

THE AGORA

WAS ESSENTIALLY

* the plenary assembly

where all the laoi ^{common} people

gathered, all the citi

zens in the town, all the

warriors in the camp, in

short, the whole mass

of those who had no **

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GOING AWAY

"Going away is the first lesson we are taught and the last lesson that we learn." —Western Cherokee

The burrowing animal
searches for safety
deeper and deeper
underground, hopeful
that nothing will
seek him, grateful
for the narrow
darkness he has made.
And the fox, who waits,
or the snake, who
knows every turn
in the corridor,
may come, or may not.

The fortunate achieve
many generations undetected,
the burrow expanding with
blind, noisy offspring
ignorant of adversity,
who is the old wolf that
wanders just at the edge
of the dark pines above ground.
Only a predator badly in need
of luck will detect their
muffled prosperity, will dig
deep enough to find them
some warm afternoon when
nothing in particular has happened.

Many will die and a few
will escape notice, but
all will leave what they thought
they would not. And the hunters
will eat quickly, eager to move
off the spot, for they must remain
always the teachers of the
lesson the others forgot.

—Russell Fowler

TABLEAU

What evangelist—
shouting good news
into the studio lenses
slapping his supple Bible
handsewn like a
shot-silk eiderdown—

Could dream—
some casual viewer
wandering across a room
would be pierced
through the airwaves
the pitched cry
acing its target
like a thunderbolt—

Would throw her
hands up
as if a voice bullhorned
"freeze."
cigarette free-falling
from oval lips,
the lighter travelling
obliquely
to torch her nested hair?

And should I,
astonished on the sofa
have dared douse
such flames
with my mashed can of
Michelob?

—Jean S. Moore

THE STRAITS OF VERMEUTHE

Joey Harbor was wondering out loud one evening after supper until somebody heard him, then he stopped. Phillie ran up to him and asked him what he was wondering so loudly about.

"Oh, Phillie," bemoaned Joey, "You just have no idea."

Phillie looked puzzled. "You're right, he said," said Phillie. "I have no idea."

"Well, let me tell you what ails my tender soul. For years I have rode these jagged ships on these brainless seas, and not once have I felt a longing for home. Now, it's my fourth powerful year on the built *Gertrudia Dros* and I have no more longing for home than I did on the electric morning that I first left harbor. I just don't have the crustiest knowledge of how this could be. Do you, my Phillie?"

"Hmmm, he thought," mused Phillie. "Gosh, no, Mr. Harbor! he exclaimed. I haven't even an ink droplet of what it is that you found!"

"Wha . . . I don't know what the devil you're talking about, you glamorous senile fool! Leave my field of sight this exitaceous instant, before your red-dish words of ignorance taint my muddled cortex!"

Phillie smiled strangely and limped away across deck to where he could avoid the sun. Joey looked out over the seascape and acted like he was very depressed, which he was. Presently, his Eskimo friend, Imok Yurok, bounced up to him and slapped him on the back playfully, like how a polar bear would.

"Ooooo . . . you seem so happy, Joey Harbor! I'm so jealous for you!" wailed Imok.

Joey grinned. "I am not in the most major bit happy right now, Imok, you furry ball of condensation!"

"Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! But you seem happy enough to me! You take this, yes?" Imok handed him some frozen dried fruit. "Chew some and let your teeth be spat out in our waves of happiness!"

Joey took the fruit and hid it in his tunic. "Thank you, Imok. I'm sure I will be stenographically de-teethed quite soon, but let me utter upon you the troubles that plunge me."

"I'm sure the plagues that trouble you are ensured to fill my ears with all the joys that sound the air, but you bore me to tear drops, so I will leave!" Imok strode quickly away as they both laughed. "Tonight, I shall see you," Imok yelled back, his words almost lost in the sudden wind. "Tonight, after your second swallow I will see you again so tell me your troubles then!"

The storm threw itself at the *Gertrudia Dros* with the fury of a dream.

—Robert Genadio

FAST EDDIE AND CRAZY WILLARD

It was a steamy, wet-blanket July night in New York City when I first met Fast Eddie and Crazy Willard. I was on the Brownsville express train, trying to urge it to Queens as fast as it would go. Barely breathable air, a straitjacket three-piece on, and all I could think of was some Johnny Walker hugging on ice cubes.

The first thing I noticed was the knife in my ribs. It was gentle, yet growing increasingly insistent. I looked down. It was a beauty. A Schrade. I think. A real pig-sticker. The distance from the knife to the owner was startlingly small, though. A tousled head of dirty blond hair was the first thing my eyes caught after looking down.

"Give me all your cash, Mister. I don' wanna' hurt ya."

