

Agora



...καλέσασθε δὲ θεῖον ᾠιδόν,
Δημόδοκον· τῷ γάρ ῥα θεὸς περὶ δῶκεν ᾠοιδήν,
τέρπειν ὅππῃ θυμὸς ἐποτρύνῃσιν ἀεΐδειν.

...and summon Demodokos, the bard divine,
Whom God gave song: the power to delight
However his own soul urges him to sing.

Homer, *Odyssey* VIII, 43-5



Agora

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Recollections of a Thing Never Come to Pass

*...And there we were, by the sea.
While the waves crashed with gray rhythm,
She, in her white evening gown,
Spread a soft, near o'er gravity.*

*Had it all but been as such,
With sand and shells, the birds overhead,
And wind to ruffle her dress.
Oh, too true and sad to near and touch!*

*The Evening star is left,
And of its own light little is seen
Of what never came to pass.
...And the sea sighs and is bereft.*

- Raphaël Du Sablon



A Strut on the Beach by Annie Gagliardi

To Fall Would Be A Beautiful Thing

To fall would be a beautiful thing.

Lean forward – Lean forward,

child.

Wooshhhh

Wooshhhh.

What did she say?—

Voices at the end of the day.

Dark patterns,

smoke signals

Puff, here.

Puff,

gone.

Shhhh, darling.

Goosebumps make tiny hills on your arms,

rub in pine, rock, dirt from

the zephyr, sparks crackle on your skin.

Did you see that?

A dark face and a soft step,

girl who once there sat.

Puff

h e r e

P

u

f

f

gone.

Look out, look up.

Clouds of hair thrown across the sky.

Thick black masses

building, roiling—

Wisps of grey flicked, white feathers

tucked, twined,

Catch the light,

Appear here,

Appear there

In and out by the wind.

Look! Look down, daughter!

Closer.

She's thrown a sheer mantle

behind her,

it brushes green pebbles—

olive drab, lime, viridian

Smoothing and blurring the lines.

Do you feel the pull?

Her Nature drawing my nature

Closer.

Below all is green wool.

W o o o s h h h h

W o o s h h h h

"To fall would be a beautiful thing."

Breathe in,

Deep—

Deep.

Cold, crisp, earthy, old.

Fathomless mind of a passionless being.

"Come," she says.

And you jump.

Your stomach swells

Suspended. Hanging. — —

Let go.

Soar, my dove.

Puff.

Here.

Puff.

G o n e.

- Ruth Hymel

Autumn's Last Light

*The falling leaves of Autumn
Grace the waning Earth just
As the brilliant rays
Of an ethereal sunset.*

*The ground that will soon be
Sheeted in a dismal white veil
Is now adorned with
A crown of gold.*

*The coming freeze of Winter's
Dark and winnowing night
Is almost forgotten amidst
Its heralding cortège.*

*Artistically brilliant and bold
Leaves lie as a silent
Tribute to their inescapable
Yet honored death.*

*An orange fire ignites
The land, and with a
First frozen spark it
Engulfs the countryside.*

*The brazen rays
Cast a burning warmth
Over a slowly icing,
Sepia developed plane.*

The Lovers

*They touch the sky,
They who love,
Piercing the firmament
Of cloudy white with
Sharp darts, gleaming.
They are the ones who
Laugh and die,
To whom all the world
Appears stripped
Down to the naked skin.
They see through,
They look beyond
The times and customs.
Intertwined limbs and
Locking lips.
They chase phantoms
And walk on water.
They know life runs
On towards finality.
They look at each other
And sightless, can see.
They mourn for passing
Beauty, wasted days, and
Nearly finished cigarettes.
And when death comes,
They welcome her, laughing,
Like *Santa Muerte*
In a carnival procession.*



- Anthony Wyatt

- Charlie Jackson

Dedicated to the Concerned Friend

Recently it's been said to me,
"We want to hear some pleasantry.
Please, no more of your pain and vice,
Write a poem about something nice.
Give us flowers and cups of tea—
We'll honor you on bended knee.
Sunshine, laughter, Italian ice,
All will have you loved in a trice."
What sort of answer shall I give?
To write not of what I live
Would serve no purpose but to lose
The healing command of the Muse.
I love the light and Springtime too,
All true lovers of Beauty do,
But not only in joy is she found—
Sometimes one must look underground.

- Ruth Hymel



Meditation by Brother Paul Shanley

Three's Company

*I know it well
Holiday every day
Eyes, mouth, fingers, ears
Crisp, cool, burning, all past-time consumed
Black morsels fading
Crimson embers glowing glass
Red luminaries, stolen remnants from the lofty vaults of Heaven
Wherein dwells majestic Prometheus, the good thief come to cherish
In three's company, the bitter-sweet earth nectar harvested.
And I crave it
Ashy clumps, crinkled piles smoldering
Memories apotheosized in frigid air
Rising higher now, the dark firmament curling, swirling
Benevolent euphoria arrives.*

- Justin Sumerel



Head of the Dinner Table by Curran Sentilles

A Villanelle: From Lines Written by Donald Hall

*The world is everything that is the case.
Now stop your blubbering and wash your face.*

*The world is everything that is the case,
Your senses bind you with necessity.
Now stop your blubbering and wash your face.*

*Typhoons can take you off without a trace
And genocide could interrupt a tea.
The world is everything that is the case.*

*A theory, one or two, may give you place
Until they leak or split apart, you'll see.
Now stop your blubbering and wash your face.*

*The smarty academic set in haste
Will tell you language is reality.
The world is everything that is the case.*

*But if you think that words create your space,
Jump off a cliff or walk across the sea.
Now stop your blubbering and wash your face.*

*There is no help for death where worms embrace.
Get used to what the agonies decree.
The world is everything that is the case.
Now stop your blubbering and wash your face.*

- Michael Hood

Zoyka¹ and Borka²

Borka was Zoyka's friend for a season, emerging one winter evening and leaving (not of his own accord, of course) that spring. Originally, he was her charge, but never a chore. She fed him warm milk from rubber medicine dispensers, one of which he managed to swallow whole. During feedings, Zoyka would stroke his smooth ears and sleek snout—it was a sheer delight to cuddle that warm, tender, alive thing.

At six, Zoyka had no doll. Her first doll, a heavy thing with a mournful bisque face and a stuffed body, was bought for her a year later, when her mother had to leave the child alone in the dark house for the whole night. This happened after Zoyka's father hanged himself out of spite and stupidity—trying to give his wife a good scare. The mother made the father mad by refusing to accompany him to the neighbor's party. She was not a social type unlike her man who played an accordion and was very popular with village widows left inconsolable after the war. For some reason the father hated going out by himself, and this time he failed to drag his uncooperative woman along. To teach her a lesson, he opted to stage a suicide in the shed: put a rope up with a good nail and stuck his head in through the noose. They later found out that his death was an accident because he never got up onto a chair but remained seated on it, the rope hanging safely low. As it happened, a motorbike fell off the hook and pushed him to the ground, forcing the noose to strangle the man after all. That's why the mother picked up the night shift at the railroad station, and Zoyka got her doll.

