

The RightEyedDeer



Issue # 7

“A Passionate Love Of Colour”



Featured Artist: Margaret Mair

Interviews: Bob Thurber & Mandy Pannett

The RightEyed Deer

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The Right Eyed Deer

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Editor's Foreword

By Douglas Pugh

Nothing stays still, not really.

It is all about time and change. Things thrive, things evolve, and other things ... sadly or not ... do not.

Issue 7 covers a lot of change, a bunch of evolution. Our two interviewees are trying something different. Two writers – one mainly a poet, the other a short fiction specialist – who have both gone into their first novels. Bob Thurber has already launched 'Paperboy- A Dysfunctional Novel' to critical acclaim. I've read it, and though the subject matter is gritty and may make some uncomfortable, the writing itself is taut, the plot excellent. One of the best books that I've read in years.

The other writer, Mandy Pannett, is predominantly known for being a poet, though her interview reveals that there is far more to Mandy than even I expected. Her debut novella, 'The Onion Stone' , is due to launch imminently. I've had the great pleasure of reading that too. A gentler setting, academia and historical intertwining, filled with scheming humanity, often in subtle ways. Again, a book that I would strongly urge you to buy. Fabulous writing.

Our featured artist, Margaret Mair, has obviously evolved too, her life taking her from Jamaica to Europe, to Canada. They all have influences, they all add colour and tones to her palette, and you cannot help but adore the way that she not only takes them in, but expresses them so wonderfully for us all to share.

Issue Seven too set the challenge of a theme, the number seven in all it's possible forms. For some contributors this was a goad to rise to the prompt, it stimulated thought. To others it was perhaps more difficult and a constraint. This has been a subject of great debate between the editors, and I think in future we will maybe leave the subject matter completely open. Sometimes we have to try things to find our way. Even finding the wrong thing is a learning curve.

The mix that makes The RightEyedDeer too, that also comes in for much debate. It will probably change and evolve issue by issue. There is no set format for success, there are no laurels to rest on. With four editors in the team come four opinions as to where it goes, but I think we have a great team that works on consensus, that wants a recognised publication with a growing following.

Because 'The Deer' is not just the editors, not just the writers, the artists, the interviewees, nor even the readership. It is the sum of all of us and we all change. We just have to enjoy the 'now'.

So go on in, Issue Seven is waiting. Enjoy.

The Right Eyed Deer

The Law Of Sevens

By Penn Kemp

What comes in sevens? The
phases we know. Snow White
was princess till seven, then
shocked into a forest octave,

till she was ready
at fourteen to know her
work: to be Queen. So I tell

my children who are impressed
with being seven! the weight
and roundness of cells, one
cycle complete.

At five times their age
I contemplate the changing series
in the divine chaos we live.

The number seven will split us,
opening the door to the world.

But they, my dears, starting all
over again, whistle away as we
do the round of beds and plates,

one for every dwarf and each of us.

The Power Of Seven

By Bob Smith

There's a girl in my Grade Seven class I like, but I don't know how to tell her or get her attention. It's the same class I've been in since Grade One, but I'm not really part of it, if you understand the difference. I don't have an EA any longer – that's Educational Assistant – not since I stopped being a problem. That only lasted a few months, but I started off with the other kids seeing me as different and I guess I still am.

I don't know what's so magical about the number seven, but it always has been for me, not simply now because I happen to be in Grade Seven. That's just a coincidence. It didn't start when I was seven years of age either. It was long before that. Maybe they were counting out loud and I came out of my mother on the seventh push, or the first thing I saw was a red seven on a digital clock. Really superstitious people would say she was startled by seven dragons when she was carrying me, or something weird like that.

Whatever, it has always been seven, but it took my parents longer than seven days or even seven months to realize that's what it was. I would be in my car seat and get excited if we saw seven cows in a field, passed a building with seven identical windows, or there were seven trucks in a parking lot. At first they thought it was the items themselves, but eventually realized it could be anything, as long as there were seven of them.

After they realized that, meals were easy. I would eat anything, as long as there were seven; seven carrots, seven stems of broccoli, meat cut into seven pieces, didn't matter. Drinking wasn't a problem either, after they got me a cup with seven teddy bears on it.

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When I started school, I was frequently really angry because I couldn't learn what the others did, and I guess I acted crazy a lot. Mrs. Simpson, the EA, said it was because I was smart, so I was frustrated. If I had been slow, I wouldn't have been so bothered and therefore wouldn't have gotten upset like that. She was there to control me when I lost it. But once I figured out how to apply the number seven to everything, I was okay.

Like learning my numbers. I had always known seven of course, could recognize seven of anything at a quick glance. Other numbers didn't matter. It was just 'a few', 'a bunch' or 'some' to me. Once I realized there were more sevens, like seventeen, twenty-seven, or seven hundred, it got better. I realized I had to know all the other numbers in order to reach them when I was counting, so that changed things.

Last night, I was reading about math online and apparently what we use is called the base-ten system and there are other possibilities. I wonder what a base-seven system would be like?

I learned to read too. At first, I could only manage seven-letter words, and there weren't many of them in the simple books they started us on. Mrs. Simpson didn't understand how I could know words like singing or farmers but not sing or farm. Once I stopped counting the letters, which is what my brain automatically did, it was no problem. I learned to look at everything in groups of seven entire words, and then I was fine. I went from not being able to read anything but a few individual words to reading with total comprehension in a matter of days. I think maybe Mrs. Simpson started to get a little nervous around me about then, but I stopped being frustrated and angry anyway, so they assigned her to someone else.

My reading got faster and faster as I learned to transit from one group of seven words to the next almost instantaneously. I learned to apply the principle of seven to everything else too. I have an imaginary grid with seven squares I can superimpose on diagrams and maps. Or anything that is chronological like history or music appreciation can be easily studied in seven-year intervals.

There's not much I haven't been able to apply the principle of seven to. However, one of those things is people. I haven't been able to figure out a seven principle to help understand or predict human behaviour. That's why even though I'm in the class, I don't feel like I'm part of it.

One good thing about that is people stop noticing you. So I've been able to hang around Jessica and her friends without them really being aware. Fortunately, there are seven of them, so even when someone is missing, I can picture the whole group. Yesterday I heard Jessica telling them about an old rock band she discovered that she really likes. They were called Sister 7. One of them said, "Like us, seven sisters."

It must be a sign to me. After all, it isn't Mister 7. Or Sister 5. Now all I need to do is figure out some way to approach her. Maybe I can ask if she's one of the seven wonders of the world?

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Raza

By Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro

When I was seven years old
I was already astute a smart worm
a perceptive cactus
who knew at that point
that during school recess
in order to prevent
my classmates jokes about my hair
my skin color
mis bembas grandes
big lips
big hips
I must get into the bathroom
to hide
or to picnic there
to write novels
to talk to my imaginary friends
there were many
legion
to laugh
to recite poems
to practice what I was taught in class
to review the math test
to fancy the teacher
and imagined she was my girlfriend
to conclude my science project
to inhale the albuterol medicine
for my asthma attacks
to cough
to practice an invisible kiss
waiting for it to happen
I learned to see my world
stuck in that bathroom
of Colegio San Vicente Ferrer
spent many years making this place my den
my cave
my hideaway

I also knew
that once sat in class
if Mrs. Guzmán mentioned the word "Africa"
while teaching Social Studies
I was supposed to wear a stoic mask
pretend it did not happen
assume an I do not care attitude
thereby obviate the long awaited reaction
of José Manuel or Eliseo
or anyone else who joined in the harassment
there was always the cry proclaiming funny
Yolanda, you are African!
you are so black
so ugly black
so bembetrueno
big lips thunder
big hip hurricane
while the teacher tried to scold the commotion
(silent children
show respect for others
remember that God punishes without rod and no whip)
while she tried to implement bullying policies
that have not yet been invented
in the seventies
in 1977



The Real Skinny On Kissing Boys

By Wanda Morrow-Clevenger

It's somewhat embarrassing, holding a magnifying glass to an inelegant time period that you can't deny because there are too many eyewitnesses to the fiasco. Qualifying as most torturous span of existence, for me, had to be the years between ten and seventeen, when I was done orchestrating Ken and Barbie's romance yet felt terribly jealous of the relationship. When I dreamily doodled my first name paired with a boy's last name (whether the boy knew I was alive or not); and when I became obsessed with Romeo and Juliet (the 1968 Leonard Whiting and Olivia Hussey film version); I was one of few females to watch the movie that momentous afternoon who left the Marvel Theater not sobbing her lungs out. Truth be told, my brain was still replaying the balcony kiss.

This ludicrous load of hormonal hysteria has long ago settled in the dust and should be allowed to rest in peace, but I'm a neat freak from way back who likes loose ends tied up in pretty, pink ribbon. A rose by any other name is called closure.

Matching nicely with the majority of grade school girls, from sponge roller curls down to patent leather mary janes, I pranced largely unaware of life's perils while flanked by my older-sibling-posse. One sister backed down a big bruiser in the school lavatory before I fully grasped the danger looming a full head and twenty pounds above me. This incident was a mighty close call. The girl had bully written all over her. Thanks to an equally big sister, I escaped the trauma of Indian-burn and having my milk money swiped. A fate worse than hurling in the hallway and later pretending the soured-chocolate-milk-sand-covered-splat wasn't mine.

On good days three guardian angels protected, held my hand crossing the street, shooed barking dogs, scratched skeeter bites I couldn't reach, hugged my hurts. Then I'll be danged if they didn't leave me woefully abandoned, skedaddled off to Oz along an alternate brick road with nary a "so long, squirt."

Stored under lock and key, five consecutive class photos exist revealing how short and skinny I was for my age. Both my parents topped off just under average height, skewing family statistics of two tall sisters, one average, and scrawny me. Toss of DNA dice, I suppose. What doesn't kill us makes us stronger and all that Miracle Whip slathered bologna.

But to be sure, Mrs. Wilton's sixth grade class was the beginning of all things awkward, producing the first of those dreadful class pictures. To my bewilderment, within the duration of one summer vacation, fellow students grew to double their size. And it did not go unnoticed that several lucky girls had bumps under their dress bodices - the holy grail of girlhood.

By year's end, my once protective sisters now ditched the half-stick who refused to sprout. Deserted by my own kin and kind, and facing the great social unknown, I ventured fearfully forward in grueling quest for a training bra. Tragically, it was in this dark hour that I entered junior high school.

Man, if I had a dime for every time someone called me skinny. If I only knew what Twiggy knew. If I could have *then* heard my future husband say, "I don't care what you thought, you were a knockout. I'd have dated you in a heartbeat." Well, I'll spare humanity the scenario played out inside his fantasy and stay focused on the boat load of hypothetical dimes that didn't help pay for my first car.

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Thin. Thinner. Thinnest. I was terminally skinny, and I hated the word like none other. *Ugly* automatically subbed and thoroughly messed with my mind, even more than the seventh grade girl's puberty film foisted upon my unsophisticated sensibilities. Why a stiff wind didn't pick me up and blow me away, ending the misery - as had been repeatedly warned could happen if I didn't eat my green veggies - I'll never know. The thought of the whole sordid mess still makes me queasy. Though, now rocking size eight jeans and a riotous C-cup up top, not so fatally. Besides, isn't it the adorable runt of the litter everyone picks up and cuddles first, despite which they choose to take home? Nonetheless, small consolation to a former runt.

And if I might add another revelation while I'm sharing: Mom, you were wrong. High school is a popularity contest. Like the clamoring throngs pulsating the hallways of Carlinville High School, I, more than coveting life itself, more than praying for Barbi Benton boobs, wanted to be popular. And fetch a boyfriend in the bargain. Pish on classes, colleges, careers, I was there for the opposite sex - normal in at least one respect.

But quickly recognizing myself as a delicate blossom dwarfed in the swaying wild oats, my overwhelmed eyeballs rolled like skittering ball bearings across waxed floors, racing, pivoting to the next classroom, afraid to slow and focus on any male, student or teacher. I was quite the streak on my toothpick legs, slightly more than a mini-dress blur.

Doing me no favors, this jumble of contrary emotions solidified my rank of wallflower. Outgoing cheerleaders cheered their adulation, pompoms whooshing, and snagged jocks. Academics voiced passionate speeches and copped enlightened *feels* off other brainiacs. And loitering along the edges were ordinary nobodies with questionable fashion savvy and bad hair styles, paralyzed with self-loathing. But ordinary didn't cut it. Not in CHS Cavalier world. Go Cavies!

Twelfth grade began in late summer of '72. In medieval times when seniors exclusively wore class rings distinguishing their royalty, whatever lesser standing in the hierarchy one suffered up until this momentous era dissolved. Seniors were gods. Allowed, within reason, to initiate freshmen and to strut their unrestrained greatness. Yeah, even wallflowers basked a bit in senior year grandeur. Because, by gosh, it *was* senior year.

I had somehow survived American history, civics, biology (and the horror of discovering after a torturous bug collecting summer that insect collections were no longer required), speech class, and gym showering alongside so very many undressed others - a hand towel provided to discreetly cover one thing or another. Since my course schedule was fairly light due to taking tougher classes in summer school, grades were almost a non-issue. What consumed every waking moment was an antsy on-the-brink sensation. My heretofore unspectacular life had managed to catch up to something special.

As refraining as young life gets short of bunking with nuns - sorry Mom - we sisters were allowed *modest* personal expression. But as The Bible ordained a woman's hair to be her shining glory, mine had been inching along for five years while no one in particular paid heed; the shrinking violet silently sending out runners and gaining ground on those elusive wild oats.

Renegade hair was essential in this time, as crucial to survival as the right pair of bell-bottoms and rock albums. Rapunzel locks reached toward my waist in a straight summer downpour - key to the inner sanctum of fitting in. Still rail-thin, but now equipped with a veil to hide beneath when needed, I entered the school building feeling a mite taller. Lifting off my shoulders via Seals and Crofts breeze, this appearance of a more interesting facet was legitimizing.