My would-be Dillinger was looking at my fourth rib, if he was that tall. I laughed. Wrong move. The knife sought warm refuge with a little more force.

"Damn! You little punk! I ought to whack you into next week."

"Mister, I'm tellin' ya, I will hurt ya!"

Great, I think, I'm being held by a kind of mutant dwarf-monster. Time to think. Have to trick him somehow. Heart attack. Perfect. . .

"Oh, my God! Help me."

I clutch madly at my chest, pitching forward as I do.

"Mister! What you doin'!?"

"Heart attack." I gasp.

He's off guard, make your move now. His hands had dropped, and he had slid back from me a little bit. I lashed out and hit him a tremendous backhand whack in the middle of his chest. He turned grey and the knife clattered to the floor. I put my foot firmly upon it and turned back to my now slightly recovered assailant.

"Mister, you could have killed me."

He rubbed his chest.

"Cuts both ways, punk."

I suddenly noticed a tugging at my foot. I turned from Al Capone and, looking down, saw an even scruffier urchin going for my foot's captive object.

"And who the hell are you?"

Grabbing the muffin by the neck, I hauled him up to a place on the bench between the little bandit and myself. I quickly guessed that these two knew each other.

"Eddie, you're such a loser."

"Screw you, Willard, you gotta' be a moron to fall for a damn heart attack. God, a heart attack."

"Whadda' I look like, a friggin' doctor or somethin'? You were my backup, bonehead. Where's your blade, anyway?"

"I lost it on 42nd yesterday."

"How?"

"The automat scam. I had to jump over the counter, and it musta' fallen out."

"Why dinna' ya tell me?"

"You never asked."

This reunion could wait. We were approaching the next stop, and I was still pissed.

"Shut up, punks!"

They froze. I suddenly felt like a school teacher.

"Who are you two, anyway?"

Sullen silence. I raised my hand threateningly. Sudden action.

The knife-wielder was named Willard, actually "Crazy" Willard, according to his partner, who was himself named "Fast" Eddie.

They both lived in the South Bronx. Crazy Willard said he thought he was fourteen years old, and Fast Eddie couldn't remember how old he was, but there was a vague recollection of a ninth birthday.

"I'm taking you two home to your parents."

Willard laughed so hard I thought he was going to fall off his seat, and Eddie just stared at me with the stoniest of stares.

"We don't know our parents, never have," he said.

"Never?"

"Never."

"But, where do you two live?"

"Around."

"Around?"

"Yeah, around."

I sometimes get the feeling that certain people wouldn't talk to me if I hit them with a cattle prod. Fast Eddie struck me as that type.

"Why did you two try and rob me?"

"We needed the money."

"For what?"

"Food."

"Food?"

"What?! Do I stutter?!?"

I have always opposed corporal punishment, but a change of view was coursing through my right fist. I refrained, however.

"When was the last time you two ate?"

"Couple a days, who knows?"

"Are you hungry?"

Do cops roll drunks? Mister, have you always been this stupid? Huh?"

I figured that beating up decadent youths would not look good to my bosses, so the "conversation" went on.

"How about me taking you two out to eat?"

"Mr., you don't want to go where we go."

"No, no, you come with me."

"Mr. we don't want to go where you go."

We had reached an impasse. I now felt vague guilt and no small sense of responsibility for these two crumbs. The station was now visible in the near distance. Rapid thought.

"Well, how about me giving you two some money? I mean, I have no food with me." A little voice in the back of my head kept shouting something about "robbery" and "knifepoint".

New Yorkers try to be as socially aware as they can, though, and these two kids were looking me right in the eye. I reached in my pocket for a twenty spot and handed it to Crazy Willard. We were in the station now, and the train was screeching to a stop. Eddie picked the knife up from the floor and joined Willard at the door. There was a soft woosh, and the pair of them stepped into the inky, sultry night. They both turned and looked into the car, staring at me. I sat, all alone, looking slightly green under the lights. The doors began to whisper shut at the very moment they shouted, in perfect union, the word you hear a thousand times a day in New York City. "Sucker!" I rolled stupidly into the blind night.

—Michael Giannecchini

THE TOWN OF MADISON

Cake batter
In a bowl
With the mixer on
Going around
And around
And around

Knowing what's next
Adding spices
Seeing them quickly absorbed
And digested
Never to be seen again

And around
And around
Until the cord's pulled out.

It sits patiently in its bowl
Like a well-mannered child
And waits
And waits

Turning two shades of green
Four shades of blue
And gray-black

And waits
And waits
Until it's given a decent
Burial in its plastic crypt.

Meanwhile
Ms. Crocker and Mr. Hines nervously play tiddlywinks
in the pantry.

