*; he didn't. Did he? No…

He pressed the creased brown blazer to his chest to lock up the odor escaping his gut. How should I do this? Should I go one by one? Or stand by the folding doors and wait for them to approach and only then extend my hat on their faces?

Before he could deliberate further, he caught sight of a tall bushy head moving briskly back and forth among the crowd. He also heard a word: *Obrigado*. At least that was how it sounded to Alfredo Scarbotto. It was uttered in a harsh but at the same time humble and thankful tone. He wondered what it meant. A couple of times he heard *gracias* as well, and *de nada*. Thank you. You're welcome. Those he distinguished plainly. Bastard...

On an impulse, Alfredo's leather shoes made for the person nearest to him. It was a silver-haired graceful woman who appeared to be in her mid-seventies. As if he had been doing it forever, he sided next to her and tapped her bony shoulder with one of his moist fingertips. When the lady turned he extended his hat in the little space given to him amid the flocking moviegoers. She gaped at him with disapproval, pursed her lips and reached for her tiny satin purse, held under her armpit. Then she placed a two *peso* bill on the woolen fedora and turned around again.

Alfredo glanced at the bottom of the hat and marveled at the contrasting blue and white bill stretched out clumsily in a backdrop of stern black.

"*Obrigado*," he voiced with confidence at the woman's back. Then he veered left to pat another shoulder.

The lady, for her part, returned her gaze to an elder female standing beside her - a sister, a friend, who knows - and said: "*Si ese tipo es brasilero, yo soy china.*" If that guy is Brazilian, I'm Chinese.

Her companion shrugged. They continued to wait in line.

by Ed Bennett

Ode to My Jeep – and Waterboarding

There are no more Cherokees.
They were killed by Germans
then resurrected, stunted
and bug eyed, as "Liberty"

like creating democracy from
sand kicked up by artillery
or the screams of abductees
taught to appreciate their freedom.

All things change, I know,
and evolve by creationists
into different, darker things
that infect the evening news

but it is the baptism that I detest
where names are masks
concealing bloody good works
performed by humanitarians.

Three Poems *by Ruth Goring*

Numbers
The accounting of Francisco Villalba,
Colombian paramilitary

At Farm Thirty-five
there were three covered trucks.
Twenty-five of us were in training,
we rose at five a.m.
Three times I was called
to take part in quartering.
I stood guard twice,
I cut once. She was young,
she said she had two children.
Four hundred are buried now.
I took one arm.

Family stories
for the Nasa people, Northern Cauca, Colombia

If you ask our elders, they will
tell you: Little sister,
our Mother grieves.
Convulsions of the sky:
listen.
The wounding of forests:
listen.
Creatures estranged
from soil: listen.

Take time, little sister,
to hear our Mother's stories.
They are full of beetles,
mold and mountains,
the busyness of birds.
Roots twist through her stories;
in the telling she rests.
We are created,
we are not alone.

With the ocean's waves
our Mother's heartbeat rocks us.
We soothe her by listening,
by tending her streams.

Tonight I will write a poem.
Tomorrow I will lean against a tree
and listen.

* * *

I dreamed Juan Tama, the sacred lake
high up the snow-capped Huila.
I dreamed a meeting of our peoples.

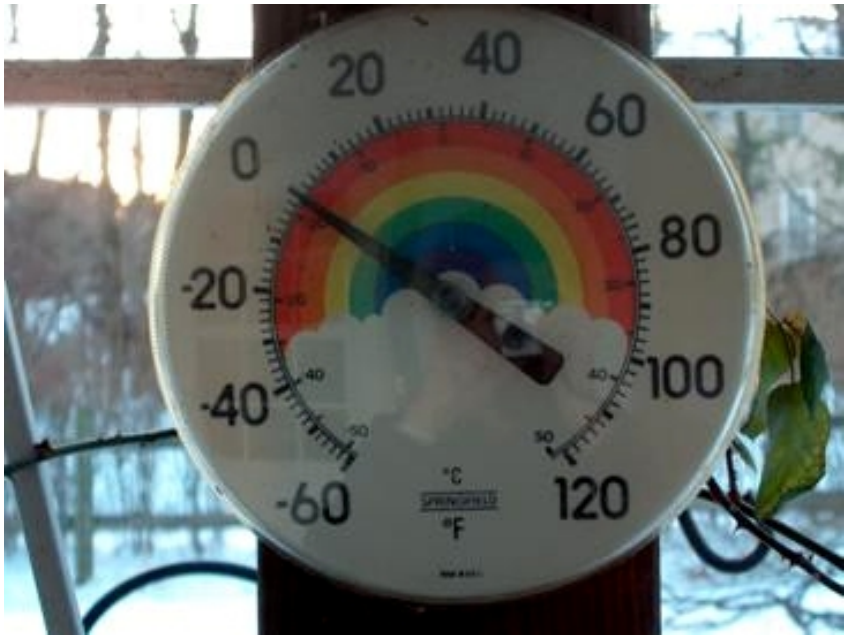
Rodolfo, peace pastor, walks
smiling, reads the earth
with Mayan eyes as lakewater
laps his brown feet,
clear as a dream.

Jazz lament

this music, gathering all smoke,
all shadows, nurses its quiet pain

throbs, rises, subsides—
a dispirited child, forgetting
demands & purpose

the world is tired
& cannot rinse away its blood



Zero Decree, O.P.W. Fredericks

I Could Be One, But No One Will Tell Me

by Tom Sullivan

My wife and I drive back to the airport and drop off the rental car. Our flight leaves in an hour and a half. By our estimation we're not running *that* late, since the airport is a small one and we shouldn't need much time to get through the check-in process. As we hustle toward the counter we discover just how skewed our logic has been. I suddenly realize that in a small airport like this, if one air traffic controller calls in sick operations probably grind to a halt.

We drop into a long line and glance nervously at our watches. We can't miss this flight given the important things we have to do tomorrow. Molly has meetings to attend and I need to play with the cat. We wait a bit longer before Molly decides to take action.

"Okay," she says, "I'm gonna try the self-check kiosk." She rambles over to the machine, slides a credit card into its mouth, and stabs a series of buttons. A minute later she walks back to me with a dejected look on her face.

"Well," she says, "mine went through fine, but your ticket says to check with the desk." I look at the ticket. It's says "See gate agent," but offers no reason for this requirement. I sigh and look down the line. We're about fifteen people back. It's going to be close.

When we get to the counter Molly hands our printouts to the airline attendant. The guy clicks away on his keyboard for a few minutes and then hands us our tickets. He says nothing about the restricted status of my ticket. When I ask about the situation he chuckles and says, "It's not a big deal. Your name popped up on the Terrorist Watch List, but you're good to go."

Noooo. Didn't they fix that thing after Ted Kennedy got bagged trying to smuggle his shock of white hair onto a plane.

I want to ask the guy how I can get myself off the list, but we don't have time. Our flight is leaving in two minutes. We jet down the hallway, jogging and looking for our gate. Molly's rolling suitcase keeps upending and she rights it each time on the fly. We spy the gate and swing towards the ramp onto the plane. The woman at the gate smiles and says, "You just made it."

