



BloodLotus

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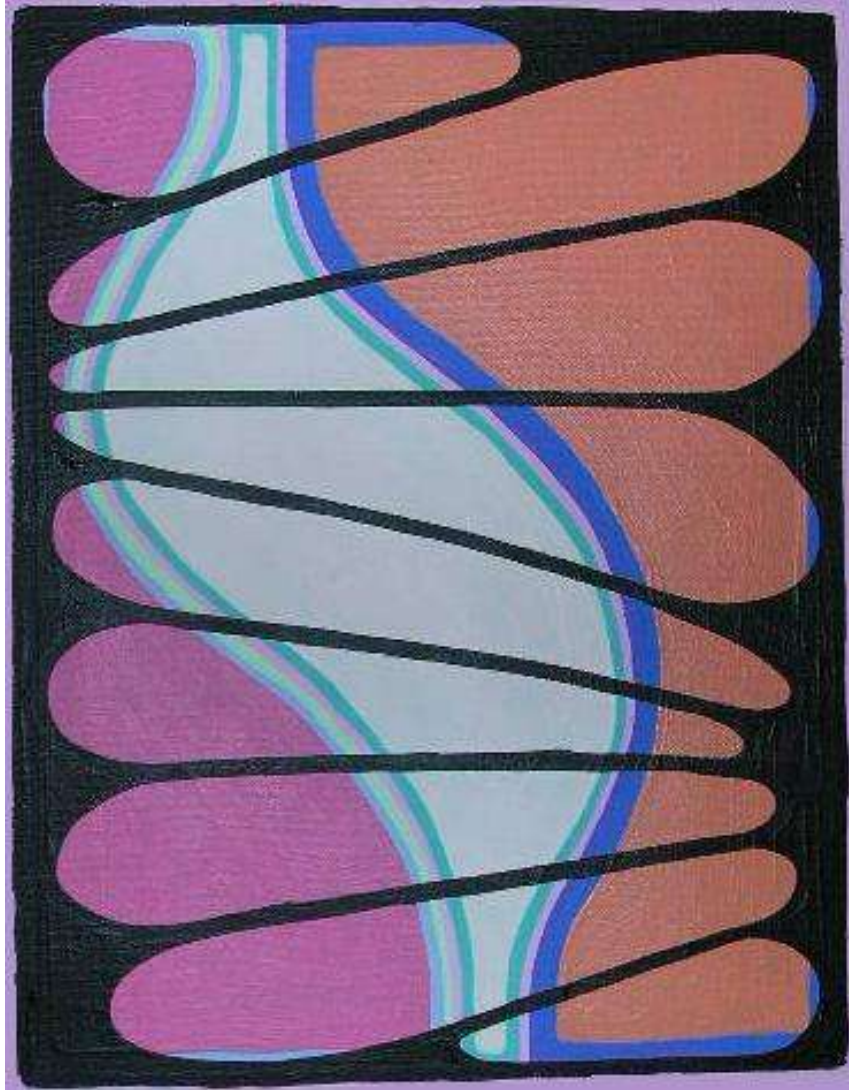
Plant

by Loring Taoka

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#5 Poetry



Abstract Painting Two

by Loring Taoka

BARE SKINNED EUREKA

when I realized that everyone has not been photographed
in the nude
except maybe as babies, but not every parent cherishes
that sweet scented skin

when I realized that everyone has not been asked
to undress, slowly
except maybe by the doctor, but in the exam room
it doesn't matter how fast or slow

when I realized that everyone has not draped their flesh
across an impromptu stage
except maybe when no one is watching, as you abandon
your insecurities with a smile

when I realized that everyone is not staring back from some
glossy 4x6 print somewhere
perhaps in a landfill by now, or set as a free download
on the web entitled easyaspie

when I realized that everyone hasn't been captured bare
in the flash of a Polaroid
I silently slipped the camera out from under the bed
and dropped it out the window

BECOMING BETWEEN

ETYMOLOGY OF VAULT: Middle English *vaute*, from Old French, from Vulgar Latin **volvita*, *volta*, from feminine of **volvitus*, arched, alteration of Latin *volūtus*, past participle of *volvere*, to roll. See **wel-**

ETYMOLOGY OF VULVA: Latin, womb, covering. See **wel-**

ENTRY: **wel-**

DEFINITION: To turn, roll; with derivatives referring to curved, enclosing objects. Derivatives include *waltz*, *willow*, *wallow*, *revolve*, *valley*, and *helix*.

*

anybody could write
sex like that

fingering between

but on the day to question how
your only answer
is to give a skeleton
key

to the vault

skirting
the issue

skimming
where it fits best

*

I know you
like to change things

to turn things if they open
of course
I'm talking about doors
how they work themselves
into frenzied oblivion
when they won't unlock

because

hidey hidey ho
there is more
than one safeproof way
through a vault

as if inside safe sleeping
on needles were a fairy tale

as if we were all able
to identify the blind spots
in there
as we shook

the pupil's dilated hand

*

it's a sad zoo behind us
sometimes

go ahead
lie (and lay hidden)

in naked little animal zeal

*

out there groaning
in the background
an unearthly glow

a wind meal

in this city of sunsets
imagine a helicopter
fucking with the wind

REFLECTION

You say, *This feels like goodbye*,
and I stay quiet, curl the sheets
in my hands so I can touch
something solid. Through the dark
I see the bicycle in the corner,
the map on the wall, the dragons
rising from the flat ocean.
I'm sad, you say, are you?
No answer. Enough talk tonight.

No answer? Enough talk tonight,
you say. I'm sad – are you?
Rising from the flat ocean
of the map on the wall, dragons
wrest the bicycle from the corner.
Nothing's solid in the dark,
or in my hands. I want touch
but stay quiet, curl up in the sheets.
You say, *This feels like goodbye*.

HEARTBREAK: PURPLE, YELLOW

April again, you stand ready,
lilac, dark spear.
Tomorrow you may burst, bleed.

When I flower, this forsythia,
spent on willow stem
beside you, ragged with my early passion.

ASTERS

The ones in my own garden
are tiny and white,
creating a firmament in the shade
of early afternoon.

The ones on the trail
have gone purple. Surely it's something
in the soil, probably iron. There's a factual basis
for everything, like the blue
hydrangea from the rusty nail.

But I listen to the crickets, too,
what they tell me about the invisible stars.

ATTEMPTED APOLOGY, A SUNDAY MORNING

even tho
i know
you won't
open the door
i will stand here
with these flowers
until the sun
goes down
or your neighbors
call the cops
again

ONE OF US NEEDED TO BE THE MAN

The fan sounded
like a busted machine gun
blowing bullets
all over the
bedroom.

I'm sure a couple
of clouds
blew in with them,
as I was sure
I felt snowflakes
falling on my exposed
skin
and seeping into my
pores
as cleanly as booze
and other
illegal substances
seep out.

Like crystal.

My body rejected
them
much like the
outside world
would.

Goose pimples
became
my skin.

My date
attempting to

cuddle,

rested his face
across my chest.

He mentioned
that he didn't know
whether to nibble on my
nipples
to keep them warm
or to kiss my grits
to defrost his.

Suddenly,
the fan
began to wail
gaily breezing
the stale scent of
sweat, sperm, and
cold old dust
throughout the room
like pesticide.

Quickly,
we arose from bed
got dressed,
left that tomb

and ran for our lives.

A CRITIC IS BORN

In the street I met a man famous
For his books. I said, "You're a man
Famous for his books, and I've
Met you in the street!" It happened
I had in my pouch some poems. "I have
in my pouch some poems," I said. He read.
"No good," he said. My brain bled. "My
Brain is bleeding," I said, bothered.
"Well there you are, already that's better!"
"But I've done nothing!" He said, "And that's
The poetry you'll find is best
Received." That gave me a thought. "I have
A thought," I said. And he: "It's shit."
Shit? I bit hard on my lip. "You bit
Hard on your lip," he said, "That's it,
That's it for sure!" "Sir?" "Sir—I'm no
Gentleman. Your poems are bad and
So must burn." Your poems are bad
And so must burn to me was rev-
Olutionary. "I'm a rev-
Olutionary," he said, and with
His hot-pink Bic lighter lit my
Poems, and then the revolution's
Cigarette. I sat on the curb.
"Why are you sitting," he said, "write."
"Write," I said. I wrote. One word.
He shook the paper from my pen:
Hot-pink. "Work on it," he said. I
Said, "Man in the street famous for
His books, may I write you long
Letters?" "One at a time," he
Replied, "alphabetically."