—Matthew Pinkston

PAPER SAINTS

Once, at 8,
after an undeserved spanking, I
descended darkest Africa,
willed myself death. (Now, I would
punish mother. Make HER cry.)

Long at paper Jesus,
I gazed. Seemed I heard the beat of His
exposed heart; watched the drip of
His clotted blood.
Then, desecrating the back of His
picture, I wrote my farewell.
Finally, ashamed and silly, I
tried to destroy the evidence.
My eraser only rubbed a hole.
With guilty panic, I tore up Baby Jesus,
threw pieces of HIM
down the toilet.

Ever since,
when holy cards sanctify my mail
(begging donation, offering prayer),
it is impossible to discard them
trash.
In atonement for sin,
inside my lower desk drawer,
live more paper saints than the painted medallions
(260 popes).
starring the gallery of Rome's Basilica,
St. Paul Outside the Walls.

—Grace DiSanto

KINSHIP MORE THAN BLOOD

Here then in mid afternoon
Of a year winding down
Like a switched off engine.
Here having found grandfather
And a deadborn child,
Half-knead in the weeds
Of neglected graves, having heard
In the backroom of somewhere
Or another a call to come
Remember all the lies retold
Of their pure lives.
Come to see the old boys. . .
Wings on my heart, collar turned high
Against the grey, having gotten it
Over with and now I find myself
Wading the grass to a shore of pavement.
Halfway there now, and
Suddenly my feet find kinship
More than blood in a slab overgrown—

"J. Anderson 2nd Lt.

321 Bomb Group

March 24, 1943"

Kneel I then for here is a flier
Knew the guts of something
My feeble wings cannot grasp
Heaven raped with a flak-death
Black-crossed wolves and stragglers
Like bloody caribou on the snows
Of patchwork fields.
How did he fall comes to me
Instantly
Burning? a meteor of flesh and blood
Taken out in a bag, hosed out.
Blown out of his turret
Fortress shot away six miles up
He fell into that armada . . . So
Now they are more to me
Than pictures in a book on evenings
Of coffee and remembering boys always

Looking up to their special blonde
Feeling the thing in some that makes them clamor
MORE AIR
Makes them ease themselves into the tin.
Throw themselves upward with sound
Sends some here as I have
Found him and his short history
Before me—

Steal a rose
From a neighbor uncomplaining
For his decoration
Face the wind
Clear the blades
Fly again.

—Alan Hodge

CASUALTIES

Numbered tags.
Filled-out forms.
Red tape is red tape
Doesn't anyone care?

An empty bed.
A faded picture.
Gone is gone
Is your son alive?

Plastic bags.
Wooden boxes.
Dead is dead
What's it matter?

Bloody soldiers.
massacred peasant.
War is war
When does it end?

—Joe Curto

The particular virtue of *Light Casualties: A Private War* is that John Willis manages to magnify the central conflict of young men fighting a fight about which they knew little and cared about even less. It is the paradox of war that those who are too old to fight send the young to die in their place; the individual soldiers, meanwhile, are bound in a battle for survival that almost always takes immediate precedence over factors of ideology or patriotism. The soldier's will to live is in constant struggle with his call to duty. The unique agony of Vietnam, which this book so sharply defines, is the rejection of the unwilling who fought, by the unwilling who sought to stop the fight, the lack of insight on the part of those who remained at home into the personal death struggles of those who went, and the almost total lack of will among the fighters but for one goal—to go home. Many never did. This excerpt is part of their story.

S. Willis
Belmont Abbey College
1986

LIGHT CASUALTIES: A PRIVATE WAR

The moonlight glistened on the estuary and the starkly black and white landscape covered all signs of the previous hostilities. The day's labor caught up with the men and they collapsed one by one until it was just J.C. and the Kid taking the first watch. J.C. discovered the Kid's real name, William Barnes, which had quickly become due to Barnes' youthful appearance, "Billy the Kid." He was from Oxnard, California, and J.C. had a great time reminiscing with him about fine white beaches with a perfect curl. The collected tension made the words bubble from Billy's mouth like water from an artesian spring. After flooding the shallower subjects, the turbulent flow finally exposed a slimy boulder of guilt clogging his subconscious.

"You know, man, life just isn't fair. I must've worried about this f--- war since I was twelve. I joined this church when I was sixteen just because they could get me a deferment as a conscientious objector. I mean, I just want to hang out at the beach, you know? I don't want to hurt anyone and I don't want anyone to hurt me. Anyway, my old man talked me out of it—told me all about how people would respect me if I pulled my weight. You know, all that patriotic bullshit. He tells me how hard it is to get a job without

that honorable discharge. Besides, all he did during the Korean War was fill out morning reports at some dump in Louisiana.