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If only in brief flicks (unflinching boy-girl contact shimmered faintly on the horizon, brought home in the coming years by Miller High Life indulgence). And although *the high life* was all I could have hoped for, it did leave me susceptible to more than hangovers. But let's put a pin in that for now, confessions for a later date.

The first boy who brandished his lips toward mine had a full name longer than his arm. We grew up attending the same church and for a month of Sundays Pete winked at me from across the Training Union circled chairs. Training Union was essentially Sunday School at night, an important tactic in the fight against teen immorality - one lesson per week apparently not sufficient for wanton Baptist youth.

Pete's segue from point A to point B was clever, so clever it blew right past me. Stunned at first, I quickly succumbed to dizzy and dazzled. Pete was the epitome of popular, and those winks were aimed directly at me (I conducted a peripheral conformation). It was all I could do to look up from the floor, because when I did he'd wink again. If a seventeen-year-old could actually die from blushing, I'd have checked out a virgin. My all time worst worry - sorry Jesus.

Church functions were unequivocally parent approved, while parties with pagan acquaintances were scrutinized and nixed in one breath. After all, what could possibly go amiss at a chaperoned church party? On the night of my longed for Romeo and Juliet balcony moment, after TU class my chaste lips, heretofore only ravished by bed pillow, were initiated into womanhood.

Details of this ping pong party itself are as moot as those attended before and after. When the last pong pinged, however, our moral-minded group gathered outside the car of an older boy who would ferry some of us home. By scenic route. Pete was instantly behind, pushing me into the backseat, scooting me along until I was against the far door and he against me. More crammed in and shoved us closer yet. His arm coiled around my shoulders like a snake. The car exited the church parking lot, two demon eyes piercing the night, and headed straight for country.

Minutes later I found my voice. "Wow, what are those lights?"

Pete laughed. "That's Carlinville," he said. Then he kissed me.

I didn't see his smooth move in the pitch black, wasn't sure for a second or two what had happened. Then his lips pressed mine a second time. I didn't know what to do so I sat motionless, hands folded in my lap, and let him bring the magic. Those amazing seconds that come once and only once.

On Monday, I morphed back into twiggy, tongue-tied Wanda and within a week Pete stopped winking at me. Stopped kissing me too. He probably expected more than I knew how to reciprocate. The first heartache of its kind came too quickly after the first joy, leaving me utterly small again.

Pete moved on to other girls; prettier, taller, shapelier ones. Girls that weren't shy and knew how to kiss back. And I swear I don't resent him his exploits, even at my past annihilated expense. My personal journey from sixth grade to first kiss was fraught with frustration, and so many times I begged the heavens for a rewind. But same as in a Shakespearean play, fate doles out the goodies on its own timetable.

Not so long after, on a clear autumn day, sophomore Tad Leffelman slipped me the tongue in the backseat of a Mustang. If memory serves, a blue Mustang.

Seven Cities Of The Apocalypse

By Stephen Pohl

Markers on the Turkish road

Dead cities with fallen walls

Breached by earthquake and siege

Marble bones of Greece and Rome

Will and can not quit the fields

Bought with blood, built up in stone



The Right Eyed Deer

The Deer Interviews:

Bob Thurber

Bob Thurber – Multi-award winning short story writer, and now novelist, having recently released his debut novel 'Paperboy- A Dysfunctional Novel'. A writer that not only strives to write some of the best fiction going, but also struggles against a severe visual handicap. He is more than a shining example of a good writer, he is the sort of stuff that heroes are made from. The Deer is privileged to have had the chance to interview him.

The novel is gritty and biting real in many people's lives. Almost guaranteed to make you squirm in discomfort, yet you dare not let the storyline go. It is also punchy and filled with short scenes, short chapters. It is, in my humble opinion, a classic piece of work – one of the best books I have read in years.

So, there I was, just grazing away in the woods, when I happened upon a most wonderful writer down by the pool. I pinched myself (a devil to do with hooves) and shook my head, but this was no mirage, no trick of the light in a dell. I ghosted up behind the trees, closer ... closer still ...

Good morning!

This is THE Bob Thurber, isn't it? Now, do I call you Sir Bob? Sir Robert? Mr Thurber? Man alive, I don't think you have any idea how much your work is raved about at home. Pinch me, will ya

Hi Deer. Thanks for taking the time to conduct this interview. I'll pinch you if you want, but I think it's the work you're complimenting, not me. Either way, I'm glad that you and your doe have found some merit in it. And thank you both for buying and reading Paperboy.

What is your favourite kind of sandwich? And your guilty late night secret snack or tippie?

I like a nice chicken Caesar salad wrap now and then. For a late night snack I like a big bowl of cereal.

Are you a methodical writer or do you grab an idea and not let go until it's done? Do you burn the past-midnight-oil because you just can't stop when an idea bites? Or on the other hand do you schedule your time, pick a certain slot of the day that is your most creative?

I generally work regular hours, starting pretty early, going all morning and into the afternoon. With few breaks. I always begin in my notebook, just jotting down whatever thoughts I find floating in my head, and I see where that leads me, if it amounts to anything of any value. If I detect any honest emotion on the page, I try to develop that. That exercise alone might fill my day. If not, I move on to other projects, works in progress. Afternoons, I pull back, evaluate, edit, rewrite. I'm always trying to flush something out, build it up, make it better. Very rarely do I try and do any serious work at night.

At the start of your writing career, you wrote for twenty years before submitting anywhere. Why was that? And what persuaded you to actually step out into the writing world?

Those in-the-closet years were basically my apprenticeship. I seldom gave any thought to publishing, didn't attribute much value in the work, so I never submitted anything. I always thought that if and when I did get around to publishing, that I'd do so using a pseudonym. In retrospect, that was a pretty good idea. I'm somewhat of an odd duck. I prefer to keep a pretty low profile. And I'm really no good at interviews and such. I'm not shy, but I don't like to talk about the work, which I consider a separate thing. The work has to stand on its own.

Did you want a pickle with that sandwich?

No, never.

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You do have serious vision problems (something I am very aware of myself). Has this affected your work, not only physically, but also in how you interpret things or even write them?

My left eye is essentially useless, has been for years. No central vision in that one. But I've still got enough vision in my right eye to manage. Some things are more difficult than ever, but I'm constantly adjusting. A big monitor helps. And we have a nice, big TV. Reading books and printed manuscripts is more of a strain, much more than writing is. So these days I tend to do most of my editing on the computer.

Should a writer keep up with a web presence? The net seems to evolve from blogs to social networks and now into Twittering. Doesn't this just distract from that end product, just writing?

I have a website, and a blog for the novel, but that's it. I don't concern myself with the rest of it. I've had dozens of people tell me I should be on FaceBook, and the other networking sites, promoting my work. I've never looked into it though. I'm comfortable just writing, then filing the work away for a spell.

You've made the brave step of moving from the short story to the novel. Now while I think you could well be acknowledged as one of the Gods of short fiction, does that help in any way when you bring out a novel?

Writing a novel was, for me, a serious effort. I had to change some work habits, keep focusing and refocusing on the same material, gradually moving through the manuscript. But once I had the story line and all the pieces, I was able to focus on them individually, then in small groups, so in that sense it's very much like story writing, though on a much larger scope. Sort of like painting on a huge canvas when you're not used to it. Generally I work in small, tight spaces, though I have published a few dozen long, long fictions in the five to ten thousand word range. A lot more going back, retouching, with a novel.

'Paperboy' is a little controversial, not only in the content which deals with a highly dysfunctional family and some elements of abuse, but also I find in the very short chapters. Some are only a page long. Was this a deliberate structure or a throwback to short fiction?

Oh, very deliberate. The mini-chapters were structured not merely for ease of reading, but for "reader relief" from some of the harsher subjects discussed. After the publisher accepted the manuscript, I rewrote it again and added about 30,000 words. It ended up being, in book form, 260 pages with 192 chapters. It's solid work. Serious work. Not for the faint of heart. Full of dysfunction, in form, and content, though some sections are absurdly comic. But I can't imagine its presentation any other way.

Brown bread or white?

A wheat wrap, please.

Given the subject matter of 'Paperboy', how is it being received?

I really don't know, but every review I've seen has been overwhelmingly positive, which is reassuring. I guess what's been most surprising are the notes from readers. So many notes. Personal testimony. Private confessions. Many of them thanking me, calling me a hero for writing this odd book. Many compliments on the mini-chapter form. A good number of people have mentioned their reading experience was more like watching a movie or having a dream.

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Will you go back to short fiction or try more novels? Or both?

Both. Always. I find that the material pretty much dictates the length, and the form.

The born or made debate? Is a writer born or made? Or a bit of both? There's a huge market of literary MFAs and stuff out there, are they producing a lot more Tennyson's and Dante's these days? Or is it just fluff to keep the places of education filled and their coffers overflowing?

Training is absolutely essential, whether it's in an academic setting or not . No one is born with that training, or with the skills and tools they'll need, though some learn easier and quicker than others. For myself, due to personal circumstances I had to self-learn, self-train. I don't know anything about MFA programs, what they teach, or their success rate, but writers come from everywhere. Or at least they used to.

Lastly ... the best piece of writing advice that you've seen , come on, spill the beans ... everybody wants a sound bite that will make them a genius ... what is it?

Easy. Henry Miller. Many years ago I stumbled upon a book listing his commandments, which (paraphrased) go something like:

- ***Work on one thing at a time until finished***
- ***Don't be nervous. Work calmly, joyously, recklessly on whatever is in hand.***
- ***When you can't create you can work.***
- ***Cement a little every day, rather than add new material.***
- ***Don't be a draught-horse! Work with pleasure only.***
- ***Stop working when you feel like it – but go back to it the next day.***
- ***Concentrate. Narrow down. Exclude.***
- ***Forget the books you want to write.***
- ***Focus on the book you are writing.***

I don't always obey those commandments, though I'm always mindful of them. And when I find myself temporary lost, or off the track, I grasp at them.

Bob, thank you so very much for taking the time to take part in this. I personally am awed at your talent, and hope for every success with 'Paperboy' along with all your other work.

Thank you, Deer. You're very kind.

Now did you want that sandwich toasted or not?

Grilled, please.

Now, about that Sir Bob bit from the start I just happen to have a few connections, I know a doe ... who knows a Scottish Highland Stag ... who knows the Queen ... kinda ... want me to put a few words in?

Couldn't hurt. Thanks again, Deer.

Bob Thurber is widely recognised as one of the world's most accomplished short fiction writers. Truly an honour to talk to him, showing what a wonderful guy he is too. You can find him at:

<http://www.bobthurber.net/>

<http://paperboy-bobthurber.blogspot.com/>

The Right Eyed Deer

Belly Breathing

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August and miserably hot. Unbearable, sweltering heat. The air's too thick to breathe, never mind prance around in a ratty wig and face paint. I'm pacing my trailer, shirtless, in rainbow suspenders and hoop pants, thinking how there's nothing funny about polyester in sweltering jungle heat.

All week the temperature's been brutal: ninety or worse, humidity like you wouldn't believe. Today's no better, but it's a travel day, thank God, except we're not moving. Rocky has the whole caravan squeezed into a shady rest stop just inside Connecticut. I can't pull any air into my trailer. I'm pacing, dripping sweat, thinking about how I'm wasting my life, honking my nose and making balloon animals for barely more than minimum wage.

Technically it's my day off, but I'm in makeup because we've got a mall promo up the road. No way to call in sick, though I am genuinely nauseous because I can't get any air. I'm no good in this kind of heat.

All month we've been touring New England, setting up Wednesdays around midnight, tearing down Mondays before dawn. Doing all these dinky little towns named after Native Americans, places I never heard of. Not our standard route, Rocky admits. And for once he's not lying, because I checked with Lester, our egg-headed strongman, and Lester tells me it's true. We're skipping all of last year's dead spots, doing the money towns, those sweet honey pots thick with baby boomers and lots of small churches.

Lester is a former CPA, and his assessment isn't at all reassuring. His roughed out figures (using conservative estimates) show Rocky's Circle Circus to be hurting, and hurting bad. According to Lester, Rocky's cash flow is running slower than a dying man's morphine drip.

So I'm smoking dope and pacing, worrying about my future. I've got a bad case of the jitters, though I'm not seriously concerned because logic dictates you don't fire your last clown, no matter how bad the numbers get. Nevertheless, I keep waiting for something bad to happen, for the other big floppy shoe to drop: for my ex-wife's lawyers to track me down, or the state police to haul all our asses off to jail, or for one of the tigers to throw a hissy fit and rip open my jugular.

All summer our two big cats, God bless 'em, have endured the jungle heat, which genetically at least they're used to, though most of the other animals look like they need a priest. The only really good news is that the climate is helping the gate, pulling people out of their hot little houses. The snack bar is setting records; between shows, Rocky has us all taking turns running for ice.

I'm doing eight performances a day -- five with the tigers, three with the Martinez brothers (a pair of convicted felons with moustaches the size of coat hangers, and not really brothers — merely second cousins who share an unnatural interest in playing with fire). Between shows I'm getting a lousy thirty-minute break, during which I'm supposed to eat, shit, repaint my face, and then make balloon animals for anything under four feet. Except it's too hot to move. And the last thing I need in this heat is an ex-felon juggling a flaming torch past my ear. But when Rocky says work, we work.

I've got my trailer's porthole-sized window wedged open, but the place is still like a pizza oven. I'm studying the pinkish stain my wig left on my pillowcase, when the boss man himself starts pounding on my door, crashing his fists like thunder, making the walls shake. In a voice deeper than God's, he reminds me that we've got a two-hour promo in a mall parking lot two miles up the road. "Quick gig. No elephants, no torches, no Martinez Brothers. Just you and the tigers showing your teeth."

Twenty minutes later, we're moving again. We circle back to the interstate, clog the middle lane, all our trailers and trucks tailgating one another. I don't have a valid driver's license, so the kid who

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works the Dunk Tank is my designated driver. I'm rocking side to side while wrestling with my racquet-sized shoes, wishing I'd taken a dump in the woods when I had the chance, when through the front window I observe Rocky's truck veering toward an exit.