Later that year of no
Correspondence nor paper
Ballots he published a book.
I bought a copy and on
The bus-stop bench read it
Straight through. All the poems
Were mine. I loved every bit.
I wrote it a bad review.

PRETENDING I'M NOT HIGH; OR, WHEN MY WHORE OF A WIFE, CHARLOTTE, ASKED ME
WHY OUR SON IS GROUNDED

The moon
was larger than a play-prop:
a yellow cuticle in oil.
Above a Russian theater
with lightning rods for gargoyles,
we spoke of bayonets,
patriarchs, backswings.
I said, Plato was a Christian.
He said, No he wasn't,
and handed me a three wood.
His polo stained with mustard.
Anyway, I'm barefoot, at Beshnakov's,
on that Astroturf you got me for Christmas,
and he snickered in my backswing.
So I told him he was grounded
and hit a ball across the river.

PASSING STRANGE

Here we are in Oklahoma, the next
stop Strange, where no one you know ever lived
and popsicles are served up for dessert,
wrapped in serviettes, where the dogs are bred
never to bark until they're spoken to,
and finger puppets entertain the kids.
Look quickly. Strange won't last long. Kresge's there,
one story, is the tallest store in town.
The 7-11 locks its doors at 10.
The newspaper is trucked in out of Enid.
It's gone, Strange is, you can see it behind,
an El Dorado, full of dust, the home
of unwed girls, pretty, each one, so briefly
their hearts grow dense, like cherry crumble squares.

#5 Fiction



Don't Bring a Knife to a Gunfight

by Loring Taoka

CHURCH GIRL

Bridgette was the prettiest girl in detox. My first inclination is to paint her as a brown-eyed angel of mercy, but really all she did was bring me a styrofoam cup of water after I puked up my breakfast. I was sweating, shaky. Standard issue detox stuff. It's boring. But she was pretty, and I liked her because she was pretty, not because she brought me a cup of water. Anybody could have done that. Bridgette had beautiful black hair, tied back, little tendrils of it falling around her ears. She had big ears. Her black jeans and sweatshirt contrasted sharply with her stunning white skin. We hung around the day room together, talked a lot, confessed to things we'd done, sleazy things. She had a husband named Dave. He was still drinking. She had cheated on him left and right. They were in the middle of a divorce. She also had a six-year-old son named Nathan. When she checked into detox, she left him with Dave. Dave lived with his parents out in the country, about an hour and a half from the treatment center. Bridgette was trying to find a halfway house that would take her. She didn't have a place to stay, she didn't have a car, and she missed her son. She felt terrible about leaving him.

That was my way in. I had a car. I had an apartment. More than that, I had a grand and idyllic vision of the future. Bridgette and I were married. We were counselors, not patients, in the detox ward. Nathan lived with us, and we had a child of our own. There were red radishes growing in the backyard of our little yellow house in the country. We were standing side by side in the front yard, her arms around me as I waved goodbye to the children, riding away in the school bus. It was clean and pure, and we were happy.

*

When we got out of detox I told Bridgette she could stay with me, just until she found a halfway house that would let her in. I played it off like it was no big deal, just a minor hassle, no problem, really. I figured the two of us in that apartment, sooner or later something would have to happen, right? Wrong. She was getting right with God. She made it clear, as soon as she walked in the door, she would be sleeping on the couch. I didn't even bother to hit on her. I told her take the bed, I'll take the couch. I didn't want to fuck it up. Anyway, I really liked her. It couldn't hurt to be friends for a while. I'd never done it that way before, the right way, and I felt like doing things right, like there was something at stake. It mattered what happened after I got her into bed. The way she looked in those black jeans was enough to make *me* want to get right with God.

I even told her I'd go to church with her on Sunday. Saturday, I drove her out to the country to get Nathan, bring him back to stay with us for the weekend. She wanted to take him to church, too. "I hope

Dave's not drunk when we get there," she said. "He's such a drunk. Worse than the two of us put together. He used to buy gallon jugs of Jack Daniels."

"Is he rich?"

"His parents are. They love Nathan. If it was just Dave there's no way I'd let Nathan stay. Dave doesn't even have a job. He just sits around and drinks all day. A grown man, and he lives with his parents."

"What did he do for a living when you were still together?"

"He was a mechanic. He's a real good mechanic. That's about the only thing I can say for him."

"Why doesn't he still do that?"

"He's a drunk, Max. We covered this." She smiled, shook her head, and placed her hand on my knee. Her touch was exciting. I felt big inside, like the bottoms of my lungs had filled with cool air. She looked out the passenger side window. Tall pines lined the road, all the needles up top. Her profile was soft with those big ears, that little nose. I was going to tell her she was beautiful but she spoke first. "I hope he's not abusing my child," she said. "I wouldn't put it past him. He really is the lowest of the low."

"You think he'd get violent?" I asked.

"He used to hit me."

"Why didn't you leave?" I asked, the shock apparent in my voice, the way I cringed.

"When you're drinking you think you don't deserve any better. There's no limit to how degrading—Max, I don't want to talk anymore."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"Let's just be quiet a minute. We're almost there."

Dave's parents lived in a big white house at the end of a dirt road. As we pulled in I saw Nathan and Dave in the yard. Dave didn't look like I expected him to. I was expecting some kind of redneck, a rough looking man with big hands and a salt and pepper beard. This guy was blonde, with a tan. He looked like a college boy.

Nathan saw us coming and ran over. When I got out of the car, Dave smiled a little, shook my hand. He looked healthy, not like a drunk. He didn't smell like alcohol. His hands weren't shaking. Before I went to detox my hands shook violently every morning until I had a drink. If he'd been the drunk Bridgette said he was, he wouldn't have looked so good in the middle of the afternoon.

"Thanks for bringing Bridgette up here," he said. "Nathan's been crying for his mother."

Surely this was not the man Bridgette described, I thought.

She knelt down to put her arms around Nathan. He was talking fast, saying things I couldn't understand, something about school, his teacher and his new friend. "Max," she said. "Wait here a minute. He wants to show me what he made in school."

She left me standing with Dave. “So,” he asked. “You’re from the hospital?”

“You could say that.”

I got the feeling he was pretty sure I was fucking her. He didn’t trust me. I wanted to tell him “I’m not fucking her,” but it didn’t seem like the kind of thing you were supposed to say. It hovered there, instead.

“Well,” he said. “Thanks again for bringing her up. I know it’s not your job, but Nathan needs to spend time with his mother. I know she’s not too crazy about me, right now, since I was the one who made her check in. God knows what she’s told you.”

I shook my head. “She hasn’t told me anything,” I said. “No worries.”

“All I do is hang out with that kid,” he said. “Just that and, you know,” hands in his pockets, he motioned to the house with his shoulder. “I sort of have to look after my parents. They’re old. They got all these animals out back. Goats. Chickens. I take care of them. You wanna see?”

I felt bad for him. I liked the guy. He didn’t need to justify himself to me as though I had been a caseworker. So I followed him to the back yard. It was big, full of trees except for a fenced off section with tall grass. There were little miniature goats with long hair and curled horns standing at the edge of the fence. He took me over there and I knelt down to get a better look. They had rectangular pupils.

“I’ve never seen a goat before,” I said.

“It’s a trip, huh? Look at their eyes.”

I smiled, turned my head to look back up at him. “That’s exactly what I was looking at.”

He smiled, too. Then Bridgette came back.