I'm not a violent guy but I could just *kill* those terrorists; after I finish dispatching the guy responsible for maintaining the Terrorist List. Admittedly, it's not an enormous deal, like being convicted of a murder you didn't commit, but it's still a hassle. I like to travel light and check in on my own, but those days are now done, unless I can get off the list. I *really* don't want to deal with Homeland Security – I imagine the place is like a DMV on steroids.

And there's also the faint possibility that Rudy Guiliani will get the VP spot, win, and then decide to execute everyone on the list, just to be safe.

Molly and I shuffle down the aisle of the full airplane. We find our seat and squeeze past a middle aged man in casual business wear. When I drop into my seat I look over at the guy and say, "You might want to be careful. According to Homeland Security, I have the qualities of a terrorist."

The guy looks at me and says, "Jesus, they got you on that list?" He shakes his head and looks down the aisle. When he looks back at me he smiles and says, "A buddy of mine got stuck on that thing. Did they bring you into a room and question you?"

I tell him that they didn't.

My seat mate says, "Every time my friend flies some people in uniform escort him into a room. They ask him questions for, like, thirty minutes and then let him go."

I think about this for a moment. This guy's friend must be on some higher threat level. Of course, it could also be a data entry error. Like his friend's name is Ben Laden, dooming him to a life of endless interrogations.

The guy keeps telling his story, saying, "So now every time the guards approach him my friend holds out his driver's license and pleads, 'Please, I'm not the guy, can't you people get me off the list.'" "At the end of the questioning they say that they'll correct the error, but nothing ever happens. I really feel for the guy."

I ask if his friend has ever gotten a number to call, someone he could speak to and resolve the error.

My seat mate laughs and says, "He tried, but he almost died waiting on the line."

As the plane rolls across the tarmac and taxis to a runaway I think about my options. They aren't good. What I'll probably end up doing is arriving at the airport extra early and checking in as usual. I'll just get in line with the other suspects. From the sound of things it's that or officially changing my name.

As the plane lifts into the air I consider possible name changes. I need to reduce the chance of any more errors (ie Thomas Sullimam, who was flagged for the "imam" in is his name, has led the government sleuths into now suspecting me). So I'd go for a single name. Most of the good ones have already been taken. I can't choose Sting, that's already being used, but there's nothing stopping me from going past-tense and choosing Stung. Bono has been taken, but I could always rechristen myself as Bimbo. Maybe combine the two to get an innocent but confident sounding moniker: Bimbo Stung. I like the ring to that. If other options don't pan out, then Bimbo Stung it is.

A few weeks later I decide to take on this beast. I log onto Google and type in the words "Terrorist Watch List." The results aren't encouraging. The top link says, "325,000 Names On Terrorist List." My heart sinks. This means that I'm competing against 324,999 other mislabeled people hoping to be removed from the list. The second link says, "Terrorist Database Has Quadrupled In Four Years." For an administration supposedly favoring smaller government this is an impressive growth figure. There's even a link about "Infants On The Terrorist Watch List." This is unreal. *Young man, drop the bottle and put your pudgy little hands in the air!!!* This is *not* going to be easy.

It seems that many people have strong feelings about the reality of the Terrorist Watch List. I nod my head in agreement when I read a link stating "The goal was to be a master database pooling information on terror suspects. The result: A litany of technical glitches and red-tape follies."

I click on a few links posted by other people sharing my experience. One posting relates that among the horde of people calling into the Transportation Safety Administration to get off the list is an anti-terrorism specialist for the U.S army. This makes my faith in getting off the list as a regular run-of-the-mill citizen sink quickly. If some guy with a high level clearance is still doing battle, I imagine my chances of success are slightly below nil.

After clicking on a few official links I manage to get close. I think. At the FBI website I grind through a series of nasty run on sentences only to find that:

"Because the contents of the consolidated terrorist watchlist are derived from classified and sensitive law enforcement and intelligence information, the TSC cannot confirm or deny whether an individual is on the watchlist."

So I'm fairly sure I'm considered a threat to national security but I can't confirm this because of national security. I click around a few more government websites, setting nowhere. In my travels I come across a comment that almost convinces me to give up:

To sum up, if you run afoul of the nation's "national security" apparatus, you're completely on your own. There are no firm rules, no case law, no real appeals processes, no normal array of Constitutional rights, no lawyers to help, and generally none of the other things that we as American citizens

expect to be able to fall back on when we've been (justly or unjustly) identified by the government as wrong-doers.

But I'm determined here. This guy is just a frustrated cry baby. I keep digging. Eventually I find the Transportation Security Agency's website and hit the goldmine. A webpage materializes that exactly matches my problem. Getting excited, I search through the text and come upon a beautiful sight, a green button that says, "Click Here To File A Complaint." When I hit the button I get:

Internet Explorer cannot display the webpage

Most likely causes:

- You are not connected to the Internet.
- The website is encountering problems.
- There might be a typing error in the address.

Classic. Actually, it's perfect. I mean, think about it. If you were a real terrorist and wanted to see if you were on the list, you'd go this site and file a complaint as if you'd been wrongly stopped at the airport. Then, when you got confirmation that you were indeed on the list you'd shift tactics and type in the name of your friend's infant son, to see if he was on this list. If the kid didn't show up on the list, you'd load up his pacifier with explosives and send him on his way to the airport.

But the folks at TSA already know this. To be safe but still adhere to various rules, they've created a complaint procedure, but then made sure it doesn't work.

It's a stroke of genius. These guys are good. They think of absolutely everything.

You can start calling me Bimbo Stung.

Two Poems *by Laurie Kuntz*

Aftershocks

It starts slowly, a rumble
a faint tremble, the light bulb shakes,
the windows wrench -- crushing glass sounds--

And the reign of distant chimes.

In the end all things not
secured tumble:

My friend writes from Jerusalem, she
 rarely goes out, and it is not without
a scrutinizing eye:
The safest corner…
A table away from windows…
She avoids buses, walks everywhere,
but not in that carefree swagger,
barely afforded to the children who walk beside her.

My Cambodian neighbor wakes most nights,
the same dream jolts her--
mistaking the wind for thunder,
thunder for bombs,
the picture of her eldest
falls off the night table.

A woman drives over the Brooklyn Bridge,
she thinks she smells the charred papers
that fell from the sky for days.
Excavations have begun.
foundations are set; blueprints blow
against an approaching wind--
Not a bone was returned to her.

In the end, all things not secured,
Tumble into a reign,
of distant chimes.

Sitting in the Northern Bleachers

The child spoke these words:

"Shut up Jew"

and in this writing, I don't know where
to place the comma

(or if that introductory phrase merits a pause)

When my son told me the story,

…a fifth grade boy … gym class…
shooting baskets…out of turn…

scattered details during TV commercials,

(he did not want to miss
any part of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*)

I thought of all the numbers branded
across the yielding flesh of my grandmother's arm,
and how she wore a woolen cardigan
even in the heat of the lower east side summer,

…and her sister who went from Dachau to Sao Paulo
and was asked, Don't all Jews live north of the Amazon River?

(because everything foreign was *North*)

My son doesn't answer my questions

because tomorrow in gym class
he wants to shoot baskets,
play among classmates,

not warm the bench in the *northern* bleachers.

