

The Hot Air Quarterly



Winter issue ♡ Number 17

Including works by Carol Wade Lundberg, Simon Perchik, James Fowler, Jennifer Phelps, Kerry Jones, Zara Raab, Jeffrey Alfier, Hal White, Askold Skalsky, and Celeste White

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The Hot Air Quarterly

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The North State's Independent Literary Journal

AIR

by Carol Wade Lundberg

My brother Ned is a mouth breather. Not just when he has a cold, but all the time. It gives him a kind of effervescent speech, tiny bubbles of moist air infusing his conversations with balloon-like hopefulness, even when he's expressing sadness or despair. It keeps some people from taking him seriously.

I used to imagine Ned trying to warn people about a fire in some crowded public place. I could hear him calling, "Fhhire! Fhhire!" each repetition floating upward with a kind of childlike excitement, so that instead of panicking and racing toward the exits, people would turn in smiling anticipation toward the sound of his voice.

When we were children, I loved to have him read to me, even though I was two years older and should have been the one reading to him. I would close my eyes and listen to his airy voice reciting the moral-dusted tales of Hans Christian Anderson, but in school he was sometimes taunted for the slow breathiness of his speech. For awhile, my mother tried to teach him to breath normally, the way they encourage left-handed children to use their right hands so they will be like everyone else. But it didn't work.

Fortunately, he has chosen a profession that requires a minimum of talking. He is an air engineer—that is, he studies air. Once he has figured out why your air is going here instead of there, or going nowhere at all when it is supposed to be leaving, then HEATCO, the company he works for, can fix your heating or cooling system so that it does what you want it to. Ned has a sympathy for air, so it tells him its secrets.

Of course this is just my fancifulness. In fact, he's an engineer who specializes in the thermodynamics of heating and cooling systems. But I think the reason

he's so good at it is because of what I just said: I think it has to do with the way he breathes; I think he has developed a relationship with air that is different from the rest of us.

At HEATCO, other people talk to clients and install or repair their systems. Gerald, his boss, is more or less resigned to the fact that Ned is not a communicator and actually uses this to his own advantage if he's in a tight spot. There is a nasty history of manipulation on Gerald's part, which Ned seems unwilling to confront. It has been the sole topic of our infrequent arguments, or more accurately, my tirades. I yell and Ned gazes maddeningly into space or changes the subject.

I remember one time in particular when Gerald, contrary to Ned's recommendation, promised a client that air conditioning could be installed in an old building with inadequate ventilation shafts. When the planning commission refused to issue the necessary permits, Gerald sent the client to Ned, who innocently believed Gerald had already told him the project wasn't feasible. Ned aspirated his way through scientific explanations of why it couldn't be done, as the client became more confused and apoplectic by the minute. Finally, he screamed unrepeatable epithets at Ned and tore Gerald's rejected plans (which Ned had never seen) into tiny pieces; he then scattered them from one end of Ned's small cubicle to the other before departing. When an almost totally speechless Ned managed to tell Gerald what had happened, his smarmy boss assured him it was all a sad miscommunication. Since the client believed it was Ned who had deceived him, Gerald emerged blameless.

Today my mother hen instincts are flaring once again because Ned is telling me about this woman who (Gerald says) insisted on talking to him personally. It seems she is always cold even though they have a brand new radiant heating system, which her husband says works just fine. She swears she feels

Continued on page 3

The Hot Air Quarterly

Celeste White: Galley Slave
Jim Dowling: The Writer Formerly Known as Jim

W elcome to HOT AIR, Shasta County's independent literary journal. It is, in theory, published four times a year, but in actual practice, vagaries of the universe—or one of the seventeen jobs we hold in our pathetic and desperate bids to support our writing habits—may, on occasion, prevent such a schedule from transpiring.

We accept eclectic submissions in these areas: Short fiction, memoir, narrative nonfiction, poetry, black-and-white line drawings, in addition to full-color art for the cover. We make every effort to read work submitted to us, but please note that the seventeen jobs, vagaries of the universe, etc., could hamper our good intentions. Decisions for publication reflect the subjective and idiosyncratic tastes of the editors; we honor and value all submissions.