“We’re gonna take him,” she said. “I’ll have him back Sunday after church.”

“Sure,” Dave said. “Have fun.”

“Do you wanna go to cheeseburger land?” she asked Nathan.

“Yeah.” He was excited about that.

“What did you say?” Bridgette asked sternly.

She looked genuinely angry. I didn’t understand, because of everything I had heard him say, “yeah” seemed to me the word Nathan articulated most clearly. When he said, “Yes, please,” I understood.

“That’s my little angel,” she said.

Dave rolled his eyes. I think I might have rolled mine, too. It seemed like such a small thing to fuss over, especially after she hadn’t seen him in so long, but what did I know about raising a kid? As we were getting in the car Dave said, “Drive safe. That’s precious cargo you’ve got there.”

I was miserable taking his son away, even for the weekend, but I was with Bridgette and it was too late to change course. As we pulled back onto the main road, Nathan asked, “Mommy, do you love my daddy?”

“I’ll always love your daddy,” she said.

“Are you gonna come home soon?”

“Mommy and Daddy don’t live together anymore. Do you wanna sing a song?” She launched into a roaring rendition of “Jesus Loves Me This I Know,” but Nathan didn’t sing along. She turned to me, narrowed her eyes, and said, “I can tell he hasn’t been practicing *that* one with his father.”

*

When we got back, Bridgette sat Nathan down on the floor in front of the TV with a plate of macaroni and cheese. She put a Bible cartoon in the VCR—an animated version of The Ten Commandments, it looked like—then sat down on the couch and started smoking cigarettes, one after another. I wondered why Nathan would be better off in a little apartment watching cartoons and singing about Jesus than he would be running and playing on a farm with his apparently good natured father. I wondered whether Bridgette had lied about Dave or I had just caught him on a good day. I wondered, finally, why she bothered. She must have known I wanted to sleep with her. What difference did it make what I thought of Dave?

Nathan got up to bring his plate to the sink and dropped it, spilled what was left of his macaroni and cheese all over my carpet. I didn’t care, I’d spilled worse things plenty of times, but when Bridgette rose, he started crying. “I’m sorry, mommy.”

“You made a mess of Max’s floor,” she said.

“It’s no big deal,” I told her.

“Please, mommy, I’m sorry,” Nathan sobbed.

“It’s okay, sweetheart. We just need to clean it up. That’s all.”

I was uneasy sleeping on the couch that night. I couldn’t get over Nathan’s reaction to his mother. I thought about Dave, how he probably thought I was sleeping with her. For the first time, I was glad he was wrong about that.

*

We went to church the next morning. Bridgette wore a black dress with a pattern of purple flowers. She was lithe and delicate and sweet looking and I forgot all about the night before. I felt good, like nothing could touch me, like I was really something to be seen with her. My neighbor was coming home from somewhere just as we walked out the door of my apartment. He was a big guy with nice clothes and a cop’s moustache, a nosy neighbor who had a pretty good idea about the way I drank prior to detox. He didn’t like me, didn’t like having me in his neighborhood, and when he saw me with a pretty woman and a kid, dressed for church, he didn’t know what to make of it. I smirked at him, raised my eyebrows. That’s right, I thought. Fuck you.

The service wasn't as boring as I expected it to be. The pastor seemed like a regular guy. He wasn't wearing a white robe, or anything. Just slacks and a polo shirt. He talked about love. God was love, he said. Love came from God. It was only through God that we could love each other. The closer a young couple came to God, the closer they came to each other. Like climbing the walls of a pyramid, with God at the top. I stopped listening. I kept looking over at Bridgette.

After the sermon the pastor asked if anyone in the congregation had something they wanted us to pray for. Bridgette nudged Nathan. "Is there anything you want to ask God for?" she asked.

There were only about ten people in there so the pastor heard. "How 'bout it, young man?" he asked. "Is there anything special you want to pray for?"

Bridgette stroked Nathan's hair. He looked up at her, hesitant. "Go ahead, baby," she smiled. She was gushing. Pure, unconditional love. I would have married her on the spot, dedicated the rest of my life to treating her like an angel, just on the basis of that smile.

Nathan turned his head and spoke directly to the pastor. "I wish my mommy would come home to my daddy and me," he said.

I was surprised by how well the pastor took it. He cleared his throat and said, "Okay. We can pray for our families. Dear Lord, we pray that all our families will be safe throughout the year and..."

He went on but I wasn't paying attention. Bridgette looked around the room, embarrassed, trembling, afraid that everybody was staring at her. She bit her lower lip, tried to keep her smile, then got up and went out into the hall. I waited a minute, then followed her. "Stay here," I told Nathan.

I didn't see her anywhere, so I took the stairs down to the basement, into a dim hallway. Bridgette was sitting on the floor with her back to the ladies room door. I knelt down close in front of her.

"Kids say things."

She turned her head, wouldn't look at me. "I'm such a mess," she said.

I took her chin between my index finger and thumb, turned her face towards mine. "It's gonna be okay," I told her. I honestly wanted to make her feel better. I'd never wanted anything like that before. Something for someone else. Not honestly, anyway.

"He's not a drunk," she said. "I lied to you."

"I don't care."

I stood up, offered her my hand. She took it and I pulled her up. We held on to each other. Her hands pressed against my back, she kissed my neck. I reached down, ran my hands along her sides, lifting her dress. It wasn't what I imagined, touching her that way. It wasn't hot. Not exactly, anyway. It felt good, sure, but how can I explain? It wasn't what I was used to. It wasn't obscene. It was just the logical continuation of the embrace.

I backed her through the ladies room door. Soon she was up on the sink and I was inside her, thinking about what the preacher said, getting closer to God.

*

We didn't take Nathan home after church. We took him back to my place. I didn't ask. Bridgette didn't protest. "Are we going home?" Nathan asked.

"This is home, now," Bridgette told him.

I wasn't uncomfortable with that. Looking in the rearview mirror, I could see that Nathan was. "I miss my daddy," he said.

"Shhh," Bridgette's voice was gentle. "It's going to be okay."

I had the feeling I was strapped in, rushing towards something terrible, but I thought if I just let go. I thought if I just didn't think about it. I thought I could have that life, Dave's life, the life I wanted. The yellow house. The radishes. The school bus. The happily ever after.

*

In a week I was back at my old job. They were gracious about taking me back, understanding about the reason I had been away. Bridgette would pack me a lunch and I would go off for the day, and when I got home she would fix dinner for the boy and me. We were like a little family, and it would have been perfect, except we were like a little family with an abnormally morbid six year old.

Nathan had stopped talking. He didn't eat much, either. He used his fork to move the food around on his plate, stared glumly at the macaroni and cheese.

"You eat your dinner, young man," Bridgette would say.

And Nathan would cry. He didn't sob, the way children will. He didn't open his mouth and moan. None of the drama usually associated with skinned knees or spankings. He just cried. His lower lip quivered. He hung his head. It was a drag.

I tried bringing toys home after work. I'd stop by the toy store, pick something I thought a six year old boy would enjoy, but I couldn't remember what I liked to do when I was six and I hadn't been around any kids since I was one, really, so I was at a loss. One day I brought home a little fire engine. Nathan wasn't impressed.

"What do you say?" Bridgette asked.

Nathan stared at his feet, so she asked again, and he started to cry.

She looked at me with her lips pursed, shook her head in irritation, didn't even touch the child. "I'm sorry," she said. "I don't know what's wrong with him."

I knew what was wrong with him, though. I couldn't believe she wouldn't touch him. I couldn't believe she didn't beg me to take them home. "If you don't quit crying," she told him, "I'm gonna give you something to cry about."

The next day I brought him a toy gun, a pistol, like a cowboy would carry.

“What do you say?” Bridgette asked.

He leveled the gun at me and pulled the trigger.