A Mother's Love

by O.P.W. Fredericks

"I did not know that we were poor until I was a teenager..."

Growing up in the 1960's and early 70's allowed me the opportunity to experience a more innocent childhood than the children of today, while benefiting from the changes, new ideas, and new technologies that were taking place in our society and the world. The Vietnam War, Flower Power, The Civil Rights Movement, and the Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo Space Programs all took place as I approached and entered adolescence, and helped shape the development of my own morals and values. While my father desperately held on to the values and social norms of the past, my Mother was open to the changes that were coming.

Mom learned to drive, against the wishes of my father, the same year I did. Mom encouraged me to keep my mind open to new possibilities and new ideas, and it was Mom who kept our family together and ensured that we lived in a home filled with love. I did not know that we were poor until I was a teenager, and I did not realize that we skirted poverty a few times until many years later. Yet through it all there was singing, hugs, kisses, laughter and love and if given the choice, I would not change a day of it.

I believe the greatest difference between my parents was that my father was an American who served his country as a Sergeant in the Army during the post WW II reconstruction of Europe and my mother was a child who survived the bombing of Germany in her basement and grew up without a father during the period of reconstruction.

Mom's family learned to adapt to ever-changing conditions. Food that was available in the shops that weren't bombed was priced far out of reach. They survived on what they could grow or barter for with neighbors and scavenge from abandoned farm fields. When the forests were scoured clean of fallen limbs and leaves to burn in the stoves, wood from furniture was used to cook and heat a single room.

Many of the bedtime stories my mother told me were about the war in Germany and how she, her sister, mother and grandmother survived. Nothing was wasted. Potato peels were used for breakfast served with hot water, and on Sunday a teaspoon of sugar was sprinkled over the top as a treat. To this day my mother

hates potatoes served in any form with the peels left on. What many of us today would discard as table scraps were incorporated into meals and there were never any leftovers. Soups were a staple and consisted of the bones from meat when there was any, and the peelings, greens or roots from vegetables, that today would be turned into compost.

At the beginning of summer one year when I was in my early adolescence, my father was fired from his job. Dad dealt with this by going to Atlantic City, N.J. for a week with his friends from the local volunteer ambulance squad to attend a national First Aid conference and compete in a First Aid competition. A neighbor who worked for the same company Dad was fired from, came to the house to offer her condolences to my mother. When she told Mom how sorry she was about Dad, my mother asked what she was talking about. The neighbor told Mom she was sorry Dad had lost his job and it was the talk throughout the company. Mom was devastated and told the neighbor she didn't know. The neighbor turned white with shock, then red with fury as she realized that not only was she the one to tell Mom, but that Dad had left for a week of fun without a word to his wife or family about their new situation.

For several months Dad would take odd jobs that lasted a day or two, but the income he brought in was insufficient for a family with four children. Mom scraped together what she could and took to cleaning other people's houses to get by. For some of the families, she cooked as well. She earned $2.00 an hour or $10.00 a day. My youngest sister was too young to attend school at the time and Mom would often take her along. Some of the people welcomed this and some made it very clear that it was an inconvenience to have a young child in their home while my mother cleaned and cooked. We were fortunate that this happened during the summer vacation because I could baby-sit while Mom worked for the people who objected. Some of the families treated Mom kindly, while others had her perform duties that would have made a grown strong man take pause. I can remember how weary she was when she came home, only to have to begin again in a house of six. My Oma, German grandmother, began to send money in the letters she wrote every week from Germany which helped tremendously. Mom didn't know how Oma knew or whether she knew at all, because she hadn't revealed our desperate situation in her own letters home, but it was the combination of all these few dollars that kept us going.

As the months passed, we survived on powdered milk and a lot of soup. The freezer, cupboard and pantry slowly became sparser until the day

arrived when all that remained were some spices, a little salt, and a partial package of dried noodles. Mom had done the best she could and stretched the dwindling food supply beyond anything I could have imagined. I tried to help by taking smaller portions of what was offered so that my younger siblings would have more to eat, and I went to bed hungry on many nights knowing that even with my attempts to eat less, my younger siblings also suffered the same pangs. For the first time in my life I witnessed my mother sobbing.

There was literally nothing left to eat. It was a hopeless situation and I didn't understand how it could have happened. I just didn't understand how there could be no food, but I did realize that we were in terrible trouble.

The money had run out. The electric and phone companies were threatening to shut off service. The oil bills from the past winter were still due, and I learned many years later that my father had already gone to the Mortgage company to obtain a temporary restructuring of the loan so that he only had to pay the principal that was due until he found regular work.

What I write here now is as clear to me today as it was some 37 years ago, and I'm amazed how some details are burned into my memory. I can remember sitting at the kitchen table with Mom trying to console her. The table cloth was a white vinyl with a border of large red, yellow and orange flowers and green vines connecting them. Mom was crying into one of her silk hankies that were adorned with violets, because there was no more Kleenex. She had brought several of these hankies with her when she came to America after marrying my father and up until this time they were used only when she went out for the evening to a social event, gathering, or church function. There was a knock at the front door. Mom tried to collect herself as I walked from the kitchen through the foyer to see who was there. I pulled aside the lace curtain of the window to find a neighbor who had befriended Mom several years earlier. I called to Mom that Sally was at the door and opened it. Sally told me, "Come on and help me unload the car". I didn't understand and thought Sally needed help to carry something up the three flights of stairs to her apartment across the street and one property up. I called back to Mom to tell her I had to go help Sally for a few minutes.

"Mom was crying into one of her silk hankies that were adorned with violets, because there was no more Kleenex."

I was surprised when Sally took me by the arm and walked me to her car. Instead of going to the driver's door, Sally guided me to the tailgate and opened it. There in the back were cardboard cartons and bags that extended from the back of the front bench seat right up to the tailgate, with some cartons piled on top of others. Each of these was filled with cans, boxes, cellophane bags and bottles, all containing food. I stood there still not understanding and then it dawned on me what Sally had done. She bumped me with her shoulder and told me to grab a box. I was actually jumping for joy, I was so excited. Together we walked up the two flights of stairs to the front porch and began to fill the kitchen table, chairs, and floor with groceries. As we began, Mom stood in the kitchen hall in shock. When she was finally able to compose herself, she asked Sally, "What is all this." Sally simply told Mom that she had so much in her pantry that she didn't know what she was going to do with all the extra and thought Mom would take it off her hands. Mom silently stood there bewildered, then began to sob again. Sally walked to Mom, gave her a hug, patted her back, and with a few tears in her eyes told Mom, "It's going to be OK."

I realized later that day, after the groceries had been put away, how excited I had been at the prospect of food and I became terribly ashamed of myself, my family, and my father. We were poor. My father had let us all down and the way I had acted was as good as begging. It was on this day that I grew up. For the first time in my life, I realized that I was the only person responsible for myself. I knew that I did not want to live like this for the rest of my life and if I was going to make it, it was because I was going to make it happen.

As time moved on, our situation slowly improved, but I could not forget how close we came to losing our home. Dad found another job and stayed with that company for more than 20 years. I earned money off and on for a few years selling greeting cards at different times of the year door to door, but the big push was in the fall when the company introduced its new Christmas Card collections. For each box of cards I sold, I received $1.00. I used the money to buy candy, gum, Christmas presents and other things I wanted that were never in Mom's budget.