"So I figure I'll take my chances, right? I knew I could never pull the trigger on anyone, so I'll just have to get out of it somehow. All my numbers kept comin' up bad, though, and I finally get assigned to advanced infantry training. I couldn't suck up enough to get assigned as a clerk or nothing, so I figure I'm sunk. I spent the last f--- year trying to figure out what I as going to be doing while some Cong was blowing me away. I couldn't tell you the dreams I've had—stuff like getting shot away a piece at a time. When we hit the country, I copped a bunch of dope and tried to make the whole thing as painless as possible. I was getting to a point where it was going to be a relief to get the whole thing over with.

"But you know what, man? All this time while I'm worryin' about all this shit, the Army's puttin' me through Basic Training, Advanced Training, Unit Training, you name it.

"So this morning, I see one of these Cong dudes running up on the flank, you know, dodging from cover to cover like they show you in Basic? The dude's going to get me then he'd have Loser from behind. All that's in my head is how I can't shoot the guy.

"I'm still thinkin' this when all of a sudden my rifle comes up and I'm lookin' through the sights, leading the sucker a little, just like they taught me. I'm still wonderin' if I can shoot him when my finger squeezes off a shot. I fire twice, the dude flips, and it's all over. The dude's wasted and I still haven't decided anything!

"I mean, just what the f--- has the Army done to me? To all of us? All this time I'm worryin' about it and when it finally happens, I don't have any say-so at all! I do just what I've been taught to do—no choice about it. These Army cats are slick, man, they slipped right in on us while we were worryin' about shining shoes and making inspections. Look at us now—they aren't worried about shined shoes and all that crap. They trained us to shoot people and not even think about it. Just shoot when they say shoot.

"That isn't right, man. We're not robots. What happens when we're back on the block again? You're going to tell the cop: 'I didn't mean to waste him, but he snuck up behind me', right? Sure you are.

"It just isn't fair."

.

J.C. admired the morale of the Korean troops. They had their own section at the convalescent center and remained organized into units even when hospitalized. In the mornings they could be seen exercising in formation, led unbelievably by officers as high as field grade, right out there

sweating along with the privates. He watched them from the lifeguard's tower, peeking out from under a towel as he drowsed through the morning shift. The beach was deserted—perhaps three or four patients a day actually had enough energy to get in the water. J.C. himself was so spent from his bout with malaria that he usually did nothing more exciting than wondering if any of the nurses would ever show up at the beach.

J.C. had talked his way into the lifeguard job after he had been "graduated" to Unit Two. It took him off the painting and KP details and, as a bonus, gave him the use of a surfboard. The waves were small but perfect, and the waters of Cam Ranh Bay were clear enough to easily see the bottom in twenty feet of water. There was an amazing, surreal quality about paddling out to catch a wave, warm breeze and hot sun caressing the skin, then turning to wait, facing the military installation shimmering in the waves of heat like a mirage. Here, it was all peace and contentment; there, the war spread along the land, growing like a cancer. J.C. was free for the moment, but at a terrible price in loneliness. His friends were in that mess and he had to go back.

* * * * *

The helicopter stopped at an unnamed firebase on the return trip to Chu Lai. It was being rocketed in broad daylight now and the crackle of small-arms fire sounded from all around the perimeter. There was an unruly mob of men awaiting evacuation at the airstrip. The base was expecting a heavy attack that evening and was in danger of being overrun. When it was announced that this would be the last flight out that day, a surge of humanity engulfed the chopper.

J.C. already aboard, was forced to a standing position as the men packed on board like sardines—over the protests of the pilot. The pilot immediately ordered the excess men off the craft, but then he began relenting to the panicked cries and pleading looks and eventually wound up going around the helicopter, physically stuffing the extra men into any space he could find.

The Huey slick was stuffed to twice its rated capacity and when the pilot tried to lift off the tremendous surge of power did little more than rock the craft back and forth on the ground. The pilot shouted over the whine of the turbines, "Okay, anybody with a weak stomach better hit the dirt!" No one budged. With a shrug, the pilot turned back to the controls and revved the engines to an ear-shattering roar. The helicopter lurched around to point down the runway and tipped slowly forward, dragging its skids. The chopper gained speed with the skids drawing showers of sparks from the grates on the runway surface. Just as the overloaded craft reached the end of the clearing, the pilot pulled back hard on the controls and they

swooped up into the sky in a graceful arc. At the top of the arc, airspeed killed by the rapid climb, the pilot put it into a long forward slide, aiming right at a low ridge across their path. At the last moment, he pulled out of the flat dive and skimmed the oncoming hillside, shooting up and over the ridge.