"Hey! Follow him," I shout to the kid. "Follow the tigers."

But the dumb jerk's up there with his Sony headphones capping his ears, oblivious to the real world. So with one shoe on I lurch forward and bang on the glass. He's numb, and despite his forty-dollar investment I can hear the crappy music leaking out of his head.

I kick the wall between us. I thump and bang until I get his attention, then I give him the thumbs right. He blinks and nods, his mouth spreading into a jack-o'-lantern grin that would scare the Madonna.

I know a fuck-you grin when I see one, so I squash my rubber nose up against the glass. "Eyes on the road, asshole!"

He jerks us into the exit lane. I watch until I can read the lettering on the back of Rocky's truck, then I sit on the floor and straighten my laces. I need to look sharp. Today, it's just the boss man, the tigers, and me.

It's a laugh shot, really. A swindle aimed at the helpless parents of spoiled youngsters. Entice the little ones with the clown and pull in the whole family is the scheme. So with Simba and Rambo posing on their platforms, I hand out yellow tickets through the bars, free passes good for brats twelve and under. I give 'em away by the handfuls, because they're worthless and the sooner I get done, the better. I slip extras to the pretty moms and the pathetically old, keeping my white-gloved hands well out of reach of the teenagers.

On a dare, or a whim, a maladjusted teen will snatch your gloves and run off like a spooked monkey. Sometimes they go for the wig, pulling at a thread not meant to be pulled. The worst of them, the truly angry kids, will turn the worthless passes into ammunition. So I avoid as many teenagers as I can, handing them nothing, because spit balls and other paper projectiles are a hazard when working with tigers. The older kids think it's all a game, like I'm a cartoon, like the tigers don't have real teeth.

Last month in Schenectady, before this miserable heat swept in, Simba caught a paper glider dead-center in her good eye. Poor baby nearly ripped my arm off.

My wound stretched shoulder to elbow, though it wasn't as painful as it later looked or should have been. Once I got past the shock of it, I hammed it up, high-stepping as I ran around the cage, all the while applying pressure, squeezing like a son of a bitch to stop the hemorrhage. Once I got Simba calmed down, I gave her a wet kiss right on the snout. She's half-blind, the poor thing, but she knows my smell. Then I crumbled the paper glider and put it in my mouth.

The Schenectady crowd went gaga. The fools thought it was just part of the show. They hooted and hollered, loving every minute.

Backstage, Rocky's wife, Ruthie, stitched the wound with a needle and thread. "This will definitely scar," she said, shaking her head at me.

"Sew, baby, sew," I said, smearing white-face on the bloody towel she'd fixed into a tourniquet.

She worked with such precision and skill that I wanted to watch every movement, but I simply couldn't. Instead, I bit down against the pain and admired the heart-shaped sweat stain on Ruthie's blouse. I was about ready to faint when Rocky stuck his head in to remind me, of all things, that I'm only a few weeks away from complete health benefits.

Ruthie told him to shut up. "Something this deep requires a surgeon."

Rocky and I grinned at one another, but we got caught.

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"I'm talking Frankenstein scar," Ruthie said. "Are either one of you registering that?" Rocky rubbed his arm in the exact spot where Simba had cut mine to the bone. "Hey, as long as it's not the face," I said, which is my basic philosophy on life. "Hold still," Ruthie said, making me wince.

Though she's no beauty queen, on a chilly night with a beer buzz and a hard-on, I could definitely go for Ruthie. She's headstrong, with a brain between her ears, and generally that's a hands-down no-boner for me, because I'm hypo-allergic to educated women. But if Rocky weren't around, say, if he had a massive coronary, I'd definitely take aim at getting Ruthie's cute ballerina torso butt-naked and belly-down. And I'd wager she wouldn't put up too much of a struggle.

Our stop in Providence is poorly planned. We've had no TV time, only a couple of radio spots and a small chintzy ad in the Sunday paper. The mob in the mall parking lot is substandard. Barely enough people to fill a school bus, and most of them are teenagers. But I whoop it up just the same, hopping around in the heat like I've been huffing polyurethane.

When all the tickets are disbursed, I wobble my knees like I'm so shocked and disappointed to be out of tickets that I'm going to drop dead between the tigers. Then I fall into a reverse-flip one-handed handstand, balancing on my good arm, holding my position until the crowd breaks into mild unenthusiastic applause.

Once I've got them smiling, I scuffle with the tigers, wink at the babes, twist a couple of dozen balloon animals for the kiddies, and occasionally squirt my flower through the bars at some teenager. From time to time, I turn a few heads by throwing my voice deep into the crowd. "Bravo," I say. And: "This guy's good!" And: "I'm taking the whole family to see this clown!"

At first no one knows it's me, then some punk catches on.

"It's the clown talking," he says. "Watch his throat."

What this pimply mallrat doesn't know, of course, is that ventriloquism comes from the Latin, meaning, literally, to speak from the belly. Everybody always thinks it's done in the throat, but the belly is where the air comes from. The trick is pushing the right amount of air past your vocal cords, using your stomach muscles to squeeze up the little puffs and whispers. For a while, I fake like the tigers are talking, first Rambo, who's got a metastasized cancer running all through him, then Simba, who's clawing her ass like she's spawning fleas again. I project two or three taunts at a couple of tall black kids, one of them a wiry scarecrow palming a basketball; the other, a beefy giant wearing his hat backwards. The kid with the ball strikes a Statue of Liberty pose and shoots me a look like he personally wants to bite my head off. I counter by tickling Simba's throat. When she stretches her mouth I pinch her fangs while pumping a scratchy growl up from my stomach. She roars and I roar, and Rambo, not to be outdone, throws in a pathetic little growl of his own. The whole front row retreats a step and a couple of brats in strollers scream like it's the Apocalypse.

Afterwards, minus my nose and wig, I smoke a pin-joint of primo Hawaiian in my trailer. The dope is courtesy of Lester, a sample of the batch he's trying to sell. I blow a stream of smoke at the window and watch the crowd scatter. My makeup pinches every pore, and my armpits are itching. (Heat rash? Fleas?) But all I want to do now is get high and forget I'm a clown.

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When the tarpaulin drops on the tiger's cage, the last few stragglers slink away. Yellow tickets are scattered everywhere; they cover the asphalt like water lilies dead from the heat. A few yards in front of me, a couple of chic moms with strollers linger, gabbing to one another and sucking up the sun.

One holds a cigarette scissored between her long fingers. I check her out. She's sharp -- a Scandinavian blonde with hair cropped like a Nazi helmet. She's wearing a yellow tank top several sizes too small, stone-washed cut-offs, rope sandals. A real looker. I remember her coming up to the cage and putting her hand out, her inch-long fingernails, pink as cotton candy, reaching toward me like claws. (I handed her a stack of passes so thick that had they been U.S. currency, she could have retired.)

I crouch close to the window, touch my nose to the glass, make a little clicking sound in my throat, and immediately sense a stiffness forming somewhere down in my floppy pants. I think about rapping the glass and inviting both ladies in.

Cigar, anyone?

Slouching beside Blondie, another mother, wild red hair tucked and tied off with a white ribbon, produces a thick stack of photos from her straw handbag. She's cute, too, with a broad European nose and a jaw line that suggests at least one Neanderthal shanghaied some Homo sapiens bride. Red looks delicious in her striped running shorts and V-necked T-shirt. But she's yesterday's coffee compared with Blondie, who is absolutely drop-dead bury-me-with-a-hard-on gorgeous. Heart-shaped ass. Bullet breasts. Big doll eyes. She's a full-lipped, animated talker. Even her teeth are sexy. Richly tanned arms and legs, slender and smooth.

She's tall, nervous, and thin. While she gabs she pinches her hips, lifts her chin, squares her shoulders, shakes her hair. Did I mention her long nails remind me of cotton candy?

Rocky used to have a cotton candy machine, an ancient monster with a crank-up awning. Some nights Lester and I would get that monster spinning, and we'd whip up a batch -- we'd go crazy mixing colors. The bearings were bad and the thing made a racket, so we couldn't run it long. We'd pull the spun sugar out with our bare hands and feed ourselves like monkeys.

I could eat Blondie's hair like that -- a sweet cottony handful at a time, taking pause to lick between my fingers.

Her teeth glint in the sun as the sweet smoke develops into a nice warm buzz. I put the joint to my lips, but it's dead. I fish out a cigarette, the last in the pack. It's slightly bent but smokable. I light up and practice my French inhale while I watch Blondie steer her stroller toward the mall, her ass doing a cha-cha. A real high-stepper.

When she stops to let a Porsche back out of a space, I watch the driver give her an assessing look, then peel out, tires screeching. She starts again, unfazed: a two-handed push to get going, then settles into a one-handed rumba rhythm ain't-I-adorable glide. I mock-punch the lump in my pants, saying "Down, Simba. Down, Boy!"

Let me tell you how it is: Once in a blue moon, pig-faced Priscilla, who can ride a pony one-handed through a fiery hoop, will visit my trailer and we'll play hide the weenie until one of us gets bored or tired, but other than that, clown life ain't no bed of concubines. Tugging at my waistband, I shout at my dick to please remember that it and I are sworn to a sacred oath. Forget Rocky's rules on fraternizing, I'm talking my face is painted on an egg shell hanging in the Clown Hall of Fame. I'm fully registered, and that makes blacklisting me easier than filling pie tins with whipped cream. I peel off my costume and put everything on hangers. I scrub up real good, then squeeze into jeans and a fishnet sweater, no shirt. I grab my wallet and tuck it into a side pocket where it makes a little square. From my dressing

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table, I take out this flip phone with a dead battery and shove it into my back pocket. Then I go outside to find Rocky. He's up front, checking the tarpaulin around the tiger cage, pulling on knots. The back of his shirt is soaked with sweat.

It's hot. Rocky is chewing an unlit cigar. He is short and heavysset. He works smoothly, like a prizefighter rehearsing in slow motion. His bald head is too small for his neck and chest, and he reminds me a little of Curly from the original Three Stooges, only sunburnt and a little less round. When he glimpses me out of the corner of his eye, he works his cigar and looks across the lot. Free passes are littered everywhere.

Rocky squints at the sun and says, "Do me a favor, okay?"

"What's that, boss?"

"Don't alienate the customers, okay? Not before they've become customers, okay? And don't make the little kids cry. It's not on our program."

"Gotcha, boss."

Behind the tarpaulin, the tigers are padding back and forth, antsy in the heat. Rocky wipes his hands on the front of his shirt as he comes over. The shirt has a picture of Simba and Rambo with their heads together beneath the words Circle Circus, Inc. Simba is showing teeth, but Rambo, who's dying, looks bored.

Rocky slides a hand over his scalp like he's smoothing hair. He looks me up and down. "You quitting today?"

It's our little joke, because I'm the third clown in eighteen months. And because I've never worked with animals before.

"Yeah, I'm running off to join civilization."

He snorts. "That's funny," he says. He squints toward the mall. The cars in between appear to be wavering in the unbearable heat. After a three count, he wags his head. "Something you need in there?"

"Running in for smokes. If that's alright?"

He checks the glitzy watch strapped upside down to his fat wrist. "Don't be long. We're out of here in twenty."

I crank up the wattage on my smile. I imagine screwing his wife while he's dangling from a meat hook. "Yes, sir. Twenty minutes. Gotcha, chief."

He taps his watch. "Twenty means twenty." He gives me a stern look.

"No problem," I say, shuffling a few steps toward the mall, making a point to stomp on the littered tickets like I'm stepping stones across a swamp. One adheres to my sneaker and travels with me a few steps until I shake it off. A dozen car-widths away, Rocky shouts, "Hey, clown, how's that paper cut?"

I don't turn, so he can't see me smile. "You want to see the scar."

"What scar? My wife sews as straight a line as anybody."

When I turn to see if he's smiling, he's bent over, scooping up tickets faster than a migrant worker harvesting potatoes.

The mall's AC feels good on my face. It feels wonderful for about three seconds. Then I'm suddenly chilled to the bone. Frigid air is coming at me from six directions. I rub my hands together as I walk. The mall's center is an oasis -- all ferns and dark glimmering wood in a sunken area with a pool-sized fountain surrounded by stone benches. Blondie is sitting on one, legs crossed, rocking her stroller. I circle round to get a better angle. She's got her chin propped on a hand supported by an elbow supported by a knee. She taps her foot, mechanically, like someone upstairs is working her strings. She drums her

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long fingernails against her cheek, starring at the slippery tiles. I can't figure if she's talking to herself, or to the baby.

I ride the escalator to the second level and get a sniper's view. Down in the middle of the little oasis, it's just her and the kid, who is slumped left, passed out cold. I think about what a woman who looks like that says when she talks to herself. If I looked like that I'd speak only to the mirror and snub everything else. I'd be like that queen in Snow White who was all in a tizzy when the mirror said she wasn't top banana.

I start to get hard looking down at Blondie's leg jerking and twitching like it's on a string. She doesn't look like she's going any place fast, so I duck into CVS to get cigarettes.

While I'm in line, standing behind a blue-haired woman cradling enough deodorant to slick down a football team, I try on sunglasses. There's a tiny mirror mounted on the carousel display. I look at myself at angles and think: a young Jerry Lewis with a John Lennon haircut. I like what I see, so I wear the glasses up to the register. When the teenage clerk looks at me, I snap off the tag and hand it to her. She shows me her braces, then seals her mouth with a professional cashier's smile. I get a pack of Marlboros, too. I tell her I don't need a bag. She hands me my change with the receipt, her eyes already focused on the next poor soul.