By the time I turned 14 the following year, I had two jobs after school: one with the Philadelphia Bulletin delivering the daily news paper and the other in a boarding kennel cleaning up after dogs and cats so that I could earn my own spending money. Half of my earnings went into my savings account and the other half I kept for myself. More often than not, I would use the money to

buy those special little things for my family that just weren't in Mom's budget and sometimes I just gave Mom a few dollars asking her to buy specific grocery items. My brother split the paper route with me so we each had about 45 customers. I earned a whopping $10.00 a week between the two jobs, which in the early '70's was a lot. I remember when I received a raise at the kennel from $0.25 to $0.30 an hour. I thought I was rich beyond imagination. Shortly after I began work at the kennel, my brother joined me, under the table of course, as he was then 12 and too young for working papers.

"Mom knew how important those paper routes were to us, so for the next two days she walked beside my bicycle in freezing rain and wet snow and delivered the papers for both of her sons."

Together we continued these jobs for two more years. During the first winter after I had become a paperboy, my brother and I both came down with the flu. We had continued to deliver the papers and clean the kennels while we were sick until we were delirious with fevers so high that we couldn't get out of bed. I remember arriving home after delivering my papers, chilled to the bone, aching all over, and coughing nonstop. Mom put me right to bed and did the same for my brother as soon as he arrived home as sick as I was. Mom kept us home from school for the next two days. On the first day I tried to get out of bed when it was time to pick up the newspapers from the drop-off point, but I was just too sick. Mom knew how important those paper routes were to us, so for the next two days she walked beside my bicycle in freezing rain and wet snow and delivered the papers for both of her sons.

I will never forget her appearance on that second day when I came downstairs after my fever broke. The moment she came home, she went into the kitchen wearing her coat and scarf, put on a kettle for tea, and began to take out the ingredients to make her family dinner. I walked into the kitchen to find Mom hunched over the kitchen table bone weary tired, nursing her tea cup. Her hands were still mottled from the cold as she held them over the rising steam from the cup to warm them. For a just moment I saw the pain and hopelessness in her eyes but once she realized I was there, she smiled and told me it was time to get dinner ready. She took off her coat and removed the dripping plaid wool scarf from her head as the few remaining ice crystals fell to the floor. After hanging them up, she poured me a cup of tea and I sat in humbled silence while she dried the floor and prepared dinner. I set the table while dinner was cooking and thought back

to the previous summer when we were so close to losing everything.

As I reflect on those difficult years, I realize that the one constant in my life was Mom. So much of our family life revolved around the kitchen table and the food we ate there together. I recall my mother making us breakfast before school and while we ate, she would pack lunches for myself, my brother, and my two younger sisters. It was in June 1975 when Mom packed my last school lunch. With every sandwich wrapped in waxed paper, every baggy of Fritos, every piece of apple pie or chocolate cake there was a small yet heartfelt hug and kiss. Mom's love was very evident to me. As the oldest of her four children, I was much more aware of the hard times, the weeks when there wasn't enough money to buy the food her family needed, pay for the oil deliveries or the electric bill, or buy the clothes her growing children needed. I remember the sacrifices made, and the often unnoticed simple acts of love shown by a mother to her children.

In 2008 Mom and I celebrate two milestones, her 70th birthday and my 50th anniversary as her son. I still enjoy the times she makes me lunch when I visit. You see, there is still love tucked in between those pieces of bread.

Dappled Stone Throne, O.P.W. Fredericks

by Claudia Putnam

Little Bighorn

You could be listening to jazz
in a truck named for a tribe,
bound for Big Sky, skis on the rack.

Then you cross
the storied river.

It's night and you're hours late,
hours left to drive.
Anyway, if you stopped and
stood in the January
wind, who knows what you'd see,
and are you ready for visions,
for this particular horror?

The Little Bighorn Casino

flares and reduces to your rearview.
Pause in your thoughts, what was
extinguished here,
who stood to the last? Look back:
the bright casino lot is full
of Cherokees and Dakotas.
Turn your eyes forward: three times

the river cuts under this highway

A Few Things I Learned at Randall-Shane

by Francine Marie Tolf

The red dress I wore for my interview at a small but posh employment agency on the north end of the Loop wasn't the reason I was offered the position of assisting two senior partners at a top-ten law firm in Chicago – but it helped. I had recently turned forty but looked almost ten years younger. I could still get away with wearing above-the-knee sheaths, which I did that August afternoon, along with a pair of chunky-heeled sandals and earrings that looked like big gold disks. My shoulder-length blond hair was pulled back with a tortoise-shell-colored band.

"You're a very attractive woman," Diane, the agency's head, noted matter-of-factly. She seemed to be thinking out loud. "You've got the background. Your resume looks great. I'm going to overlook your score on the typing. With a little practice, your speed'll get up there. Anyway, this is an *upper scale* position. I'll fax Linda your materials. I'd be very surprised if she doesn't want an interview."

My typing test score was thirty-nine words per minute. This was humiliating, but I'd never done well on typing tests. Interviews, on the other hand, I was good at. Successful interviews had gotten me my previous jobs: receptionist at an architecture firm; assistant to a Communications Director; and legal secretary at a small, family-owned law firm located in Old Town. I'd been at that last job for nearly thirteen years. Rosa, another secretary who'd been there almost as long, used to joke with me about still working at Schoffman and Schoffman when we were little old ladies.

"Can you read this motion, Francine?" she'd ask me in a quavering voice. "My eyes are going."

I'd grab a file from her desk and stoop over. "I don't know, my back is acting up today. You better bring Marv his Geritol."

Rosa was a member of the small group of attorneys and support staff who formed my second family. Patriarch of that cobbled-together family was Marv Schoffman. Marv owned the three-flat and the firm; his oldest son worked there also and represented the second, less important, Schoffman. Marv could have used some consciousness-raising when it came to women's issues. He adored gossip and could never finish a story he thought was funny because he laughed too hard. Marv also wept easily, like Toad in *The*

Wind in the Willows, then promptly forgot the cause of his remorse. I know this, because he frequently pulled me into his office to discuss his relationship problems. Once, on my birthday, the head of Schoffman and Schoffman slipped into the tiny backyard of his building and added a tiger lily to the flower arrangement I found on my desk. "It reminds me of you," he told me a little shyly.

I loved that man. He had died of melanoma a year ago. Since Marv's illness began to keep him away from the office, the firm had suffered. His son, Bruce, lacked the gift and the will to keep Schoffman and Schoffman the thriving personal injury practice it had once been. What interested Bruce was finding medical malpractice claims that he could settle quickly without having to go to court. After his dad died, Bruce sat me down and told me he needed me; out of loyalty to him and to his father, I stayed on for nearly a year. By then, even Rosa had moved to a downtown law firm. The support staff consisted of myself and Brittany, a newly-hired twenty-one-year-old with a pierced belly button and no conception of grammar. It was time to go.