The helicopter paused again fifty feet above the ridge and started another long slide. The claustrophobic passengers had their nausea stopped cold by the flat, paralyzing ping of sniper rounds against the floor of the cabin. J.C. held his breath as he waited for the hot jab of pain.

It never came. Like a rollercoaster escaped from its tracks, the chopper alternately hung motionless in the air and swooped through the valleys gaining speed and altitude. They cleared a few more ridges, then arrowed in on a patch of raw earth that marked another firebase. The craft came in at an alarming speed, bounced gently, and skidded to a stop. The helicopter was still rocking as the pilot killed the engines and turned to the stunned passengers with a huge, mustachioed grin. "We're here, gents. Thank you for flying, 'Insane Airlines.' The stewardesses will help you debark."

.....

The supply sergeant at the company was one of the old line grunts. J.C. was surprised to see him in clean fatigues, sitting at the counter. "Hey, Mex! Am I supposed to salute, or what?"

"J.C.!" What's happenin', bro! They kept saying you bought it, but I knew better. Only the good die young."

"Well, it looks like I'm back for awhile. Where's the company at?"

"Over at Thunder on guard duty for the Battalion HQ. Gavin'll be glad to see you; poor guy's been over here every day beggin' for some help."

"Sounds like soft duty up on Thunder. What the hell are you doin' here?"

"You remember that thing with the Purple Hearts? Where you get out of the field after you cop two? I got one right through the leg just before you left. I think. Anyway, that was number two. The round went clean through so they just slapped a band-aid on either side and sent me back. When I asked them about the two Purple Hearts, they go, 'Sorry, we just changed it to three.'"

"Big hearted bastards, aren't they?"

"No shit. Anyway, the first day I'm back, wouldn't you know I stepped on one of those little tin can toe-popper jobs. Blew all the skin off my foot but it didn't break any bones so they wouldn't send me out-of-country. I did manage to land this job before they changed the rules again. Takes four Purple Hearts to get out now."

J.C. accepted a cold soda and enjoyed the novelty of sitting in a chair.

"How are Semple and the guys?"

"You didn't hear about Loser and the Kid? It was the damndest thing." JC almost fell out of the folding chair. "What happened?"

"They bought it about two weeks ago, just before the company moved up to Thunder."

He could barely get the words out, but he had to know. "How'd they get it?"

"Like I said, it was really weird. It looked like they had set up their perimeter position right on top of a mine. They pulled watches all night without settin' it off. Then in the morning when they were both crashed out, an ambush comes back in with one of those scout dogs, you know? Anyway, the dog starts snortin' around and set off the mine. Blew the shit out of all three of them."

"Three of them?"

"Countin' the dog, I mean. The stupid dog was supposed to be trained to sniff out explosives. Ain't that a pisser?"

"Semple's okay?"

"The Eggman? Oh, sure, he's cool. He's the top man around here these days. The colonel likes to borrow him when they need some trackin' or . . ."

JC was lost in thought. It took three ponchos to make a good shelter. On most rainy nights, JC's poncho had been the floor while Billy's and the Loser's had been the sides. It looked like that case of malaria had saved his life.

—John Willis

A TALE TO FRIGHTEN CHILDREN

When Hansel and Gretel were
abandoned by their parents
and forced to go to college,
they left a trail of breadcrumbs
to guide them back to the real world.
But hungry Philosophy professors
flew down from the trees
and ate up all their certainties.
Now they wander the Groves
of Academe, unable to find a sure
path that takes them home again
where all grow so comfortably fat.
Lost in thought, they grow so
progressively thinner that not
even a witch would have them for dinner.

—Russell Fowler

ABSOLUTION

Tuesdays,
when I was growing up,
between East Ninth and Ninth,
Hawkins Street.
I'd intercept nonno with his weekly
gift: homemade bread;
it was to save his aging legs extra steps,
I'd tell myself.
But after our *ciaos* and *baci*, our
addios, holding the loaf's heat,
a brown-bagged mamma,
an oblong breast,
to my cheek,
breathing in its yeasted
good, I'd race
home, toe up back
steps, to hide the
attic.
There armed with the kitchen
blade and nonna's gooseberry jam,
like candy, I'd devour
the loaf.

Strange, during those years,
not once an itch of
conscience: the cast-off clothes and
boots and furs, friendly priests surrounding
me, listened like stethoscopes;
without applause or condemnation,
they confessed and absolved me,
cleansed me from
the commission of all
my childhood sins.