At the railing, I think it's the sunglasses playing tricks with the light, but no, Blondie is on the move, all right. With renewed vigor, she's steering a collision course for JCPenney. Fifty feet up, I stroll in the same direction, sliding the pack of Marlboros along the railing, while watching Blondie's butt bounce past a pushcart of sports memorabilia. I'm figuring Okay, JCPenney, anchor store, must have a second level. When she disappears beneath a banner that reads, "Wacky Wednesday is Discount Madness," I pick up my pace.

I find the store's entrance and cut through Ladies' wear, admiring the tight sweaters on the headless mannequins along the way. I ride the escalator down, walking a few steps ahead of the glide until I spot her; then I backpedal upward until I get my bearings. She's in Housewares, admiring a tire-sized skillet.

I stand in Jewelry, behind a young couple holding hands, but I don't take my eyes off Blondie. When she starts toward the exit, I follow. I'm less than ten feet behind her when a woman in a polka-dot dress crosses my path and takes up a position there. She's a sales clerk, with a name plate centered between her breasts that reads: Dotty. As I sidestep, Dotty asks if I'd like to open a JCPenney account.

"New customers receive an additional ten percent off all purchases for thirty days."

"Not today, Dotty," I say, brushing past her.

Twenty feet ahead, Blondie punches the button for the elevator. I stand directly behind her, admiring her bottom half.

"Pardon me," I say, "I'm doing a survey for the Monks of Mercy. By any chance, are you an unwed mother?"

She tosses her hair like she's doing a shampoo commercial, blinks.

"No, I'm not," she says. "Why?"

I look at the kid, a dirty-faced blob, sleeping and sucking air. I smile at the gold band on Blondie's ring finger. "Separated or divorced?"

She nods no, looks at the child. When she looks at me again, her eyes flicker.

I touch my chin, puckering like I'm a wizard pondering a spell. "A widow, perhaps?"

Her eyes narrow as she takes a step back. Her sweet mouth curls up and breaks into a dubious smile. "Who are you?" she says.

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One other time, at the grand opening of a mall outside Georgia, I screwed a woman in her car in broad daylight. We were parked beside a dumpster near the customer pickup of a toy store. The woman, a chrome blonde with the hard body of an athlete, not your typical weak-kneed Georgian peach, believed I was a security guard. She actually believed her car was illegally parked in a handicapped zone.

I lean closer. "Mall security, ma'am."

But it's no use -- I can't keep a straight face. I'm too high or too nervous. For a few hazy seconds, I get lost in her liquid eyes. Then I start rambling: "We've just been alerted that a battalion of terrorists are converging on the premises. They're armed with exploding babies and are apparently hell-bent on ruining a perfectly good shopping day." I nod at the kid who's dripping drool onto a pale blue shirt that reads Grandpa's Pride & Joy. "I'm afraid I'll have to check the little tyke's diaper, ma'am, just to be safe."

"Wait a second," she says, poking my arm with a pink fingernail. "You were that clown. I recognize the voice."

Which is preposterous, really, because one voice is not the other.

"Clown, ma'am?" My left leg trembles, going crazy as I take out the flip phone and snap it open like I'm Kirk signaling the Enterprise. "What clown is that, ma'am?"

"The one outside, before. In the cage. You gave me all those tickets." She tosses her hair again. Her smile bubbles and collapses. "Is this a gag?" she says.

I smile, not missing a beat. "Not so loud," I say. "And please! Don't look directly at the camera." Hitching a thumb over my shoulder, I drop my voice to a cool whisper. "Not yet, anyway. Freddie isn't quite ready for us."

She looks past me. "Freddie?" she says. Her face does a series of lifts and folds. "Oh my God," she says.

I mouth into the flip phone. "Tight zoom, Fred. This is our girl. Get ready for a take."

Then, tight-lipped, nostrils flared, I imitate electrical popping sounds and a crackly voice that answers, "Roger on that. Over."

Blondie stares at the flip phone. "I knew it," she says.

She looks down at her sleeping baby, smiles, touches her mouth, looks off. Her shoulders shudder and shake. One knee buckles slightly and she puts a hand on my chest. Steadying herself, she gives me half a smile, delicious and pink. "You scared me," she says, but her eyes, all wet and shining, say something else.

"Don't be nervous," I say. "Turn and smile." I loop an arm around her shoulder, pulling her in, nudging her left. We stand hip to hip. She's beaming. People stop to stare.

"I can't see," she says, squinting.

"You're not supposed to. Look straight ahead." I clamp the dead phone under my chin, cramping my neck. "Ready, Fred?"

Constricting my throat, I squeeze out more static. In a voice that sounds like it's underwater, I reply, "Ready when you are."

More bewildered shoppers gather round, stirring like wasps at a picnic. "They're filming a commercial," someone says. There's a chorus of oohs and ahhs. So I take off my glasses, grin at the crowd. "This will only take a moment, folks." I give Blondie a squeeze, aligning my fingers with her ribs. I place my other hand beneath her chin, steering her gaze to a spot no one else can see. "Right there," I say. "Big smile."

A few people squeeze behind us, mugging for the camera that isn't there.

"What channel will this be on?" somebody says.

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Blondie repeats the question into my ear, her tone very much like a shy starlet on the set of her first major film. Her sweet voice vibrates all through me, until she adds, "You know, so I can tell my husband."

This revelation doesn't impact as much as it should because I'm watching two men in Catholic school blazers, both carrying walkie-talkies, racing down the escalator.

"All times," I say. "It's a multichannel package."

Blondie moves her mouth as if to ask something new, but I cut her off. I press a finger to her lips.

"Okay, people," I say. "Gather 'round, folks. Let's get this right the first time. Together, on three. Circle Circus is coming to Providence!" Their dumb looks are encouraging. "Everybody ready? All together..."

As I count off, I smooth my hand up and over Blondie's ribs and give her boob a careful squeeze. Maybe she notices, maybe she doesn't. If she's so freaking happy, why isn't she home baking cookies and knitting a Christmas scarf? Why is she lollygagging at the mall, posing for fake commercials with every clown she meets? On three, everyone shouts so loud we rouse the baby. The little creature's face tightens, then expands as he unleashes a scream like a wounded monkey. Blondie pulls away and scoops the brat up, cooing and cuddling. She looks at me as if for help, then lifts its little hand and flaps a wave for the faraway camera. I grin at the security guards, one a tall Stan Laurel type, the other a square-headed buffoon with a build like Hercules. I kiss the baby on the forehead, then, tilting in farther, give Mamma a hard kiss right on the mouth. I try slipping my tongue in but she jerks away, her face suddenly pink as her fingernails. Her eyes roll, then narrow, and for half a second she looks like she's deliberating the quality of the air, deciding if it's safe to breathe. Her nostrils flare. One shoulder dips as her legs start to go.

"Somebody, please, take my baby."

She sways; both knees buckle. Some fat lady with a bad wig grabs the kid just as Blondie teeters into the arms of Hercules.

As I'm backing away, Blondie unleashes a series of short piercing screeches that could pass for B-movie scream-queen impressions, as a chorus of beefy male voices shout in my direction. I get my elbows rocking and start speed-walking like my pants are on fire. Because it's all about an exit now, all about finding a door. I push through one, then another. The heat hits me like a wall. At the far end of the lot, littered tickets are everywhere, but the landscape has changed dramatically -- no truck, no trailer. Rocky's packed up and gone.

Behind me, it's all business, all footsteps and voices, a regular stampede of crazies. And just like that time in Schenectady when Simba went a little nuts, I'm center stage, all eyes upon me, and my only concern is getting out alive.

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Diary Of A Man Who Doesn't Keep A Diary

By John Wilks

Sunday:

A drooping wing of wallpaper hangs above my couch. A patterned bat. A paper vulture pinned to the peeling, damp-dappled surface. So many things in life could be fixed with a lick of paint and stoic ignorance of their underlying faults. But I tile the floor with supplements, into which I will later fold cat litter with the same due care as crockery. The smell in the kitchen is not roast beef and Yorkshire pud, nor even last night's leftover kebab. This afternoon, I will visit the library as if visiting a ward of comatose patients and stare unshaven at spines. All those words pressed like dried flowers between closed pages are the same as mine, but in a different order.

Tuesday:

Sustenance is sought in pizza and a DVD. Deep crust filled with spicy redness. Blood heat to burn the tongue. Would that my wounds were bread and wine. A sacrament to stave starvation. Walk the plank with pirates who steal royalty from the republic of Hollywood. A million dollars to scream at blank green vistas. Like childhood make-believe when I was a cowboy of the Essex prairies. A commando spanked for getting grubby knees. An astronaut marooned in a weed-choked bombsite. A superhero whose kryptonite was soap. Now I pay others to do my imagining for me. Wash my hands with a lemon-scented serviette. Leave my meal half-eaten while those African kids mum told me about are carrion.

Monday:

Wake up with Marc Bolan. My bed a shroud in the cobweb grey of morning. The speed of light creeps slow as death across a Bergmanesque beach of grainy glaciations. And no girl of my acquaintance ever quit New York in the wide-mouthed company of amphibia, unless it was a Louis Vitton clutch as seen in 'Heat'. The semi-somnambulant stumble along the landing establishes a base camp in the bathroom. Where more intrepid souls survey the Himalayan foothills, I view the week ahead with all the oxygen starved clarity as the cloud-curtained peak of Everest. Breakfast DJ is no Sherpa. Bolan fades. The rock I must climb is not glam.

Wednesday:

I am Samson, holding the pillars of the week apart. My hair is lost, not through betrayal but male pattern baldness. My strength is the knuckle-headed grim determination to endure. Call me plodder, call me backroom boy. Who bears the weight does not dare to shrug his shoulders, for fear of what may fall around his ears. I am the mime artist in the invisible box who finds the seam in the air where the world might be prised apart. Glass double doors that crush his fingers. The weekend stops here. Keith Fordyce is dead and my Lambretta did not survive the mod revival. Look back in angst. I had more stature in the past, if only for my platform boots.

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Thursday:

*It begins on yellow Post-It notes. Hasty scribbled lines between customers. A cut-up in reverse. Pre-deconstructed thoughts already fractured. (Next please.) On the internet, hyperlinks between pages construct a meta-stream. So much is false, so much is hype, so much confessional, in churches where the walls – no more substantial than golden paper bricks – constrain a Facebook heaven where god blogs. Tag or halo? The unreliable narrator who suggests **this** connects to **this** also hates those sliding block puzzles where a picture is a stratagem. And gems are formed in strata, carbon stressed and crushed.*

Saturday:

Market and supermarket, the Nietzschean ideal of frozen food. The irradiated flesh of fruit and veg, harder to kill than harvest mice. Than honeybees. I used to browse the racks for vinyl, for screams and licks and tough romance in grooves. Black spirals. Needles are now laser beams. I scan the barcodes for two-for-one ready meals as the tannoy plays chav anthems and calls the names of children lost. My wallet is full of loyalty cards, which tells you something of my moral stance. Take home a colour chart. Ten shades of magnolia in all but name.

Friday:

Call me Barb, she says. Her lips are the razor-edged wire in no-man's-land. Her smile a serrated blade, a bayonet with which I puncture the barrage balloon of my heart. Each bottle I drain is a Molotov cocktail to throw through a poet's window. Burn upon the imperfection of a desperate day. The kindling hours stacked dry. An arsonist's dream of tinderbox and powder. My kiss ignites the bronze foundation on her brassy cheekbones. This trench warfare. This skulking in a boggy slit while the big guns pound. I wear a black poppy on my breast. Seven petals. One for each woman I love in memory. Lost in the killing fields, the minefields of dud diffidence. No medals for cool.



The Right Eyed Deer

Once Life (2)

By Maude Larke

In window-reflected night
the unbearable thrill

of honeyed tea
and the swivel chair

spins from me
the dizzying thought

that only the dog is daring.

Recompense

By Maude Larke

it must be
my eyes

they're all surprised
that I should find
yet another trophy
such a lift

but I know

Doubt

By Maude Larke

two double bends
over laboring diaphragms
as trembles communicate
but nothing else

the slipped words
enough to starch
the remaining wishes
together

let this louche gray remain
or I delve into black
and you straight into the sun

and a penumbra
loops around my throat
and its very darkness chokes

it was
a different gift

and I tell them
it's not the award
but the reward
that I got
for the award

and they start making
sly comments
about hot sex

I can't really
make them sense
that it was simply
one warm kiss

The Right Eyed Deer

A Perfect Colour On You

By Sallie Tams

We met at 7:00pm outside the fast food outlet, under the proprietary gaze of Colonel Sanders. Easier that way we agreed, than trying to find each other in a crowded pub. It made sense to me, even though I felt like a complete jerk eyeing up every woman under 30 who walked past to see if she fit the description. Jake, my so-called best mate hadn't given me much to go on.

"She's a little colourful," he said with a poker face, "yes that's the best way I can describe her - colourful. I know you two will hit it off."

It may sound corny but as soon as I saw her, I knew she was *the* one. Capital O-N-E; the ONE.

But by that time it was too late to run for it.

What can I say? I'll be 30 in a month and I'm starting to get as desperate as my mother sounds every time she asks me if I've found myself a nice girl to settle down with. Right now I think she'd settle for a not so nice one.

So here I am facing the one reason why I have never, ever gone on a blind date.

She's dressed with the coherence of the truly colour-blind or maybe she's wearing the outfit for a bet: apple green tights, yellow boxing boots and a red dress - a very short red dress or perhaps it's just an overly long shirt. I toy with the idea of telling her that green really isn't a good colour on her but if she is colour blind that would be cruel.

Of course, the whole thing could be nothing more than a bet. I half expect Jake - the bastard - to appear any minute, laughing his head off and telling me how easy it was to set me up and by the way have a look at your ugly mug all over Facebook.

I don't know which worries me more - that it might be a set-up, or maybe that it isn't.

She's sitting in front of me wearing a goofy kind of smile and slugging back *Mojitos* like she's dying of thirst. We sit outside in the pub courtyard so she can smoke - which she does with endless repetition - so I'm slapping mosquitoes feeling like I'm gonna need a transfusion before the end of the night. I tell her she's been watching *Mad Men* too much. She doesn't get the connection, pauses for a heartbeat to raise an eyebrow in my general direction and looks at me like I've just said Clinton was monogamous. Then she resumes her monologue and fails to notice I've ceased trying to turn it into a dialogue or if she does, she doesn't care.