It's frightening to leave a job after almost thirteen years. It's even more frightening when you know the skills that made you valuable will be irrelevant to your next employer. I worked hard at Schoffman and Schoffman. I kept the docket calendar and arranged depositions. I met with clients myself before preparing written discovery. But I didn't do that much *typing*, and my computer knowledge was rudimentary. Schoffman and Schoffman was so low-tech, we didn't even have e-mail. The thought of working at a fast-paced downtown law firm made my hands sweat, but it was the obvious choice. I wasn't going to find another niche like the one I'd inhabited comfortably for over a quarter of my life.

Hence, my interview with Diane. And Diane was right: Linda, the assistant director of human resources at Randall, Shane, Livingstone & Frederickson did, indeed, want to meet with me. I wore a new suit and was dazzled by the blue slice of lake and sky that met me as I walked into the firm's main lobby. It was on the forty-second floor of a soaring concrete and steel rectangle that took up an entire city block of downtown, Chicago. My interview went well. I smiled, I looked interested, I asked earnest questions. Diane was elated when she told me on the phone the next morning that Linda wanted me to meet with the two senior partners. I wasn't surprised. I knew I'd impressed Linda. What I didn't know – I didn't know a lot of things, but I especially didn't know this – was that the position I was interviewing for had been open for weeks. It would have meant a step up and higher salary to almost any secretary already working at Randall-

Shane. No one wanted the job, because no one wanted to work for Steven Groth, one of the two senior partners.

*

I used to hate Steven Groth. I spent considerable energy inventing scenarios in which he was humiliated as I calmly looked on. I don't any more. He was what he was: the closest thing a human being can be to a cold-blooded predator who eats anything in its path. There are reasons why lawyers are called sharks. Steve epitomized them. He was a tall man, six feet two or three, with hair like white stubble (although he was about my age) and small black eyes that might have been alive once but were now dead. When he got angry, which was often, the back of his neck turned an ugly red.

Two scenes memorializing my former boss:

- I am at the copy machine, down the hall from my desk and Steve's office, swearing softly and frantically over a load of oversized, two-sided documents that Steve has just handed me, with the greeting, "I need three sets *now*." My phone is ringing, but I figure I'd better let the machine pick it up. Wrong choice. From inside his office, Steve screams my name so loud everyone on the forty-sixth floor can hear him, including the receptionist at the other end of it. Later, she calls me and whispers, "Are you *all right*?"

- Steve is in his office with the door shut, talking to a deep-pocketed client – the business he owns is a Chicago landmark – who is being sued by a former assistant for sexual harassment. The client is, in fact, a sleazebag who has been sued for sexual harassment before. It is Steve's job to make the current accusations appear as weak as possible, and given the evidence I've read, it's a difficult task. Two silhouettes against frosted glass. Raised voices. Then, the door bursts open and I hear the tail-end of Steve's " . . . much she can do, and anyway, she's *NOTHING BUT A FUCKING SECRETARY!*"

Every day I worked for that man, I was aware of how my lack of experience and skill disgusted him. I learned very quickly not to ask any questions. He ignored me, leaving transcription tapes and envelopes stuffed with receipts on my desk. Sometimes I'd have to go into his office to search for a file. Under a drift of pink phone messages, I once found a memo to him from another partner detailing why he, the partner, could not pledge more billing hours the following year – heresy at a law firm like Randall-Shane. I think it

had something to do with illness in his family. Across the body of the memo, Steve had written to someone in fierce script, "*CAN YOU BELIEVE THIS*?" The partner in question agreed to pledge more billing hours.

*

Some law firms train secretaries for three weeks before sending them out to work for a particular set of attorneys. At Randall-Shane, you got a day. My morning training consisted of sitting in a room with other new support staff, listening with increasingly heavy lids as various people came in and gave spiels about the departments they managed: filing department, docketing department, mail room, law library. We were given lots of binders. After lunch, Connie, a tech assistant whose hummingbird energy left me dazed, taught us software programs. There was a time-entry program for billing hours, an address book program, a calendar, a program to red-line documents . . . . I left knowing none of them.

I walked part of the way home that night before catching the train. In the little park across from the Newberry Library, I noticed a few people had gathered. They were staring down at something. I joined them and saw: a baby bird had fallen out of its nest. It was probably terrified of the monster figures towering over it, but it couldn't move. All of us felt bad, but none of us knew what to do. After standing there a few minutes longer – as if that somehow mitigated our guilt – we left the tiny creature. That evening, on the train, something unheard of happened: a man offered me his seat. "You look troubled," he said. "Is everything all right?"

One of the things I learned at Randall-Shane was that an attorney with a purple face screaming my name at the top of his lungs will not make me cry. Kindness, however, can undo me. I wept quietly all the way home: for me, for the bird, for the stranger who cared enough to ask a woman with a troubled face if everything was all right.

*

It didn't help that I was replacing Superwoman. Jan was probably in her early thirties, but had the peachy complexion of a girl in college. She looked like she spent her days barefoot under apple trees, but Jan Pastorek was the smartest, most accomplished legal assistant I have ever seen in action. She was the kind of secretary you could ask to red-line the revisions in a forty-page document, then send it out as an attachment to the group email we used last week, *you know the one, but first convert it from Word Perfect to Word and add this postscript to the last two parties, and don't use their office emails, use their alternates, the addresses are in my book.* An

attorney could call that out to Jan as he was leaving for the day, and she would execute the orders perfectly, in under an hour, while answering phones, signing for faxes, and taking note of the mail being delivered (mail was delivered hourly throughout the day), in case something important came in. Jan was Superwoman.

She was also nice. I sat with her for two days before she started her own new job in the accounting department. Jan tried her best to groom me, but she was too fast and too good to be of much help. It was during those two days we spent together that I learned the reason for her changing positions. Reasons, really, the first being overload. The position I was about to take over from Jan involved assisting two senior partners, Steve and Tony, and one junior attorney. Preparing the monthly bills for Steve and Tony alone was a huge amount of work that not even Jan could do without coming in on weekends, which she didn't mind. What she minded was the fact that this, like so much else she did, was taken for granted. It must have been at once a sour source of pride and a keen irritant when Jan learned that the secretary who was to replace her – *me* – would no longer be expected to prepare bills.

The second reason Jan left her position was Steve. Steve never screamed at Jan. Why would he have cause to? In his own eat-anything-in-my-path manner, he might actually have appreciated her. He just never said so. When after four years of working for them, Jan gave birth to her second little boy, Tony sent an extravagant arrangement of flowers and a warm personal note. Steve sent nothing. That hurt Jan, but what hurt her more was the fact that Tony, after learning she wanted to change positions within the firm, didn't negotiate to keep her, even if it meant that Steve would have to be teamed up with another attorney. I'm surprised Tony didn't. Maybe he interpreted Jan's move as disloyal and was hurt himself. Certainly, the two of them had enjoyed an excellent rapport.

But then, everyone liked Tony. He was all that Steven Groth was not: warm, outgoing, able to handle enormous pressure with the light touch of the true professional. Tony expected the best from the attorneys who worked for him. He got it, because you did not want to disappoint Tony. *I* did not want to disappoint Tony. It's little short of astonishing, given my ignorance when I began to work for him, that I didn't. During my time at Randall-Shane, I had only one talk with Tony that came close to being personal, but it made an impression. For one thing, I learned how he felt about Steve. "I do not know," he said with profound distaste, "how people put up with the man." Tony also told me he knew I cared about my job, and

that it showed. "Plenty of secretaries are fast, but they're also satisfied with almost right. You're not. You want to get it *right*."

