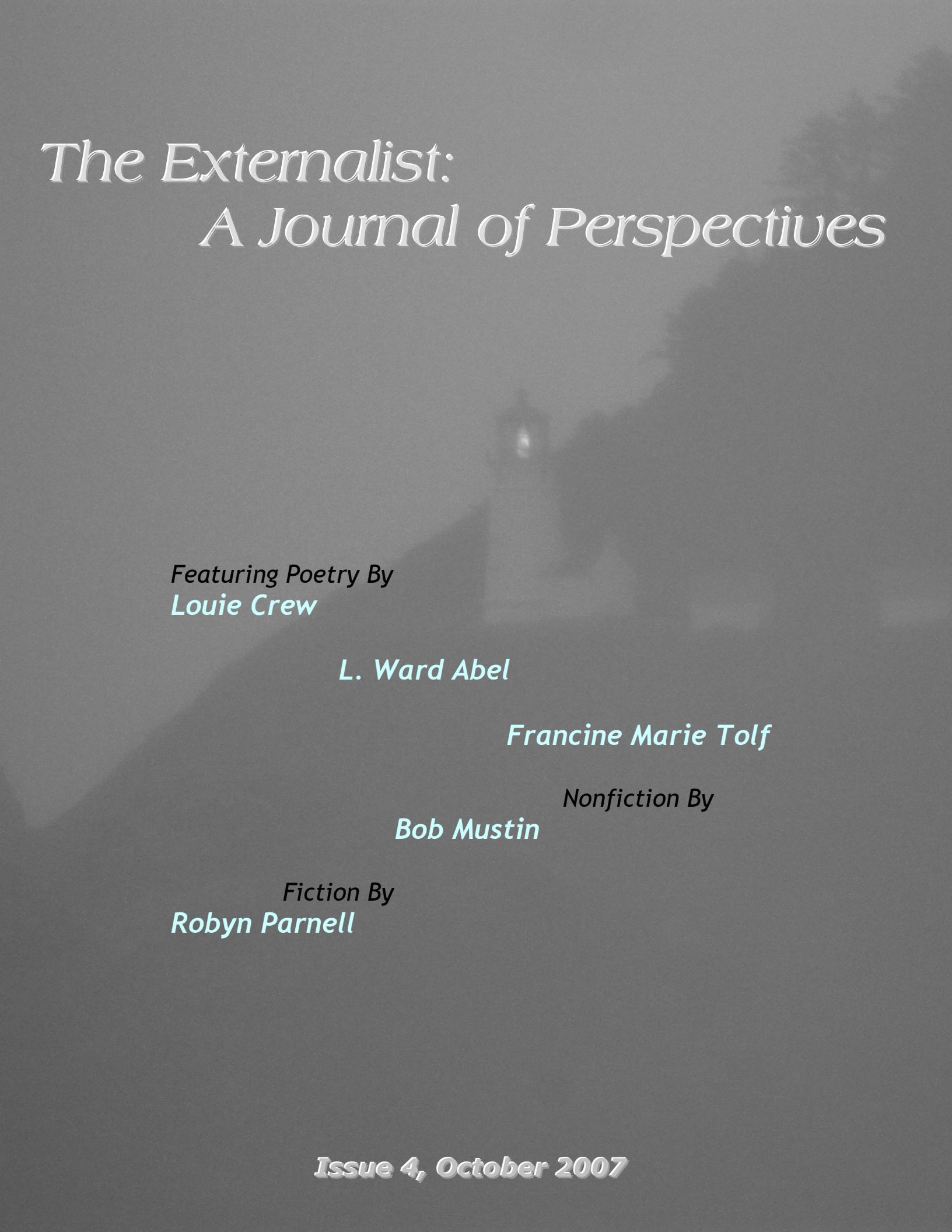

The Externalist: A Journal of Perspectives

Featuring Poetry By
Louie Crew

L. Ward Abel

Francine Marie Tolf

Nonfiction By
Bob Mustin

Fiction By
Robyn Parnell

Issue 4, October 2007

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A Note from the Editor

With so many worldwide concerns, it's sometimes easy to forget the role our environment plays in our lives and in turn, the role we play in our environment. These past months, earthquakes have struck several countries; volcanos have erupted without warning; floods have overwhelmed nations unaccustomed to flooding. Yet our attention through the media has focused on inherently human concerns: the political primaries, taxes, celebrity mishaps. Autumn serves as a vibrant reminder that life is cyclical, that change is a natural occurrence, and that we are part of a larger world.

This issue begins as always with our Editor's Choice, a poem by Francine Marie Tolf that doesn't speak of the environment, but confronts the essential human quality that lies at the base of externalism: the potential for both good and evil in each of us. We move forward into *Coming into Consciousness,* an essay by Becca Deysach that reflects on the philosophies of consciousness and what that might mean for us.

Perhaps not surprisingly, other work in this issue explores the same concepts in myriad ways. From Louie Crew's *A Quiet Description of a Queer-Basher* to John Martin's *A Boyhood Perhaps (No) Stranger Than Most,* the idea that perception is the one essential ingredient to experience is ever-present. Martin's memoir also reflects on our changing culture and this concept is explored further in poems like Tammy Manor's *Modern Love Letter.*

From an editorial standpoint, finding new voices has become one of my favorite activities. *Issue* 4 *of The Externalist* is the debut publication for two of our contributors: Joseph Murphy and Daniel Steele. Other contributors have been publishing for years; some have recently published their first books. We welcome them, and you, to our pages. Enjoy!

L

Editors' Choice

Editor's Appreciation

Tolf's poem is at once subtle and painfully direct, both personal and disturbingly universal. The poem speaks of the base qualities of humanity that make externalism necessary: it acknowledges the monster in each of us and the deep respect that humans have for genius regardless of the consequences. The content of this piece has the potential to completely overwhelm the craft, but Tolf skillfully uses language and line breaks to remind the reader that this isn't a letter at all--it is poetry at its finest.

by Francine Marie Tolf

A Letter, a Request

I have been thinking about you, Gauguin,
your final months on an island
where aging cannibals posed for tourists.
I have been thinking about the pornography
you decorated your cottage with,
the twelve-year-olds you bribed into bed;
how despite the oranges and coins, they must have
turned away from your rancid breath,
the oozing, ulcerous leg.
I have imagined the luxuriant penises you carved
on the rosewood cane you walked into town with,
your childish glee at the Catholic priest's concern.

I have shameful dreams of my own, *mon sauvage*.
If I've disliked you, it's not for your sad
debauchery, or the braggadocio you seemed incapable
of abstaining from. It's that thin crack
of hypocrisy that runs through the civilized,
the way you revered your Black Eves
on canvas, then described to a friend your *vahine*,
a girl of fourteen who "got down on her back" for you
whenever you wanted.

I'm a hypocrite too, sometimes,
and without the saving grace of genius.
I hope you knew you possessed it,
despite the ridicule in Paris
on your return, your comrades buying paintings
out of pity, and the bad liquor and wormy fruit
you lived on in the Marquesas, cockroaches feasting
on unprotected drawings.

After you died, no one bothered to plunder
the sketches and wood carvings that cluttered
your rooms, the wall panels that bloomed
with winged lizards and flame-colored waves.
They rotted in over-ripe air as your tiny garden
thickened to jungle.

Perhaps I have no talent, you wrote near the end,
for once neither swaggering nor melodramatic,
just a man quietly doubting
his entire life's meaning . . .

You should visit me in a dream soon, Gauguin.
You could tell me whether your fame
amuses you. You'd despise my appetite for guilt,
but I promise you that disappears at night,
when I howl and rage
like any sinner; when I fly like a serpent
through black wind you could paint,
if you bring a brush, with colors you've stolen
from heaven, from hell.

Coming into Consciousness

by Becca Deysach

...but I wasn't quite sure how they had become me.

"Dad! Come quick!" I cried. I was standing at the side of my parents' bed, holding back tears and trying to control my quivering lip. "My marker fell down the toilet!" I was truly more upset about the loss of my brand-new, from-the-Easter-Bunny, bright-orange smelly marker than I was by any understanding that I had just damaged the plumbing of our only bathroom.

While my parents slept in that morning, I colored at my little table next to the bookshelf spanning the length of our dining room. I had spent those early morning hours tracing the naked figures of a man and a woman on crinkly, transparent paper with a rainbow set of felt pens that smelled as good as a roll of Life Savers. Even as a five-year-old, I was in awe of the naked human body and the story of what happens when two of them become one. From bedtime tales, I knew about how a penis fits into a vagina, all the millions of sperm that enter a woman's body in one act of intercourse, and the death that almost all of them face on their way to the egg. I knew that the small, blonde person I was had something to do with those tiny sperm and my mother's eggs, but I wasn't quite sure how they had become me.

Pondering these things with my legs hanging over the lip of the toilet that morning, I dropped my marker into the bowl. I guess that propping myself up, wiping, holding my pen, and trying to figure out my connection to sperm and egg was too much for my two hands. Hoping to hide the evidence of my clumsiness, I flushed the marker down the toilet. My dad spent the weekend tearing up the bathroom floor while I ran errands with my mother, unable to get sex out of my brain.

Shoved between paper bag pillars of groceries on the back seat of my parents' fake-wood-paneled station wagon that afternoon, I asked my mother, "Mom, if I weren't me, would I be somebody else?" Young enough still to think that my parents lived lives devoid of mystery, I was surprised when she softly exhaled, "I don't know."

"But, if a different sperm had found your egg," I continued, "would I look different, but have the same personality? Would my personality be in the body of somebody else very far away? Or, would I just not be anybody?"

Again she sighed, "I don't know, honey. What do you think?"

I tried to imagine what it would be like to have my personality in somebody else's body in another part of the world. Imagining what it would be like to not exist at all was harder still. All I could think of was the deep black of the TV before 5:00 a.m., before people began to inhabit that world.