She drains her glass - again - and looks at me, moist eyes shining with expectancy like a dog anticipating a bacon sandwich. I'm fearful for a moment she may start to drool.

"Another drink?" I ask.

"Oooh, thought you'd never ask, I'll have a *Mai Tai* this time." I can almost hear my bank balance dwindling and head back to the bar, where by this time, I'm on first name terms with the barman.

The Right Eyed Deer

When I return, the thin cotton of her dress has turned into an accordion around her hips exposing even more of expanse of green-clad thighs. Nice hips, I suppose. My mother would approve of them, child bearing hips, she'd say with emphasis. I'd call them a little broad but they have a certain appeal and I imagine playing a tune on the accordion, squeezing her hips between my hands but in my fantasy all that it does is make her talk even more between noisy gulps of *Mai Tai*. It's like a tidal wave of white noise or in her case red, yellow and green engulfing me and all I can think is how much bad Karma can one guy get? I wonder what it was I did in a past life to deserve it.

I hope I enjoyed it.

And then I see you across the courtyard and my breath catches at the sight of your beauty. My heart skips as my eyes sweep along the lines of your smooth, unblemished skin, which glows in the last rays of the setting sun.

She's still talking, jabbering ninety to the dozen through a blue grey fog surrounding her head. I catch only a few words - death metal ... feminist imperative - but my mind is filled with you. I feel your presence as if you were right beside me: inviting, enticing and calling my name. I want to reach out and touch you, feel your warmth and explore the texture of your skin. I want to caress your curves and breathe in your fragrance. I want to hold you in my hands and admire your perfection. I want to possess you.

She flicks her hair back as she stubs out a cigarette with impatient little stabs and a final twist like she's driving in a drawing pin. Her hair doesn't actually flick, it just sort of floats and falls. She's had it in one of those things that makes it look like she's stuck her fingers in a plug socket so it's all kind of crimped up. I look at you: serene, polished, so completely natural and flawless. My heart feels like it will burst with longing for you. I want to carry you away, just the two of us - alone, together, locked in an endless embrace.

She finally stops talking and informs me she is going to the "little girls room."

"Don't they have rooms for women?" I ask. She snorts and stomps off.

Do I dare take my chance whilst she's gone? Could I? Should I?

I look sheepishly around the courtyard, there's no one else here now but us. Your heady fragrance draws me to you, I'm caught between *Scylla* and *Charybdis* and yet when I reach out and touch your perfect skin, I know you are no hard place. I hold you, I caress you, breathe you in.

It's too late to turn back now. I have to have you.

My fingers close around your curves and I snatch you from the branch and sink my teeth into your firm green, delicious flesh.

Green is such a perfect good colour on you.

The Number Of Deception

By John Wilks

She sings like a sixties black
soul diva but flashes her
blonde pussy as they try to
make her go to rehab she
says fuck off and gets a new
tattoo with her lover's name
spelt wrong but her kids ain't his.

Birds grow on trees as thick as
fruit and fall into the clouds
when ripe. There is a fable
that child Jesus fashioned birds
from clay and flew them like kites
without strings. But gravity
is not fooled by religion.

Picasso bends the bull's head
back into a bicycle.
In terms of invention, which
came first: sculpture or the wheel?
Are we not the human race
rather than the human art
form? Leave Turner in his grave.

The art of unfinished lines;
where the painting stops is where
the brush begins. The colour
of the artist's unwashed hand
contaminates the canvas
and the scene is but a smeared
remnant on an oily rag.

Seven is the number of
deception, presented as
free choice. From seven cups I
drink my fill. With seven swords
I steal away. From seven
sticks I build a fence. I pay
the price with seven marked coins.

It wouldn't be a poem
without some mention of love
and a contrived metaphor
that breaks the metre, like his
broken heart, leaving stains on
his shirt sleeve, which stays unwashed
because he uses Brand X.

I cannot see daffodils
without hearing that damned verse.
Spring is spoilt by lonely clouds
and golden hosts. For god's sake
shut up and let me see things
as they are. It's fucking cold
and it looks like rain today.



The Right Eyed Deer

Seven Days In A North London Suburb

By John Wilks

cats litter gardens
 in squirrel lined avenues
 of bird spattered cars

art deco stations
 inhale commuters; exhale
 discarded Metros

hilltop Palace view:
 London rendered soft edged grey
 beneath smoggy skies

police tape tatters
 mark boundaries of bloodstains
 round flower tributes

kebab scented streets
 daubed with fresh pavement pizzas;
 knife culture cuisine

cars broadcast reggae
 from pirate radios of
 the Caribbean

exotic bush meat,
 healthy as a Big Mac, brings
 a taste of the veldt

A Passionate Love Of Colour

Margaret Mair

Margaret Mair was born in Jamaica and came to Ontario, Canada as a student. She stayed there to live, work, volunteer, and raise a family, and that was where she discovered the challenges and joys of creating art.

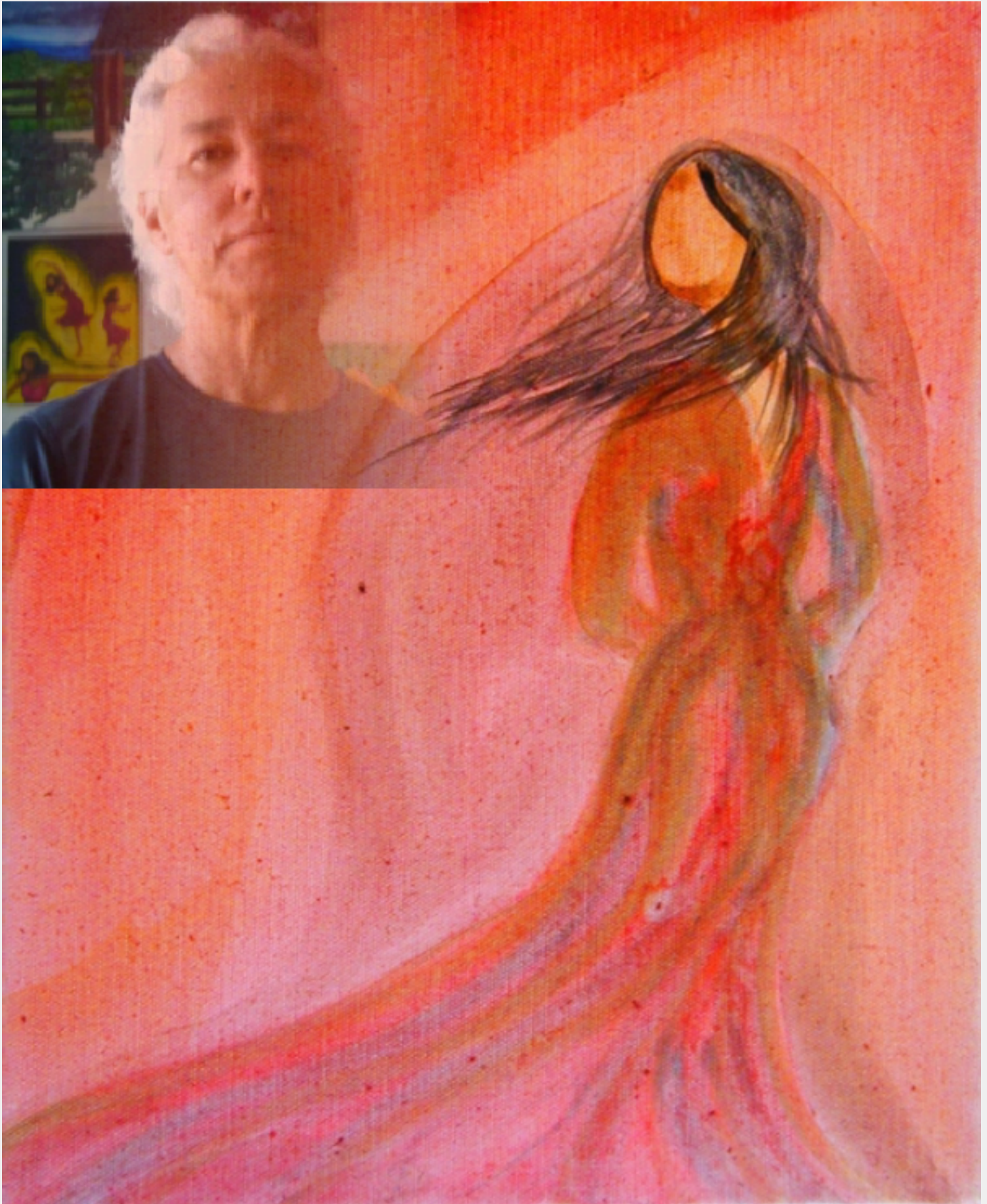
Her journey into art began simply, with drawing. After learning more about drawing and how to use colour (with live models, in a portrait class with Isabel van Zant) she joined an art group (SOYRA). There she met other artists, learned from demos and workshops and became involved in showing and selling her work through group shows, then through a co-op gallery and individual shows.

Now she is based in Nova Scotia, where she made landfall after a couple of years of cruising through some of the Atlantic islands with her husband. There she divides her time between painting, writing and helping prepare their sailboat to go cruising again.

She creates her art with love, thought and passion – and a passionate love of deep, rich colour.

Learn more about her at her website: www.mairimages.ca, or see her more recent work and share thoughts about art, painting and other interesting things at her blog: mairimages.wordpress.com.

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Value For Money

By Jon Pinnock

The garden centre was full of screaming feral children.

“Does nobody own any of these rats?” said Sheila to Harry.

“Steady on, they’re only kids,” said Harry.

“Yeah, well, if we ever have any, I’m keeping them on a lead until they’re past puberty.”

Harry gave an uneasy smile. According to Doctor Hussain, it was his low sperm count that was the problem, but he still didn’t feel he should take all the blame. Yet every time Sheila mentioned children, another knife entered his heart.

The focus of attention had shifted to an ornate wishing well that was situated in the middle of the yard. The kids were taking it turns to throw pebbles down the well, shouting out their wishes.

“I wish your trousers would fall down!” shouted one.

“I wish you’d poo your pants!” shouted another.

“I wish you’d FUCK OFF!” shouted the last. He must have been all of seven. His friends all cheered and ran around some more.

“Hey, gimme a coin,” said Sheila. “Wonder if I can get one in from here?”

“Huh?” said Harry, handing her a 50p nevertheless. He saw Sheila take aim and hurl the coin through the air into the well, muttering something under her breath as she did so. Then they watched in delight as the next child tried to throw a pebble in, overbalanced and went head-first into the water.

“How about that?” said Sheila. “That’s what I call value for money.”





Sevenling (Sipping Cherry Cola)

By Jean Brasseur

Sipping cherry cola through a straw,
listening to Leonard Cohen;
the world viewed behind big sunglasses.

Breeze-rippled pool, serene turquoise;
bored children play elsewhere
this last week of August

in no particular decade.

Sevenling (He Once Raised)

By Jean Brasseur

He once raised beautiful roses,
two daughters and considerable hell;
never once sat still under fluorescent light.

Tonight, watching him watch TV, you would never know.
He pushes around the peas and mashed potatoes,
ignoring the Jello and fat-free milk.

Just a gray man with reruns and memories.

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Seven Days, Two Lives, One Liar

By Rachel Green

Is it Friday yet? Or only Thursday? They said I could see my Lydia on Friday, poor little mite. She's only twelve. She was scared to death in 'ere, she was. All the screaming and crying and shouting of godless words. I tried to cover her ears but what can you do when it goes on all day and night?

There's all sorts in here. Women drunk on gin and worse. Thieves and pickpockets. Gypsies and charlatans and fortune tellers. Respectable folk too, them's as fallen on hard times and 'ave accrued debts. Aye, and me, who never did nothing to nobody.

Poor little mite. She wasn't very well when they took her away. Not surprising, really, what with the shit and the filth in 'ere. Nothing but a horse trough to drink from and nothing but mouldy bread to eat. That's not a diet for a child to live on. Not when she's used to fresh veggies an' eggs from the chickens and a bit o' meat when I can afford it. Not that I can very often, mind. The journey din't do her no good neither. They took us on Friday. Three days it took em to drag us from Bakewell to Derby, locked up in the back of a cart wi' every bump in the road rattlin' yer' bones. At least they gave us clean watter on the way. Then they threw us down here in the darkness wi'out even tellin' us what we was accused of.

I wonder if she'll get better vittles now? I don't know where she is. They took 'er off somewhere so she don't get infected by her mother's sin. Sin. That's a laugh, innit, what wi' me going to church every Sunday and Saint's day. She thought it were all her fault, see.

Eeh, I'm right thirsty I am. I ain't drinking out o' that trough, though. Not for a king's shillin'. Have you seen what's floatin' in there? Rats is the least o' it. I'd rather suck the piss off the floor than drink out o' that. I'm fair famished an' all. Not that I could eat wi' the stink of them in 'ere wi' me.

I thought we were free o' this yesterday when the gaoler come. He stands at the top o' the steps and calls out me' name from a sheet o' paper and I thought 'Thank the Lord they've come to let us go'. I woke Lyddie up an' we fair dashed up them stairs but we gets to the top and two men put shackles on us. 'You's off to see the magistrate' he says, an' I swear I never been so fritten in me life.

Well, we was dragged along stone passages and they shoved us into this courtroom what was full of learned gents all talking and shouting. I was in a right state, up before all them men and me stinking o' the pit they'd kept us in. I had no chance to wash me hands and face and I was covered in shit and filth worse than when my 'Enry, god rest 'is soul, made me clean out the pigs. I could 'ardly stand upright for the chains around me' wrists an' ankles.