It was the first time I’d seen him smile in days. I smiled back, and for a second there I felt like we understood one another, and it was going to be alright. The next second, the back of Bridgette’s hand went hard across the side of his face. He cried out and fell. She yanked him up by his arm, swung him around. When she let go, he crashed into the wall. As he fell back she struck him again. I grabbed her by the waist, pulled her away. “Jesus Christ,” I said. “Take it easy.”

I had to lift her off the ground; she was kicking and shouting not to tell her how to raise her child, not to take the Lord’s name in vain in front of him. He was on the floor in the fetal position, shaking quietly, as if he was sincerely hoping no one could see him. Bridgette twisted away from me and went for the pot of macaroni and cheese on the stove. She swung it, missed. Macaroni went everywhere. She swung again and connected with my ear. I fell down. My ears rang. I saw her turn to Nathan, raise the pot above her head, and I lunged. We both hit the floor. After we rolled around for a minute I got her pinned.

She was still shouting. “Let me go!”

“Are you gonna calm down?”

“Let me go!”

“Are you gonna calm down?”

Back and forth like that, both of us breathing heavy, Nathan still curled up on the floor. After a second someone was pounding on the door. “Are you okay in there?” It was the nosy neighbor, the big guy who didn’t like having me in the neighborhood.

“Help me!” Bridgette cried out. “Please help!”

He didn’t wait for an invitation. He just crashed in. Before I could say anything my nose was pressed into the carpet. “Call the police,” he said.

“You’re not seeing the whole picture,” I told him.

He lifted my head a little and slammed it back down on the floor. “Shut up, you fucking piece of shit,” he said.

Bridgette told him not to curse in front of her child.

*

On the yellow wall of the jail cell, someone had drawn three crosses, like the scene at Golgotha. I didn’t know what that was supposed to mean. I’d been arraigned, charged with aggravated assault. The bail was outrageous. More than I had. They’d appointed a lawyer for me. Some lady. I tried to tell her the whole story, but she didn’t give a shit. It was all routine to her. As far as she was concerned I was the scum of the Earth. She was just trying to bargain

a little, make it look like she was trying. Even Nathan had told the cops I attacked his mother. She told them I attacked him. It was a mess. I was in trouble.

I thought being clean I'd never see the inside of a jail again, but I was always in trouble, trying to get stuff I wanted, stuff I didn't deserve. Women, money. Whatever. I stared at the crosses, wondered what those other two guys were hanging for. They were thieves, I knew, but I wondered what they had stolen, specifically. What they'd tried to steal, anyway.

A guard called my name. I went up to the bars. "You're free to go," he said. "Bail's been posted."

"Who?"

"David Yetter," he said.

After I got all my things I went outside. Dave was standing there waiting for me. He smiled. "How you doin'?" he asked.

I didn't know what to say.

"Never mind," he shook his head. "Stupid question. Look, I don't know exactly what went down but I've got a pretty good idea. I know you're not from the hospital, anyway."

"I met her there."

"She told me you worked there. She told me you were just giving her a ride up to get Nathan. She was staying at a halfway house and they were going to let him spend the night with her one night. A lot of other bullshit."

"Where is she now?"

"I took her home. She's got a lot of problems, you know? Don't worry. This thing'll never go to court. I can get her to drop the charges."

"Why are you helping me?" I asked. "She's your wife and I—"

"Please," he stopped me. "I don't need to know any more than I know. It's not your fault. She's pretty, and she's convincing, and she's kind of my responsibility." He offered me a cigarette and I took it.

We stood there for a minute, smoking in front of the jail, then he gave me a ride home. The fire engine and the pistol were gone. Someone had cleaned up the macaroni. Bridgette, I assumed. I looked around to see if she had left a note, but she hadn't. I looked around to see if I could find any evidence that she had ever been there, a toothbrush or a pair of socks. Eventually I sat down on the couch and turned on the television.

PIANO LESSONS

Lorraine is once again trying to teach me the piano. Not play, really, just do a song with her. She sits in front of the black Steinway, shoulders leaning in, both hands lightly touching the keys, and I'm beside her on the bench. She wants me to play the high notes while she plays the low. I haven't a clue what I'm doing, but I'm enjoying the smell of her perfume.

She's a small girl, blond, very pretty, a couple of years older than me, but she doesn't look forty-one. I've known her for years. She reminds me a little bit of a girlfriend I had when I was nineteen. Her name was Debbie and she wanted to be a concert pianist. We broke up because she thought she needed to pursue her career in New York. I saw her back in town a few years ago, playing in a club but looking tired and worn, and she had gotten fat. Lorraine will never look like that. The only thing that's changed about her over the years is a few lines around her eyes, but they only show when she's smiling, and when we're together, she smiles a lot.

My left shoulder is pressed tightly against her right, and I can feel the rhythm of her breathing. She laughs at my fumbling attempts to play the right notes and takes my left hand.

"Not like that, stupid." She presses my fingers into the keys. "Like this."

I laugh too, and she turns her head and kisses me on the cheek, her lips soft and smooth, her breath smelling faintly of Amaretto.

It's a small penthouse, crowded, and the air is smoky. A bleached blond and a redhead are kissing at the buffet table, leather miniskirts and tight tank tops stretched over bodies that probably made a plastic surgeon rich, but they look happy.

On the white leather couch sits an odd looking quartet—Mike and Lisa and an older couple. Mike's hand is running across Lisa's back while her fingers seem to be playing scales up and down his chest. They've been together for about two weeks, and they're sure they're in love. Maybe they are.

"Are you going to play, or what?" Lorraine asks.

"It's hopeless." I get to my feet, place a hand on her shoulder, and kiss the top of her head. "I'm never going to get this figured out, anyway."

"You're probably right."

"Besides, I have to find Carrie."

"Why?"

I'm not really sure why, except that she came with me, and right now I don't know where she is. Mike and Lisa are still at it on the couch. The older couple beside them, a man wearing a black tuxedo and a woman in a black evening dress, argue about something while the man cuts lines on the mirrored coffee table, laying them out like a musical staff. Glassy eyed but in perfect harmony, they lean forward and put silver straws in their noses. When they

finally come back up, the man pinches his nose and smiles, staring at the two girls at the buffet table.

“You used to look like that,” he says.

After wiping her finger across the table and rubbing her gums, the woman takes a deep rasping breath and exhales. “Asshole.”

“When did you turn into such a bitch?”

“Let me see,” she says, running thin fingers through her short gray hair. “Maybe it was when you stopped looking at me like that.”

A movement of people crosses in front of me, and for a moment I lose sight of the older couple. A few seconds later, the woman is gone, and the man begins laying out new lines. Lisa is now running her fingers through Mike’s hair.

I scan the room for Carrie, consider calling for her, but she wouldn’t hear me over stereo. Someone put on a new CD. Liza Minelli I think, or it could be Barbara Streisand. Stepping away from the piano, I feel a tug on my sleeve.

“You coming back?” Lorraine asks.

“Always.” I pat the back of her hand and head for the kitchen.

It’s a mess, counters littered with bottles and cans and ashtrays. It’s crowded in here too, and hard to hear over the cacophony of clanking dishes, slamming cabinet doors, and people talking too loud. I don’t see Carrie, so I walk over toward the island to fix myself a drink.

“Rob!”

A baritone voice from the other side of the room. It’s familiar but I can’t quite place it until I see him approaching. It’s Steve. This is his penthouse. We’ve known each other for quite a while. Not friends, exactly, but still a long time. He reaches me. There’s a drink in one of his hands. With the other, he hands me a joint. I take a hit.

“How you been, Steve?” I give him back the joint.

“Good. You?” He sets the joint in an ashtray.

“Fine.”

“Come alone, Rob?”

“No. With Carrie.”

He takes a sip of his drink. “Where’s Lorraine?”

“At the piano last time I saw.”

“Figures. Want a drink?” He reaches for a bottle. “Rocks, right?”

Without waiting for an answer, he reaches into a tin bucket, drops ice into a tumbler, splashes Chivas into it, and then hands it to me.

“So where’s your wife?” I take a sip.

“In the bedroom with a couple of friends. Want to join in?”