The questions my mom couldn't answer haunted me for a while, but Barbie and games of "house" soon took precedence over puzzles with no solutions. And then, a few years later, watching a cartoon of a dog watching a cartoon, I had a flashing insight of infinity, though I did not have the words for it then. What if the dog in the cartoon was watching a cartoon about a dog watching a cartoon about a dog…? When did it stop? It stopped no sooner than contemplating my ability to mull over my own existence did. It stopped no sooner than forever. Suddenly, I was a girl with the ability to consider not only her own life, but her own life in a world filled with infinite possibilities. Suddenly, I felt small.

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Evolutionary biologists say that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, that our nine-month adventure from zygote to birth echoes the four-billion-year journey we've taken from the early soup of life into the Holocene. We each begin as two cells becoming one deep inside our mother's universe. Incubated by her womb, we, as cells, divide and divide, replicating ourselves the way our earliest ancestors did in a sea as wet and salty as our mother's. As the microscopic ball we are begins to differentiate during the first few weeks in our amniotic home, we strikingly resemble an embryonic fish with our seahorse-shaped bodies and gill slits. By the end of our first month we have three-chambered reptilian hearts, and small bony tails that remind us we are animals. We look distinctly human by the end of the third month, but in the fifth are temporarily covered from head to toe with fine mammalian hair. We spend the last three months in our mother's saline sea as aquatic creatures, developing the bodies with which we ultimately enter the world to begin our passage as humans.

If our forming bodies provide a time-lapsed glimpse of all we have been on the way to becoming human, what can our terrestrial lives' journeys tell us about how our ancestors' minds evolved once they were human in form?

Our entry onto dry land is not easy. Our mothers moan and scream and tear as they push our round heads through their small birth canals. If it weren't for the splash of natural painkillers released by their bodies during birth, mothers might never choose to go through such an experience again. And yet, despite the

pain our emergence causes our mothers, we come into the light as small and helpless creatures, capable only of the simplest reflexes necessary to keep us alive. If someone rests our wobbly bodies on our mothers' bellies during our first slippery moments on land, instinct tells us to slither up to her breast and begin suckling in an act honed over the last 200-million years. That mammalian moment is vital to us, as it makes our mother's posterior pituitary gland release hormones that help make us emotional humans. As we fill our little bellies with her antibody-rich milk, oxytocin washes her brain with warm and pleasant feelings, encouraging her to hold us close. We need that embrace. Nurses in preemie wards noticed long ago that without regular and frequent touch, infants isolated in incubators don't grow. In hospitals today, holding and massaging neonates is as important a part of their care regime as supplemental oxygen is.

We are exhausting little beings and lifelong distractions.

What is true for preemies is true for all babies. For the first several months of our lives, our healthy growth depends on someone carrying us, holding our heads, and tending to our cries and laughter with an attentiveness I can hardly imagine mustering. We are exhausting little beings and lifelong distractions. We fill our mother's arms and laps with weight that increases daily, slow her down, and make it hard for her to do her work. Other primate infants do not require so much of their mothers. Baby chimpanzees and their close cousins, bonobos, are born with the ability to grip their mother's fur so she is free to use all of her limbs for climbing, food gathering and preparation, grooming, and anything else that arises. We, too, are born with fierce grips, but our smooth mothers have little for our small hands to grab hold of.

As soon as our furry cousins are weaned, they are able to forage for their own food. We, however, depend on our parents to feed us for at least the first decade of our lives. This was particularly true for most of human history, when feeding ourselves was more than a matter of peeling a slice of processed cheese away from its plastic wrapper and plopping it between two slices of equally processed bread. Until the advent of agriculture just ten-thousand years ago, sating our hunger required a deep knowledge of the nuts, seeds, fruits, tubers, and greens our home environments provided, and a level of manual dexterity refined enough to crack, pick, uproot, and prepare those goods. While fast-developing chimps and bonobos are quite capable of getting their own food when they are still small, human children take years to master those

complicated skills.

Given all of these human vulnerabilities, how on earth did a creature born as soft and needy as I ever make it as a wild animal? How did archaic human mothers tend to their infants without the help of Pampers, snugglies, baby monitors, or strollers successfully enough that those things could one day be invented? How could evolution possibly favor a floppy, smooth-skinned baby whose disproportionately large head caused complications or death in twenty-five percent of births before the advent of modern medicine? It seems like any species whose offspring demand that much energy and put their mothers in such a risky position would never survive more than a generation or two before dying out, as so many evolutionary experiments do. Indeed, no species does make it in the long-run if it has as many obvious shortcomings as we, unless there are some hard-core payoffs for taking the risk to birth such a beautiful burden.

How could evolution possibly favor a floppy, smooth-skinned baby whose disproportionately large head caused complications or death in twenty-five percent of births before the advent of modern medicine?

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"Can I hold him?"

I was in Iowa for the first time, missing a few days of kindergarten so my mom could help out with her sister's new baby. Aunt Ruba set my cousin Nick on my lap and made sure his head was supported by the pillow she'd tucked beneath my still arm. I smiled for the photo my mom took of me on the soft chair, my legs sticking straight out from the yellow dress she'd made and barely reaching the end of the seat. Thrilled to be holding my brand new cousin and terrified I might break him, I slowly turned my face away from the camera to look at his small body. He was calm. And he was so soft. I brushed my face against the top of his head to get as close to his downiness as possible.

"Be careful of his soft spot," my mom reminded me. Oh yah, I remembered. Babies always have that dent in the middle of their heads that I am supposed to watch out for. I jerked my head up immediately, scared to be so close to the softness of his brain.

I have held a lot of babies since that visit, and I've run my hands over every one of their small skulls, both fascinated by and terrified of their tenderness. The close proximity of their brains to my fingers makes me uncomfortable each time, and my stomach turns to think of the damage

an adult's strength could do to them. The flexibility of newborns' skulls seems like yet another human trait that should have put our ancestors on the quick road to extinction, but that sensitive center is part of what makes all the vulnerabilities inherent in us worthwhile.

At birth, our skulls have six soft fontanels where the bones haven't fused because our brains are not fully developed. When our ancestors began walking upright about four-million years ago, their pelvises narrowed and only those babies who could squeeze their way out of small vaginas survived. Time favored underdeveloped infants whose brains were encased by pliable skulls that could make way for their brains' growth. Unlike our early primate ancestors, whose brains at birth were packed into firm skulls with most of the information they needed to survive, we enter the world fragile and blurry-eyed, demanding years of attention to help us complete the mental development our ancestors achieved within the dark quiet of their mothers' wombs. Because of our protracted childhood, experiences build our brains as surely as genes do. A dynamic interplay between traits inherited from our parents at conception, and the sights, sounds, and relationships we devour as we grow create the neural connections our brains need to make us the deep-thinking creatures we are. Influences from the nature of our genes and the nurture of our homes cannot be separated from one another because our cellular storylines instruct the world to shape us.

The continents-wide scattering of bones from several short-lived hominid species suggests that upright primates who have babies with big heads and long childhoods are indeed an evolutionary gamble. However, the advantages our closest ancestors reaped from their offspring's prolonged development outweighed their detriments enough to bring them out of Africa and into every corner of the planet. Nobody is quite sure why our lineage was so much more successful than other hominids', but the interactive learning and inventiveness of our youthful years certainly played a role. We are born to adapt, and this has made all the dangers posed by our slow and soft growth worthwhile.

Today, just 1.7 million years after Homo erectus females began giving birth to their underdeveloped babies in southern Africa, members of our species live in ocean-deep submarines, in outer space, and everywhere in between. We have adapted to our environment by shaping the contours of it to meet our needs, and those contours have, in turn, shaped us. As a result, most of us develop in a world more human than anything else—more street than game trail, more strip mall than berry bush, more lawn than forest. More closed than open. These things make it easy to forget that we are just one more amalgamation of

nerves, protein, flesh, and DNA that time has thrown together, that we are a mere six-million-year moment away from the ancestor we share with chimpanzees and bonobos. We forget that we are animals, wild beings that have refined their shelter-building and food-gathering techniques so deftly that over six-billion of us now spread across the planet. The distinctiveness of our inventions disguises the fact that we are only one of many species that uses tools and vocal communication, makes their homes with an attention to the aesthetic, and has a range of thoughts and emotions.

Indeed, we are animals, born and bred in a wilderness of our own making...

Indeed, we are animals, born and bred in a wilderness of our own making, and yet there is clearly a sharp contrast between the kind of creature we are and the rest of our biological kingdom.

Perhaps humans' distinction from the rest of the living world has little to do with our ability to think, feel, and create, and everything to do with our ability to ponder those thoughts, feelings, and inventions as I began to do some twenty years ago. We are metaconscious, cursed and blessed by the sense of self our forebears developed long ago. The ability to conceive of ourselves as organisms who know that we know is a burdensome boon from those Australopithecines who got onto their two feet and roamed the African plains four-million years ago. Our self-reflective consciousness is an endowment from narrow-hipped bipeds who gave birth to unfinished apes, and built intimate networks of friends and family to help them attend closely enough to their babies so that they could one day have grandchildren with brains for the world to form. Our intelligence is a gift from those hominids who had lengthy childhoods, long-term love affairs, formed complex cooperative communities, and eventually made the kind of neural connections necessary to put the abstract concept of "me" into words and creative works. Our unique minds are an inheritance from our parents, from early *Homo sapiens, Homo erectus, Homo habilis, Australopithecus afarensis*, and the genus *Pan*. They are a legacy of the earliest life forms that inhabited this planet, the carbon that permeates the universe, and the water, wind, and dynamic topography that shape ourselves and our home.