I don't mind telling you I clasped me 'ands and prayed to God that someone there would realise I was innocent o' whatever it was I was charged with an' let me go. All them men dress in black 'ats an' gowns wouldn't do nothin' to an 'onest seamstress, surely?

Then the judge makes this funny noise an' everyone goes quiet. 'Are you Mrs. Maud Stafford of the parish of Bakewell in the High Peaks?' he says an' it all sounds so official I burst into tears. Well, 'e leans forward and tells me I bin accused o' witchcraft and wants to know if I plead guilty or not guilty and then summat about me' soul in dire peril. O' course I told him I weren't no witch, just an 'onest working woman.

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Then this other bloke stood up. Thin as a pole 'e was, like a skeleton covered in skin with a face like an 'atchet. I says to me'self 'no good can come of a face like that.'

'Me Lord,' he says, and he 'olds up this sheet of paper, 'I have here a sworn testimony that, on the night of the fifteenth of October, sixteen 'undred an' eight, Mr John McTavish, an upstanding subject of the King, awoke in his room at the house of the accused.'

I remember McTavish. Drunk as a lord all day and night an' no money to pay 'is board.

The 'atchet faced bloke goes on. 'He awoke because there was a strange light shining through the floorboards. He spied through the crack and saw Mrs Stafford and her accomplice, Lydia Stafford, engaged in suspect activities.'

Well, what a bunch o' rot. I 'ad to smile. If that's what they'd dragged us here for they could bloomin' well drag us back again. Lyddie couldn't sleep, that's all. We made some warm milk o'er the fire for her.

Anyway, the bloke makes up some lies instead an' says 'The culmination o' these nefarious deeds was the chanting of the words "O'er thick, o'er thin. Now devil to the cellar in Lunnun" whereupon they both did vanish and everything became as night again.'

The court went into an uproar wi' folk shoutin' an' yawpin and makin' such a racket as to wake the dead. The judge bangs 'is 'ammer until everyone quiets down again and 'atchet face goes on.

'So startled by what he had witnessed, Mr McTavish attempted to memorise the words, the better to tell the authorities. He realises now it was somewhat foolish to repeat the words, for a great wind blew and transported him all tattered and torn in his nightshirt to a lamp lit cellar in London. There he observed the accused and her daughter bagging up parcels of stolen silks and muslins which they had obtained by witchcraft from the shops thereabouts. When she saw him, Mrs Stafford straight away passed him some wine in a bottle, which he drank and fell into a trance.'

I shook me 'ead. What utter rot they was talkin. Truth o' the matter was 'e was drunk and spun a petty tale that nobody would believe in a month of Sundays. I thought we'd be 'ome in time for Easter after that, but 'e just smiled a bit and carried on.

'When Mr McTavish awoke, the women were gone. 'E was found by a watchman and taken before a magistrate on account of being 'idden in a cellar under suspicious circumstances. When 'Is Worship enquired about 'is clothes, 'e said 'e supposed they were still with Mrs Stafford in Derbyshire, and when asked if 'e'd walked to London in 'is nightshirt, 'e recounted the tale of bein' transported there by witchcraft.'

And then, to make 'is point, 'e puts down 'is paper an' thumps the table with his fist, makin' all the court jump in fright an' says 'Whereupon, Me Lord, a warrant was issued for the arrest of the accused an' 'er accomplice.'

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Well there was such a shoutin an' yawpin I feared for me' life right then an' there. I looked across at Lyddie an' she was all silent and withdrawn. She'd been brought up to be bright and courteous up until I 'ad Mr McTavish to stay. It took me a week to coax 'er into revealing her troubles and then an 'ole night of 'oldin' 'er while she sobbed out 'er sorry tale, certain she was to blame and would be damned because of it. It was no wonder she 'adn't bin able to sleep.

Mr McTavish, who was only ever upstanding afore the taverns opened, 'ad accosted my Lyddie an' promised 'er riches an' 'is 'and in marriage 'an than 'ad his wicked way with 'er then told 'er she'd be damned for eternity if she ever told. It's no wonder she was bloomin' withdrawn, were it?

I looked at er an' I wanted to 'old 'er in me' arms but I couldn't, see, 'cause they'd separated us. She looked as grubby as the poorest street urchin when only a week ago she was the prettiest child in Bakewell.

Then the judge turns to me an' asks me if I've got 'owt to say in me' defence. Well I bobs a curtsy whilst I collects me thoughts. 'Good Sir,' I says. 'I'm a God-fearing woman, barely scratchin' a living by makin' hats and providing lodgings, since my 'Enry died. That Mr McTavish is a scoundrel, an' 'e forced his attentions on my poor girl an' when I discovered what 'e'd done I threw 'im out. I've kept his clothes and possessions, until such time as 'e pays me what 'e owes on his lodgings.'

'That was more 'n a week ago, Sir. I ain't no witch, nor me daughter neither. Nor are we thieves or drunkards, but good 'onest folk who go to church regular. I've prayed at the 'eadless cross in the churchyard every day since, pleading wi' God to take the sin from Lydia and give 'er the peace what is any child's right.'

I would 'ave swayed 'im, too, 'cept the 'atchet bloke says 'I think we've heard enough, me Lord. The accused is clearly guilty, she even admits to praying at an 'eadless cross and slandered the name of the very man accusin' 'er. The prosecution rests.'

Then there's this fit o chucklin' through the court an' the judge bangs 'is 'ammer again and this other bloke puts a black 'ankie on the judge's 'ead.

'Mrs Maud Stafford,' 'e says, 'It is my sad duty to pass sentence upon you and your daughter. You have been judged guilty of the 'eresy of witchcraft and will be taken from this court to a place of execution, where on Friday the thirty-first of October, sixteen 'undred an' eight you will be 'anged from the neck until you are dead, and your bodies burned. May the Lord have mercy on your souls.'

An' that was when they took Lyddie away from me. I hope she's all right. Is it Thursday today, or Friday? They said I can see 'er again on Friday.

Putting My Legal Pad Straight

By George Korolog

You're nothing until somebody needs to fashion something with you. Christmas list, drawing, origami, letter, paper airplane, outline, shopping list or ransom note.

Jesus Christ, a ransom note! You have no principles, no ethics, no morality. You think you're engaged just because you can fashion panic with a razor cut?

Candidly, you're nothing without me, and you've got a lot of nerve staring back at me with that ever present "let's get this moving" look

You like me. You don't like me. You have no opinions. Always with the smart remarks, "wherefore art thou, George?" You take delight in repulsing me from your barren facade; contrary poles of a magnet.

I want to tell you to piss off. You're complicit in nothing, in everything, anything. You're non-committal and clean, perfect parallel blue lines; rectangular with attitude.

I have no birds to hang on your wires, no letters to artfully practice, aaaa, bbbb, cccc. I realize that you hate how this is going. My pen can't connect childhood memories with the Chevy dealership in a meaningful way.

I can't seem to rhyme how I love to nudge my head into my dogs neck and inhale the scent of deep popcorn. So now, I'm scribbling chaos across your face as reprisal. I'm not going to dress you up and put you on display.

You're of no help whatsoever. I may not even share what happened here, but if I do, no holds barred. We're going word processing with spell check, no apologies for you, scrawled into smithereens again.

You're going into the trash. I am almost not afraid to leave you there. Alone again.

The Right Eyed Deer

The Deer Interviews:

Mandy Pannett

Good morning, Mandy :)

First of all, Mandy, I'd like to say thank you so much for agreeing to be interviewed. You are one amazingly busy lady. Not only a highly respected poet (congratulations on those IBPC results, that is a wonderful result – first and third place in a 'poem of the year' contest across what? Nineteen poetry forums?), but now about to venture out and have a novella published too. And that's in between working and editing all The RightEyedDeer poetry stuff too. You don't have some sort of clone back-up do you?

Well a clone would be useful for householdy things but I wouldn't want it (or me) to end up like the victims in Ishiguro's 'Never Let Me Go' (A shocking and moving book – and the film wasn't bad either).

Shame, I always thought a clone might be good for foraging in the woods, hard work finding the best nibbles in the forest you know ... but then I suppose it would eat the forage and leave less for me ... So ... if we can get the preliminaries out of the way ...

What is your favourite kind of sandwich? And your guilty late night secret snack or tipple?

I've just googled 'quotes about sandwiches' to see if I could find a witty answer to this since I'm totally hopeless at repartee! I'm not bothered about sandwiches but I do like quotes so here are two I've added to my collection: 'There's nothing like unrequited love to take all the flavour out of a peanut butter sandwich' (Charlie Brown) and this one which I think anyone who offers critiques on writing might take to heart: 'Sandwich every bit of criticism between two layers of praise' (Mary Kel Ash).

How long have you been writing? Serious writing, yeah, notes to boys in class at school don't count. What inspired you to start?

I've always dabbled in writing – plays for dolls etc (boys didn't come into my rather sheltered life for quite a long time ...) I think the bottom of my wardrobe has seen 3 novels, 2 plays, umpteen short stories and a sheaf of blush-making poems now all thankfully consigned to the land of lost dreams.

I was inspired to start by writing song lyrics. I was living in South East London at the time with two small children but managed to escape once a week to an evening class (run by my dear friend Jan Land) that taught guitar for all levels of ability (impossible though that may sound) After a while eight of us called ourselves 'The Octopus' (how original is that?) and inflicted our dire singing and playing on the local folk club at every opportunity. Great fun but it wasn't for me (too many thumbs) but I started writing lyrics for the group and others and it snowballed from there. With my friend Charles Gaan who composed the music, I wrote lyrics for over 40 songs, a full length musical for children which was performed with a cast of 100 and several pieces for television including 'Play School' (Remember that? I went to the studio once to watch them making the show and saw Big Ted and Little Ted etc).

Later, when I found myself becoming absorbed in writing poems, the lessons I'd learned from lyrics remained with me – the need for conciseness and the perfect word, hard and soft sounds, the balance of rhythm etc.

The Onion Stone? Just tell us a little bit about it, how did it start, and where is it now? Is it getting ready on a launchpad yet, and how did you happen across a story like that, treading between academia and Shakespeare?

It's being typeset now and will be launched in November by Pewter Rose Press. It started when a friend of mine casually mentioned that she had been at university with

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someone who claimed to be the descendant of Shakespeare. This set me thinking. Some time later I was in a second hand bookshop in Cornwall and bought a massive tome called 'This Star of England' by Charlton Ogbourne which claimed that Edward de Vere, the Earl of Oxford, was the real author. There are dozens of other claimants out there and it is a fascinating subject. I have just contributed my own bit to the puzzle!

'The Onion Stone' is set in the late 1980s but has a sort of parallel story set in Elizabethan times. Although I have invented my own claimant, I have tried to make all the other historical characters and settings as accurate and authentic as possible. I don't see the need to alter history – it is vivid enough as it is. I did a huge amount of armchair research – which I love doing anyway.

What was your biggest 'Oh my God ...' moment in your writing career? The best surprise, or maybe even the most embarrassing? Oh go on then, both ... (wink)

I suppose the most exciting moment was the first time I won a competition. It was run by the magazine Writers' Forum and I wrote a poem with the boring title 'In the Garden Centre' It described just that through three of the seasons (I couldn't think of anything for Spring so left that out) Each verse had a different rhythm and tone. When I went to the prize giving in Birmingham I was such a novice that I didn't know I'd have to read it aloud so didn't even take a copy. Fortunately, or not, they had one there so I had to read it, unrehearsed. It's not a poem I've ever included in a collection of mine as I think now that it's more than a bit rubbishy, but I do recall it with affection.

Another highlight was when I was invited to be a guest poet at the Wessex Poetry Festival in Blandford Forum. My first collection 'Bee Purple' had just been published and David Caddy, editor of 'Tears in the Fence' gave me wonderful support and encouragement. Needless to say I was absolutely terrified on the day and my throat barely allowed more than a croak at first.

Another lovely time in my writing career was when I wrote a long sequence of poems called 'Boy's Story' set in medieval Ludlow and my then partner, now husband, Phil Gravett, (well he's still my partner of course) wrote several instrumentals to accompany the poems and we recorded it in our living room. We didn't have much technical equipment at that time so incidental noises, like the dog scratching itself, tended to get recorded as well. We had to redo the track where a motor bike went past; it didn't quite fit the medieval tone.

Did you want a pickle with that sandwich?

Oh alright then. Low fat cream cheese with avocado and mango chutney.

Writing is often a labour of love, you combine teaching with your own work plus everything else, it all eats into that precious commodity, time. How on earth do you manage it all? Do you regiment yourself with a schedule? And how does that affect your own creative urges?

No schedule although I try to do some kind of writing every day even if it's editing or critiquing or planning for a workshop. I find I write best in the early morning and if I do find I have a clear day then I ignore anything else that insists it needs to be done and try and lose myself in creative stuff.

Should a writer keep up with a web presence? The net seems to evolve from blogs to social networks and now into Twittering. Doesn't this just distract from that end product, just writing? Or do you think that it's a necessary part of a writer's repertoire?

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Well it seems to be a part of writing today although I don't like doing it but reluctantly go along with it. I'm quite enjoying working on a web site with Pewter Rose because I'm able to talk about the writing process and the background to some of my poems which is fun. I've also put in lots of quirky, historical bits to go with 'The Onion Stone' such as the difference between medieval fairies and Shakespeare's sprites.

Brown bread or white?

Brown with seeds.

So what is the next big project? A poetry collection? A novel or novella? A sequel?

I have lots of material that would make a fine poetry collection (I think) if I can only get a foot in the door of a biggish place ... In the meantime I am very happy just adding to it. If I do write another novella it will probably be something about Richard 111 and the Princes and all the mystery. I used it as the setting for 'Boy's Story' and I do have one or two theories of my own ...

Who is your literary hero or heroine and why?

My favourite prose writers are Jane Austen and Graham Greene but there are loads of others I like. The same with poetry but I particularly admire Edward Thomas for his utterly perfect clarity of vision and language and John Donne for his skilful use of extended conceits and juxtaposition of different and quirky images.