“No thanks. Not my thing.”

“Three at a time.” He reaches for the joint and takes a huge drag and rolls his eyes toward the ceiling. “God, I love that woman,”

“I’m sure you do, but I prefer it one-on-one.”

“You’re divorced. Live a little.”

"I better go find my date." I tip back the rest of the Chivas and set the tumbler on the littered countertop. "Thanks for the drink, Steve."

He waves a hand toward the doorway, spilling some of his drink. "You know where we'll be if you change your mind."

Leaving the kitchen, I move back toward Lorraine still at the piano and touch her shoulder. She looks up at me, smiling, and continues to play. The old couple on the couch are now leaning back, relaxing, smoking cigarettes, their earlier discord apparently forgotten. Mike and Lisa are gone, as are the two girls at the buffet table, but the room is still crowded.

"Did you find, Carrie?" Lorraine asks.

"Not yet. I'll be back in a minute."

Moving toward the hallway leading past the spare bedroom, I notice the bathroom door is ajar, so I slowly push it open to discover Carrie, fully dressed, sitting on the toilet, chin resting in her palm. Tommy, tanned, dressed in sweatpants and a sleeveless t-shirt as usual, is resting his hands on the sides of the sink, staring into the mirror. His face is flushed, and there are tears on his cheeks.

"We were just talking," Carrie says, tapping her fingernails on the glass in her hand.

"So I see. Sorry to interrupt."

"It's all right," Tommy wipes his eyes. "We're done."

"So what's up?" I ask.

"Nothing," Carrie says.

"It's all right, honey," Tommy says. "I'm not embarrassed."

"About what?" I ask.

"Brent dumped him today."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"It's all right."

"Men are such fucks," Carrie says. "I told him that he should go back to his wife."

Tommy splashes water on his face, wipes it with a thick towel, puts his hands back on the sink, and returns to studying his reflection in the mirror. Carrie continues to drum like a metronome on her glass.

"I just don't get it, that's all," he says.

"What happened?"

"I don't know." Tommy's voice cracks. "Brent just said that it didn't feel right between us."

"Men. They're just a bunch of--"

"Would you just shut up already?" I'm really tired of that refrain.

"What am I supposed to do, Rob?" Tommy asks. "Take faggot lessons or something? Jesus. I'm new at this, you know?"

"I'm telling you, you should--"

I turn toward Carrie and stare. Her mouth drops open. She stands up and brushes the wrinkles out of her dress. "Sorry, it's—"

“Just leave us alone for a few minutes.”

“Fine.” She storms out the door, slamming it behind her.

I turn toward Tommy. “So what now?”

“I don’t know. Get my own place I guess. What about you?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you and Carrie.”

“Oh, that. I’m going to break it off with her. Go solo for a while”

“Good. When?”

“Soon.”

“Carrie’s a two-faced bitch. You should be with Lorraine.”

“Lorraine and I are just friends.”

“So you’ve said. Give me a hug?”

“Sure.” I wrap my arms around his shoulders. “I hope you two work it out.”

“Thanks.” Tommy pushes away and wipes his eyes again. “So let’s go rejoin the party.”

Back out in the living room, I see Carrie sitting cross-legged on the couch, drink in hand, talking to some guy I’ve never seen before. She looks at me and glares, then returns to her conversation. The CD is over, and I hear Lorraine still playing. It’s a love song I think, but I can’t quite remember. I walk across the room and sit beside her on the bench, and I can feel the warmth of her body as our shoulders press together once again.

“Hi,” I say.

“Hi, yourself. Come to try again?”

“Not tonight.”

“Oh.” She stops playing and looks me in the eyes.

“You know I’m no good at this.”

“You don’t give yourself enough credit.”

“Maybe so.” I clear my throat and look at my watch. “It’s late. Got a ride home?”

“Paul is picking me up when he gets off work.”

“So how are things going with you two?”

“Fine.” Her eyes turn away as she places her hands back on the keys. “Really.”

I reach out and put my right hand over hers. “I’m glad.”

“He’s a good man.” She turns her hand over, and our fingers entwine.

“I have to go.”

“So soon?” She lifts her arm and runs the back of her slender hand across my cheek, then wraps an arm around my waist and puts her head on my shoulder. “You’re a good friend, Rob.”

“You too.”

Motioning to Carrie, I head for the front. She stands and goes into the spare room to get Mike and Lisa, and a few minutes later, they all meet me in the foyer. We get our coats from the closet and leave, riding quietly down the

glass elevator, listening to a violin concerto on the speakers. Outside, we hail the small red clad valet, who runs off to fetch Carrie's car. No one is speaking.

When the car finally pulls up, Carrie pushes me out of the way and grabs the keys. "I'll drive."

I shrug, tip the valet, and walk around to the other side of the car. Mike and Lisa climb in the back seat. Standing at the curb, I slip my hands into my pockets and look up. It's a clear and cool night. "I think I'll walk."

"Suit yourself." Carrie disappears into the car, slams the door, and pulls out. Mike and Lisa wave goodbye through the rear window. The taillights swim off into the sea of cars, and then I start to walk, slowly, heading nowhere in particular. Finally, I stop in front of a music store and stand for a very long time, admiring all the pianos through the window.

WRONG

The elevator lifted them into a collection of carpeted rooms. Helen hung back. He couldn't remember the room number. They were late. He looked for couples congregated around a campfire. Campfire? Table. He meant table. He craned his neck down corridors, into rooms. Helen padded behind him and there they were. He reached back and tugged her inside.

They slipped into the two empty chairs waiting for them near the door, next to the single woman. She smiled warmly. He looked around. The too-tall table cut-off bodies, a circle of floating grins. Helen sighed. He wanted her hand. He wanted to say "Save us." He hadn't removed his sunglasses. Fine. They could watch themselves in his blue reflective lenses and wonder what lurked beneath.

Helen kicked his shin. He hadn't been listening. He focused. Ten couples. A red-headed couple—had he ever seen such a thing before—started, finished each other's sentences. He caught snippets, a pregnancy, brown-bleeding, but their baby held on. Were they pregnant? Still? What the hell?

The next couple. Four miscarriages. But this one took. Were they allowed to hope for a baby, now? The baby kicked vigorously. They didn't know what to think.

Oh, Jesus. The wrong support group. His fucking up never ended. They all had babies in their bellies, fighting for life. He saw the still forms of his twins. Their mouths peculiarly open. He thought the lips moved. Did you see that?, he had called out. No one heard him.

He couldn't move. Helen made no movement to stand up either. The room spun up and up, pushed him toward the back of his seat, the wall. He'd talk. He'd say "Sorry, sorry."

But then Helen was speaking, "Our babies died," she said. "And my husband wouldn't hold them." The pain had become matter-of-factness. Chilling. The couples shuddered.

"Oh my," the single woman said, the leader. Monster, he caught, whispered from wife to husband. Monster.

"And now?" Helen continued. "I don't know. So weak. I wonder if the twins inherited his weakness. No. I know that's insane. But still—"

They curled away from Helen, he understood their recoils. A curse that might be catching, a blight brought into an already anxious room. Their very worst fear. They came to convince themselves they had done what they must to avoid such a Fate. What delusion. Nothing you could do, he should tell them, if he had the strength.

"Well?" the single woman, the leader or therapist, repeated. Silence. He realized then she'd been addressing him.

An answer. Is that what Helen, the world wanted? He didn't know. He could make one up. What did they want to hear? But instead came this.

"It's sick. To hold their dead bodies. They shouldn't ask that of anyone."

"I don't think—" The single woman, angry.

"Your wife—" A chorus from the couples. "How could you—"

And Helen. "I did ask it, Jack. I asked it of you. Do you still see them, Jack?"

"Yes. In the morning. The pond."

"And what are they like?"

Such stillness in that room. Sacred. At its root, it meant "cut off." Helen had entered that world, untouchable. He had fucked up and not entered it with her. He not only saw that now, but felt his betrayal deep in the marrow, how separate and inviolate she'd become. He hadn't gone there. Why? Did the answer lie in his own nursery? Did he have to go back? No. Excuses lay there.