Although our adaptations have kept us growing fast for hundreds of thousands of years, Homo sapiens' success is taking its toll. The instruments and lifestyles we have developed to insulate ourselves from the vagaries of the natural world are now driving the planet's sixth mass extinction episode. We are dying of lung cancer, breast cancer, hunger, obesity, war, and depression, and our malleable minds

make us think this is normal. We are cutting down forests and mining deserts and as long as we damage the places that life needs to evolve, we damage ourselves. Not since the earliest anaerobic bacteria poisoned the atmosphere with their oxygen-laden byproduct has a single species been responsible for the rapid extinction of so many others. And as far as I know, no species has ever recognized the danger it poses to itself and its home and still continued to terrorize it. Until now. Metacognition gone awry, this is what makes us unique.

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"A reading from the book of Genesis." I took a deep breath infused with fear and continued. "Adam and Eve rebel against God and are cast out of the garden." Aside from a cough here and a sneeze there, my carefully enunciated twelve-year old voice was the only sound reverberating throughout the packed stone church. I was the choirgirl chosen to read the first reading in that year's Lessons and Carols for Advent. It was a huge honor, and I wore red satin and white lace to make my mom proud.

The story I read that night is similar to the one most people know—Adam and Eve lounge happily in the Garden of Eden, naked and blissful, until an evil serpent whispers to Eve that she should eat an apple off the tree in the middle of the garden. "But God said we shouldn't," Eve counters, "He says we will die if we do."

The snake laughs at her. "You will not die, for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." And so, despite her hesitation, Eve gives in to her temptation, eats the forbidden fruit, and suddenly sees that she and Adam are stark naked. Ashamed of their bodies, Adam and Eve stitch loincloths out of leaves and hide from God as he approaches the garden. Their omniscient Father quickly discovers their naughty deed and throws them out of Eden for good.

Until Eve ruined perfection for the First Couple, they lived in bliss and abundance, ignorant of their nudity. But upon taking the first bite of the fruit from the Tree of Life, the two became as self-conscious as teenagers in a swimming pool. All for a bite, they saw their smooth, bare skin contrasted against a garden teeming with tangled plants and fur-covered beings. Adam and Eve's perception of themselves was suddenly pierced by an awareness that they were man and woman in an other-than-human world, and they did not fit in.

I like to think that the apple which gave Eve the ability to harbor the abstract concepts of good and evil was crisp and tart, and made the insides of her cheeks water and her tongue ache for more. For her partaking of this ripe fruit was not humanity's original sin, but its coming into consciousness. It is

only right that Eve should have savored the fruit that gave her the beautiful and burdensome ability to recognize herself in a world of possibilities.

Perhaps the authors of her myth knew that the dawn of our species' self-awareness some forty thousand years ago marked an entry into a world of recognizable beauty we could both celebrate and devastate. Perhaps they understood that an alertness to our naked vulnerability was responsible for our ejection from Eden, for with self-awareness arose also a brilliance packed with wonderment, fear, and unrestrained creativity, the colossal effects of which are destroying the Garden today. But the scribes told a different story than the one I believe. Our dissociation from the intricacies of Eden is neither a punishment nor gift from God, but a result of the unique form of consciousness our fourteen-billion-year evolutionary story gave us. And our dissociation from Eden is a catastrophe our consciousness gives us the responsibility to repair.

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The sun never rises before 5:00 a.m. during the Illinois school year, so my high-school morning activities always began in the dark. Daily, I slunk through my parents' bedroom, down the shifting stairs, and changed into my running clothes on the daybed in the den. While pulling off my sleep-softened t-shirt one morning, I caught my reflection in the window. I had been staring ahead towards the dark nothingness of predawn, but saw instead a woman's body. Her round breasts shocked me; the smooth contours of her waist and hips threw me off guard. Trapped between a fierce admiration of her beauty and the frightening insight that that woman was me, I stared only for a moment before hurrying into my high-compression sports' bra.

I am not entirely sure why it took two years with fully developed breasts to actually see that I had them, nor why the realization that I did was so disconcerting. Some of my discomfort surely had to do with the knowledge that I would never look like the women in magazines or on TV, but that this body now put me in a position to try. It was more than that, though. That morning, I saw the passage of time held in soft young curves. I saw a body that was a part of a moving universe over which I had little say. And I sensed that my ability to control either my body or the universe would only decrease as I moved through them. But I would try.

That flash of insight into the inevitability of change was one of the many that had punctuated my life since the weekend I dropped my marker into the toilet and first asked, "Who am I?" Each time I caught a glimpse of something

larger than I could comprehend, I felt both more uncomfortable in my skin and increasingly buzzed by the understanding that I was a chance event in a world of endless possibilities. That level of awareness brought me fiery moments of creativity and intense discussions about the meanings of life. It also made me feel wildly out-of-control in an out-of-control world. And so I learned to manage what I could. My weight, for one, by eating twelve-hundred calories a day and running five miles on even the meanest ones. I recorded every bite of food I ingested, graphed the miles I ran against my weight, and scheduled my days by fifteen minute intervals in the pages of my Chandler's Assignment Notebook. If I could not slow the flow of time or constrict the expanse of space, I could at least be in charge of how I steered my body through them.

I often wondered during those years if anybody...ever felt their skin prickle and throat catch when they thought about all the miniscule chance events that had fit together to make their lives possible...

I often wondered during those years if anybody in my high school besides my group of friends and me ever felt their skin prickle and throat catch when they thought about all the miniscule chance events that had fit together to make their lives possible, if my classmates stood around kegs of beer discussing the fact that they never would have been born if their grandma hadn't needed advice on whipping egg whites one afternoon sixty years ago, or if their great-grandmother hadn't been so engrossed in the book she was reading while walking home one evening that she bumped into a man heading to a train that later crashed. . . while he sat safely eating a blueberry pie apology in a town he never left. Whether or not they discussed these things with red plastic cups in their hands and foam on their upper lips, I no longer doubt that my peers were also struck, on some level, by the predicament of their existence; after all, such ponderings are trademarks of being human. I now wonder when our wordless ancestral family members, whom we would not recognize as time travelers if we met them in a wilderness hot springs, made the invisible transition from simple present-tense living into a universe of abstractions.

At what point in our evolutionary journey did we first ponder the predicament of our presence in a big and bold universe, did little *Homo sapiens* first ask their mothers, "Mom, if I weren't me, would I be somebody else?" When did we rise out of the existential slumber we had been in for the first few million years of our history, see the sky, and long to understand it?

When did we first go to sleep with the understanding that we were nearly defenseless beings in a world incomprehensibly vast? Did that knowledge fill us with a pang of deep loneliness, of fear? Did it give us a sense of the exquisite beings we are? As internal dialogue does not fossilize, we will never know the true answers to those questions. Nonetheless, I am willing to bet that our ancestors were as overwhelmed as I when they began to recognize a reflection in a still pool as their own, as they began to think about themselves as creatures with the ability to think about their place in the world. Anthropologists believe that awareness urged them to paint, bury their dead, carve beads, make musical instruments, and weave elaborate mythologies, and we date their coming into consciousness by the appearance of those works. I suspect that that self-awareness also urged them to seek comfort in the control of who and what they could, just as I had done in the well-planned diets and exercise regimes of my adolescence, in the years before I learned to submit, however tentatively, to the exhilarating discomfort of living in an unpredictable world.

Some forty-thousand years after the first signs of our species' coming into consciousness, we are coming into a new level of awareness about our place in the world. We are beginning to understand just how far from Eden our creative and controlling capacities have taken us. We are learning that, as inconsequential to the cosmos as we may feel, our adaptations to this wild planet impact things as huge and abstract as ocean depths and the air we breathe. Although we may not yet be mentally equipped to truly grasp the enormity of the planetary problems our lifestyles create, we do know that we will not be able to go on living the way we do for long. Raw nature just can't keep up with our speedy consumption of its offerings. If we continue taking as much as we do at the pace we do, we all soon will find ourselves hungry and sick in an empty world. This we know.

It is time to use the same creative minds that compel us to both sweep red ochre over cave walls and build nuclear reactors to make some important decisions. We must decide how much our place on Earth means to us, and if an expanding universe is something we want to continue being a part of. We must decide if the joys that being here bring are powerful enough to take weight off the knowledge that we are just one young primate species in a huge assembly of life. And we must make our decision soon.

If we determine that we do love it here, that we care about all the lives with whom we share common stellar ancestors, then we must also be brave enough to take responsibility for the problems our

species has created. We must learn to sit with fears of our smallness and our potential failures as we roll up our sleeves and use our strength to ensure that four billion years of life on Earth have not been in vain. And we can do it. For as much as the threats we pose to ourselves and to the planet may lie in our accelerated consciousness, there too, lies our hope. Our humanity is as defined by our ability to dance, sing, create art, imagine, invent, and love, as it is to fight, fear, and control. Although our bodies' deepest memories will not allow us to escape our darkest tendencies, the soft heads and hearts with which we are born give us the opportunity to decide who we will become.

Who will we become?

by Joan E. Cashin

Springtime

In the face of irrepressible beauty,
human beings, do your duty:
procreate.

by Louie Crew

A Quiet Description of a Queer-Basher

I see the same dimple his mother kissed
40 years ago as she rocked him through fears
like those which again glaze his eyes
as he pops his belt at my forehead
while he has me tied to the tree.
His snarl is as simple as his wrinkled nose
which rejected Pablum or prunes,
and he spits his tobacco juice in my eye
as gleefully as once he burped on her
or slobbered Zwieback down her bra.