—Grace DiSanto

FOR DIGESTION

In ancient dreams something
was always eaten—apples, dust,
the snake's own tail when nothing
else would do. Ingestion was
always a metaphor for learning
or sex or growth. Small wonder
we pray most sincerely over
food, and wolf down our days
like hot grub. Down at the
Burgerland, our children
practice gulping all day,
their eyes closing over
each bite like a frog's.
Some say someday even the
world will be swallowed
in a cosmic fog and the sun
will burst like a ripe cherry
against the palate. Or sooner
still the bombs will create
one great radiant oven that
will bake us until we're done.
Let us hope those tables are
spread in good taste and the
proper toasts are indulged.
As food we came in and as
food we'll go out, a passing
fancy from beginning to end.

—Russell Fowler

DINNER AT STONEHENGE

Deaf
And
Dumb
Blind
And
Paralyzed
Stone
And
Cloth
We sit at the table and seethe.
Our plaster faces show
Our perfection
Our sublime nature
Our happiness
While
Old patchings and new cracks
Betray
Our tears
And
Our love
Attempting prison breaks.

—Matthew Pinkston

THE DINNER PARTY

Trapped: in the cage of polite conversation
the click of cups
the sweep of silver
confined by the flowered table
defined with the people (tabled as flowers)
pretending the novelty of these hours.
I've no hands on the table.
I'm not reaching over.
I'm nicely in accord.
(But I'm sipping my wine, courteously asking for more,
hellbent on escaping the sober
cage of polite conversation.)

—Sister Mary Ellen Weir, RSM

THE PRICE OF PASSAGE

It was a desolate part of the country, and a place where I'd never been. Driven by an overwhelming desire for solitude, I had simply picked a direction and followed the roads where they led. I was funneled from major roads to secondary, from good to poor to potholed, and I was bumping along what seemed to be little more than a path when I realized that I saw no lights around anywhere, and hadn't for a while. I stopped the car, turned off the lights and the engine, and sat. Only a faint ticking from the engine broke the silence. I was alone. I sat for a while, then stepped out into the night.

It was quiet. The night air was swirling with mist, and crawling with a silence relieved only by the soft sounds of my squishing steps, and the wind. Driven by that wind, clouds hurried across the face of the bright moon; shadows darkened, deepened, then merged, camouflaging themselves during the passage of the clouds; rocks and trees took on grotesque shapes, and the trees made sinister moves when shaken by the rough, unseen hand of the wind. Now and then the wind would moan as if in pain, or fear, as it wound its way through the dark gullies that scarred the moor; then it seemed to sigh with relief when it slipped through the grasping arms and fingers of the tortuously stunted trees that lined the road like a disorganized column of soldiers retreating from some hell. It was a god-forsaken place, as if God had picked up His marbles and gone home: it fit my mood, so I trod the lonely, empty reaches of a moor.

I had a strange feeling of foreboding that increased with each step: each step that took me farther from the secure reality of my car; but my need to be alone pushed me on. The cold bulge of the gun in my pocket banged against my thigh as I picked my way carefully over the uneven, yielding ground. My footsteps made sucking sounds, and the soft wet earth pulled at my heels. I looked behind me and saw, here and there, my footprints shimmering in the intermittent light of the moon.

The probing wind, and the damp night air which fed the thickening fog, picked through my clothes with icy fingers. I pulled up my collar, hunched my shoulders, and pushed my hands deeper into my pockets. The lump of steel in my right pocket was no colder or harder than the cold, armorplated feeling in my heart. My mind, my heart, my "soul"? I'd already passed through hurt, then despair: I had travelled far beyond them both. I no longer cared. My dark night of the soul had long ago progressed beyond pain to the ultimate emptiness, indifference.

Have you ever been so emptied, so drained, that you simply no longer cared about anything? That is the step beyond despair; that is the step

where there are no possible horizons, near or far. It is the point where you can fall no deeper: you have hit the rock bottom of the bottomless pit. You know it, you realize it, and you don't care. So, you wander aimlessly, not knowing where, if anywhere, you're going, not having to set a fix on where you're coming from. Some have seen this in an acquaintance, since this soullessness does happen: you'll never see it in a friend, because those who have bottomed cannot form, cannot reciprocate friendship. It's futile for you, and often fatal for them.

Alone, as I wanted to be, and chilled as I bundled myself against the cold, I walked, taking a trip from nowhere to nowhere; factually, I knew I'd just driven from Plymouth, but that was just a reference point on a map that had no reference points. Plymouth was just another jumping-off point from nowhere to nowhere. With the arrogance of indifference, I didn't even know how I got from Plymouth to that sucking desolation; a random choice of direction, an aimless choice at forks, had led me there; wherever "there" was. Before that was a long succession of ports throughout the world, trying to lose myself.