Now when Borka was given to Zoyka by her father, who picked him out of the litter delivered unexpectedly on a truck that transported pigs to the slaughter house, nobody expected the creature to last long. Zoyka was thrilled to play mother to this doomed and abandoned creature. She also did it in earnest. Being the last of seven children, she grew up with just one sibling still living at home. But Rayka spent more time outside than inside. Five years older than her baby sister, Rayka was a real tomboy whose early childhood was spent among four older brothers. To say that Rayka's manners

1 Zoyka is a diminutive of the Russian name Zoya.

2 Borka is a diminutive of the Russian name Boris.

and tastes were crude would be an understatement, for she terrified almost all neighborhood boys whom she beat soundly and regularly—for prophylactics' sake. Zoyka, on the other hand, had always been sickly and well-mannered, so after Rayka did not succeed at getting rid of the new baby by throwing it out of the cradle, she lost all interest in her sister's existence. Thus Borka was nursed by Zoyka not merely well, but meticulously, and he grew strong and smart to everyone's surprise.

At two months old Borka was as fun to play with as any puppy would be, but from about three months of age and till he was moved outside, Borka became Zoyka's veritable playmate, excelling particularly at the game of hide and seek. When he hid himself, he did it creatively, getting behind unlikely objects like a pile of decorative pillows on the parents' bed, or an oven. He stayed dead quiet until discovered, exploding then into peels of piercing squeals. And when he went on a search for Zoyka, he tracked her by her scent right away, but stalled and walked all around the room to prolong her agony of waiting. At five months, Borka had to leave the house, for he was getting too robust for an indoor pet, not that this idea could even enter the parents' minds. They are not to be blamed for it either, since people were too busy surviving to entertain a serious thought of sharing life with a pig.

Zoyka was a homebody and did not venture outside until the weather got nice and warm in June. At the end of the summer she was passing by the low fence of a pen where her father was feeding the animals, when one of the hogs emitted an odd, piercing squeal and rushed to the fence. Never stopping before this puny obstacle, the beast crushed it under his formidable weight and threw his bulk over the stunned Zoyka: the pig's front legs went over the child's shoulders and her whole body disappeared under the animal hulk.

Zoyka's father reacted fast and dragged the beast from his favorite baby girl. It has to be said that this unemotional man had a tender spot in his heart for his last child. He took time to teach her all he knew, and he found her a good student for a change, since all his other children revolted against his authoritarian discipline and fled from home as soon they knew how to or where to go. Toward his youngest, he exhibited peculiar protectiveness though. The pig did not resist the man at all, but the creature sounded pitiful as it got

pulled away from Zoyka. Next day Zoyka learned that Borka was speedily slaughtered.

For the life of her, Zoyka could not recall later whether or not she ate any pork that season, but the thing she did remember was that Borka loved her to death.

- Svetlana Corwin



Cardinal by Geordin Christopher

In Memory of Father Kenneth

Goodbye, Father.

*We entrust you to that
Primordial dust
From which
God called up
Our progenitors
In Eden.*

Goodbye, Father.

*They have finished dinner.
The vesper bells are ringing.*

*We cannot weep long—
There are still dishes to be
Washed, Father,
And your mess is still on the
Table,
And your tea is still hot.*

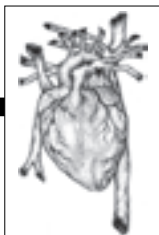
*You must go now, and I
Must remain behind.*

*You soon must be
Sown
In the cold earth
Like a corn of wheat,
Sleeping until
The harvest.*

*You must be going, Father.
There are still dishes to
Be washed.*

- Charlie Jackson

APOCALYPSE



Hailing the Apocalypse

*I start to scuff away the ash,
Half-embarrassed by the sacred stillness,
But, on second thought, I let it be,
Thinking that the dead could appreciate
Something real sinking down to mingle
With their bones. In the frost,
Quiet, still, in the queer echoes
Between gravestones waiting ponderously,
I join the dead—why not?
The dead have no pretensions.*

- Ross McKnight

*2012 Recipient of the Agora Art & Photography Award***



***Growth** by Jacquelyn King*

The One, the Latest

Standing in a light mist, Hal watched as his coffin was lowered into the ground. It was black, embossed with steel and gold, obviously very expensive. While the preacher said his bit, Hal waited uncomfortably, never liking the depressing words of yet another funeral. The ceremony finished, he helped shovel dirt on top of the deceased. Hal was the Zephyr Heights gravedigger and mortician.

For some time the party stood in silence around the disturbed ground, but their lives had to go on without their beloved. Eventually they broke up and left him behind, the memory of that tragic suicide a burning mental scar.

Alone now, Hal went through the graveyard, locking up. In the falling dusk, shadows began to crawl across the land, psychological reminders of Hal's patrons. He hated this job. What other field expected your customers to be brain dead? Apart from politics, that is. But in a small town like Zephyr Heights, you were lucky to have a steady job. Hal had no choice but to keep at it.

He slammed shut the front gate, clasping a giant, silver chain across it. The voices were calling to him again: "Freedom!" "Life is an illusion!" "Join us!"

Ignoring them, he returned to his home, a three room shack about a mile away. He lived alone, but lived fairly well. The grave keeper was, after all, treated to quite a bit of financial aid from the town. They went through so many keepers it had become necessary.

The following day in that death-drenched place, Hal was cleaning up reminders of why the holy chain had been made: singed human limbs, cooking fires, torn black cloth. They appeared every night without explanation or any reports of crime, so the police had given up investigating long ago.

One reporter had tried to document what went on at night in Zephyr Heights, but he had been assigned to a mental institution and his equipment was never found. Although he couldn't be sure, Hal had encountered shattered pieces of metal and glass that resembled camera parts. Of course he had never stayed himself.

A few more depressing processions, more overturned dirt, more teardrops feeding the grass: Hal was busy with the recent pandemic taking young and old alike. Then another dreary day was over. He

sighed as he locked the gate. It was the only sound he had made for some ten years. After all, it made pain more bearable for people when they didn't need to talk to the likes of him, just hand over money. But he was tired. So tired.

Peering through the metal bars around his cemetery, Hal felt a rush of disgust. All this time spent as a mock-priest over something no one understood...why were they afraid? Why was he alone responsible for resisting this invisible weight? Again, he heard them: "Stop fighting yourself!" "Stay!"