"Your wife asked you a question."

He couldn't look at Helen or the floating faces absorbed now in what he'd done and left undone. He spoke. "What are they like? I don't know. I didn't hold them. So I don't know."

"No. You do know. I don't. I held them—and now they're dead and you didn't so you get them, you see. So I need you to tell me, Jack. What are they like?"

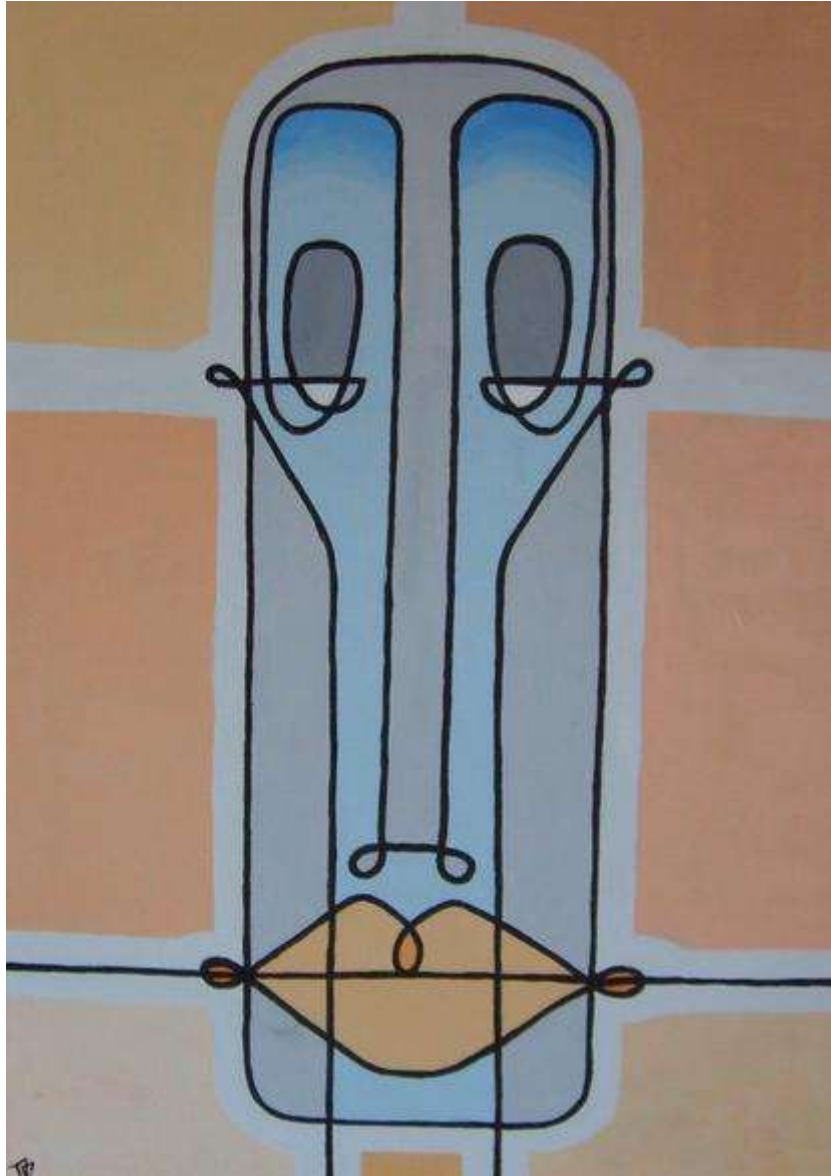
Their twins reached for him, not her. They floated up away from the bedroom and toward the deck where he bent toward them in his own mist, the steam of coffee. He sat wrapped in a blanket, waiting, but they held their distance, at the tree line, emanating from the ice and the birches, their eyes the color of the deep spring—green as the leaves and grass and flowers. They wanted him and Helen was right, they were not dead yet.

"Well. Go after her."

Helen had slipped out. He toppled the chair, nearly upset the table, stumbled down flights and flights of stairs. Outside, a warm front had moved in. A fifty degree difference the radio predicted. He drove around Penn and didn't see her. When he arrived home, he found the house empty. He ran from room to room, twice, three times.

Then he was still. Out the window, he saw her, floating above the pond, twins and mother, together again. His reach for them, blocked by the pane, would never reach them. They floated further and further from the pond and earth, the space they left filled in with the nothingness of night.

#5 Creative Nonfiction



Somnolence

by Loring Taoka

MAKE THIS BED WITH AWE

In memory of William Styron

I wrote my first fan letter when I was thirty years old, and despite my efforts at adult restraint, it was as gushing, as fawning, as passionate as any letter from a teenage girl to her rock star idol. It was, in short, fanatical, and writing it gave me that cathartic feeling one sometimes gets when confessing a long-held and secret love. But it was to no music icon, or movie goddess, or charismatic leader that I wrote, but rather to a writer, a writer's whose books have been the shapers of the man I've faced the world for the past fifteen years—William Styron.

I first bumbled across Styron when I was twenty years old—in April, the day after I resigned my Anthropology major and formally committed to English for good. I had only recently given myself to the idea and romance of being a writer, despite all the risks, despite the near nonexistent chance of happiness or success—and this mad and idiotic career choice was roundly encouraged by my best friend and roommate, Fred, himself a chemistry major. He may regret it now. I sometimes do.

With my new writing career in mind, I had gone to the university library to pick a writer I had never read and was thumbing through the stacks when I stopped, for some reason, on *Sophie's Choice*. As with most life-altering events, at least, my life altering events, it was utterly and completely random. I had never heard of the book or movie, and Styron's name I knew, for some reason, only because of his novella, *The Long March*. In short, I checked the book out on a complete whim. But then, looking back from the decrepit age of thirty-five, it seems less like a whim than it does a Zen-like bit of serendipity—a fateful confluence of several different subconscious streams in my life gushing together in this novel to create a deluge.

This was at the University of Central Florida—at the time, a relatively new university in Orlando still on the edge of the swamps, scrubs, and cow prairies that made up the Florida that was still very much tangled in the world of the rural South. At night, we had possums, armadillos, and wild boar all over campus. I had grown up in a southern family—eating grits and catfish and attending revivals and church suppers. My brother and brother-in-law both rode in rodeos and used dip. We punctuated any gathering, whether baby baptism or mass funeral with a gargantuan dinner. The South was very much bonded into every cell and bone, but at 20, it was something I was also trying to escape. Like any kid, I wanted more than anything to travel and expand; to just move. Yet another best friend, Jessica, with a singular passion for family and region that still impresses, had begun to make me see what was beautiful and magical about our sometimes benighted homeland. Jessica was also Fred's

girlfriend, now wife, and the three of us had a rather hurricane-like dynamic at times.

Also, that March, a photo exhibition about Auschwitz had been staged on the first floor of the same library and the thirty some odd pictures of bodies stacked in enormous tormented mounds had profoundly shaken me. I sat out on the front steps for a long time with my head in my hands, trying, through the heat of the spring Florida sun, to burn off the sticky something that seemed to seep in and stain my very skin. And so, reading through the book jacket of *Sophie's Choice*, I suppose it answered some questions that I did not even know how to ask—a young expat Southern writer, the Holocaust, a beautiful woman and her charismatic chemist lover.

I started the book on a Saturday, after dinner. Fred was away at a chemistry conference of some sort, and I was alone for the whole weekend. I picked through the first chapter—stopping to brush my teeth or go out for a walk—but by the time Stingo first heard Sophie and Nathan humping upstairs, I was hooked, but hooked in the sense that a fish is hooked. Something sharp and painful had entered my flesh, and when it was torn out, there would be blood and wounds and scars.