Inverse

by Daniel Steele

"Man's dual nature is a source of fascination from which the truth and falsity extracted are only travesties of each other. Who is the real man, which is his real nature, and what composes reality?" smirked Liam Hease, reaching for his drink. He lifted the glass of rum mixed with apple cider to his lips and sipped, then he cleared his throat. George looked around the bar, crowded with office-companions from the optical manufacturer company he worked for. *Now you can really see*, was the motto. Most men had loosened their shirts and ties, while the women sat on stools with their legs crossed. The light in the bar was yellow and mellow, almost like a sleeping candle. Somehow, Liam had dragged George into a conversation in which he was the unwilling participant. Liam always did that; he was always overbearing, and you could never refuse him anything. But tonight, Liam's words and arbitrary thoughts continually bewildered George; perhaps that was Liam's cruel aim. George sat in one of the back tables, staring miserably around him at the laughing, noisy bar-occupants. He was tired of Liam's mindless egocentricity and absurd tales. George disliked Liam; Liam seemed to comprise everything George could wish for, and at the same time, it was everything he hated. George swallowed his

Liam seemed to comprise everything George could wish for, and at the same time, it was everything he hated.

remaining drink in an effort to appear entertained.

"I'll go get us another drink." he interposed hastily, before Liam could speak again. Liam nodded and tapped his fingers on the table impatiently. George stood up from his seat and walked over to the counter, where he ordered two drinks and was greeted sympathetically by Linda Dowell.

"Still can't get rid of him?" She said, flashing Liam an unnoticeable lingering glance with her green eyes. George assented, and she smiled laughingly. Why couldn't he free himself from Liam's company; was there compulsion inside repellence, perhaps? George remained there, waiting for his drinks, and Linda turned back towards the balding man she had been talking to. He was buying her drinks and wetting his lips gluttonously, not even trying to hide how old and sweaty he was. George's eyes stayed glued on Linda's luscious golden curls, then he turned and noticed Liam observing him shrewdly. George wished he had the courage to walk away from Liam. Liam had smooth, dark hair and was visibly handsome. He was also known to be intelligent and slightly belligerent, and yet, he always kept his composure of nonchalance, except when his impatience or excitement struggled against it. For some reason, he seemed to scorn success, even his own, as if it were imposed rather than bestowed upon him.

George differed greatly from his present table companion; in exaggerated language, almost like a frog is distinguishable from a prince. In fact, it had often been remarked in the office buildings that George could be considered the complete antithesis of Liam. He wore thick glasses and had thin hair and was always unassuming and polite. George often felt insecure, although he hoped nobody noticed, and he was considered mediocre but hard-working. It had become a popular joke at one point to overdramatically draw attention to their differences when they were seen together, and consequently George had taken pains to avoid Liam. But the unpredictable prince had suddenly taken interest in George, and Liam was difficult to put off when he wanted someone's attention.

"Do you know want to know something about her?" proposed Liam when George returned with the full glasses.

"Huh?"

"Linda Dowell, she's the Office Manager's mistress. He's the bald man speaking to her." Liam laughed as George frowned in confusion and disenchantment. He didn't answer, but Liam was already discussing something different. George drank some more of his gin, listening uncaringly and in pieces to what Liam was saying. Linda and the

Office Manager left the pub, and George kept imagining her being undressed by the balding man. George glanced up from his quickly vanishing drink, as Liam seemed to be reaching the height of his argument. "I believe man's essence could be found if only two opposites, two vastly contrary human beings were shaped into one, or transfigured into each other. Somehow, the different pulls could neutralize each other, and then we'd discover the essence inside the nullity." He was eyeing George possessively, and George was still thinking about Linda, without registering what Liam had said.

"Huh?"

As it turned out, George got drunk. Perhaps he was disillusioned by Linda Dowell's unfaithfulness to his fantasy. In any case, Liam chauffeured him home, pondering as he drove, while George seemed to be consumed by a sleepy lull. An hour later, they both sat in George's green couch silently, until Liam unexpectedly pulled George's head back and forced him to listen.

"George, haven't you ever wondered what it would be like...to be me?" He drew his face closer, until George could smell his unusual apple cider breath. "Knowledge..." he whispered, as George cringed from the sweetness of Liam's apple breath.

"George, haven't you ever wondered what it would be like...to be me?"

"No..." answered George, feeling scared, but only somewhat cloudily. Liam drew back, irritated and dissatisfied. He began to think again, while George began to nod off. But once more, Liam abruptly grabbed George by the collar and pulled him up until they faced each other.

"George, you love Linda Dowell, don't you?" inquired Liam knowingly.

"Yes..." answered George, and let himself fall sleepily onto Liam's shoulders. He began to snore, but Liam slapped him on his cheek and George woke up.

"George, Linda Dowell loves me. " sneered Liam.

"Huh?"

"You don't think she actually loves that old man, the Office Manager?" laughed Liam contemptibly. George didn't answer. Liam allowed him to drop back and become enveloped by the warm caress of the sofa. Then, George began imagining Linda stoically allowing herself to be undressed by the balding man, until he, George, suddenly burst into the room and happily guarded her away.

"She loved me, George, and I

turned her down." Liam shook his head in pity. George felt like hitting Liam, but he could not even muster the strength to fight his own submergence into the absorptive sofa. Instead, he imagined himself in Liam's place, passionately embracing Linda.

"So, have you ever wondered what it would be like...to be me?" purred Liam protractedly, generating a false happiness in his voice.

"Yes." sighed George softly from beneath the engulfing folds of his yielding sofa. His vision turned misty and faint as a tear escaped his eye.

"Ah. Then I propose to you that we switch identities." Liam's eyes gleamed with excitement. He rescued George from the spongy, malleable sofa. "Like the Prince and the Pauper. We shall become one another." said Liam. His dark complexion lingered anxiously before George's eyes. Then, to George's astonishment, Liam's features began to move around and dance. George made an effort to concentrate and then answered slowly.

"How?"

“The product justifies the means…” laughed Liam. “It is possible, and that is all anyone shall ever know.”

He smiled and lifted George, semi-conscious, to his feet. He grunted once, and then carried George towards the door of his apartment and all the way down the stairway. He lay him into a car seat cautiously, like a prized laboratory specimen. Liam had the determined look about him of a pioneer, a man facing unknown perils. Then George felt that the clouds of sleep were enclosing, so he sprouted wings and flew away into the land of dreams.

*

The next day, he woke up on his green couch. Except it didn't feel his anymore. It was no longer soft and accepting, but rather foreign and unrelated. He stood up, feeling unwelcome, but completely refreshed. He walked towards his bathroom mirror, where every morning he was accustomed to consolidate the truth.

He wet his face with cold water and then dried himself with a green towel. He observed himself in the mirror and allowed his fingers to course through his smooth black hair in admiration. Then he smiled smugly and checked for the whiteness of his teeth. While still staring into the mirror, he noticed another man behind him, but he didn't turn.

"Liam?" inquired the man dubitatively. He was somewhat short and stocky, and he was wearing thick glasses. His hair was scant and disheveled, and he was holding his hand to his head in discomfort.

"No, my name is..." Liam paused, as realization set in. Both men were looking at each other's reflection in the mirror, instead of speaking face to face.

"I think something didn't work, Liam, I doesn't feel like we've switched." said George, as he approached the mirror slowly, wincing in pain.

"Damn!" Liam said as he struck his palm with his fist. "When we made the switch, I expected that our true personality would nullify the outward facade. Then, we would have been able to discover what truth is. But instead, all we've done is like transfiguring a potato into an apple, and then planting the resulting apple back onto an apple tree! Or, likewise, making the apple into a potato and planting it back into the earth… How useless! We have become one another only to realize we *really* have become one another! We have changed nothing..."

"Why are you complaining? I got your hangover." George winced in pain again.

"Do you know what this means, you useless man?" snarled Liam.

"Huh?" asked George, beginning to feel overwhelmed by something larger than his headache.

"It means that man is bereft of any true essence! Man's only reality is his own perspective. Take away his assessment, his ability to judge and be judged, and his existence will be as void as reality itself... "

George nodded in awe. "The essence of experience resides within perspective. Quite frightening."

Both men stood together as one, in front of the bathroom mirror, staring towards their own reflections in uncertainty. Their images stared back in defying interchangeability. *Who are you?* they seemed to question.

by L. Ward Abel

Broomfield Calling

To Joe Strummer

He had that
thing
gnawing him from the past
long after conquering the world
with a black telecaster
and an attitude. Strummer wouldn't
change anything, nothing, in the wax
he let go, wax that made him a prophet
in everyone's mind, that took him
to his beloved New York and beyond.
It was only for
a moment. It was gone that quickly.
And all that was left was that

thing

that made him
look away.

Invisibility

by Thomas J. Misuraca

By the time he reached his mid-40's, Tony had achieved total invisibility. With each passing year, he felt himself slowly fading away, now he could move among the masses unseen. He was barely a shadow or a whisper in somebody's ear.

Tony tested his ability in the gay section of town. There, he walked through the streets, unnoticed by the crowds of gay men. Nobody made eye contact or moved out of his way as he passed.

When he ventured into a club, the doorman didn't even glance at his ID. At the bar, the bartender passed over him until all the other men were served. And still, Tony had to shout out his drink order. He was at full invisibility on the dance floor; fellow dancers bumped into and stepped on him constantly.

Tony wished he'd develop an invisible force shield as well.

His invisibility strengthened as the night progressed, and he eventually left the club unseen. He walked through the darkened city streets, felling as if he were one with the night. Others who moved through the shadows did not see Tony pass.

He climbed into his car, a vehicle that would be ignored by the other drivers on the road. He made his way home, getting into his apartment so quietly, his neighbors never suspected he went out. There he would remain the rest of the weekend, fading further away.

He wondered how long it would be before he wasn't there at all.

by Joseph Murphy

Greensky Hill

1.

Would the dirt road's tight curves be too much?

Foliage pelted the windshield, caught in wipers;
The squeal of limb against metal,
Again and again.

But the annual Hemingway tour was not to be disrupted:
Our bus soon ascended
That hill he had taken in a buggy.

We'd lunch as he had
At the Horton Bay General Store: that boy among boys,
Bright with stories to come,
Surely as hungry as us.