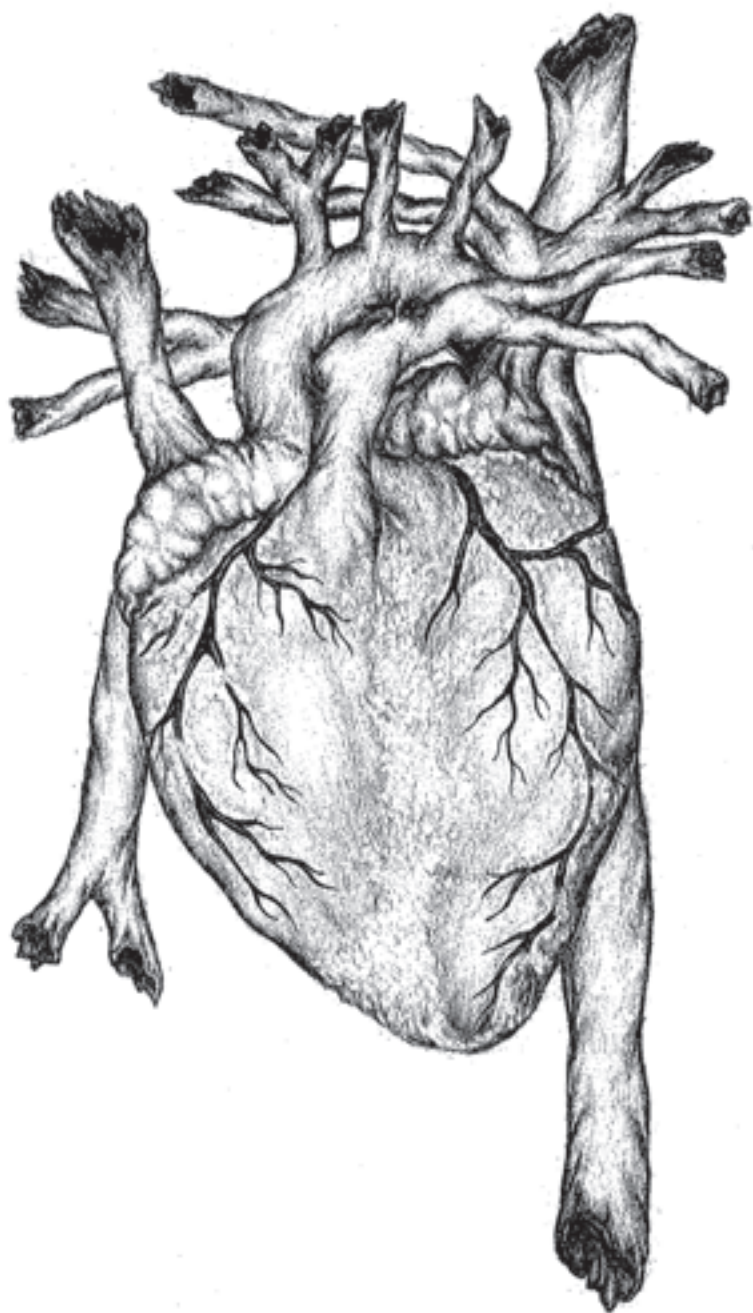
It was dangerous to listen, but he did for a moment. Whispers wafted around him like fog, twisting themselves into his brain. They were different, tonight. He sympathized with what they said. Against his better judgment, he laid a hand on the blessed chain and disconnected it, re-entering the cemetery.

Inside the gate the real shadows had eaten themselves, vanishing into oblivion, but they had been replaced by others. Hal stumbled towards them as his vision twisted the stones into strange objects like altars. He laughed at them. What a silly notion: altars in a graveyard. In *this* graveyard.

Reaching one of the things, he took a proffered hand and lay down. Yes, this was where he was meant to be, discovering the secrets he had sought for so long. All around him the shadows were chanting, growing from the ground into tree-like figures. But they moved, and they had arms: arms that held Hal in an embrace smelling of burnt skin. There was no reason to resist, and he gave in to their spell, closing his eyes and smiling as he felt a knife-hilt pressed into his hands.

The following day a tombstone was newly decorated, and it bore the simple epithet, "Hal Pear, beloved mortician. We can only hope that suicide is forgivable in God's eyes." Hal had gotten the answers he had sought. He had learned about God. And just like all those keepers before him, Hal, too, had failed with that knowledge.

- Timothy Tanko



The Heart by Jacquelyn King

Angel of the Apocalypse

We wait for you,
we the few, the brave,
in broad-backed factory Adirondaks,
with legs propped up and crossed.

We watch the paling sun,
and smile back at Your Grace;
we humbly engage—
we raise a glass.

We anticipate and change
under the honeyed, imbued light,
and Earth groans beneath that weight.

My skin is richened by Bourbon—
this hand! Kentucky! and France!
Brazen our dark, radiant scepters,
and we are men.

- Ross McKnight



Wounded by Jacquelyn King

Riddle Me...



One:

*I can be forged
I can be broken
I can be lost
I can be spoken
I do not question,
Doubt or wonder,
You can lose me
By one blunder.
What am I?*

Two:

*I am the end of the beginning
And the beginning of no end.
What am I?*

Three:

*I am the most, I am the least
I am the fast and yet the feast
I am joy, yet I am sorrow
I am here, but gone tomorrow.
What am I?*



Useless Stroke of Genius

It is extremely lonely in here. I'm kept virtually motionless all day long, with no prospect of ever moving again. I was brought in decades ago, and it seems that I will never be set free. It doesn't make sense to me, because when I first arrived I saw plenty of action.

It was nice to be busy. Every day I worked out, and was given ample time to rest. Sure, the occasional surgeries were a downside, but it was worth knowing I was being productive. Those were the days. I would be called up and given an assignment. I never knew how important it would be or how long it would take, but the thrill of the fight made the time fly by. I was so good that I was the only one of my kind in the area. No job was too big or too small. Give me enough time and I would see it through. But my glory was not destined to last forever.

As time drew on, I was called upon less and less. My skills had not diminished, but my superiors were beginning to take care of their business in less...violent ways. I just never imagined I would be cut out. But then again, job security is an unattainable ideal. The universe is always changing, and my specialties are refined and specific. I wish they would have let me retire. But they kept me on in case on some rare occasion they have need of me. So I spend more and more time waiting. I used to pass the time by counting my ribs, but after four years I found that I was never going to have more than

22, and turned to holding my breath.