I swept through the rest of the book with a maniacal zeal I have never since matched. I skipped classes and meals. I read on the toilet. I read while walking. At two o'clock on Tuesday morning, a little over forty-eight hours after starting chapter two, I closed the cover on the last page, turned off all the lights, threw on a CD of Mozart's Symphony Number 40 in G minor and literally sobbed till sunrise. When morning came—a bright, golden, Florida spring morning, “excellent and fair”—I was a different man. Not a day has passed since, not in fifteen years, when I have not thought of Sophie, Stingo, and Nathan.

For a long time now, I have been trying to pinpoint the source of that fugue of weeping. Whenever I think about it, the phrase that surfaces is a simple one, a cliché—but it keeps popping up in my thoughts—the Death of Innocence. Innocence killed or murdered or, more accurately, willingly laying itself down to sleep to make room for another more painful thing. But I have not thought of innocence as a good thing in a long time. It's a kind of ignorance really, a blithe, potentially dangerous unawareness of one's own potential to become either a monster or saint. In a book I read recently by Ziauddin Sardar, the author says that any seeker of God—in his case, through Islam—must have above all self-doubt and forgiveness. The innocent are able to believe in their own righteousness, and wielding it as a weapon, judge others. Those who invoke the innocence of children forget the fights, the humiliations, the emotional torture that children visit on one another. Perhaps childhood often seems idyllic because we didn't know what we were doing to each other. Innocent.

None of the characters in *Sophie's Choice* are wholly innocent—not the heroes, not the villains, not the victims nor the saved. Guilt abides. Stingo, my

doppelganger, abandoned his cancer ridden mother at a crucial point in her disease. Moreover, he is entangled by birth with the racial violence then ravaging the South. In his youthful quest for sex, he even abandons his doomed friends at the fatal moment when he might have saved them. Sophie, the ultimate victim as a survivor of Auschwitz, had an anti-Semitic father who helped foment a pogrom against the Jews in Krakow. By virtue of her fluent German, she was made secretary for Rudolf Hoess, Commandant Chief Butcher of the death camp, and relished this collaboration as an opportunity to save her children. Nathan, the Jewish chemist, loves and charms both Sophie and Stingo, yet, because of his schizophrenia, cannot stop hurting them. There are countless other sins and betrayals, large and small, but all of them stand in the shadow of Auschwitz, like little saplings around the parent tree, and are unified by it, absorbed in it, so that although the great crime against humanity seems like an almost otherworldly thing in its horrid Satanic evil, it becomes deeply linked to all those other small evils and betrayals that we, that I commit every day.

Styron, in *Sophie*, was often taken to task for emphasizing the plight of non-Jews at Auschwitz—an insipid criticism, one harkening back to the tribal thinking that helped make the death camps possible in the first place—as if such a monstrosity could be the sole property of any one race when our century has delivered up others to the slaughter house, Armenians, Sudanese, Rwandans, Bosnians, etc. etc. What was really revolutionary about *Sophie's Choice* was not the universalization of the death camp experience, for it takes no great leap of imagination to think of oneself as a victim, but rather the universalization of the Nazi experience. We could all be monsters, every innocent one of us. I had always seen myself as a basically good guy. I was a Southerner, but not a racist. I did not betray my friends. I would never have participated in the death camps, and neither would have anybody I loved. But *Sophie's Choice* intertwined the great evils with the small little ones I knew and I saw that not only could I do these things, but I did do these things, that some of my flaws were not just flaws but seeds, that, given the right soil, would bloom me into a soldier of the SS. And that this was also true of anyone I loved. This revelation was both crushing and liberating, crushing because I could never escape guilt for things others did—ever after when I read of various slaughters big and small, whether Abu Ghraib or The Killing Fields or Rwanda or Lebanon—I could never really identify with the victims. I always knew that a part of me was the perpetrator as well. And liberating because from it flowed this great desire to love the world as hard as I possibly could.

So many never learn this simple thing, that they could just as easily be the monster. No one commits evil because they enjoy evil—the Nazis could kill Jews and Slavs because they told themselves they were saving the German race. The English colonists murdered Native Americans because they were pagan enemies of Christ. The Stalinists were cleansing society of the classes

that brought it to its knees and on and on and on, and in *Sophie's Choice* I saw it clearly—how easy it was to be the well meaning destroyer, even of those you loved most fiercely. And if I was implicated in Auschwitz by analogy, then my closeness to Stingo sucked me into a much more private metaphor, and I saw a vicarious vision of myself through him as the unwitting doom of my friends Fred and Jessica through sins so accidental that I might never notice until it was too late. Private and world grief came rushing together, and I started to see what loss was, what there was to lose and how God did not save us from either loss or causing our own loss, and if it didn't teach me humility (even now, I am in effect, bragging) it at least taught me the need for humility—for self doubt and forgiveness. And how else would I have found it out without being taken through the lives of these people, without living behind the eyes of Stingo and through him, the life of this one woman as she struggled to survive one of the most barbaric soul-eating moments in history?

This has become a fan letter to a book, when what I meant to do was praise my favorite author. Certainly, Styron's other books are ethical atomic bombs as well. I recently reread his book of essays, *This Quiet Dust*, and found myself enraged over a piece on William Calley, my fellow Floridian redneck who led the murders at My Lai. Kick in the edit function on your PC, find and replace Vietnam with Iraq, My Lai with Abu, Nixon with Bush, and the essay is just as relevant today. Styron begins his evisceration of Calley with this hefty sentence: "Whole seas, one feels, could not contain the tears humanity must shed at the horrors of My Lai." A Biblical invocation if there ever was one, bringing down the Isaiahic language of the Old Testament God down upon this massacre. It's a very Southern thing to do and well appreciated by this former Baptist, for all the dry analysis in newspapers and histories sometimes lacks the raw, vital, damning power. Styron was the voice of Yahweh cutting through his follower's bullshit with good old fashioned fire and brimstone, but also, with humor, mercy, and humility.

So when last Tuesday morning, I opened an email from a writer friend living in Vietnam and saw these words in the first line: "I'm sure you saw that William Styron died," I was dumbstruck. In a completely spontaneous, dramatic gesture, my fingertips flew to the screen and I managed to choke out a "what?" My boss whirled around in her chair, "Something wrong?" Nothing, I answered. Nope. For what is there to say? I have lost a father, a grandmother, and countless friends, and now a man I do not know is dead and I feel like someone has hit me in the stomach with a bat.

At thirty, I mailed off my fan letter to Styron feeling more than a little ridiculous. I'd sent it in care of his publisher, not even sure it would reach him. Imagine how gratified and delighted I was to get a reply not two weeks later, hand-written. "I'm most grateful to you for your generous letter," he wrote. I was already blushing. "It heartens me to get a letter like yours since I get discouraged from time to time about the future and value of fiction and about the hard job of writing; words like yours are like a good dose of adrenaline and

Jeff Gibbs

allow me to take hope. It's important—essential I should say—that books, which are lifelines to the future—continue to be written and read. I hope you'll continue to explore, as you put it, the darkest side of humanity, and that you will find the right way of expressing what you have to say. I'm touched to think my work may have helped in that valuable process.”

His death makes one less moral force moving across the American landscape. I hope we can be worthy heirs.

JULY 30TH, 2005, 10:07 AM

Ted, the cat, takes a long pause in front of me. Stands on the desk. Looks up at the window. Chatters at the baby blue sky. The birds sailing by. Then steps forward. Makes the leap to the window sill. Sniffs the air as the wind breezes in. Watches a noisy plane amble over. Then leaps down to me on my hand-me-down chair. He sits and stares at my face. Chatters. Touches me with his paw. Because he's feeling something. And wants me to feel it too.

Two living creatures. Together in this house. Unable to truly communicate. So we do the best we can. Chatter. Pet. Paw.

I wonder if he ever watches me. Thinks about my path as I cross the living room. How sometimes I stand and stare out the window. At deer in the field. Crows on the crooked steeple. Birds in the leafy branches of the cemetery's big maple tree.

?