We'd pause by a circle of trees the Ojibway held sacred,
Near Peter Greensky's church.

Sitting in the pews, we'd hear of a girl from the tribe,
Prudence Boulton, whose father had been a sawyer
For Dr. Hemingway.

She'd soon come to covert his handsome son;
And he, the good taste of her mouth.

She was to do first for him what no woman
Would do better.

2.

Behind the church, I found a path:
I'd follow it up through a wooded knoll;
Down and past well-tended graves.

I'd see emblems carefully set in remembrance of veterans.
Small flags, too: honor, duty.

Many, though, had been forgotten:
Their graves marked by weathered epitaphs and crosses
Slanting from the brush.

3.

Returning, I'd overheard this: "She's buried here."

Prudence. I hadn't known.

Pregnant: 16. She'd committed suicide,
As had Richard Castle, the boy she'd loved.
Her unmarked grave seemed part of an untended garden.

A patch of petal and stalk was bordered by stones
Pushed unevenly into the loam:

One of the ladies on our tour
Knelt down to straighten them.

Maddie Is Dead

by Robyn Parnell

Dead. Maddie is dead.

Karen, hello. How nice to run into you.

Maddie is dead. Dead dead dead.

How are you doing? How's Michael?

Michael is alive. Maddie is dead. I am pushing the cart down the aisle while Maddie is dead. How the hell fucking hell am I? Dead. Maddie is dead.

Credit or debit? Excuse me, ma'am.

Ma'am? Will that be on your credit or debit card?

She's dead.

Do you know about our special this week? You get a free car wash with every fill-up of twelve gallons or more.

Dead is dead. Fill 'er up; my daughter is dead.

* * *

Go to the closet, turn on the light. She's still dead. Chose something.

Chose anything. Dead. Maddie is dead.

"You look nice. Green has always been your color."

Maddie is dead. I look nice. Dead. Say it, god fucking fucking damn it, dead.

"I'd choose a tie to match and then we could do that couples-dress-alike-thing. But you said that anything green close to my face makes my eyes look like peeled grapes." Michael knotted a red and navy blue striped noose around his neck. "Do you remember? You actually said that, once."

Maddie is dead. I will never again say anything of consequence. Not once; not if I live one hundred lifetimes.

"Karen?" Michael placed his hand on his wife's shoulder. "Thanks for doing this. We can leave early if you like. It's just to put in an appearance."

* * *

Karen stood next to the non-alcoholic beverages table, her hands cradling a cup of punch. She raised the cup to her nose and sniffed once, twice, three times. She detected no aroma from the too-bright, neon cherry-colored liquid.

It's all dead. Maddie is dead.

She took a visual inventory of the hotel's third floor conference room, which was littered with beverage carts, hors d'oeuvres tables, no-host bars, cheese and pastry buffets, and that woman. That woman was still there: a sinuous silhouette in a black and silver sequined dress, standing drill sergeant straight in front of French doors that opened onto a balcony. That woman had been watching Karen ever since Karen and Michael arrived at the party.

A jovial waiter balancing a tray of champagne glasses on his upturned hand briskly approached the punch table. Karen averted her eyes and mouthed, "No thank you."

Maddie is dead. Dead dead dead.

Without breaking his stride the waiter dipped his chin in acknowledgment and continued his arc around the room, steering toward the couples who were laughing and chatting in front of the strawberries and chocolates table. Karen lowered her head and pretended to sip her punch. She raised her eyes to look over the rim of her cup; that woman was still staring at her. Karen took a step backwards and barely managed to suppress a gasp when she felt the table edge jam into the back of her thigh.

She's dead. Maddie is dead.

The sequined woman strode across the marble-tiled floor, her stiletto-

heeled pumps clicking a purposeful TAP-tap, TAP-tap TAP-tap. A waiter carrying a tray of drinks passed behind the woman; she turned, clicked her tongue and fluttered her hand. The waiter bustled to her side and followed her as she headed toward the punch table.

"Here." The woman held her hands out to Karen.

She's dead.

The woman's eyes never left Karen's as she gently but firmly pried Karen's fingers from around the cup of punch. She set Karen's punch on the table, took a glass of red wine from the waiter's tray and gave the glass to Karen. She took another glass of wine for herself, draped her left arm around Karen's shoulders and wordlessly steered her toward the French doors.

Dead dead dead.

The woman led Karen out onto the balcony. "My name is Mara." She spoke simple words, yet they coiled and curved like the ivy tendrils wrapped around the balcony's railing.

My name is Dead. My Maddie is dead.

The woman sipped her wine, arching her neck slightly as she swallowed. She looks like the majestic, great blue heron that hunted frogs in the creek behind our house, our old house, Karen thought. A silvery-black, great blue heron.

"My son died three years ago, November nineteenth, the week before Thanksgiving. Cerebral hemorrhage. He was eight." The woman took another sip. "It was a playground collision. Isaac ran into another boy or the boy ran into Isaac; we never found out. He collapsed on the way to the school nurse's office. He was gone by the time we got to the emergency room."

"I'm sorry." Karen gulped. "I am so, so sorry."

The woman stood on tiptoe and lifted her glass, as if she were toasting someone across the room. "Isaac had Sam's — his father's — eyes."

Karen turned around. A tall brown man in a brown suit waved to the woman, then resumed speaking with a man who stood beside him at the bar.

"Isaac had the warmest eyes you'd ever seen. Not icy; blue-gray eyes can often seem icy. He was all Sam around the eyes and forehead." The woman looked out the window, over the balcony, and traced her finger down the bridge of her nose. "But he had my nose and mouth." She leaned back against the balcony railing, arching her eyebrows at Karen. Karen turned

and backed up to the railing, and the two stood side by side, looking in on the party.

"When Isaac went to his first sleepover Sam and I chided ourselves for being such wimps. It was only one night; how could we miss him so much? Then Sam reminded me that anytime our son was gone we could simply look at each other, and between the two of us there would be Isaac, looking back at us."

A faint breeze wafted across the balcony. The woman lifted her wineglass to her mouth. "Sam and I haven't made love in over two years."

Karen downed her wine in three gulps. It was young, tart and tannic, and sucked the moisture from her tongue.

"Where is yours?" the woman asked.

"I don't see...." Karen looked furtively around the room. "There." She spotted Michael in the far right corner of the room, standing by a large potted palm tree. He was holding a plate full of canapés and talking with his boss.

"It just makes it worse," Karen heard herself say.

"When you try to tell?"

Karen nodded. "But there's nothing

"If I can't say it, then there's nothing."

else. If I can't say it, then there's nothing. 'What's on your mind; how was your day; what do you want to do tonight....'"

Nights of playful, puppy-passion; Michael spooning his glistening, hard body around her legs, nibbling on her stomach, gurgling and cooing. Please oh pleasy-please, my Karey-warey, can we make a baby? Please oh please oh please? Just one widdle baby for Mikey-wikey.

"My daughter is dead. My Maddie. She was four."

"Yes."

"We named her Madeline, like the little girl in the books."

"Ah," the woman murmured. "'In an old house in Paris, covered with vines, lived twelve little girls in two straight lines.'"

"She was at a birthday party for a boy, a boy in the old neighborhood. We don't live there anymore. I don't remember moving, but we did. I woke up one day, not that long ago, and we'd moved to a new house. Michael said we had to move."

"That was probably a wise decision."

"She choked on a balloon. They think she was trying to blow it up and inhaled it instead. She'd gone to another room, by herself, when the boy started to open his presents. Maddie didn't like crowds and loud noises. She was blue when the boy's father found her.

"And now she's dead. Now she'll always be dead."

"Yes," the woman said. "She will."

"They're wrong," Karen muttered. "They're all wrong and it's not true. If you name it, if you say it out loud, it will not go away."

Karen set her wine glass on the balcony railing. "Maddie loved worms, loved to dig in our garden. She made dirt igloos for the worms. She smelled like what was always underneath her fingernails: little wiggly creatures and dirt and compost. She smelled like a world growing."

"Mmmm." The woman tilted her head back and inhaled deeply.

"Will it get better?" Karen asked.

"How long has it been?"

"Seven months."

"Not yet. It will get worse, then different. It will never be better, but it will be different. And different is...better. Better than worse." The woman drained her remaining wine in one silent swig. "For two and a half years the word 'heal' was used, to my face. The ignorant do not intend cruelty; still, there it is." She dangled the empty glass behind her, as if she were considering dropping it into the shrubs below the balcony. "Then when I was finally starting to recognize who stared back from the mirror, the scars would open up again, open and oozing. I had to apply a compress; wrap it up."

"What do you see now?" Karen asked.

"Everyone else stopped seeing the bandages...it must have been over a year ago. They're flesh-colored, you see. My mistake, I suppose, in trying to hide them. What do I see now?"

Karen was startled by the woman's laughter.

"Me? I see an immense, fading scab. With the occasional dab of pus around the edges." The woman laughed again and lifted her hand to her throat. Her fingers lightly caressed her chin; short, perfectly manicured nails shone with pearly, translucent nail polish, and a gnarl of needle-thin, blue veins snaked across the back of the woman's hand underneath lightly-freckled, bone china white skin.

Karen looked at the exquisitely

chiseled face, into dark eyes shimmering in fevered sockets. She tried to imagine a pale secretion oozing from a corner of that voluptuous, fiery mouth.

"I haven't sold a painting in months." Karen felt the words trickle down the side of her own mouth, and she wiped her palm across her lips. "Not even a sketch. I'm down to one gallery that still displays my work, but last week I took down the show I had there. I can't sell those ones, not now. They won't take my new portraits, the gallery owners. They say, 'You're no cubist — where are their hands?' But I can't paint hands. I cannot draw a person's hands."

* * *

Karen eased herself down on the bed and kicked off her shoes. "There is no demonstrable proof of God," she said, massaging her toes. "But Satan, I can buy it. There is a devil. Male, of course. He invented high heels. The rest is history."