It wouldn't be so bad in here except I can't see a thing. It's always completely dark until my superiors have a job for one of us. Then the blinding light comes and earthquakes wreak havoc, slamming us all into each other, practically knocking us unconscious. I suppose they do that so we'll be submissive and not rise up to strike at them. I can't imagine what they're scared of though. None of us get along with each other, and I can't even talk to the others in my sector. It's mostly because their language is completely unintelligible, but even if I could understand them I wouldn't want to associate myself with them. They are too weak to take a stand and fight, and I can barely stand it when they crash into me. Somehow I always manage to get smeared with black pus from their bowels. And most of them are lazy and worthless, claiming that their ability to "communicate" is actually useful. I've never been able to find out where they come from, but it must be somewhere in the strip. Everything comes from there.

As much as I have grown to loathe my superiors, I still can't help but hope they call on me again. Every time I see the light my heart drops. I shield my eyes and try to communicate with them, convince them that I am the one they want. But they rarely listen. For some reason they only want the runts. Those measly no good louts. I must give them credit, because they are obviously doing something right. I just can't imagine what. Maybe they are really good at looking pitiful. But if that's so, shame on my superiors. There's no reason to encourage a useless being. They have nothing on me. In my day they couldn't stand in my shadow.

I just can't wait to get back on the hunt. I can barely remember what it tastes like, but I have no memory of anything being better. So I sit here and wait for that day when they will remember me, and have a need for me to sink my teeth into that delicious white flesh.

- Keith Sterett



Mad Tea Party by Geordin Christopher

Four:

By some I am worshiped
By some I am burned
By some I am welcomed
By some I am spurned
You can forget me
If once you attain me
But it would be better
If you had chained me.

What am I?

Five:

I tie tongues
Bend minds
Strike thoughts
Break binds—
I will catch you
Unaware
You can fight me
If you dare.

What am I?

Six:

I am beauty
Yet am pain
I stand silent
In the rain.
If you seek
To hold
And take me
You must with
A sharp knife
Break me.

What am I?

Seven:

*I have no fears
And weep without tears.
What am I?*

Eight:

*Black and gold
Small and bold
I will drone
I will bite
I will harvest
I will fight.
What am I?*

Nine:

*I am not body
Nor am I soul
But if you lack me
You are not whole.
What am I?*

Ten:

*I show only what you make me
But be careful lest you break me.
What am I?*

- Riddles by Caitlin Clancy

Answers to Riddle Me: One: trust; Two: death; Three: life; Four: knowledge; Five: temptation; Six: a rose; Seven: a (weeping) willow tree; Eight: a bee; Nine: the mind; Ten: a mirror.

Useless Stroke of Genius: a stapler.



Looking for Answers in Nature by Maryanna Ponce



Stems of Thought

*Toiling through soil and doubt
Stems of thought sift, shift and shove
Seeking breath, expression, life-in-light,
Casting about for warm-assurance of day,
Clearness of sky above. Unsure of what will be
When, unfolding, they at last burst forth and see.*

- Annemarie Maimone

The Drug Store

After my wife's surgery, I began hanging out at a place called the Mortar and Pestle, which you might immediately think was some seedy bar with a gravelly-voiced barmaid and a broken down juke-box stuck off in a back corner, and maybe they've got a couple of specialty drinks that'd knock your butt into next week, but you'd be wrong. It's a small drug store on the edges of a dying strip mall near my house, which, in case you're interested, is in a dying neighborhood. Probably a third of the homes are in foreclosure. I'd like to thank the financial geniuses on Wall Street for turning my dreams into one big nightmare. Thank you very much, you greedy bastards, for pushing me and my ailing wife closer to the abyss of financial oblivion.

So I first started making these trips to get my wife's medications. But this drug store is an independent, not part of those huge chains where everyone acts automated like their phone messages. This place is a throw-back to an earlier day. The druggists and assistants are always talking to each other, like they're at a family reunion. And then some high school kid comes through with a dust mop, cleaning the floors, and they actually speak to him. "Did North win the game on Friday?" someone asks. "Yup," he says, "they pulled it out in the fourth quarter," or some such. And they all act so interested. "Way to go Hound Dogs!" says the cute brunette. So I take all this in while I'm sitting on one of those old-timey, two-seater benches in front of the prescription counter. I just naturally relax to the sounds of their banter, and feel like I'd like to stay all day, maybe even ditch my blood-pressure medicine.

Now I know what cynics and those egg-head academic-types might say about a place like this, that the ambience is all made up, that this particular store is just one of hundreds in the Mortar and Pestle franchise which requires employees to be down-home and folksy. Every store hires this teenager to bop around with a mop every two hours or so and interact with the staff. Why bother?

Because of the bottom line, they'd say. So gullible people like me will relax and buy more sundries where the real profit is. Maybe they're all actors, they'd say, hoping for a gig on one of those big-time Reality TV shows, or maybe, if they're real smart, they'd say it

is a Reality TV show. Fine by me! They can say what they want. It's a free country last time I checked. But all I got to say to them is BS! I went online and typed in Mortar and Pestle, "m-o-r-t-e-r a-n-d p-e-s-t-h-i-l-l." And guess what. The store doesn't even have a web page. So there! Try it yourself if you don't believe me.

Okay, I've got some old prescriptions around the house that have one or two refills left, leastwise, that's what the label says, so I get them transferred to the Mortar and Pestle. I don't really need them, you understand, but it makes my visit legit, like I don't want to get picked up for loitering. I'll have a bite to eat at the lunch counter, linger over my coffee, and then sit on the bench by the pharmacy until someone makes a point of asking me if I've been helped. Sometimes more than one of the girls will speak to me. Just to drag it out, I'll say I'm being helped when I'm really not. When I'm done there, if I go back to the lunch counter and order a piece of pie or a scoop of ice cream, I can almost make an afternoon of it.

Then one day, while I'm waiting for a prescription on the bench after I downed a cheeseburger and a mess of home fries, having a good old time for myself, this really pathetic, hangdog-looking fellow sits down beside me. What's wrong with him? Can't he see this space is already occupied? I give him a look, but he doesn't seem to notice, so I keep my mouth shut because he looks so darn miserable.

"They took it all," he whimpers with his head dangling down almost between his knees. "They took it all," he says again, shaking his head just so you can notice his woe-is-me routine.

I have to tell you, at this point I felt a little uncomfortable. You know, two guys sitting on a bench together in a public place and one of them is whimpering, which is not me. And this bench is none too big that our legs almost touch.

So I feel like I have to say something, maybe to get him to move on. "I know what you mean," I say, putting on my misery-loves-company voice, "my mortgage is underwater, and my wife just had part of her brain removed."

Then he looks up at me as if he just realized I been sitting there. "No," he says. "That's not it. That's not it at all."

What the hell! I say to myself. Just try to befriend someone down in the dumps, go ahead, I dare you. Try to talk about something what might be of mutual interest and see where it gets you.

Don't hold your breath for no stinking Nobel prize.

Then he says something I can't quite believe. He says, "Fairy in a Jar." It's either him or me now. One of us is gonna have to move, but just to be sure I heard it right the first time, I say, "What was that?"