The preferred way to submit is via e-mail to hotairquarterly@yahoo.com. Submission guidelines available upon request. To submit hard copies, send work to:

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c/o Hot Air
P O Box 675
Shasta, CA, 96087

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On the cover:

Roberta A. Stone creates an array of diverse artwork, including assemblage, collage, and painting. A resident of Redding, California, Roberta's award-winning work has appeared in a number of exhibitions and national juried shows, including the North Valley Art League and Infinite Designs in Redding, the Highland Art Center in Weaverville, and the All About Art Gallery in Missoula, Montana.

*

It's a risk, these clouds
gathered in the open, grow huge
take on the shape they need

though once inside this jar
escape is impossible
—you collect a cloud whose mist

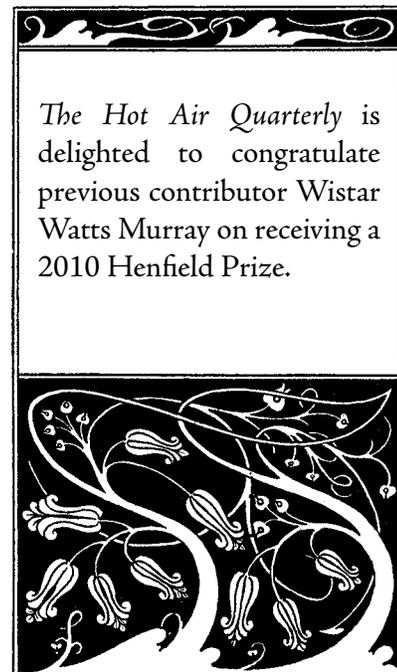
no one studies anymore, comes
from a time rain was not yet the rain
pressing against your forehead

and your mouth too has aged
coming from nowhere to open
as some mountainside

believed by all the experts
too high for predators
or a dirt that devours

even its place to hide in flowers
yet you will date the jar
for their scent and later on.

—Simon Perchik



About our contributors:

Carol Wade Lundberg teaches creative writing in private workshops and at Santa Rosa Jr. College in California. Her short stories, essays, and poetry have appeared in numerous literary journals and anthologies, including *Poetry*, *New York*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Albatross*, *Zone 3*, *Calyx*, *Edgz*, *Jane's Stories*, *Bellowing Ark*, *Mobius*, and *Rambler*, among others. She has published one book of poetry, *The Secret Life*, and is awaiting publication of her first novel, *The Rock Hunter's Guide*, which was a finalist in the Parthenon Prize for Fiction Competition.

Simon Perchik is an attorney whose poems have appeared in *Partisan Review*, *The New Yorker* and elsewhere. For more information, including his essay "Magic, Illusion and Other Realities" and a complete bibliography, please visit his website at www.simonperchik.com.

James Fowler teaches literature at the University of Central Arkansas, where he edits the poetry journal *Slant*. His work has recently appeared in such journals as *Cave Region Review*, *Southern Cultures*, *The Chariton Review*, and *Colere*. He has work forthcoming in *Poetry for the Masses*, *Elder Mountain*, and *Children's Literature*.

Jennifer Phelps: I am a devoted lifelong writer living in Shasta County, California. Although I also write personal essays and short stories, my first passion is poetry. Several of my poems have previously been published in *Hair Pieces*, the 2008 anthology of Sonoma County Writing Practice.

Kerry Jones was raised in Catasauqua, Pennsylvania. She received her MFA in creative writing from Wichita State University, where she now teaches. Her fiction has appeared in many literary journals.

Zara Raab's poems appear in *West Branch*, *Arts & Letters*, *Nimrod*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, and elsewhere. She has literary reviews now in numerous journals, including *Poetry Flash*, *Rattle on-line*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, and *Colorado Review*. Her *Book of Gretel* came out this spring from Finishing Line Press. Her first full-length collection, *Swimming the Eel*, is due out in 2011. She lives and writes in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Jeffrey Alfier is a Pushcart prize nominee whose poems have appeared recently in *Pacific Review* and *South Poetry Magazine* (UK), with work forthcoming in *New York Quarterly*. His chapbooks are *Strangers Within the Gate* (2005) and *Offloading the Wounded* (2010). His third chapbook, *Before the Troubadour Exits*, will be out this winter from Kindred Spirit Press. He serves as co-editor of *San Pedro River Review*.