The born or made debate? Is a writer born or made? Or a bit of both? There's a huge market of literary MFAs and stuff out there, are they producing a lot more Tennysons and Dantes these days? Or is it just fluff to keep the places of education filled and their coffers overflowing?

I don't know much about this so won't pontificate except for saying it would be a shame if writers ever come out of a mould. It may sound a bit hypocritical saying I think too much emphasis is put on publishing when I'm as keen as anyone to get my stuff into print but a lot of writers have their eye on the market before they have even begun to write to their full potential. Certainly they don't seem to allow themselves the enjoyment of the writing process, the sheer joy of creativity. I said in a recent interview on Every Day Poets that I see poetry as a way of life, both inner and outer, individual and general and the older I get the more I believe it.

Lastly ... the best piece of writing advice that you've seen, or preferably used.

May I have 3, to make up for the sandwiches?

Read and enjoy as much of other people's work as you possibly can – different styles, cultures, eras etc

Don't allow yourself to be easily satisfied. You may have found your 'voice' but there are no rules to say you can't try on another and another.

Most important of all – be attentive. I think that speaks for itself.

Brilliant! Thank you very much, Mandy. It's been a delight talking to you, and your time and patience will be very much appreciated by our readers.

Now did you want that sandwich toasted or not? And where do you keep that clone?

Not.

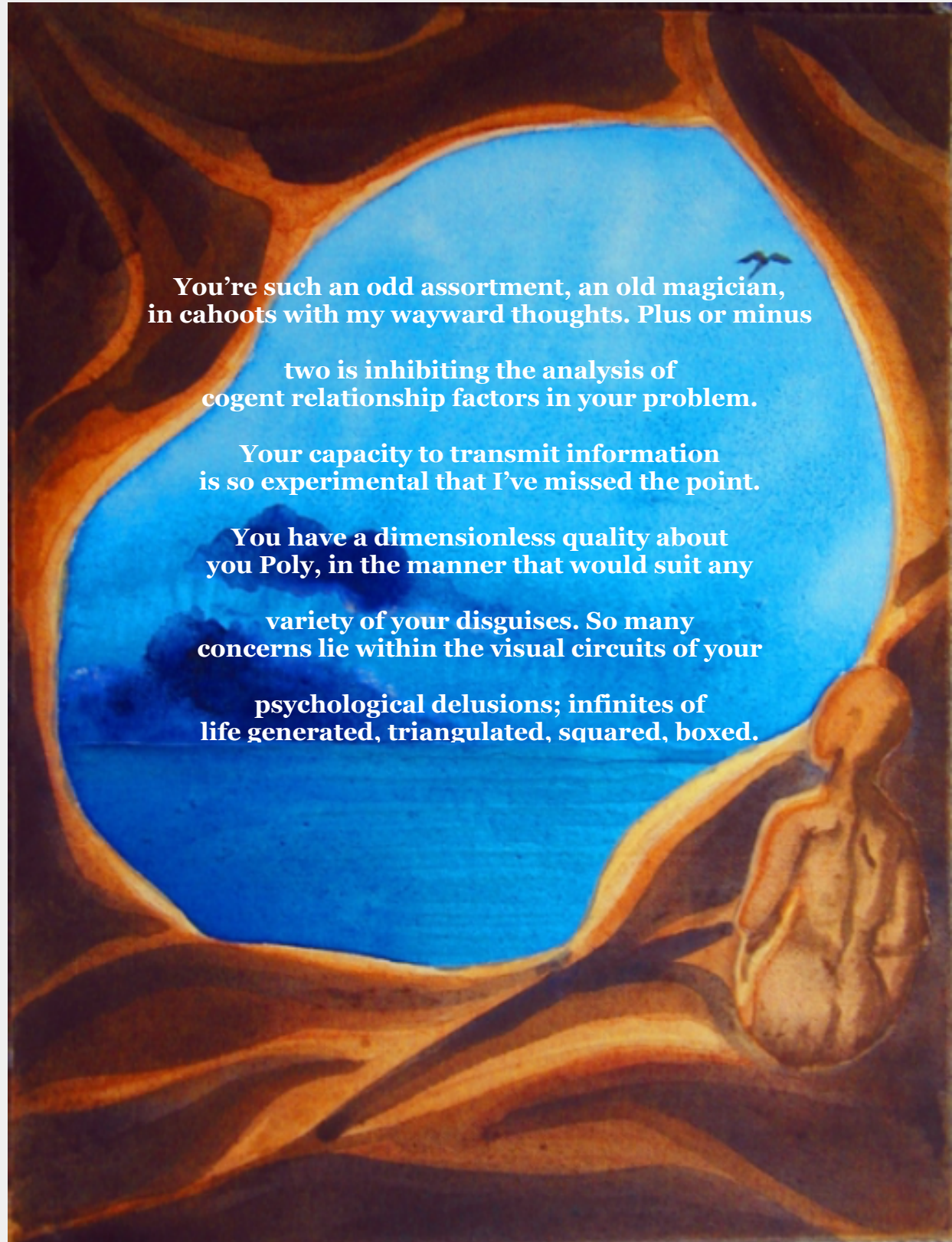
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Lots of thanks for this interview.

The Right Eyed Deer

Poly

By Eilidh Thomas



**You're such an odd assortment, an old magician,
in cahoots with my wayward thoughts. Plus or minus**

**two is inhibiting the analysis of
cogent relationship factors in your problem.**

**Your capacity to transmit information
is so experimental that I've missed the point.**

**You have a dimensionless quality about
you Poly, in the manner that would suit any**

**variety of your disguises. So many
concerns lie within the visual circuits of your**

**psychological delusions; infinities of
life generated, triangulated, squared, boxed.**

The Right Eyed Deer

What's In A Name? What's In A Face?

By Sharon Birch

I have often wondered if having a famous name makes you predestined to become famous. The two of us, Sharon Tate and I, Natalie Wood, were in the communal sitting room, the one that was always used for interviews, with its nicotine-stained walls and broken air conditioner. I wondered how it had come to this, for her and for me, and it was times like this that I hated my job.

'It was because of the sand, you see.' She looked down, puffing on a Benson's and scuffing new Reebok's around on the tatty tiled floor.

I stifled a cough. It had been a long time since I'd smoked but I had no doubt that by the end of the day, I'd be fancying one myself. For now though, it irritated the hell out of me. It wouldn't do for me to upset her though. I needed her to talk and withholding special privileges didn't make for a loose tongue. Some called it manipulation, others called it a technique. I didn't care what anyone called it, it got the job done and this was a job I wanted over as soon as possible. I hated being nice to people I disliked but it's essential in my line if I want the right result. There's something about double standards not being good for soul or something but if it has to be, so be it. I nodded, saying nothing, just hoping she'd talk, purge her own soul.

'It reminded me of him. I felt he was there with me, with us ... and I couldn't bear it.' Looking up, she blew smoke rings.

Hmm ... peace pact. I didn't nod, just kept looking at her, waiting. Silence is a killer. They always try to fill it. They all have to talk eventually.

'He looked like him. Every day there was more of his look about him.' Giving me direct eye contact, I guess she was daring me to challenge her.

I gave it back, impassive.

Making dust circles on the floor, she looked down again and said, 'Anyway, what I'm trying to say is, it isn't my fault. It was him. He made me do it.'

It was always somebody else's fault. A son, a father, a lover, anyone. Whoever, it had to be someone, it usually was. It was never their own fault.

'They said you were hard-faced,' she threw at me.

My eyes had followed her feet and I looked back up at her, jolted out of preconceived ideas. I gave her half a smile. I didn't ask who 'they' were.

'Don't say much, do ya?'

'You asked to speak to *me*. I'm here to *listen*. To *you*.'

'Huh?' Nodding her approval, she seemed to like that. She added in a whisper, 'Nobody ever listened to me much. Guess I just had to be here to get someone's attention.'

It was often the case, but I didn't tell her that. Instead, I crossed my legs, easing the pain in my calf. It was going to be a long day.

Pulling the last dregs out of the butt, she stood up. 'I don't scare you, do I?'

I waited, looking up at her before saying, 'No,' and then threw it back at her. 'Why should I be scared of you?'

'People are. I'm a murderer. A kiddie-killer, a nonce,' she said, grinding the tiny cigarette end into the pocked flooring like many before her.

I shrugged. 'I've met many murderers, many child abusers ... each have their own story to tell.'

'Just one of many then aren't I? Nothing special about me. Never was, except my dumb name, called after some Hollywood actress, dead before I was even born.'

'I can relate to that.' I nodded.

'Huh?' She looked up, surprised.

The Right Eyed Deer

'The name thing.'

Blank.

'Natalie Wood.'

No recognition.

'Hollywood actress, married to actor Robert Wagner. She drowned in a boating accident in 1981 ... big thing at the time.'

'Well then. I guess you kinda know. You musta been born before she died though?'

'Yeah, I was. But I know what you mean about your name. I'm always amazed how many people mention it when I first meet them.' Providing her with something in common, an affinity; I liked that. I knew that she'd give it all up and talk to me. Now we were joined.

Sharon Tate: drug taker, part-time dealer, sold her body, so street rumours said but she was a bit classier than that. She was working through an agency. Allegedly. From what I knew of her file, she'd had great beginnings but then fallen at fifteen, pregnant and in care. By twenty two, she'd built up a pretty portfolio of petty crime. Typical teenage angst sort of stuff ; missing from home a dozen or so times, shoplifting and so on. Flicking through the documents, there was a caution for being drunk in a public place, court appearances for minor public order (arguing with a policeman in the street), possession of cannabis x 2, a spattering of theft cautions and then convictions for the same. Possession of cocaine was followed by a not guilty for dealing and cultivating crack. All inevitable, all part of the familiar spiral of descent.

And now - Murder. She'd lost her way, lost her soul and as I knew in my line of work, the two often held hands.

'I loved him. I did. Really.'

Who? And did she? Really? I waited.

'I might not have been the perfect mother but I did love him.' Her eyes waterlogged and she scratched a worn patch on the inside of her arm.

I looked away as her shoulders fell with tears.

'Tell me ... what can I ... can I do?'

'I need to know everything,' I told her. 'Before I can tell you anything *you* need to tell *me* ... and I need the truth.'

She nodded. 'Can I get a drink? Water ...'

The cooler in the corner had no cups but it didn't matter, the stagnant dregs that were left weren't appealing. I hated these places, they stink. The public purse doesn't seem to stretch far in terms of comfort in places like this, on purpose, I guessed. I was thirsty too but sick of her interruptions. We needed to get down to it. I pressed the button to call a warder, or whatever they called them in a psychiatric hospital. I couldn't imagine they were all nurses and they certainly weren't all screws.

As the jangling of keys approached, I took a chance, 'Look Sharon, we need to get this sorted ... today. There's a lot to cover, a lot of work to be done.'

She nodded, scratching her arm again.

My suit was uncomfortable. My blouse had started to stick to my back. I could feel the sweat dripping between my cleavage. These wretched buildings were either too hot or too cold. Another psychological technique designed for maximum effect.

With a plastic beaker of water for us both, a fresh pack of fags and the obligatory digestives on a saucer, I hoped we were ready.

She began, 'I suppose you know my father?'

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I wasn't expecting that. 'Er, not really. I know *of* him of course, but I don't know him.'

'That's good then -,' she paused. 'If I believe you.'

I knew what she was thinking. A high ranking police officer for a father would give anyone cause for paranoia. His spies, his snouts, could be and probably were, everywhere.

'He disowned me.'

Not surprising.

'It was a long time ago. I had no chance, not really.'

They never do. I waited.

'Are you gonna believe me?' Scratch, scratch.

'I'm prepared to listen ... to take your case ... but you have to tell it first.' How much longer did she want? I could see that she was rough in a pretty kind of way, the way that a hard life might make you look. I scratched my nose with my manicured fingernail as she continued to wear a hole in her upper arm. A different corner, a different life ... and I shuddered.

'I tried to tell ... but ... they didn't believe me ... and he shut me up. He told them I was trouble ... a tart, a slag ... that I had loads of boyfriends. And that I took drugs. I didn't though ... well ... not then. But they believed him ... Mum believed him. He made her believe him so what could she do? And that did it. If me own Mother wouldn't hear me, who *would* believe me?'

I could see that a wayward daughter might cause some trouble for a budding police chief. All that power. Gone.

'She came to see me ... twice ... before she died. I didn't know she was ill. She came for Luke really, to see him.' Looking up, she blinked away tears. 'I think she guessed. And she never came back.'

She looked at me, eyes accusing, and said, 'You know. What I'm going to say.'

I didn't give her anything.

'You do, don't you? You know what I'm going to say.'

'You tell me,' I asked, trying to encourage her with a little nod.

'He used to take me out ... walking the dogs. That's what he told Mum. We'd go up to the sand dunes, up in the bunkers ... every weekend and the light nights when he wasn't at work. Why do you think I ran away? I hated those fuckin' walks. I fuckin' hated him!'

She lit another fag, blowing the smoke up from her jutting chin. I mustn't forget to take the lighter back. It wouldn't do to leave it. Not in the interview room. Not in the local nut house.

'He made me lie down ... *not by still water* ... or was it a bridge over troubled water ... I don't know, isn't that a song? But there were no bridges ... not for me. I had to lay down, or kneel ... or do whatever he wanted me to do ... and I *always* went home with sand in me pants. An' that's what did it. The sand in me pants.'

She started rocking, back and fro and as she did, I saw a light leave her eyes. For the first time since I met her, sympathy twanged somewhere deep inside me.

'Sharon? Sharon? You still with me?'

Nothing.

'Sharon? You were telling me about the sand.' Looking at my watch, I'd been there two hours already. I jumped as her shout resonated through the room.

'Why am I Sharon? Why? He chose it you know. Why? His fancy woman, that's why. Called me after her ... his tart.' Scratching, her arm was raw, bleeding, sore.