Then he says it again, "Fairy in a Jar." Before I can get up, he starts this little speech not even looking at me. "It was her whole life making Fairy in a Jar. You know, she'd take a photograph of a loved one—a child, high school graduate, parent, or old couple—cut it out and glue it to the back of some card stock. Then she'd paste on little fairy wings to their backs, stick the whole thing down to the bottom of a jar, cover up the jar bottom with moss or beads or some such, slip background in like foil or wallpaper, and then screw on the lid. Sometimes she'd tidy up the lid a bit. Fairy in a Jar. But if she put the picture on the lid and then screwed the jar on top, she called that Captured Fairy."

Once I heard this, I started to calm down. That Captured Fairy thing was a little bothersome though. I pictured this tiny human bashing itself against the jar moth-like. But never mind that. I couldn't help but take an interest. "That's pretty good," I say, "just the kind of thing that might give my wife a little boost." But he hasn't heard a word I've said.

"She got the idea when she found a black and white photo of her grandma in a canning jar with a bunch of beads, a locket, I think, and someone's baby tooth. The old lady was standing in front of a wisteria bush which made her look like she had fairy wings. The wife said it was a sign. She couldn't make them fast enough, mostly for folks in the church. Then once she got herself set up on the web, the orders come pouring in. It seemed everyone just had to have one. I never seen her so happy. That's when Craft-All got wind of her doings and offered to buy her out. 'Over my dead body,' she said. So they just took her idea and run her out of town."

"That's a darn shame," I say.

"It kept me busy too, mostly collecting jars with lids. They had to have lids. 'Over my dead body,' that's just about what it's come to."

I pulled out my billfold and showed him a picture of my daughter, step-daughter really. "This here's Amber," I tell him. In the picture she's wearing army fatigues which make her look a little thick

through the middle. She's squinting into the sun and there's just sand behind her, but you can tell she has a pretty face. "It'd do my wife a world of good if you could do something with this here picture."

I took it out of the plastic holder for him to get a better look. He studied it for awhile. Then he drew himself up, nodding his head several times like he's appraising the Hope diamond. "She'd make a great fairy," he said.

"Well, that's good enough for me," I tell him. "Take it." So as to be helpful, since he was doing me a favor, I thought I'd give him a little advice. So I say, "Why not change things up a bit and do angel wings instead? You know, make an end run round those corporation crooks." You would have thought I had done something really terrible to offend him like ripping off a big one in his precious church or peeing on his Sunday best wing tips.

So he gives me this little lecture. "No, no," he says, "that would be blasphemous. It wouldn't be theological. See, the word 'angel' means 'messenger.' They're messengers from God. They're God's people. We're God's people too, but we're people people, not Angel people. Satan and his tribe aren't God's people at all."

Brilliant! I'm thinking to myself. He ought to be a religious professor with a bunch of drooling students sitting at his feet. Then I wonder, didn't God make devils too? But never mind that. His big interest seems to be in geography.

"So, God locked the gate of heaven tight when he gave the bad angels the toss. The really bad angels went to hell, which is in outer darkness way down below the earth, and those innocent-bystander angels that got mixed in the crowd of bad angels ended up here on earth and became fairies. Since God had locked the gate, as I said before, they were like angel refugees. They can't be God's messengers. That should be obvious to anybody."

Once he said that, I start to get tense. As you can probably tell, I'm a pretty patient person, but ten years ago before my heart went tilt, I would a drug him out to the parking lot and knocked off a couple of pounds of fairy dust.

"Okay," I say keeping my temper reigned in, "but that don't explain the wings. Why would any self-respecting angel give up his god-given, heavenly wings for ones that make him look, well, like a fairy?"

“Don’t need ‘em now. I can see you need to study up on the subject. Cause if you had been listening in the first place, you’d a known the answer to that question. Firstly, as I already explained, they can’t be messengers from God, so they don’t need no angel wings to get up yonder and back. And second, they need some kind of locomotion to get around to do their good deeds.”

“Wait a minute,” I say, feeling my anger ease off a bit, “I thought fairies played tricks on people like balling up their hair and tying it to the bedpost at night just to see them break their necks when they jump out of bed in the morning.”

“No,” he said, “that ain’t fairies, fairies on their own leastwise. They’d never do such a thing. That’s devils making fairies do evil things to be-smutch their name.”

So I say, sort of calm and casual-like, “I guess that means fairies are just working for the devil and can’t resist the evil one. Ain’t that right?” That got him to sputtering. But before he can launch into more nonsense, I say, “Don’t that go for humans too? When you do something bad, like, covet thy neighbor’s wife, it’s just the devil in you, right?”

I must have hit a nerve, because at that point he says something really ugly. “There’s no use talking to a blockhead like you who don’t understand spiritual things. I’ll tell you this right now, nobody, and I mean nobody, is gonna make me or my wife put angel wings on nobody’s photograph. I don’t care who it is. It just ain’t natural!” He dropped the picture in my lap and stood at the prescription counter with his back to me. I could hear him saying, mantra-like, “Get behind me Satan. Get behind me Satan . . .”

I guess I’ll have to take that as a compliment, but from that point on I just didn’t have the same appetite for hanging out at the drug store.

- Michael Hood

Absence Noted

*Summer's heart-thumping
thunderstorm has left us bereft
of many a venerable tree.
Their last rites were hasty—
dumbstruck neighbors gaped
as dump trucks hauled away*

*the mortal remains.
The Church of the Holy
Comforter stands comfortless
on its denuded lawn.*

*Some mutilations figure
worse than death, as stumpy
amputees forlornly brandish
random remnant limbs
where once they preened
their green symmetric crowns.*

*These glaring gaps in the canopy
transform the landscape,
leave me pining for
the former leafy whole
to shade my hot
September stroll.*

- Sister Jane Russell



Solitude

*debbie died
alone,
bragging about
the people she kicked
to the curb.*

- Bill Bambach

Displacement

*in motion she becomes
her place shifting
freely
leaving behind what she occupied
taking up a new part of space
of nothingness for now
but surely her own
in other words
constrained
predisposed
to a freedom
always within her
always beyond reach
the change from where
she was to where she is
the measure of her becoming
oblivious of what she has
seen on the way where
she stopped for coffee
the unfamiliar diner
discounting the contours
of geographies encountered
a loss? progress?
who can choose
or diagnose
her history
not her
not even her*

- Rajiv Tiwari

New

*peach fuzz caught on the curved back
of my little curled creature*

*carved in clay
chirped from the dust*

*timid sculpture
weathered crisp*

*at the cusp of your
organics*

*drool dewes the downy where dreams dip
and dare brews of white lullabies
into static*