Once I had a past, and perhaps a future. Losing myself in merchant seaman travel was my answer to having lost my future; when I lost hope, I also lost my future, so I gave up my past. I had been well educated, encouraged, and loved. When I came back from the war, it all started coming apart. I'd been "Dear John" lettered while in Nam, and the bitterness that started was exacerbated by my homecoming, or lack of one. A quick, expensive, and failed marriage with a nasty bitter ending took its toll, and then I faced, and lost to, financial failure. For a while, I tried to live on my hopes, and consoled myself with books. That effort also failed, and, almost all of my bills paid, I jumped ship on life. I started a long voyage, and it led ever away from home. It took a while to realize that I had no home; at first, I was running away from something, and running after something else. As my voyaging wore on, however, the past receded like the wake of my ship: from a turbulent, clear record of passage, to a flat calm, where there wasn't a trace of it ever having existed.

The future receded from me in the same way: first a bright, glimmering hope, then a mirage, then like the almost memory of a dream just after you waken, and then nothing at all. I became the man in the middle sailing from nowhere to nothing. The realization was like a final freedom: I set no course, and left no wake. At that point, I took a flight of fancy, and assumed the name "Dutchman." My shipmates called me that (after some physical persuasion), and the lubbers knew me only by that name. In my solitary drunks, I addressed myself by my assumed first name, "Flyin'" (appropriate, since I was once a pilot), though that part of my name was only for me

to know, I found it a triumph to have chosen a name for myself that mocked both past and future. Like that phantom ship. I could be seen, or not be seen, or not exist at all. If I chose, I could sail into the teeth of the wind, set no sail, steer no course, leave no wake; and who could say that I was ever there at all? I had absolute freedom, and that's what led me beyond despair.

Many people think about suicide when they reach despair, when they lose faith in themselves, after it seems everyone has lost faith in them. Of that many, a small many attempt suicide: a still smaller many succeed. Fewer still can succeed and survive.

When I bought the gun to kill myself, it was already too late; but I kept the gun. It's meaningless, I thought, but there has to be a ritual, a time and a place. So I kept the gun: it was part of my ultimate freedom for when I decided for once and for all, whether to be or not to be.

I was a successful suicide, for while still shuffling around this mortal coil, I had ceased to exist: I had killed the me that was. Vestiges still remained, but they forgot, or didn't give a damn for the past and future. Only the men who carried me on the roster or issued my paycheck knew what my "real" name was. I was successfully getting "away from it all." That anonymity was the price of the passage I demanded whenever I signed on with one of the fleabitten shipping companies that were my steady source of employment. I went wherever the ship I hired onto went, until I'd get bored, then I'd find another. There was always another. Small, starving companies were willing to take on any cargo, any crew, with few questions asked. In lieu of questions, high charge might be made for the cargo, and meager wage paid the hired-on crew.

My last voyage was from Melbourne to Plymouth, with legitimate cargo for once. When we docked at Plymouth, I went ashore with everything I owned: my money, a suitcase of clothes, my gun, and a not-full ditty-bag. I'd lost, given away, or discarded every trapping from the long-past.

I rarely went ashore, and sailors generally accumulate more than an overnight bag's worth of possessions, so when I left, no one noticed. I had perfected my method of existence. No one noticed I was gone, or if they did, thought anything of it.

Plymouth might have been a pleasant town, if I'd cared about anything; but I'd long ago given up living for existing, and I really didn't give a damn about the existing. I had sought to become, had become, like my namesake phantom ship, or like a zephyr: I existed, and might happen to brush against you in a crowded world, but you could never be sure, would probably never notice, would certainly never remember, and sure as hell not care. It was the way I wanted it.

Even with that special self-protection, I was vulnerable. After several days in a rented room, I found that people wanted to sell or rent me anything and everything. Ever since my disastrous marriage, I'd been lacking the fare for that streetcar named Desire. I hated "love," scorned friendship, and believed in no bargain. Plymouth was crowding me already. I rented a car and drove until I reached what I now know was the vast plain of Dartmoor. I stopped when it seemed that I'd gotten away from people.

The chill of the wind that whipped the fog about me, the cold reality of the gun in my pocket, and the soggianness of my socks brought me back from my lethargic reverie. I was aimlessly trudging along; then I remembered that I'd sought solitude in order to make a decision.

Actually, I was ambivalent about the outcome of the decision, in fact. I didn't want to get involved enough to make it; I wanted it made for me. Oh, it involved me all right, but I didn't want to get involved. In a sense, I was an uninterested bystander; live or die, heads or tails, what's the difference?

Heads or tails? I felt a coin in my pocket under the gun; I shifted the gun to my left pocket, and reached back into my right. Why not? Live or die? There seemed to be enough reasons to justify either: flip a coin and let the god of chance decide. Indifferent? Well the reasons for living or dying seemed about as well balanced as the sides of that coin.