Michael lay down on the bed and folded his hands behind his head. "That's nice," he chuckled.

"Oh yes, that's nice. My feet are killing me. That's downright wonderful."

"I meant it's nice to hear you make a joke." Michael reached up and placed his hand alongside the zipper on the back of Karen's dress.

"I met someone, at the party." Karen leaned back, testing her weight against Michael's fingers. "Her husband's name is Sam, do you know him?"

"Sam? Don't recognize it. He could be in accounting, or sales. What was her name?"

"Their son Isaac died three years ago. I can't remember if she told me her name."

Michael sat up. "What did you talk about?"

"What do you think we talked about?"

Michael fingered the edge of the bedspread.

"Clover honey; remember the orange-scented kind we got at the farmer's market? Sweet clover honey dripping, down the edge of a serrated knife — that's what her voice made me think of." Karen shook her head. "I don't know what she said. She didn't say memories heal.... She didn't say it will get better."

"But it will." Michael's voice was flat and spongy. "It has to, I promise."

"Maddie is dead, Michael. For as long as we live, she'll be dead."

Michael shut his eyes and rubbed his temples.

"Maddie is dead. Every morning when I wake up, she dies."

"Don't," he moaned. "Don't you think I know?"

"Every day, Michael. Every single, fucking-hell day. Maddie is dead. No one ever says it, have you noticed? 'Poor Karen and Michael. They lost their daughter, you know.' Maddie is dead; we never lost her. We knew exactly where she was."

"It was an accident," Michael said.

"You're not supposed to hate a child, anyone's child, but this is necessary. I knew I would hate that boy, even before Maddie died." Karen pulled her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around her ankles. "He had greedy, grasping fingers and hard eyes. When he clenched his hands he made a bully's fat fists. Snotty nose, fat teeth and did you ever notice his eyes? He had bully eyes. The other kids at the party must have been from his daycare; none of the neighborhood kids would play with him. I felt sorry for his father, the night he brought the invitation over. I could tell he'd been making the rounds and no one had said yes. Didn't you wonder why I told Maddie she should go? It was just to be nice. Know what else I told her? I told her if it got too loud she could slip away to a quiet spot and find some way to amuse herself."

"No, oh no." Michael rolled over onto his stomach. He curled himself around Karen's feet and rubbed his nose against her ankles. "An accident," Michael said. "Just a tragic, freak accident.'"

"I believe in freaks," Karen said. "And tragedy; I believe in tragedy. But not accidents. Maddie is dead."

Michael pulled away from her and buried his face in a pile of laundry he'd left at the foot of the bed. "No, no...I'm sorry," he groaned. "I told the real estate agent to accept the first offer, any offer. I thought if we stayed, I'd see him on the street one day, out playing kickball in the street, like any kid, and I'd strangle him. I wouldn't be able to stop myself."

Karen closed her eyes and held her breath and began to count. When she could count no longer, she inhaled, opened her eyes and looked down at her husband. "Stay there." She pressed her lips to the back of his knee. "Right there; don't move." She darted across the room and removed a sketchpad and a small box from the chest of drawers by the closet.

"Just like that; yes...." Karen sat down on the bed beside her husband and touched his fingers, which were wrapped around the back of his head. Her hand moved in quick, light strokes, the pastel

chalk between her thumb and forefinger scratching and whispering across the sketchpad.

"Just like that," she sighed.

by Anca Vlasopolos

Looking the Other Way

. . . tree, great-rooted . . .

The homeless are no trees.
Like leaves, they blow or cling,
Gather darkly in unnoticed corners,
Murmur, shout out under the wind's whip.

Like leaves, they blow or cling.
To the passerby looking the other way they
Murmur, shout out under the wind's whip.
A hand like aged oak holds out for chancy alms.

To the passerby looking the other way they
Whisper darkly of the summer gone.
A hand like aged oak holds out for chancy alms.
Coins if they come are tossed from palm to palm.

Whisper darkly of the summer gone,
Tell the passerby some story of back home.
Coins if they come are tossed from palm to palm
So giver does not touch the desiccated stump.

Tell the passerby some story of back home
Stretch out the hand, the tale, far from your wreck
So giver does not touch the desiccated stump.
Then you can pile in corners with others of your kind.

Stretch out the hand, the tale, far from your wreck.
What matter sidelong glances so long as coins are tossed.
Then you can pile in corners with others of your kind,
Share the fierce fires of a hastening fall.

What matter sidelong glances so long as coins are tossed.
Gather darkly in unnoticed corners,
Share the fierce fires of a hastening fall.
The homeless are no trees.

Warming Still

this summer men pretending to own the world meet
to carve it up according to specs drawn by their puppeteers
outside mothers howl for children clobbered
hair yanked out
air made vicious with gas to make you weep

we've seen this stuff before
so many times before

the planet imperceptibly revolves its blues and greens
and pictures from the dark we only can imagine
show us smaller patches of white caps
more green
more yellow where they haven't been

on the news sharks bite and eat a few of crowds
using the oceans as pleasure pools
the news tells us how to fight the sharks
a former lobbyist now government employee
to watch the industry for which she lobbied
says we've allowed the sharks to go unhunted
for too long

a ladybug lands on your neck and bites
on your friend's hand and bites
on your sister's knee and bites
this we have not yet seen
this perhaps we should
take as a sign

A Boyhood Perhaps (No) Stranger Than Most

by John Martin

Of the childhood adventures I tend to look back on most fondly from the years that I spent in the San Francisco Bay Area, the trips that I made with my family to that most commercial of places, Fisherman's Wharf, remain some of my favorites.

Once or twice a year my father would break into his piggy bank and use the change he had saved to take us to dinner. And although we tried each of the restaurants in turn (Scoma's, the Franciscan, Alioto's), we eventually settled on Tarantino's as our return-again favorite. Back in those days all the men were still expected to wear jackets and ties in the dining room, so if you showed up without one or the other, the management would dress you accordingly before showing you to your table. No one would stand for such condescending treatment nowadays, but it was the 60's that taught us not to put up with us such behavior. Back then, people could still institute rules that treated people unfairly, and not have to justify their actions.

As transplants from Denver, the urge to get out and see everything within driving distance meant that weekends were almost always devoted to sightseeing. On any given Saturday, we might take in a ferryboat ride over to Tiburon, passing by Alcatraz and its sand-colored cell blocks, or drive down the coast to one of the old Spanish Missions, or spend a day wandering the fog-shrouded paths of Golden Gate Park. Very few of these trips required much in the way of money—an occasional lunch out, or a cheap souvenir was all that was needed to make the day special.

Our first year in the area we lived in a community called Pacifica, whose perilously steep hills afforded breathtaking views of the Pacific—that is, when they weren't enveloped in fog, which was rare. I came to know ice plant and banana slugs for the very first time climbing those hills, and days without sunshine that lasted for weeks. From the two-lane highway at the top of the hill, sirens would shriek late at night like banshees let loose from their graves, alerting us to the latest in a long string of grisly auto fatalities, the flashing red lights, crushed metal and smoke all too easy for my young imagination to picture as I lay in my bed.

Life out of doors was especially odd in that climate, similar to life on the moors in an old Sherlock Holmes mystery, and although I continued to wander the schoolyards and hillsides in search of adventure, as all young boys are wont to do, the fog cast a pall on my exploits. Or perhaps it was just my own evolving sense of

self, realizing even at that young age that I was not one of the chosen few destined for great feats of courage or strength. It is a point of transition that every young man must come to terms with eventually, and the afternoon that I spent held captive by a school bully changed me forever. Forty years later, I still look back on that experience with a mixture of shame and regret.

But it may not have just been the fog that was responsible for my feelings of anxiety. Even then, I think that the sense of discomfort I was experiencing around other people began to grow worse in those inhospitable surroundings. Often I played by myself, and though I remember the names of a few friends from those days, I look back on none with any particular fondness.

* * * * *

For every one of those trips that we made to the Wharf in search of new dining experiences, we made an equivalent number of excursions just to take in the sights—a stroll through the gift shops (anyone still remember the Sea Captain's Chest?) and bins spilling over with cheap souvenirs, or a stop into Ripley's Believe or Not to see what new wonders had been added since our last visit. A particular favorite of mine was the Wax Museum, whose decidedly un-lifelike figures (despite all claims to the contrary) became objects of great fascination for me, if only because they introduced me to the idea of realism as an aesthetic. With their full, yellow lips and glistening foreheads, the faces all looked exactly the same to me, like children all of one parent—until you entered the Chamber of Horrors, and the point of what you were seeing dramatically shifted from the familiar to the grotesque. None of the faces contorted in pain corresponded to people we'd heard of or knew, unless you counted Jean Paul Marat being stabbed in his bath by Charlotte Corday, an odd sort of addition one must suppose was included to lend the whole enterprise an air of historical authenticity. Presumably, the people buried in dirt up to their necks or hung from the rafters with hooks through their abdomens came, as did Marat, from a time when humane forms of punishment would have been as unthinkable as rehabilitation. Fortunately, we now live in far more enlightened times.

Fortunately, we now live in far more enlightened times.

And although I have always considered myself more sensitive than most, the fact that I found these atrocious displays so compelling seems as odd to me now as it must have been to my parents back then, who could not have helped but wonder what sort of man I would grow up to be.

I can't answer that question for them. Only they know what accepted definitions of normality would have

People born with a hunger for the rare and unusual, like old Mr. Ripley himself, might seem a bit strange or off-putting, at first, but in the end show themselves capable of much richer life experiences.

been tolerated back in those days. What I do know is that objects long since eradicated from the backdrop of childhood, removed in the interests of maintaining a sense decorum and common decency, such as scale models of guillotines in which the head of the prisoner actually tumbles into the basket, have since been replaced by video games in which children can learn to use grenade launchers with deadly accuracy. I have to ask: Is there really a difference?