I did want to get it right. I took home unwieldy manuals and studied them at night. I practiced my typing on weekends. I memorized lists of client and matter numbers and tried my best to get a grasp on Randall-Shane's labyrinthine filing system (I never did). All my acquired knowledge, trembling as clouds on the surface of a pool, shattered instantly when Steve stalked up to my desk and muttered grimly that he needed a letter to go out to (mumble, mumble, mumble) along with (mumble, mumble, mumble). "Forget what you're doing, I need this now," he'd snap before his door slammed. My heart would pound, my fingers would turn to ice. I would not get it right.

I did, however, give the gossip-mongers plenty to talk about, especially after Steve asked human resources for another secretary. He did this after I'd been at Randall-Shane for eight months. He never said a word to me about it. I found out from other secretaries. Once the news was out, I could feel the buzz I created as I walked past desks. But not when I walked past the desks of Denise and Jenna. Those two young women made the twelve months I spent at Randall-Shane a little more bearable than they might have been. Jenna had been there for only a little over a year, and Denise had worked her way up from the filing department. Like that stranger on the train who gave me his seat, they blessed me with unnecessary kindness, answering my many questions without ever making me feel stupid, helping me when they were busy themselves.

We went out to lunch together a few times. And here is where I hesitate, because what I'm about to say sounds so ungrateful but has everything to do with why I'm writing this. I noticed one day, as the three of us walked into a restaurant, how Denise and Jenna entered: giggling, suddenly self-conscious, as if they might not have a right to be there. Did being secretaries at Randall-Shane have anything to do with the way they carried themselves? I did not want to be the kind of woman who enters a room apologetically.

And I certainly did not want to become an attorney. My year at Randall-Shane made clear to me how tedious much of a corporate defense attorney's job is. It's easy to be dazzled by the glitz of a big law firm – to assume that the work that goes on there is grand and complicated, far beyond the understanding of the average person. From what I saw, most of it is not. Defense attorneys get paid by the hour. The more work a firm bills for, the more money it makes. No one at a defense firm is going to have a secretary who gets paid twenty dollars an hour prepare a simple pretrial memo when

an attorney whose hourly fee is fifteen times that can bill for it. I once skimmed the deposition of a man who worked for a bus company that one of Randall-Shane's major clients. The deposition concerned whether or not he had stolen something (soda? a uniform?) and taken breaks when he should have been working. The employee was barely literate. His deposition cost more than whatever he might have stolen. No doubt that pathetic transcript was part of a bigger case; it may even have been necessary. Still, it made for painful reading.

*

After Steve fired me, human resources assigned me another partner. Gene was decent, but very needy. His office was two floors below Tony's. I was constantly, comically, running back and forth between the forty-sixth and forty-fourth floors. I was preparing bills now, too, although I was too busy to attend any training sessions: I learned on my own. I was finally getting a handle on my job, beginning to understand and to execute the responsibilities of a legal secretary at a major corporate law firm. And I at last had the confidence to know I needed to get the hell out of there. I was never going to feel comfortable at Randall-Shane, a huge icebox of a corporation with a caste system as firmly in place as India's. I was never going to walk into work and not feel sick in the pit of my belly.

I applied for a position in Evanston at a not-for-profit organization. The salary was about half of what I was making but enough to live on. When they offered me the job, I said yes. It was hard telling Tony, but I could live my life to please someone else – albeit, someone decent and admirable – or I could live it to please myself. I chose the latter. I'm sure my giving notice provided plentiful fodder for the office gossips. I didn't care.

On my last day at Randall-Shane, Denise and Jenna took me out to lunch at Trader Vic's. I stayed late, as usual, to get a project completed for Gene. Tony was out of town; we'd said our good-byes before he left. When he called that day, he said nothing about its being my last one there. I took his cue and did not mention it either. It was about seven p.m. when I walked out the doors of Randall-Shane for the last time. I don't remember the train ride home, but I'll bet no one offered me a seat. I know I did not look troubled. I did not look troubled at all.

by David Chorlton

Ecorealism

In his painting, *The Last Word*, Rene Magritte
placed a tree upon a leaf, framing it
to show a part as greater than the whole.
Floating unaccountably beside a wall
and drawn with precision against the backdrop
of a mountain, the leaf has veins
symmetrically branching toward its edge
while the tree grows darkly along the stem.
Whether he intended prophecy or not, Magritte
showed the world shrinking faster
than can be measured with numbers. No trace
of snow is found on the peaks, only a dry
glaze of sunlight at late afternoon
when the minutes grow so long as to threaten
postponement of night and a force so intense
it can push the stars back
into a universe expanding beyond even
a surrealist's imagination, which can fit the snowmelt
from a glacier in a teacup or sweep the air clean
with a broom, but has no power
to curb the appetites of men who want to eat
until the only food remaining them
is a single cherry in a refrigerator, glowing red
like the sun challenging the frost that preserves it.

Follies of a Sane Man on a Cold Night

by Luke Evans

I hammered my brakes; at the last second, when I realized I was hitting her for good or bad, I hit the gas pedal instead.

The cold was the worst part. I only had on a hoodie, and the nighttime wind bit through me like a dorsal fin through the breakers. I couldn't feel my fingers anymore. They were like icicles, quite literally. I know that's been said before, but I swear, I could have snapped them off and stabbed you with them, and I wouldn't have felt any pain.

I'd walked halfway up the hill, and still no cell phone reception. I couldn't even dial the numbers anymore. Like I said, my fingers, icicles... you know.

Oh, where are my manners? I'm starting in the middle. Sorry.

I was driving down the road -- country road, late, 2-in-the-morning-ish, blaring Chevelle (the band, not the car -- oh, how I wish it was the car!) -- when... you still with me? Did the dashes lose you?

Well, long story short, a doe jumped in front of me. Bottom of a hill, nowhere to go, see, cause just past the deer was this little bridge going over a stream. I hammered my brakes; at the last second, when I realized I was hitting her for good or bad, I hit the gas pedal instead. (Grandpa taught me that. See, when you brake, your car angles downward which in turn propels the deer onto your hood and through your windshield -- very dangerous. On the other hand, when you accelerate, your car angles upward which forces the deer underneath the car -- much safer for the occupants.) But not for the car. That stupid hunk of fur and blood ripped my transmission apart, only *after* tearing up my radiator when I first hit it. My little rice turd (sorry, slang -- rice rocket means fast Asian car; mine was a Honda, but not exactly fast)....

Where was I? Oh, right. The car teetered on the deer. The driver-side tires were off the ground. When I hopped out, it was like climbing down from a truck. Not a semi, just a pickup. Or a van. Usually the ground was about four inches away, not a foot.

I tried calling for help, but there was no service in this god-forsaken valley of pastures and cow pies and deer carcasses. That's why I was walking up the hill, to get cell phone service, so I could call Dad or someone to pick me up. That's

where I started, if you recall. I was freezing. I figured I'd die of pneumonia before the night was through.