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Teetering minds, drifting in and out, irrational thoughts and actions; they always made me uneasy. If I had to convince a court, I'd have to grit my teeth, wear it, but they penetrated me all the same.

'Tell me about the sand in the shorts.'

'You know. You know what happened. *He raped me*. Every time he could since I was twelve. I loved him ... until then. And now I hate. Hate. *Hate him*,' she howled. Rocking back and forth, a wild woman sat wretched in front of me.

I could see it all very well. An influential policeman? A wayward daughter? Crime? Drugs? Unwanted pregnancy? Hell, he could cover an allegation like that.

'He was Luke's father.'

Wow. The catch. She'd given it up.

'I told my social worker but she did nothing. She said nobody would believe me. Not with a history like mine ... but they let me keep him, let me keep my baby, my Lukey.'

'DNA will prove it – or not,' I told her. Bread and butter of a sexual abuse allegation and easy to sort out, easy. 'But why? Why kill Luke?'

She liked giving me the eye contact, I'll give her that. I gave it straight back.

'It was a bad day but I gave in. He'd come ... to pay for me, to have sex with him. My father. My own father! He was going to buy me, pay for it, with me. I screamed at him, told him to get out. He wasn't gonna touch me ... never again. Oh, I don't know if he knew it was me he was gonna get, I don't think so ... think he just asked for a girl ... but he got me. And he wasn't 'avin' me!'

Scribing, I looked up, nodding encouragement, trying to get it all down.

'So I took Luke to the beach. He'd been begging me, so I thought maybe it would be good ... but he wouldn't leave when we had to go home. He kicked sand everywhere ... ran into the sea ... I love him ... so much ... my beautiful, beautiful boy ...'

I wished she'd stop damn rocking. And scratching her damn arm.

'It was because of the sand in my pants!' Her howls rang loud, bouncing off the thin plaster walls. 'He wouldn't shut up ... whining ... going on. I was driving ... and I could feel them ... the hot grains of sand, pin points prickling my fanny. And I hated it! It was sunny ... a real hot day ... I tried to be a good mum... let him do what other kids do but he kept going on and on ... so I parked up in the car park. Near the prom. I got in the back ... just to tell him off like, to tell him to shut up, stop whinging... but he wouldn't. His clothes were wet. He didn't want to go home ... he was mad at me ... and ... and he shouted at me. And when ... when I looked at him ... into his face ... I saw my him, saw my father, heard my father shouting at me, saw the same look in his eye ... and I felt the sand ... felt the sand and saw my father ... and then I lost it ... I strangled him. I strangled my father, shouted at him to shut up, to stop it, to stop ruining my life ... I saw my father's face ... I felt the sand in my pants ... and I killed him.'

I wonder if having a famous name makes you famous? It's times like this that I like my job. Both our names in the headlines and if I do it well and get her off, well, I've cracked it. Provocation, temporary insanity, diminished responsibility, something like that. After all, that's my job.

I need to make my own name.

The Right Eyed Deer

Leaves In December

By Michael Lee Johnson

Leaves, a few stragglers in
December, just before Christmas,
some nailed down crabby
to ground frost,
some crackled by the bite
of nasty wind tones.

Some saved from the matchstick
that failed to light.
Some saved from the rake
by a forgetful gardener.

For these few freedom dancers
left to struggle with the bitterness:
wind dancers
wind dancers
move your frigid
bodies shaking like icicles
hovering but a jiffy in sky,
kind of sympathetic to the seasons,
reluctant to permanently go,
rustic, not much time more to play.

I Know From My Bed

By Michael Lee Johnson

Sometimes I feel

like a sad sack

a worn out old man

with clown facial wrinkles

I know when I reflect

stare out my window

at the snow falling

from my bed

my back to yours

reflecting on my pain

ignoring yours

I isolate your love

lose your touch

to another

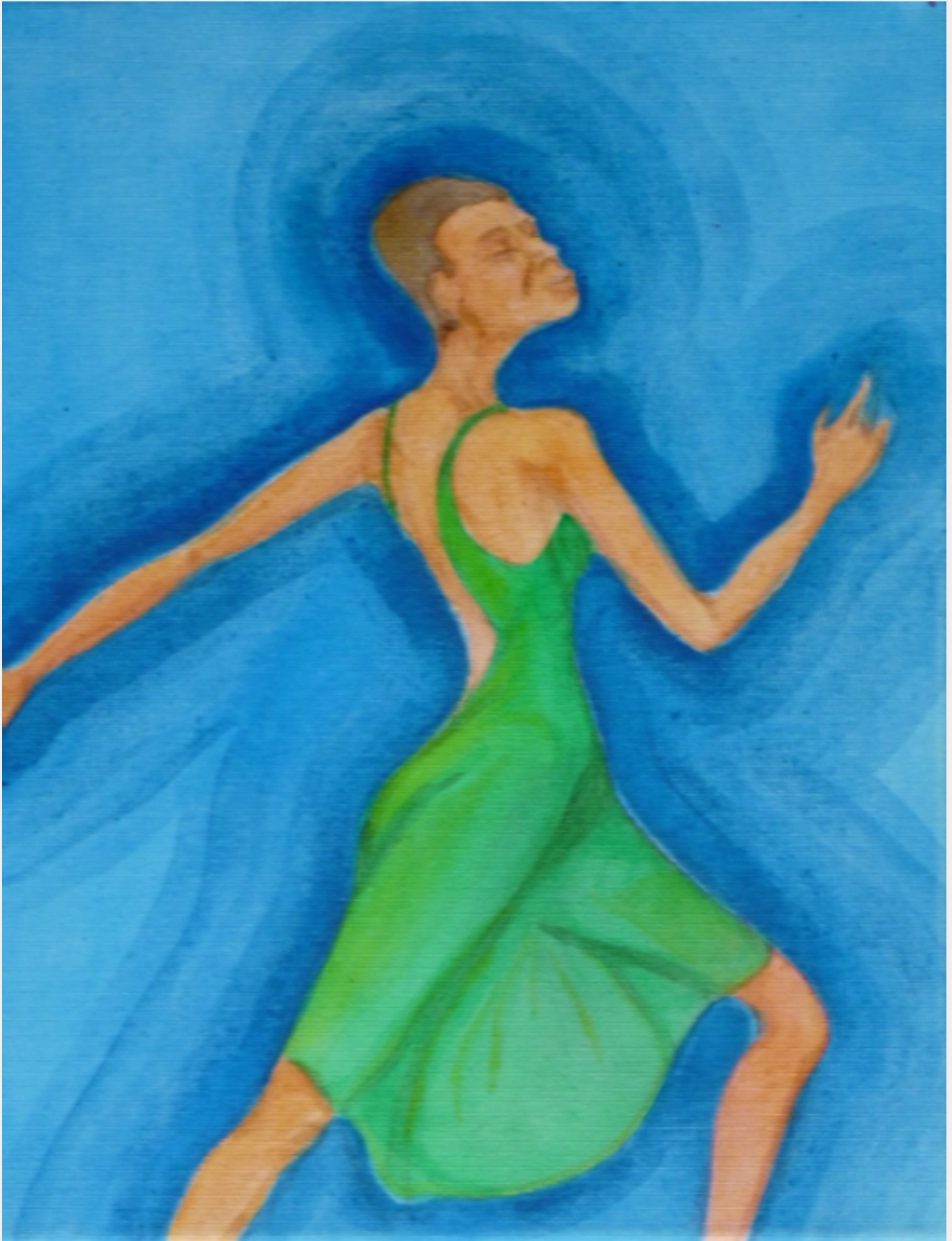
forgetting

it is our bed

not mine

that I lie in

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Author Biographies

Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro is the author of *Caparazones* (2010), the first lesbian fiction novel written in Puerto Rico, published by Editorial Egales in Spain. She won the National Institute of Puerto Rican Literature Prize in 2008, the Woman Latino Writer Award Residency from National Hispanic Culture Center in Albuquerque, New Mexico in 2011 and the PEN Club Prize on 2010 and 2006. Arroyo Pizarro is the Director of Puerto Rican writers participating in the Second Puerto Rican Word Festival attended in Old San Juan and New York on 2011.

Sharon Birch (also writes as Effie Merryll) hails from Hartlepool, England, the land of the Monkey-hangers. She escaped when she thought she might become their next victim. She now lives in the land of the Scots. Sharon spends her time trying to write fiction, reading more, browsing the net and reinventing her life. She's even been known to win the occasional competition. Just don't mention the monkey.

Jean Brasseur Jean Brasseur lives in Northern Virginia. She enjoys all types of poetry particularly that written by new and unknown poets. Jean has been writing poetry for as long as she can remember but only became serious about her craft a few years ago when impending birthdays made her realize it was now or never. Since then her work has appeared in *The Battered Suitcase*, *Orange Room Review*, *Gutter Eloquence* and others.

Rachel Green is a forty-something woman living in the wilds of Derbyshire, England. Although a novelist by trade, when she's not hammering stories and poems on the anvil of life, she can generally be found walking her three dogs, gardening or playing with sharp swords in the garden.

Michael Lee Johnson is a poet, freelance writer and small business owner of custom imprinted promotional products and apparel: www.promoman.us, from Itasca, Illinois. He is heavily influenced by: Carl Sandburg, Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, Irving Layton, Leonard Cohen, and Allen Ginsberg. Michael has been published in over 24 countries. He is also editor/publisher of five poetry sites, all open for submission, which can be found at his Web site: <http://poetryman.mysite.com>. All of his books are now available on Amazon.com: http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_ss_b?url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&field-keywords=michael+lee+johnson.

London Ontario activist poet, performer and playwright **Penn Kemp** has published twenty-five books of poetry and drama, had six plays and ten CDs of Sound Operas produced as well as several award-winning video poems. As London's inaugural Poet Laureate, she initiated and judged Poetry in Motion, <http://www.heartlondon.ca/>, and National Haiku Competition, www.homecounty.ca . As Writer-in-Residence for University of Western Ontario for 2009-10, her project was the DVD, *Luminous Entrance: a Sound Opera for Climate Change Action*, Pendas Productions. She hosts an eclectic literary show, *Gathering Voices*, archived on CHRWradio.com/talk/gatheringvoices. See <http://mytown.ca/pennletters/> , <http://www.poetrymap.ca/profile.php?PoetID=42>.

George Korolog is presently SVP of a Fortune 500 technology company in San Jose, California. He is associated with the Stanford Writers Workshop at Stanford University and has studied with Chanda Feldman and Kirsten Anderson. His work has appeared in *Willows Wept Review*, *Riverbabble*, *Earthspeak*, *The Recusant* and *Symmetry Pebbles* among others. He has a Masters Degree in Psychology and lives in Woodside, California.

Maude Larke lives in France. She has come back to creative writing after years in the university system, analyzing others' texts, and to classical music as an ardent amateur, after fifteen years of piano and voice in her youth. Publications include *Bird's Eye reView*, *Naugatuck River Review*, *Oberon*, *Cyclamens and Swords*, *riverbabble* and *Sketchbook*.

Wanda Morrow-Clevenger lives in Hettick, IL. Seventy-two pieces of her nonfiction, fiction, and poetry are scattered across numerous literary journals, magazines, quarterlies, and anthologies. Publication of her first book *This Same Small Town in Each of Us*, a collection of pre-published this and that, is forthcoming this year.

Jon Pinnock has had over a hundred stories and poems published in places both illustrious and downright insalubrious. He has also won quite a few prizes and has had work broadcast on the BBC. His novel "Mrs Darcy versus the Aliens" was published by Proxima Books in September 2011, and will be followed in 2012 by his Scott Prize-winning debut collection of short stories, "Dot(.), Dash(-)", courtesy of Salt. He blogs at www.jonathanpinnock.com and he tweets as @jonpinnock. Mrs Darcy's own much nicer website may be found at www.mrsdarcyvsthealiens.com.

Stephen Pohl writes from Baltimore. He holds a degree in Theater Arts from Towson University, has worked as a Baltimore police officer and in insurance claims investigation. His articles, poetry and stories have appeared in regional and national publications and online.

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Bob Smith (not a nom de plume, just uncreative parents – he has a brother Joe) is a Canadian writer who has published three novels and has had short stories appear in ezines, newspapers, and anthologies. Settings as diverse as children's camps from Lebanon to British Columbia and Ontario colleges from Hamilton to Haliburton have exposed him to incredibly varied people, a rich source of inspiration for his writing.

Sallie Tams lives in Stone, Staffordshire with Willie the world travelling Plott Hound. When not writing, she works as a Management Consultant. In 2009 she returned to live in England after many years in New York and Massachusetts. Winner of the 2010 Whittaker Prize for Fiction, she has since been published by Ether Books Ltd and was runner-up in the 2010 Slingink Scribbling Slam.

Eilidh Thomas writes short stories and poems and hails from Glasgow, grew up in Ontario, studied in Wales and has lived in North East Scotland for thirty five years. She has recently completed creative writing courses with The Open University. Eilidh has recent work in Leaf Books anthology *Away Too Long*; The Whittaker Prize Anthology 2010 *Body Parts and Coal Dust*; Mason's Road online literary journal; EDP; Club Eclectic: the STIRRED POeT as well as TRED6. She is a member of The Write Idea - an international writers' forum.

When asked to provide biographical details, **John Wilks** is inclined to be flippant and evasive. He is not interested in self-promotion and prefers his writing to stand by itself. In his working life, he is trained to conduct ISO Quality Audits. He therefore believes that spurious information does not add value to the finished product or improve customer satisfaction.

Amelia L. Williams, PhD, is a poet, cook, soccer mom, hiker and medical writer living intentional community in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Her recent accomplishments include hosting a World Café and selecting the name "Claret Velvet" for her D&D character (now, sadly, defunct). Her poem "Lane Shift" appeared in Issue 5 of *Hospital Drive: A Journal of Word & Image* (<http://hospitaldrive.med.virginia.edu>). She has participated in poetry readings at Writer House in Charlottesville and Rapunzel's Coffee and Books in Lovington.

The Right Eyed Deer