Hal White has spent most of his writing career writing the most exacting possible non-fiction: mathematics. In this violent change of behavior, long hoped for by his readers (Criminy—enough with the heteroskedasticity!), Dr. White turns his attention to short narrative, delighting

all with his choice of length and decision to engage in prosaic licence.

Askold Skalsky: I have appeared in numerous small press poetry publications, most recently in *Cutthroat* and *Istanbul Literary Review*. I have also been published in Canada, England, and Ireland. Last year I received an award from the Maryland State Arts Council for my poetry and was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Celeste White is the author of the novel, *The Last Good Fairy*, winner of a New England Book Show Award, as well as the award-winning title, *The Legend of the Flying Hotdog*.

(*"Air," continued from page 1*):

drafts. They are important clients and Gerald is anxious to please them because the husband owns several new condominiums which need heating and air conditioning systems. Ned has checked their house and found nothing wrong. But he's convinced there is plenty wrong with her.

"She insisted on talking to *me*," he says effervescently, clinging to the seat of my kitchen stool with both hands and leaning toward me. He is obviously upset and I remind myself to take him seriously, despite his unusually high level of aspiration.

"She's afraid her husband will think she's crazy. She asked me if I believed in ghosts!" he finally manages to tell me.

"Ned, Ned," I say comfortingly, putting on the tea kettle and taking down the chamomile tea, "She's just a rich neurotic housewife with too much time on her hands. It's not your problem. Did you tell her engineers don't believe in ghosts?"

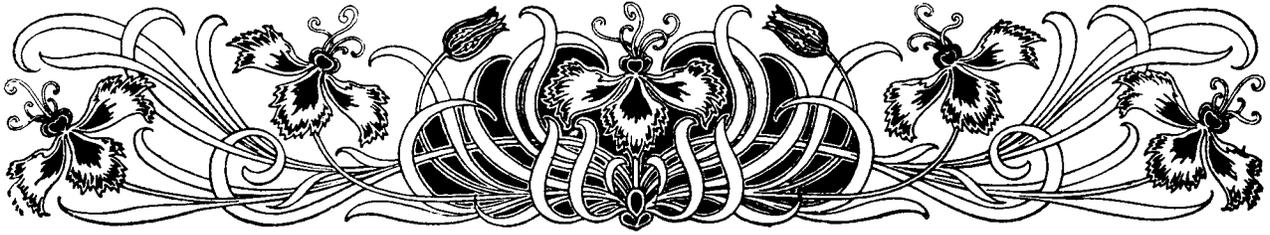
Ned is quiet. Then he goes sort of limp and says very slowly, with almost no bubbling, "I couldn't tell her that. Besides," he says looking down, "you know, I mostly just listen when I have to do this sort of thing."

"Why not?" I ask indignantly. "It just takes one word: No! The sooner you nip this in the bud the better. She (and Gerald, I think to myself) wants to make her neuroses your problem."

"I've checked their house," he says evasively, "and there are no drafts from outside. But..."

"But what?"

He looks at me. "When we shook hands, hers were so cold. And she said she felt cold air around her heart. I was sitting three feet away and I could



feel it too," he says in a whisper, looking away.

I begin to feel distinctly chilly myself, not about this ghost business, but about Ned. He isn't cut out to handle neurotic women. Look what it's doing to him. This time I have half a mind to call Gerald myself. "Are you telling me you think there's a curse on her or something? That an evil spirit is making her cold? That's ridiculous! Let Gerald deal with her. It's his company; it's his client." My voice is rising incrementally.

"You know, spirit is just another word for air," Ned says enigmatically. "Spirare means to breathe." "Don't quote me Latin," I say, banging the tea kettle down on the stove, forgetting to be sympathetic in my anxiety. "So the breath of an evil spirit is making her cold? Give me a break!"