That's when a terrific crash resounded behind me. Steel rending, tires squealing, brakes shredding. I admit that my first thought was a UFO had crashed somewhere close. My second thought was my car had exploded. The rest of the thoughts that followed didn't have time to form into anything coherent, but I remember flashes of CIA conspiracies, Russian mobmen, little girls with bombs, nose-diving jetliners, and (I'm not proud) the deer becoming some super animal zombie and flinging my car away with incredible strength. I think it ate it too. I said I wasn't proud.

But it was another car. I hadn't thought of that. Looked like it'd been going at quite a clip when it hit me (my car). Must not have seen me (my car) at all. Did I remember my flashers? Sure I did. Maybe.

It was another one much like mine. Little cruddy rice turd. It had taken my car's place on the bridge, pushing mine until it was cocked sideways. The whole rear was now caved in, and the two cars may as well have been one. Good luck getting them apart. The front of the other car was equally caved in. In fact, the hood was gone, basically. Where my back window ended, the windshield of the other car began. They were, of course, both shattered and hopelessly mangled. My first thought as I saw it was elation cause I figured this person's insurance would pay for my car. Woo-hoo! Then I wondered who this other person was. Maybe I should take a look. Maybe it was dead.

I opened the car door. Well, that makes it sound too easy. The handle wouldn't lift, so I kicked it. That didn't help, but it did take my mind off it for a second as my toes pounded. But then it came. I had to throw all my weight against the door to make it budge, but it swung completely open.

There was a girl inside. Not a day over thirty. Maybe twenty-five. Used to be pretty, I bet, before the crash. Hard to tell now. Blood covered her face. Her neck was bent back unnaturally over the seat (no headrest -- bummer), her head facing the ceiling, her back splayed, her legs pinned by the dash which had accordioned with the hood and obliterated all the leg room. I couldn't even see her feet or the pedals. I reached way over the debris of the car and her body and waved my hand in front of her eyes. Nada.

Great, I thought. She's dead. This is *not* going on my record.

That's when a little voice said something, and I tested the colorfastness of my underwear.

It was her. She was still alive. I felt lucky to be alive myself, after a scare like that.

I leaned in to listen: "Richie, is that you? I'm so glad you came back! I've missed you, Richie." Her lips tried to smile. They almost did.

"You'll be all right," I said. It felt like a lie, and she couldn't even seem to hear me. I followed it up with "You're doing good" cause it made *me* feel better, anyway.

She continued as if I had said nothing: "Do you remember that time in Paris? When we got lost? Sandy was there. We were looking for the Rue de Rivoli, but weren't anywhere close."

She said that street -- Rue de Rivoli -- rather fluently. Not like English at all. So I said, "Are you French, Miss?"

She kept on talking. I was feeling a little put out. I don't like being ignored.

But she said: "You stopped at a little store, and got mad when the clerk refused to speak English." (Here she laughed, a sickly, terrible sound, but almost cute, in a way.) "So I spoke to him in French. Do you remember? I loved you then."

She paused here, so I butted in. "I hate to intrude, but do you happen to have a phone in here?" Not sure

She kept on talking. I was feeling a little put out. I don't like being ignored.

why I thought it mattered, but maybe, just maybe, hers would work. But she didn't answer me. She talked to "Richie" instead.

"I'm sorry, Richie. I lost your cd. I know I said I didn't, but I did. It was me. I was afraid you would be mad, so I didn't tell you. I didn't mean to lose it. I'm sorry." Tears formed and traced their way down her unmoving, bloody face. I could only imagine what the salt felt like on all those open wounds, but it didn't seem to faze her.

Suddenly she laughed again, and this time it sounded less strangulated, more joyful. A glimmer came into her eyes. "I'm so happy you came, Richie. You can call me Kiss if you want. I know I always gave you a hard time about it, but it's okay. Everyone calls me Alexis; when you call me Kiss, I feel special. I want to feel special, Richie, like you used to make me feel."

I thought about moving her, but I'd heard that moving someone with a broken neck could be fatal. I wasn't about to be the cause of her death. Then I thought, maybe I should be writing these down. What if "Richie" really would like to hear these? But

I was flooded with logic: I had no paper; I had no pen; I had stiff, frozen fingers that would sooner fall off than mold themselves around a pen; and it didn't sound like Alexis had broken off on good terms with Richie. I rather doubted he'd be coming around to mourn her, should she die.

In the movies, that always means the person's dead.

I looked at her broken, bleeding body. At her mutilated face. At the glass from the windshield covering her like so many diamands. A royal burial.

"I'm gonna go find help, you hang in there, okay?" I didn't actually expect her to answer *me*, per se, but it had been too long since she'd said anything, so I waved my hand in front of her eyes again, then I climbed onto the step into the car so I could look into her eyes. Uh-oh. Something in my stomach rolled and churned. I thought maybe I should check her pulse, just to be sure, but I have this thing about touching dead people. No can do. Creeps me way out. My skin would crawl for days.

But she was dead. She had to be. Blood was coming out of her mouth. In the movies, that always means the person's dead. No one else can bleed from the mouth. It's like a medical rule, I think.

Did I mention yet how very cold I was? Still an icicle. That passenger seat, with all the broken glass and lack of leg room, looked mighty tempting. No wind in there. Just warm carpet seats. I could fold my legs beneath me and chill, just for a minute, unil I was ready to walk the hill again.

That's when I smelled gasoline. I decided being *that* warm was not a good idea. I ran halfway up the hill before I stopped, and I never looked back. The *boom* never came, but one can never be too careful.

They tell me she was twenty-three. Just like me. Richie did show up, at the police station. He looked pretty bummed. I didn't introduce myself, seeing as I was about to be actively investigated in the negligent death of his former and maybe future girlfriend. We'll see what comes of that.

Whenever it gets cold out, I wear gloves now. The cold was the worst part. I swear.

Gut Reaction

William L. Ramsey re. Matthew Wylie, "On August Interviews," Issue Six

The title of Matthew Wylie's wonderful poem "On August Interviews" undersells this poem. It is a densely packed symbolist poem that proceeds by regular dialogic interchanges, but the language is always on the verge of pulling away from the encounter. The first three exchanges are nicely done but reliable, given our expectations of an interview: "when did you arrive here," etc.

It is the fourth exchange, for me at least, that really begins the fireworks. At this point the interviewers shift from information gathering to offering terms: "Then we will prepare for you fields of hymn . . . ." And in response the subject of the interview promises to "stalk your open eyes like a black moon on the braided sea." I love this line perhaps more than any other in the poem, because it really delivers what it threatens. There is no possibility of predicting this line. Its watery rhythm rolls under the new moon with a logic all its own. The concluding exchange builds on this wildness admirably.

My only criticisms concern the title, which could be altered to set the stage better or provide additional context and tension to the text, and the form in which the dialogue is set. I was put off at first by the omnipresent quotation marks and offset stanzas. I prefer the Yeats approach: identify the speaker in italics at the start of each quote, then print the line without quotation marks all flush to left margin.

Submit your own "Gut Reaction" to work in this or a prior issue of *The Externalist* by sending a response of 50 to 200 words to editor@theexternalist.com. Please include "Gut Reaction" as the subject header of your email. The best submissions will be published in an upcoming issue of *The Externalist.* By submitting to "Gut Reaction," you agree that *The Externalist* has the right to publish your submission and keep it on our web site indefinitely. There is no payment for "Gut Reaction" pieces and we regret that we are unable to respond to these submissions unless we will be using them.