If I had to speculate, I'd say that an inclination for the grotesque or unusual might not be evidence of an abnormal disposition so much as a healthy imagination. People born with a hunger for the rare and unusual, like old Mr. Ripley himself, might seem a bit strange or off-putting, at first, but in the end show themselves capable of much richer life experiences. Fortunately for me (I now believe), San Francisco was in the midst of a transformation, and I was in the best position of all to benefit from it.

The outward signs of this transformation, captured in phrases like "far out" and "out of sight," communicated the idea, perhaps for the very first time, that the further away a person's behavior deviated from the norm, the more it was to be admired. Referring derisively to "the establishment," people with long hair and beads tried to distance themselves from conventional thought and modes of expression, giving voice to an entirely new cultural vernacular. *Support Our Troops* casts a weak shadow alongside expressions like *Make Love Not War* and *Black Is Beautiful* and *Power to the People*.

At my young age, I remained largely oblivious to these currents of thought, or the threats they might pose to the culture at large. Of the few ideas that filtered down to me—the music of the Beatles, the allure of mind-altering drugs—people my age took them in stride, finding them no more remarkable than soldiers going to war, or the assassination of presidents.

For in its beginning stages, this thing we refer to as consciousness latches onto the events of the day, like bark surrounding the tender white pulp of a tree. These events of which I'm now thinking, no matter how unprecedented they might seem to mankind at large, can no more be regarded as strange or out of place than a heart could seem strange to the body in which it resides. This is the aspect of consciousness that every subsequent generation forgets, how the young mind passes no real judgment over the events that happen around it. It simply trusts

that all sights and events are part of this thing called life, to be learned from and incorporated into the final product. The sorting out into categories only comes later, once the mind has had a chance to process whatever has been taken in. In the mind of an adolescent, outrage or discrimination do not exist.

Thus, if a child comes of age in a culture where people question the lives they are being asked to model themselves after, those questions are bound to seep into that consciousness, forming the foundation for a certain outlook on life and its purpose. But if no such questions ever are asked, or if the events of the day are secreted away, or reported without context, then what sort of imprint can they leave? What sort of consciousness forms around emptiness?

I am grateful that I grew up in an age where people were taught to question the ideas that government and other institutions tried to foist upon them. For this is what governments always have and must do—create consensus. But if the populace is unable or unwilling to examine the motives behind that consensus—to determine whether it is driven by a belief in the dignity of human life, or simply by greed—then the people trying to establish that consensus have no reason to examine their own motives, or to decide if they serve the best interests of the democracy.

* * * * *

As I look back on the impressions I'm left with it, I see that the Bay Area was above everything else a frontier—not just a place where new houses and communities were being built (God knows the impulse to colonize and develop is still thriving and well)—but where people acquired the habit of questioning everything, and how they might learn to hold up their own lives as an example of something meaningful and ultimately more fulfilling. It's unfortunate that the 60's have become so much of a joke even to those of us who lived through them. In retrospect, they seem impossibly idealistic, and impractical, and yes, even eccentric, like a lonely old aunt. But it was also a time of heroes, of people admired not for their wealth, or success, but for the ideas that they stood for: Martin Luther King, John F. Kennedy, John Lennon.

One time I was walking near Fisherman's Wharf, on some kind of outing or other, I no longer remember, but turning my eyes from the water and the large ships tied to the pier, I looked up and there walking toward me was John Lennon and Yoko Ono, John with his arm slung over Yoko's shoulder like a young lad showing off his new girlfriend.

Fast forward then to the year that I lived in New York, when the first reports came over the radio that John had been murdered outside his apartment. Between those two events stretch the years of my own

timid development. Regrets over the way a life has been lived are common; rarer still are regrets for the potential for what might have been, for the promise of an age squandered, and lost. This is our legacy, we children of the 60's. We will probably never see the likes of it again.

by Tammy Manor

Modern Love Letter

Years ago men and women would write each other love letters
The art of the love letter is almost lost
We wrote e-mails back and forth while he was in the war
He once told me he'd saved them all
Somehow a love e-mail just isn't the same
There was once a time when I would print out e-mails from a guy
Somehow a typed note with a return path and maybe an ad at the bottom just isn't the same
I want a man to sit down with pen in hand and scrawl me a note professing his desires and innermost thoughts
Part of me wonders if that kind of romance is dead
I spent a good 20 minutes tonight erasing text messages from him
Words like "I love you" just gone at the touch of a button
Erased off the screen almost as quickly as you said them to another girl
I don't think you know the power of your words
Or perhaps you do and you don't care
Using the same words over and over to different girls
Toying with their emotions before you get bored and move on to the next
I know about four women, how many others were there?
How many times have you uttered the same words over and over?
You've got your lines down pat
Your part has been cast but the leading woman keeps changing
A week ago you told me you wanted to spend the next 70 years with me
Now you lay in the arms of yet another girl
I'm a strong person, I'll move on
I just feel sorry for all victims that lay ahead in your path
Save all your love e-mails
Copy and paste them for the next girl
This way you save time in your ADD of a love life

by Victoria Elizabeth

Downtown Detox

Found passed out on a sidewalk,
she'll dry out at downtown detox.
Two cops navigate her past
men laid out on mats and cots,
to an eight bunk-bedded room.
Three days of de-licing, quakes,
retching, and paranoid wails
will pass before she awakes,
begins her past dead shuffle
toward me and the cigarettes
I always hate to bring her.
She lag-lip grins as if we met
in a bar or someone's house,
smirks at our bond as sisters.
My unanswered hug shrivels.
She joins other drunks, tweekers,
crackheads and junkies for smokes
outside in a redlined wall-box:
Clean, yet never cleansed from the piss
and puke air of downtown detox.

The End of Invention

by Bob Mustin

Sitting in an airport at 4 a.m. in a foreign country can be surreal, but we were tired enough to make it downright hallucinatory. We'd flown from Asheville, North Carolina to Atlanta to Frankfurt to Amsterdam with excruciating waits at each stop, then immediately boarded a riverboat docked near Centraal Station. After saluting the ensign and greeting the captain and crew, we tore into the provided dinner, heard an orientation for the next day's excursions, and swooned into bed. The next morning we began an exhilarating, virtually nonstop tour of the Netherlands. Seven days later, our hurried, adrenaline-laced visit ended where it had begun, at Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport.

On four hours' sleep, we dragged our luggage to a waiting area and tried to brace ourselves for the return trip. A nearby trio of Middle Easterners had huddled and were trying to tease one another into an alert state. A small, balding man beside us tried to sleep in an uncomfortable plastic airport chair. We sought coffee and breakfast and, finding none, we slouched into a pair of those uncomfortable seats and waited.

I began a bleary people-watch — my favorite pastime in alien places. Quickly bored in the near-empty airport, my attention fell to a vertical neon sign across a brace of check-in counters, the sort I've found easy to ignore in bustling metropolises. It began scrolling a rambling message in English.

The sign had been erected to give us Yank tourists a message to take home, I supposed.

"Peace is always better than war," its fleeing red digital letters read, "nothing positive has ever been accomplished by war."

Ah. The Dutch are still angry at the U.S.'s unilateralism and overly idealistic, neocon-inspired posturing in invading Iraq. The sign had been erected to give us Yank tourists a message to take home, I supposed.

"The people aren't the problem," the message board continued, "it's the ones who want to control the people — the multinationals, the churches, the governments — they're the problem."

Huh. Someone's been reading my latest novel manuscript on the sly, about to give away the plot. If I see one mention of nationalistic European terrorists…

"Such organizations can't possibly represent the people's needs — they make arbitrary rules to entrap,

confine and diminish the human spirit."

I turned to my wife. "You see that sign?"

She glanced up, nodded, returned to her paperback.

Good. That no one else was reading the sign meant nothing. I wasn't having an exhaustion-induced vision.

"Time means change, and institutions never change," the message went on without a breath, "what does that tell us about institutions?"

By now I was mesmerized. By the message and its possible origin, but more so by the non-linearity of such an experience in a foreign airport.

"Freedom," the sign pronounced, and I sensed its keynote line looming. "Freedom is the only thing left to the people, and we must retain it at all costs. The freedom to do what we want with our bodies, with our minds, with our energy. To restrict this is the last and yet the greatest form of tyranny."

At last I was getting the gist. I was in Amsterdam. Drugs are open there. The government had sanctioned a Red Light district. Banned books could be found in dusty nooks, including those tacitly banned in the U.S. by distribution companies' exclusion. The Dutch were multilingual, friendly, open. Ideas, art, music, poetry, styles — all modes of expression — they flow about the Netherlands like so much water through its polders.

This small, oddly energetic nation had me empathizing with French monk Gerbert and the way he described Córdoba, the then center of Spanish/Moorish culture. Art, philosophy, science, literature — these were everywhere in Córdoba, in the streets, on the people's tongues. Then a new Caliph came to power and commanded all books be burned. Within five years, Córdoba lost its civilizing force and became nothing more than a social and cultural backwater for almost two centuries.

But what had caused the Dutch, of all people, to so resolutely demand and maintain such openness, even in the face of a newly installed right-wing administration? Right-wing governments have been sprouting up world-wide like spring weeds; even we rambunctious Americans, who like nothing better than a trendsetter, have bought into this growing surge of repression, even as it fosters the hyper-materialism capitalism aspires to — something the late Pope John Paul II warned the world about in his too-fatherly manner. But how did the Netherlands become the standard bearer of personal freedom?

#

I scrabbled through my backpack for notes I had taken on our manic, weeklong trip. To gain a proper feel for the Netherlands, you first have to

picture the Low Countries two millennia ago. This was a land of nearly sixteen thousand square miles reminiscent of the swamps and bayous of south Louisiana. The sandy deposits at the mouth of what was eventually known as the Zuider Zee had been left there as the last ice age receded some ten thousand years ago. The people living in this forbidding land — Frisians and Celts — fished and hunted in a relatively warm but extremely wet climate they were convinced no one else would ever want. And for a long while no one did.