*your wet balmy breath drags and plucks my
rhythmic drum*

*a beat so wild
my little angel one
winnowed away
from heaven*

*gasping mud
the soul
came from*

- Robin Taillon

Chthonic

*Down swings the hammer past the glaring eye,
down upon the twisted snake of writhing steel.
The crashing blows ring; rocking rhythm sings
the shaping of the fire-softened ore.
Metal kinks, bends under pounding, rends the air—
the smith's perfect hand under the smith's tall shadow,
under the smith's dark, primal smile—
roaring, glowing, melting fire white as death—
the sword a fell idea, a formed thought,
the sword shining black, smooth, perfect,
the sword potent, the sword real,
the sword woven of a twisted snake of steel.
Rave, black soul, roil, squeal.
Pop like a beetle in the heat.*

- Ross McKnight



The “Dialogue” of Modern Philosophy

*“As sure as two and one is three,”
A certain Descartes says to me,
“Is my Method for good sense.”
Kant steps in with much pretence
And says, “No, no, my imperative
Is categorical, therefore, definitive.”
Locke turns in his commodious grave—
A spot which much labor gave—
As his neighbor Sir Bacon, in monotone,
Begins to speak and claim, mid-drone,
That Nature’s secrets are his to bend,
Forgetting, however, his unfortunate end.*

- Annemarie Maimone

***Coney Island
New York
Photographer***
by Paul Toscano



After Rain

In the Track of a New England Poet

*Come Sweet, O this night
While old grows the linden tree
And brave love takes flight.*

*Bruit, this singing down
With the wood world's torn despair
And wet leaves lying near.*

*Cling fast, mine quiet love
While memories their shadows cast
And time cease to last.*

- Raphaël Du Sablon

2012 Recipient of the Jean S. Moore Award*

Hymn to St. Sebastian

Spirit

Is on the surface-superficial,

Not beneath

In sinewy bones,

Blood veins bursting

Bladder-bile, gut.

Spirit

Is what the eye can see,

The ear can hear—

Not in gory gut-work,

Mechanized medical

Mining

Like oil drills drilling,

Trying to open up

But butchering badly,

Miss.

St. Sebastian,

Muscles rippling,

Head drooping

Sweat, youthful athlete

Red-ruddy with blood.

Chiseled

Features failing,

Pierced

With the shaking shaft,

Sprawled,

Parts all consummated

In the roaring intensity

Of martyrdom.

Pierced again, sinews

Stretching,

Gasping, panting,

Fainting,

Faltering-fleshy

Beneath the wild wounds

Shouting

Roman solider, strong youth,

Succumbing to the arrows

But on the surface

Perfect paradigm of

The new creation,

The cross-Herculean

Making Christ's own

Adonis

Alive, artful

Arrow master-aesthete:

Spirit aroused,

Body bursting,

Erupting into

Resurrection.



- Charlie Jackson

The Death of the Winter Rose

*Whistle the wind
And fly the wave
Break the crest
And snap the stave*

*Billow out
And draw the line
Swerve the shoals
Rend the chine*

*Hard the crash
Into the sand
Behold the bulk
Uncrew'd, unman'd*

*There she lies
Upon the shore
She will sail
Never more.*

- Caitlin Clancy



View from High Line Park, New York by Paul Toscano

Poiein

You will watch
as the artist
commits to the touch,
pulling his hand down
across his eyes
on the spiked tops
of barren trees,
the unshaven whiskers
of a snowy mountain—
pointed, but numerous enough
to bear him up.
The first and last
touches
are blood.

- Ross McKnight

Prick ~ *For Sylvia Plath*

With iron and honey I glaze both cheeks
while two bees bumble up each cascade
pressing curvy pumping abdomens
with points plying as they scrape
each presses into a cheekbone producing
blossoms of irritated wine and grape
pixilated with pyrexia I collapse in a
webbed hammock perplexed
and wait and wait
my mouth blazing I gaze up and despise
the puffy diluted masses in fields of blue
my cheeks dilated threatening to thunder
and then a pause as sweat brings honey
tumbling uncontrolled
out from within

- Robin Taillon

Quiet Shadows by Roger Jones



The Burden

*Goddess sing, sorrow'd muse bruit the soot-snuffed
candle-darkness, this hearse song
For the weight is cast off.*

*The two cities consumed, leaving ash.
The world is to be:
Being Light
...and the epic has finished.*

- Raphaël Du Sablon

Crossing Over

*The time the snow
drank me
I knew, in their eyes,
I had gone too far.*

*Something happened there,
in the glaze. Stars and ice stuttered words
to the air,
tuned by a wind that sang me
half a shot to heaven.*

*And so the snow drank me—
and I let myself be drunk.*

*It's not been the same between us
since I knocked on the familiar door
(that seemed so suddenly a stranger's)
and they said, "You'll make a mess
coming in like that,
so wet and stuttering."*

- Ellen Weir



Lotus by Jan-Pavel Kovar

The Lily of the Isles

Silently, Isabelle slipped out from under the embroidered covers. She hesitated for a moment, standing beside the huge, canopied bed. Beside her, in a similar four-poster of down and gilded wood, little Jeanne lay still. The girl's small, tired limbs hung limp among the silken sheets and over the side. Isabelle crept past her sister and past the open window, feeling the light summer breeze swish the curtains and skirt of her nightdress. The moon shone down, soft but bright, dancing on her dark curls. She cracked the door open—it creaked ever so slightly—and stepped into the hall. Little Jeanne did not stir. Slowly, very slowly, Isabelle came out onto the landing. With baited breath she tiptoed to the banister, her bare feet making scarcely any sound on the rich carpeting. At first, all seemed dark about her. She waited for her eyes to adjust to the lack of light, then descended the high, curving staircase until she could just see the full length of the hall beneath. Sitting down on the steps, Isabelle drew close to the twisting, carved bars of the railing and pressed her face between them. The moon, now a bit higher in the sky, spilled its light in through a high window. *Plus belle que les diamants*, as Madame Durand would say: *more beautiful than diamonds*. Isabelle cringed mentally at the thought. How she despised learning French! Though not yet twelve, the raven-haired child had already forgotten the dulcet tones of her mother's native tongue, spoken, as though from far away, over her cradle.

Isabelle shivered as she saw the vast emptiness of the tall stone foyer. She felt now, though not for the first time, how alone she really was. But it was not being alone that bothered her—not tonight, at least. No, Isabelle knew—vaguely, and for reasons she could not explain—what troubled her was that someone might come along and then she would not be alone. And yet—Isabelle grasped at straws as she sat there in the night, looking down at the velvet-covered walls, now deep purple in the dark, and the shadow-wreathed paintings of noble men and important ladies. *What am I looking for?* Isabelle asked herself, sighing. She was restless tonight. Why could she not feel well, even when she was with little Jeanne? Jeanne, the only thing she had left in her desolation. Good, beautiful, tiny Jeanne!