Contributor Notes

Ed Bennett is a Telecom Engineer living in Las Vegas. He was born and raised in New York City, lived for a time in the New Jersey suburbs, eventually moving to the lush and bucolic Eden of the Mojave Desert. His work has appeared in the *Manhattan Quarterly, The Paterson Literary Review* and *The New Verse News*.

David Chorlton was born in Austria, grew up in England, and lived in Vienna for several years before moving to Phoenix in 1978. He is a visual artist and poet, with many magazine publications and individual chapbooks and books, the most recent of which reflect his engagement with the natural world: *Waiting for the Quetzal* (March Street Press) & *The Porous Desert* (FutureCycle Press).

When not reading, writing, working, or perusing the internet in conjunction with one of the above, it is hard to say what **Luke Evans** may be doing. Keep an eye on him. He lives in Maryland with his dog who doesn't read or write anything, but actively promotes his work in *The Hiss Quarterly, MindFire Renewed, Opium, Contrary, Edifice Wrecked*, and beyond. Good dog.

Jéanpaul Ferro is a 4-time Pushcart Prize nominee. His work has appeared in the *Columbia Review*, *Connecticut Review, Bryant Literary Review, Cortland Review, Birmingham Arts Journal, Review Americana, Portland Monthly, Identity Theory,* and *The Providence Journal*. His work has been featured on WBAR radio in New York City and he will be the featured author in the August 2008 issue of *Contemporary American Voices*. His book of short fiction, *All the Good Promises*, was published by Plowman Press. Additionally, his work will be featured in the upcoming National Public Radio series *This I Believe* on NPR. He currently lives in Providence, Rhode Island. E-mail at: jeanpaulferro@netzero.net.

O.P.W. Fredericks is a retired Registered Nurse from Pennsylvania who recently returned to writing after several decades. His poetry and short stories reflect human interaction and the human condition interpreted by his philosophy of life as well as recollections from his childhood and his career. He is presently working on a novel based on this philosophy and the health

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Kathie Giorgio's writing credits include stories in *Fiction International, Dos Passos Review, The Pedestal, Bayou, Eclipse, Potomac Review, Arabesques Review,* and others. In the near future, stories will appear in the *Hurricane Review* and in *Midway Journal.* Her stories have also appeared in such magazines as *Buffalo Spree* and *Passager,* among many others, as well as in Papier Mache Press's last anthology, *Generation to Generation.* Kathie holds her BA in Creative Writing from the University of Wisconsin – Madison, and her MFA in Fiction Writing from Vermont College. She is the director and founder of AllWriters' Workplace and Workshop, a creative writing studio offering both online and on-site classes in all genres and abilities of creative writing, and she is also the new editor/owner/publisher of *Quality Women's Fiction* magazine. She teaches online for Writers' Digest.

Besides **Ruth Goring's** collection *Yellow Doors* (WordFarm, 2004), her recent poems have appeared in *Conte, Mars Hill Review, Out of Line, Dos Passos Review,* and other journals. She is co-director of Chicagoans for a Peaceful Colombia (www.chicagoans.net) and a book editor at University of Chicago Press.

Laurie Kuntz's bio is as elusive as her estrogen levels. Sometimes she remembers she is a poet and sometimes not. During her five minutes in the sun Laurie has done the following: She is the winner of the **1999 Texas Review Chapbook Contest** and her chapbook, ***Simple Gestures*** is published by **Texas Review Press** (2000). **Blue Light Press** published her chapbook, ***Women at the Onsen,*** in 2003. **Edwin Mellen Press** published her poetry collection, ***Somewhere in the Telling*** in 1999. She is the author of two English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) books, ***The New Arrival,*** *BKS*. 1 &2(**Prentice-Hall, 1982, 1992**). She was the editor of the University of Maryland's Asian Division's literary magazine, ***Blue Muse*** and was a contributing editor to ***Hunger Mountain Magazine.*** Currently, she is a contributing editor for ***RockSaltPlum*** online literary magazine, (www.rocksaltplum.com). In 2003, three of her poems were nominated for the prestigious **Pushcart Prize**. More on her life and poetry can be seen on **lauriekuntzpoetry.homestead.com.** Pining for the tropics, she works and writes in Northern Japan.

Joe Paddock is a poet, oral historian and environmental writer, and has taught in the Creative Writing Department of the University of Minnesota. His books of poetry include *Handful of Thunder* (Anvil Press)*, Earth Tongues* (Milkweed Editions)*, Boars' Dance* (Holy Cow! Press), and *A Sort of Honey* (Red Dragonfly Press).

Claudia Putnam lives among the Indian Peaks of Colorado. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Facets, Switched-on Gutenberg, Rock & Sling, MARGIE, RHINO, Cimarron Review, Roanoke Review, Literary Mama, weber studies*, and elsewhere.

Caryl Klein Sills is an Associate Professor of English Emerita from Monmouth University in New Jersey. Since her recent retirement, she has largely devoted her energies to writing fiction. This is the third short story she has had published. She is also working on a coming of age novel set in 16th century Venice.

Thomas Sullivan is a humor essayist residing in Portland, Oregon. His most recent work, a memoir entitled 'Life In The Slow Lane' recounts a hair-raising summer spent as an instructor in a drivers education car (available at www.lulu.com). His short fiction is slated to appear in the UK online journal 'Whispers of Wickedness' (www.ookami.co.uk).

Francine Marie Tolf lives in Minneapolis, where she has taught literature and creative writing at the University of Minnesota and the College of Visual Arts. She recently received a Minnesota State Arts Board Grant and a Grant from the Barbara Deming/Money For Women Foundation. Francine's essays and poems have appeared in many journals, including *Rattle, Nimrod, 5 AM* and *Apple Valley Review*. She is the author of two chapbooks. Her personal web site can be found at http://www.francinemarietolf.com.

Donny Wankan lives in the Houston area with his wife and daughter and teaches and studies English Literature. Born in the piney woods of East Texas and raised in Dallas, he is one half crude hick and one half phony intellectual.

Jennifer Weathers currently attends the MFA program at UNCW, where she also teaches undergraduate creative writing. Her poems have appeared in *The Pedestal Magazine*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *Poetry Miscellany*, and are forthcoming in *Hunger Mountain*, *SLAB* and *Red Clay Review*.

Parker Wilson, Psy.D. is a doctor of clinical psychology and the founder of the Awakened Mind Institute. Dr. Wilson is a psychotherapist specializing in the treatment of psychological trauma and abuse, addiction and compulsion, depression, grief and loss, and family and couple's issues. Dr. Wilson is an expert in Buddhist psychology, mindfulness based cognitive therapies, and mindfulness meditation techniques. Over the years, he has worked with thousands of people who have been victimized by crime and childhood abuse, become addicted to alcohol and substances, are battling depression and grief, are grappling with intimacy and sexual issues, or are just struggling to stay together as a person, a couple, or a family. He is an adjunct faculty member at both the University of Colorado at Denver, and at Argosy University. Dr. Wilson periodically conducts mindfulness workshops and seminars, and he is a regular public speaker in and around the Denver area.