Then the Romans came, pushing west of the Rhine River, seeking to control its many mouths. Eventually Roman influence waned and Germanic tribes plundered this low country, razing the Latin civilization the Romans had imposed on these people. Charlemagne's Franks followed, bringing an authoritarian form of Christianity, their influence later diluted by a last wave of Viking raiders. Feuding Duchies later divided the land, only to be subjected to Spanish invasion and the infamous Jesuit-led Inquisition. Spanish influence fled before the Protestant Reformation, something the Dutch now speak of as a new form of repression dressed in the same old papal cloth. Calvinism, the State religion, forbade Catholicism and arrowed itself deep into the personal lives of Dutch citizens.

Then the floods came. Solar disruptions, we now think, caused inordinately high tides and massive rains, nearly destroying an emerging Dutch culture. So they built dikes and canals to drain the land. Despite more modern protective devices, these centuries-old structures remain to display some of the world's most enduring inventiveness.

Maybe it was the eventual success of such efforts, forged by will, craft, and ingenuity, that led the Dutch to an eventual role as world power. They built ships — large, ocean traversing ships — and set sail for the edge of the world. They rounded Cape Horn and the Cape of Good Hope, and set up shop in South Africa and Indonesia.

But not without cost. Many of the Dutch were forced to sell their children to merchants and seafaring enterprises, boys conscripted as sailors for those far-reaching voyages, more than ninety percent never returning. Girls were indentured to the same merchants to take care of mundane household duties, many serving as prostitutes for returning sailors.

Despite such problematic practices, the Dutch became a world power. Other nations envied their accomplishments. England coveted their colonies. A series of Dutch and English wars resulted. During an era of perpetual European war, the French overthrew their monarch, pounding Europe with political shock waves. This led to the Napoleonic Wars. The French conquered and occupied the Low Countries,

intending them as a buffer against Russia.

Later the Netherlands suffered their own catharses of religion and government, relaxing Calvinistic doctrines and allowing Catholicism once more. The Dutch established a constitutional monarchy and parliament.

With barely time to accustom their economy and culture to the Industrial Age, the Dutch declared neutrality and non-alliance as they came under threat from Nazi Germany's National Socialism. Germany invaded anyway. World War II nearing its end, Hitler considered breaching the dikes and flooding the lowlands. Fortunately, his absorption in protecting Germany from Allied invasion prevented that. Despite some fifty thousand Dutch starving at the war's close, many surviving by eating tulip bulbs, they bent to the task of rebuilding, and their nation quickly regained its vitality.

#

As I folded my notes away, the message began again. I found myself memorizing it. The more I read it, the more I came to understand. With only two hundred years of geo-political dominance out of two thousand, constantly facing the need to protect themselves from nature's erosions and war's ravages, its small wonder the Dutch now seek a less conventional path through the minefield of human experience. Might not their focus on creative, personal pursuits, however idiosyncratic, be seen in the future, not as self-serving hedonism or political avoidance, but the last natural step of human social and personal development, the natural end of their inventive prowess? The Dutch are famously blasé regarding government and religion, certainly not without cause. They're not unhappy laggards, though; they're an industrious, friendly and curious people. They have a history of adaptation, of personal and national responsibility in the face of crises. Might not their influence once again be ascendant, in ways circumventing the waters of power politics and economics, the dams of restrictive religious institutions? Certainly those proffering that rambling message in Schiphol Airport seemed to think enough of this possibility to tout it in the most unorthodox of forums.

I found myself memorizing it. The more I read it, the more I came to understand.

by Mel C. Thompson

Excerpt # 5: Notes from Christian Bookstore Clerks

God's tackiness cannot be transcended.
I accepted Jesus Christ as my personal savior
In the back of a strip mall in Orange County.

We saved innumerable souls one night
In a steamy Safeway parking lot
Behind the Chevron gas station.

We waited for the rapture with erections
Hidden beneath thick jeans and briefs.
We made out furiously to gospel music.

Our members were smoking pot
And sternly rebuking the unrepentant.
Being born-again can be complicated.

The don't-ask-don't-tell policy
Was a hypocrisy we anticipated.
Satanic records were on the down low.

Fornication was also rampant.
Only I remained naively celibate.
But I am naive about everything.

What I want now is worldwide power
And a big temple for my headquarters.
Only mindless obedience arouses me.

My love is a depersonalized script.
Gangsters dig these basic precepts.
Buddha's gunmen line the roads.

The portal to the realms beyond
Are actually located in Disneyland.
Let this is my suburban revelation.

October Contributor Notes

Poet, composer of music and spoken-word performer, **L. Ward Abel** lives in rural Georgia, and has been widely published worldwide, including *White Pelican Review*, *The Pedestal*, *Versal (Netherlands)*, *Juked*, *OpenWide (UK) , Ink Pot, Texas Poetry Journal, Words-Myth,* others. His chapbook, *Peach Box and Verge*, is published by Little Poem Press (2003). Twenty of his poems are featured, along with an interview, in a recent print issue of *erbacce* (UK). His new book of poems, *Jonesing For Byzantium,* is published at UK Authors Press (London, 2006).

Ms. Cashin writes from Columbus, Ohio. She has published in *Acorn, Intuitions, Poetry Monthly*, and *Poetry Superhighway*, and she has work forthcoming in other journals.

Louie Crew, 70, has read his work in China, England, Hong Kong, and in over 20 venues in the United States. He's the author of 1,820 published poems and essays. He's an emeritus professor at Rutgers. He and his husband Ernest Clay live in East Orange, NJ.

Becca Deysach holds an M.S. in Environmental Writing from the University of Montana, and has facilitated classes for Prescott College, the University of Montana, Working Artists, and Write Around Portland. Her work has appeared in *Camas, Terrain, Amoskeag, Punk Planet, Nervy Girl,* and *Rogers Park Sun.*

Victoria Elizabeth is a three-time cancer survivor, an Army veteran, and a teacher. Her poems have appeared in *Main Channel Voices, Troubadour, Standing On The Ceiling, Unbearable Uncertainty, Exquisite Reaction, City Works*, *Urban Spaghetti,* and *The Mid-America Poetry Review*.

Tammy Manor is a 29 year old high school English teacher in NYC. She's been writing poetry for over a decade. She does poetry readings in various locations on Long Island and in NYC.

John Martin is a Denver, Colorado native who has been writing professionally for over twenty-five years. His work has appeared in *Bloomsbury Review* and *Bias Onus Quarterly*, with a short story entitled "Centerpiece" currently appearing in *Per Contra*, where he was short-listed for the annual short fiction prize. He is currently in search of a publisher for his first novel, *The Innkeeper's Wife*. You can reach him at WordofMouthCO@aol.com.

Tom Misuraca is a Boston native living in Los Angeles. Over eighty of his short stories have been accepted for publication in literary magazines all over the world, including *Art Times, Thema* and *Spoiled Ink*. His first original novel, *Lifestyles of the Damned*, will be published by James A. Rock later this year. He is on the Board of Directors of FirstStage L.A., who have produced two of his one-act plays, and his first full-length play, *Little Black Book: A Little Black (No, Blue!) Comedy*. And a film he co-wrote, *Happy Holidays*, is making the festival circuit this year. When he's not writing, he works as a graphic designer. Visit his website: www.kidgoth.com.

Joseph Murphy has been writing for about 10 years. *Green Sky Hill* is his first publication.

Bob Mustin has been a North Carolina Writers Network writer-in-residence at Peace College under Doris Betts' guiding hand. In the early '90s, he was the editor of a small literary journal, *The Rural Sophisticate*, based in Georgia. His work has appeared in *The Rockhurst Review*, *Elysian Fields Quarterly*, *Cooweescoowee*, *Under The Sun,* and at *thesquaretable.com, raving dove, and R.KV.R.Y* in electronic form. Another fiction piece is forthcoming in *Reflections Literary Journal,* and a nonfiction piece in *Gihon River Review.*

In a misguided attempt to summon the Muse, **Robyn Parnell** once saw the profile of the love child of Condoleeza Rice and Stephen King formed by the dust bunnies under her computer monitor. She consumed caffeinated beverages until the image faded. Her short stories have appeared in *Seattle Review, Satire*, and over seventy anthologies, magazines and journals. Her published books include a collection of her short fiction, *This Here and Now*, and her children's book, *My Closet Threw a Party*. Parnell lives and writes in Hillsboro, Oregon.

Daniel Steele writes in two languages, at the moment finds it easier to use English as spoken in California. He speaks Spanish also, as is spoken in Spain. He is a high school junior and enjoys soccer enormously, chess, art and studying French and Latin. He watches movies, having seen about 100 films that are part of the history of the art. Of course, he spends his free time reading and writing stories. He says, "I guess I can't boast I've won anything important, although I did receive a 'Magna Cum Laude' award in my Latin class."

Mel C. Thompson was first published in his high school poetry magazine at the age of 14. He is a songwriter, political activist and comic who has appeared on radio and television. His poetry and photography has been published in dozens of magazines, newspapers and underground zines.

Francine Marie Tolf's poetry and prose has appeared in over forty journals. Her first collection of poems, *Blue-flowered Sundress*, was published this year by Pudding House Press. Her second collection of poetry (Plan B Press) will be published in the spring of 2008.

Anca Vlasopolos' nonfiction novel, *The New Bedford Samurai*, appeared in 2007, as did her poetry collection, *Penguins in a Warming World*. She published a non-fiction book, *No Return Address: A Memoir of Displacement* (Columbia, 2000; recipient of the National Writer's Voice Award for creative non-Fiction; and of the Board of Governors and life achievement in arts awards from Wayne State University).