Little Jeanne, who ought to be a queen or a princess or a duchess at

the least—but not here. Not here. The fair child's heart was too noble, too pure, to live in such a place. Surely little Jeanne, of all people, had not deserved this? Isabelle sat unmoving upon the stair, unable—or unwilling—to shake off these thoughts which now hurried unbidden to her mind. Why had the two of them been sent here? Why must they, out of all the happy girls in Britain, be stripped of home and what bit family they had left—Papa—to inherit some dusty titles and a hollow mansion in a foreign land? Yes, they were better dressed, and better fed, than they ever had been before. But that was beside the point. The grounds and gardens and bright, dignified halls, so exquisite, so lovely, by day, were revealed in the night. They were cold, unloving, unfeeling.

Staring straight ahead, Isabelle made out a large mass in the dim hall. There, she knew, was the magnificent chandelier. Made of gold and polished mahogany, it hung between this staircase and the one opposite. Once a thing of splendor, the silent night watches saw it transform into a grasping black hand. Isabelle looked around and felt that everything about the high manor house and the long, sprawling grounds had transformed this way. She was alone, but alone with the darkness. She was alone, but the mute presence of the splendid, yet soulless, objects pressed in on her mind. These things were of a time gone by, the bones of a family history that was almost dead. Almost. It had, it seemed, just enough life left to choke an uprooted flower. Isabelle thrust her head into her lap and covered it with her hands, but even there she could not escape. Warring within her, sometimes so fiercely she thought it would drive her mad, the young girl now perceived the clashing of her own blood—that of the Isles with that of Gaul. Inside her it was Britain against France; the stout-hearted Saxons once again standing ground, facing the Norman invaders. Would the conflict never end?

At the little house at Eventide they had been poorer, Isabelle reflected, but even the walls there had a friendly feeling. The very earth had seemed warm and sweet, as if the world itself had its hands in that place, as Papa said, hands that curled up to enfold even the lowliest lily, no matter how far from its native soil it grew. And now all that was gone—at least, for now. The lily was torn from its bed. But little Jeanne, precious little Jeanne, Isabelle thought. Here was her last bit of hearth and home, the last thread that could hold

her wavering hope. She did not deserve the small girl's sweetness, and yet she could not live without it.

Isabelle started as something touched her shoulder. She looked around quickly, then put a hand on her heart and exhaled gratefully. It was only little Jeanne. The diminutive girl stood a step above, one fragile hand rubbing the sleep from her eye as she yawned. Her wispy brown hair, tumbled about from the bed, reached down so that it just brushed her delicate shoulders.

"Come back to bed, Is'bell," she whispered, tugging the older girl's sleeve. Isabelle rose, took the child by the hand, and led her upstairs. As she went, Isabelle gave the desolate hall a last glance, and turned away. However these next few weeks played out, she sensed she must pass a test: either she would remain here and become a great, but empty, lady, or she would return whole—somehow, somehow—to humble Eventide. She kissed little Jeanne, tucked her in, and stood one last time before the moon-bathed window. Below her stretched the wide expanse of grey that was the nocturnal world—forests, fields, cultivated gardens. And there, so distant that it hovered on the edge of her sight, a faint glitter rose from the water of the Channel. Isabelle stared and scarcely breathed. There, so remote yet so maddeningly close, was England. There was Papa. Far below in the forbidding hall, the long, somber tones of the grandfather clock pronounced the hour. The time had come; Isabelle knew she must decide. The lily, left unplanted, would surely die. One moment passed. Then two. Then, just as the last deep note faded on the air, she chose.

- Caitlin Clancy

In Praise of Ignorance

*It is attributed to
Hegel, that
“The spirit is a bone.”*

*Sight, scent
Taste and touch,
Hearing, all the senses
Hearken to hiddenness—
To beyond things,
Transcendence in the immediate*

*In a grotesque incarnation
The Christ Child in
The grimy grotto
And
Occult sacraments
To which piety prays:
Roots in smeary-oil,
Unctuous herbal bottles,
Honey jars,
And saints sought through
Dressed candles,
Burning greasy flames*

*In rosary beads clinking
In the hands of holy women,
In red, glowing charcoal
Sparks, sage smoke
Swallowing novena prayers
And paper petitions placed
Beneath votive lights*

*God is in the bone,
The Spirit is in the streets
And sanctuaries*

*In pound-cake and white rum,
Offered thankfully
For favors granted,
In the smashed heads
Of plaster saints,
Punished
For favors refused.*



- Charlie Jackson



“Marketplace” by Annemarie Maimone

Sad News

Carlos died yesterday. A waiter from the restaurant emailed me.

I met Carlos there, at the Mexican restaurant, but I didn't talk much to the other waiters. So, when I saw an email from one of them, with the subject "Sad News," I nervously scrolled down, past the other unread messages.

I opened it. "Nick, I hope you are doing well and you and your family are having a great Thanksgiving. Hate to be the bearer of bad news but your friend Carlos passed away yesterday. I believe it was due to complications from diabetes. Some of us from the restaurant are going to visit the church where Carlos rests. Some of his extended family will be there. We will be sure to pass on your condolences. –Zubin"

I stared at the monitor. There weren't any emotions. I can't say I was sad or any of that. I was just there, reading the news, then staring at the words: "complications from diabetes."

My mom asked me something. I told her I was going for a walk.

"It's raining."

"I'll take a jacket."

"Dinner's ready, so don't take too long."

I went out the carport door, up the driveway, and walked on the grass alongside the road. Across the street was a cow pasture. I watched the cows and thought about their inevitable death. But it didn't connect. It wasn't the same. A cow doesn't have stories.

I thought about how he had fled his country's civil war after some soldiers tried to kill him. I thought about his trip "al Norte" and how difficult it was for him. He left his family, hid his identity, crawled through tunnels, lived in ghettos, starved, got very sick and lost everything.

In California he had a handful of jobs waiting tables. He worked at a hotel first, where he was, he said, "one of the lucky ones who waited on El Presidente Clinton when he visited the city de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Ángeles."

But most of the hotel's wealthy guests locked themselves in their rooms for days at a time doing drugs and having parties. "I brought them food," Carlos told me. "I was the only face these pistudos saw

other than the girls they had visit them.”

The job was fine but he couldn’t stand to look at them anymore. He went to an Italian restaurant. When he took a job at a Mexican restaurant just months later, he missed only one thing about the Italian job: “El vino gratis.”

But it was easy to give up the free wine for the free Mexican food. It wasn’t the same as the food of his Central American home, but it was filling.

That’s where I met Carlos. At first I always asked to sit in Mauro’s section. Not because I liked him personally. I just appreciated his consistently good service. And he liked my tips. I don’t know a lot about relationships, but I do know good tipping makes good friends.