I took the shilling out of my pocket, the only coin I had on me. I flipped it into the air, and watched its spinning shining as it rose to meet the moon directly over me. Just as it reached its zenith and began its irrevocable fall to decision, a cloud blotted out the moon, and the coin fell to the ground unseen. I searched the dark, wet ground, probed with my fingers, but couldn't find it. To hell with it, I thought. I'm going back. When I stood up again, I was lost. The moon's light was gone, and I had no landmarks, not even my footprints.

I didn't panic; my indifference precluded that. Emotion had long since gone out of me, and fear was just another emotion. Okay, I was just a little annoyed. I coldly realized that I'd gotten disoriented, and didn't know the way back.

I picked a direction and walked: a direction will take you somewhere. I walked for a long time across that moor. It felt good. At first.

It became tiring, as I was used to being ship-locked, and the initial exhilaration wore off and became a plodding, one step after the other drudgery.

The fog swirled madly ahead of me, and seemed to be trying to take on some form, thickening and twisting; I almost fell into the stream I came upon, but was able to stop myself partway down the bank. I clawed my

way back up the embankment, not minding the mud. Excitement ran through me, that I'd found a reference point. I don't know how wide the stream was, but I knew that waterflow led to people, and then I wouldn't be lost.

For the simple reason that I'm right-handed, I decided to follow the stream by turning right. My confidence rose, but I couldn't shake a feeling of, no, not fear, but tension, an awareness.

Positive that the stream would lead me to civilization, I wasn't surprised when a vague form in the fog ahead solidified into a pier, a line of people: people who were obviously waiting for a ferry. They were oddly dressed and quiet, not chattering the way people normally do when waiting in a line. I didn't see any buildings, any evidence of a village, yet there were at least a dozen people in that line, out in the middle of nowhere. Strange people, I thought, to live in a place like this.

I asked the group where I was, and how I could get back to the road where I'd left the car. Each in turn lowered expressionless eyes to the ground and shook his head. I stood there, furious, when I heard the splash of oars. The line of men and women came to life and began to stir and shuffle expectantly. The boatman came into sight out of the mist, and I ran to the shore to meet him. He was dressed even more strangely than the others, with dark eyes and long beard spilling out of a cowl, a long boat cloak grazing his sandalled feet. He looked at me as if I was the wierdo when I asked him where I was.

Dismissing me, he shook his head, looked past me at the line of people, and said one word: "Obolos." I turned around just in time to see them all open their mouths. On each tongue lay a coin.

I then knew where I was, and ran from the place. The god who watches over madmen and fools must have been on duty and guided me, because I eventually found the road, and my car. I drove like the Furies were chasing me, back to Plymouth, back to people, back to life.

All thoughts of self-destruction are gone now, and I want to live again, really live. I'm trying to come alive again, to become who I could have been. I'll let fate decide how and when I die. I'm in no hurry, but I'll tell you one thing, Doctor: I'm going to be prepared.

When I die, I'll make damn sure I have a coin to pay Charon.

—Edward T. Egan

SALON

There is always some new woman
They wish to be, plastered on a wall
Somewhere—garages their men go
With chat of conquest,
Wreathed in smoke some fancy
In living color,
Something that will come to them
From another's wonderful bottles.

This is the thing they want to be
When they step through his glass,
Feel the shock of his sharp aromas,
Greet curled friends, seat themselves
To innocuous music,
Thumb through a yellowed world
Of stars, broken hearted lovers, better
Homes and gardens—
Seek the touch of magic
Before his mirrored walls that
Can make them twice what they really are,
Gown themselves in pink plastic. . .

MAKE ME A DREAM

They say without saying. . .
And he lifts them one by one
to keen scissors.

Make me like THIS they say
Pointing to women hanging over his door
Take the strands of us that are rooted
Far below skin
Give them new language
Pull our souls then upward
With your hands that touch
But never feel, pull them
Wholly out and away
From what we are,
Give us new eyes to see the work

Of 40 years cut away
Into a newer form of being
Crowned in radiant glory
Forever.

—Bruce Hodge

WE ONLY KNOW IN SHORT BURSTS OF LIGHT

knowing our uncertainty
we proclaim these truths to be
self-evident: evidently self-centered
in their sober bloated righteousness:
we do not know.
we will never know.
we are creatures of the unknown
who possess certainties of the known.
paradoxically sheltered in our loneliness
but free in our own bondage of need for others
we live for ourselves
and each other
in order to seek the truth
which we fear.

and with our uncertain knowledge
wrapped in reason
we humans venture out into the vast reaches
of that wilderness we call
ourselves.

—Michelle Kidd

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