Ah...this simple life. Where today I'll mow the lawn. With the old green push mower that I found in the basement of the church when I moved to this place three years ago. A solid machine. Powered by a Briggs & Stratton engine. One that asks so little of me. A bit of oil. Fresh gas. A clean spark plug. And always, it is ready to run. To remind me of the day my Dad brought an old Briggs & Stratton to the side door of Thunder Bay Junior High School. For me to disassemble and reassemble. For a project in my Power and Energy class. Third hour with a bunch of burnouts and jocks. Led by Mr. Leeland. A short man with Popeye forearms who was filled with stifled frustrations, but guided by good intentions.

His goal? To show these kids something that they could use in this life. How to follow directions. Take things apart. Rebuild. And do it again. Because he knew how it would turn out. That most of us would never stray far from home. And we would never reach any higher than our parents did. There would be no climbing of the social ladder. No corporate executives. Genetic scientists. Or astronauts. We boys would grow into men's bodies, but we would never change. We'd become bigger boys. Obsessed with Power and Energy. But we would never have enough drive, ambition, or heart to know how to truly use it. The best Mr. Leeland could do was prepare us for a life of fixing things that he knew would be broken.

I think Dad knew this when he brought me that small engine. In a heavy duty cardboard box. Covered with an oily rag. When he let me wrestle it into the school all by myself.

"I got it," I said, as I stumbled up the steps and fumbled with the door knob.

"I know you do," he said. "I know."

And he drove away. And I walked inside. To a workshop table. To learn how to take it apart. And to put it together again.

?

I will think of that today. As I push along the old green machine. Mow diagonal rows. Until the lawn is tidy. Neat and trim. So people can visit. Pass by. Say to themselves, "*Now here is a man that really knows how to keep a place up!*" And I will feel I've accomplished something. As I retreat behind walls. Shower away the smells of another day that's passed. The fresh cut grass. Exhaust fumes. Gas. And I will go to bed with some artificial peace. Balance in the darkness. At the edge of sleep. Knowing deep down that I haven't done a thing.

And tomorrow, I'll wake. Refreshed, or haunted by dreams, and I'll go downstairs. Pass by Ted, the cat, as he's curled up in the wooden rocking chair. And I'll walk to the coffee pot. Pour in the water. Put in the grounds. Turn it on. And stand in the kitchen. Leaning on the sink. Staring at the lawn, the trees, the old crooked steeple, trying to be happy because I've been given a great gift. Another day. To get through. To get things done. To make it okay.

#5 Contributors

Randall Brown is a teacher who lives outside of Philadelphia with his wife Meg, a cabaret singer, and their two children. He is a Pushcart nominee, a fiction editor with *SmokeLong Quarterly*, and on the editorial board of Philadelphia Stories. He holds an MFA in Fiction Writing from Vermont College and a BA from Tufts University. His stories, poems, and essays have been published widely, with recent work appearing or forthcoming in *Clackamas Literary Review*, *Del Sol Review*, *Cairn*, *The Saint Ann's Review*, and *Connecticut Review*. He's currently working on a short short collection, *Mad To Live*.

Brendan Carlin is an undergraduate at the University of Toledo. He studies English and Philosophy and waits tables at an Applebee's. This is his first published work. He hopes you enjoy it.

Richard Epstein lives in Denver. His work has appeared in an assortment of little magazines and academic quarterlies, here and in the UK, including *Denver Quarterly*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Orbis*, *Staple*, *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, and *The Shit Creek Review*, and his blog, mostly poems, can be found at RHEpoems.blogspot.com. If your parents own a publishing house and you have any influence with them, Richard hopes to hear from you.

CB Forrest lives in Ottawa. His poetry has appeared in *Bywords*, *Ascent Aspirations*, and *Schrodinger's Cat*. His short story 'The Lost Father' won an award in the 2004 Canadian Authors' Association Short Story Contest.' His first novel, *Chasing Pace*, was released in 2005 and is available online via www.chapters.ca. He is currently finishing a poetry manuscript titled *wounded hearts of the many*, which examines the impact of addiction in its myriad forms.

Jeff Gibbs is a writer currently living in Boston. He is originally from Florida and got his MFA at the University of Arizona. Recently he's had poems published in the *Heat City Review* and *Red Mica* and short stories in the *Heat City Review*, *Diagram*, and *The Bridge*.

Bryon D. Howell is a poet currently residing in New Haven, Connecticut. He has been writing poetry for a great number of years. Recently, his poetry has appeared in *poeticdiversity*, *Red River Review*, *The Quirk*, *The Cerebral Catalyst*, and *The Lost Beat*. Bryon is also the Editor-in-Chief of four online poetry 'zines:

The Persistent Mirage, Bringing Sonnets Back, Quentin's Naughty Poetry Journal, and The Brave Little Poem Daily.

Katherine Hunt grew up in El Segundo, California and currently lives in Massachusetts. She just received her MFA from Emerson College, and her poems and essays have appeared in various literary journals.

Kathleen Kirk is a co-editor of *RHINO* Magazine. Her poems, stories, and essays appear in a number of print and online journals, including *Beauty/Truth, Comstock Review, Drought, Ekphrasis, Fourth River, Greensboro Review, Midnight Mind, Ninth Letter, Oklahoma Review, Poetry East, and Wicked Alice*. She has a chapbook of theatre and persona poems, *Selected Roles* (Moon Journal Press, 2006), some of which appeared first in the anthology *In A Fine Frenzy: Poets Respond to Shakespeare* (University of Iowa Press, 2005).

Sara Mattson believed s'mores were the perfect food until she found out the ingredient list of marshmallows includes dead animal parts. She is currently in the computer lab at the University of Toledo. Later, she will leave and go somewhere else. People that know her are almost positive that Sara is not a cricket.

Ian Bean Moore is the book critic for the *Smoky Mountain Sentinel*. He currently lives outside of Asheville, NC.

Deborah Poe's work is forthcoming or has recently appeared in *Copper Nickel, Drunken Boat* as a finalist for the Panliterary Awards, *Anemone Sidecar*, and the anthology *Fingernails Across the Chalkboard: Poetry and Prose on HIV/AIDS From the Black Diaspora*. Two of her poems were nominated for Pushcart Prizes this year and last. Her manuscript *Our Parenthetical Ontology* is forthcoming from CustomWords. *Our Parenthetical Ontology* was also a semi-finalist for Elixir Press' Seventh Annual Poetry Award.

Sam Ruddick's work has appeared in over a dozen literary publications, most recently *Gulf Stream, Phantasmagoria, The Red Rock Review, and Painted Bride Quarterly*. His work can also be found on-line at pindeldyboz.com, 971menu.com, and this summer at *The Green Hills Literary Lantern*.

Daniel R Snyder is a Saginaw writer, originally from Los Angeles, who is now as close as one can be to a native Michigander without being a fan of the Detroit Tigers. His better works have appeared in various literary journals, including *Bellowing Ark*, *Controlled Burn*, and *Whistling Shade*. The bad works keep his woodstove continuously burning through the cold and dark nights of Michigan's winter. Contact him at drsnyder1@charter.net, and read more of his work at danielrsnyder.com.

K.J. Stevens is 33 years old. He lives in an old house in Alpena, Michigan. In the country. Near a cemetery. Owns an old church. Has one dog. Three cats. Has written a few books (*A Better Place*, *A Place to Land*, *Infidelity*, and *Dead Bunnies*). Current projects include *Landscaping* (creative nonfiction) and *Thunder Bay* (a novel), both to be published later this year. K.J. is a graduate of Central Michigan University. He studied Creative Writing at Hamline University. To reach K.J. please write to kj@kjstevens.com.

Loring Taoka, or Lorin if you want to be legal, was born in Vermont. He was raised in Upstate New York and Northern New Hampshire. He is currently attending The University of Toledo. His major is General Studies/Liberal Arts—he is focusing on metalsmithing, spanish and women's/genders studies. He likes coffee. Hopefully by this time next year (the fall) he will be in an MFA program, dedicating his time to being a metalsmith/future bum.