The first time Carlos was my waiter Mauro was out sick. Carlos didn’t offer the regular “Hola amigo.” He just looked at me and said, “I work here four months. Every time you come you ask for Mauro. You love him or something?”

“I don’t like inconsistency.”

“Así es la vida.”

“Sometimes. But I still try to avoid it.”

After I finished my meal I cleaned my table and stacked my dishes neatly at the end. I told him thank you and, in the interest of making a new friend, I left a large tip.

I walked past the large pasture and ended up at the stores that were pretty far away from my parents’ house. They were closed for the holiday. I had gone further than I had planned, but the Thanksgiving weather in Georgia, even if it is raining a little, is good walking weather.

Carlos lived in walking distance of the restaurant and the local state college, where he took classes, including French.

Shortly after he waited on me that first time, we began spending most evenings at a bar across the street from the restaurant. We talked a little. But mostly we drank beer.

“Why French?” I asked him once.

“I thought if I can learn English, then I can learn French.”

“Why not Italian? Isn’t it closer to Spanish?”

“French is prettier. I heard a song in French about a partisan and

I wanted to learn it.”

“Have you learned it?” “J’ai changé cent fois de nom. J’ai perdu femme et enfants. Mais j’ai tant d’amis.”

“What’s it mean?”

“He cambiado el nombre...”

“No,” I stopped him. “En inglés.”

“I changed my name a hundred times. I lost my wife and children. But I have many friends.”

I finished the walk, went into my room to change then told my mom I was ready to eat. She set out the turkey, dressing, sweet potatoes and all. We ate, mostly in silence. I thought about Carlos. I thought about how skinny he was. His thin, white shirt buttoned halfway down with no undershirt. I remembered his simple soup meals and his almost-bare apartment. I lost my appetite and excused myself. My dad asked me to at least have some wine before leaving.

It was a French wine. My dad poured a glass for me, then for himself. My mom started to clean up while my dad and I drank the wine without talking. He refilled our glasses. Some spilled on the tablecloth, leaving a red stain. I decided to tell him about Carlos’ death. He knew something happened. I told him about the email. He said he was sorry. I told him I wasn’t sad, and he said I would be. Carlos told me he was ready to die. “I’ve lived a good fifty years. That’s a good amount of time. I don’t want to be too old,” Carlos had told me.

My dad said he was turning fifty-eight this January and my mom fifty-seven in March.

The previous summer had been a hard time financially for both Carlos and me. I hadn’t published anything and the newspapers had lost interest in my style, or topics or something. The Mexican restaurant had been losing customers because of a bad review in some free Spanish-speaking newspaper.

To save money, we had been meeting at a nearby grocery store to buy a six-pack of Negra Modelo. We drank them in the parking lot and watched the traffic go by. Sometimes we talked, mostly in Spanish, but sometimes in English when I was feeling lazy. When I didn’t want to talk, he talked to me in French and I pretended to understand.

After the wine with my dad, I went to the computer to see if I had any new emails. I did. It was from Zubin in California. "Again, sorry for delivering bad news on a holiday. I just attended the wake for Carlos. It was very somber and Maria Mercedes led a prayer on his behalf. The funeral will be held this evening at 7:30, so if you are going to say a prayer, that would be the best time to do it. Other than that, not much more to report...life is short so live well."

It was almost seven in the evening, so I drove to an open gas station and bought a pack of Negra Modelo, the thing that probably killed him. At 7:30 I went into my room, put on the record with the song about the partisan, and listened to it on repeat.

The next morning I woke up early, before my parents, before the sun, and turned off the record player. After gathering the empty beer bottles, I brewed a pot of coffee. I took the dog to the park behind the house and threw a ball for her. It was a lovely morning. The day was a bit warmer and clearer and I thought about those days I spent in Guatemala with Carlos, with similar weather.

It was two years ago that I traveled with him to visit his family and home. At that time, he had been away so long that he felt very disconnected. So we spent most of our time at a bar called Rick's. The English form of possession always bothered him. "Rick's!" he'd tell me after a few drinks, "Damn people can't even keep their language. They have to use American names and American possession. It's bad enough we are drinking Scotch whiskey."

But the drinks were strong and cheap and the frijoles negros were dark, so we sat in the courtyard of the bar for hours each day. We talked about his past life in the country. He told me about the time he visited the country with his American ex-wife and bought her chocolates from the most expensive chocolatier and they listened to a band of Mayan men play their wooden instruments on the sidewalk.

In the mornings, during my visit, I would get up before the traffic began and walk two blocks to the large, yellow church. In the back was a chapel where I would see the same old women praying. Each morning I knelt down and asked for forgiveness. Then I went for coffee. The coffee was good everywhere, so I went to a different place each morning. Then, I'd walk back to the hotel and, when Carlos was ready, we'd go to Rick's.

I walked back to my parents' house with the dog and the coffee had finished brewing. My dad was awake and I brought him a cup. We sat on the second-hand couch and watched the morning news. "I'll be heading back Monday," I told him, staring at the television.

"You can stay as long as you want. We like you here."

"I'll leave Monday."

When the news was finished, my dad kept watching whatever came on next and I went to my room. I started to write, but only wrote down a song that was stuck in my head. Then I drew a really bad picture of a falling leaf and decided to drive to the nearest church.

The eight o'clock Mass was almost over, so I took Communion and waited for everyone to leave. I sat in the pew, looking at the white Jesus on the cross. I had always liked that church, but now, compared to the churches of California and Guatemala, it was nothing. The Jesus was boring, the building looked like a cupcake and the pews were cheap.

I tried to pray, but I couldn't stop thinking about Carlos. He was an atheist. In the email, Zubin said something about meeting family at a church. And they had a service for him at the church. He was an atheist, and happy about that, even when he told me fifty was a good age to die. Would an atheist want me to pray for him? I didn't think he would want me to, so I didn't. I didn't pray at all. I just sat and looked at the white Jesus and thought about how dark Carlos was, especially in those half-unbuttoned white shirts.

- Christopher Lux

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Awards

Jean S. Moore Award*

The Jean S. Moore Award was established in 1998 in memory of the late Jean S. Moore, an Abbey English Professor. Each year, the recipient receives publication in *Agora* and a cash prize. This award represents top submission as judged by the editorial staff and is based on creativity and originality.

– Charlie Jackson is the 2012 recipient of the Jean S. Moore Award for his submission “Hymn to St. Sebastian.”

Agora Art & Photography Award**

Each year, the recipient of this award receives publication in the *Agora* and a cash prize. The award represents top submission as judged by the editorial staff and is based on creativity and originality.

– Jacqueline King is the 2012 recipient of the Agora Art & Photography Award for her submission “Growth.”

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