"Not a spirit's breath," Ned says patiently, as if he were speaking to a distraught child. "Her own breath!" I can almost see the bubbles rising in his earnestness. "It's her own body that's making her cold!" His voice is thoughtful, puzzled. There's nothing hysterical or weird in his manner. So I sit down on the stool next to him and give him my full attention.

"What do you mean Ned? That she's creating these drafts?"

"Something like that. Not exactly. I mean, she doesn't know she's doing it. But it's really not so strange," he says defensively. "We get hot when we're excited. People can heat up a room. And people who are anemic or have mononucleosis actually get colder; their body temperature drops."

"So you think she's sick? You're not a doctor. How can you be sure?"

"I'm not sure why she's cold. I'm just sure she really is." He looks at me defiantly, with the absolute certainty I used to find so maddening when we were children. "I don't think her body's sick," he continues. "I think it's her emotions. That's the part I'm not sure about. But I know the cold is coming from her. I could feel it," he says with finality. "I'm not wrong about that."

End of conversation. He obviously has unshakeable faith in his own powers of observation. Just because he doesn't know why something is happening, doesn't mean he isn't convinced about the what. We drink our tea and he leaves. I don't see him for several weeks. But I find myself speculating about whether our feelings can make us hot or cold, can actually trigger little flesh and blood space heaters and coolers that change the air around us.

Once or twice I test the air around my chest to see if it's warmer or colder than the air at the end of my outstretched arm; I don't notice any difference. But the day a student writes me a nasty letter impugning my teaching ability and just about everything else, I sit on the couch wrapped in three blankets, feeling chilled to the bone; this time when I put my hand on my chest, it's cold despite layers of wool. And one night when we're cuddled on the couch watching *Casablanca*, our favorite movie, I notice a warm layer of air around my husband's body.

When Ned comes over for Thanksgiving dinner several weeks later, he's his usual cheerful, childlike self. He reads to the children, who love the sound of his buoyant syllables as much as I did at their age. I don't think to ask him about 'the woman' until we're cleaning up in the kitchen. Ned is again perched on a stool, his favorite resting place, wiping my sterling silver bone dry with a cotton towel, putting each piece lovingly in its felt pocket. The sight of him there reminds me of our last conversation.

"I take it the problem of your ice maiden got solved," I say, meaning that Gerald has handled her.

"Yes it did," Ned says with a certain air of being pleased with himself.

"Well?" I urge, interested in spite of myself. "What happened? Did you have to talk to her again?"

Ned finishes drying the serving spoon he's holding and places it carefully in the felt-covered slot of the silver chest. "I talked to her husband," he says almost smugly.

"To her husband? About what?"

“About her being cold,” he says, picking up a fork.

“Wait a minute. You talked to her husband about her being cold? What does that have to do with their heating system? He must have thought you were both crazy.”

“It has everything to do with my system,” Ned replies somewhat imperiously. “I’m supposed to be the expert on air. I’m supposed to know what it’s doing!”

“All right,” I say hastily. “I assume it worked since you’re so pleased with yourself. But you hate explaining things to clients. What exactly did you tell him?”

Ned smiles. “I didn’t have to say much. I just asked him if he knew the story of the Snow Princess. I’m dumbfounded. “You asked him if he knew the story of the Snow Princess,” I repeat like an idiot.

Ned flutters his eyelids dreamily. He seems to be remembering the story, one of his favorites. “Yes,” he goes on, “All I knew was his wife was cold and getting colder. I didn’t know why, but I figured that wasn’t as important as getting her warmed up again.” He puts down the fork and looks at me.

“Then I told him to kiss her, like in the story, but to *really* kiss her. “It’s not all that far out,” he says mildly, as I continue to stare openmouthed, clutching a Tupperware of mashed potatoes. “It doesn’t matter what the problem was, or how it started. People get angry or hurt and they shut down. After that, talking doesn’t do any good. You have to get their attention somehow, sort of re-light their pilot.”

“So it worked?” I say with a sarcasm that surprises me. “He re-lit her pilot then?”

“Oh yes!” Ned says happily. “They’re on their way to Hawaii right now; they said they both needed some sun.”

I feel angry and confused; Ned has wriggled out of reality once again and come out smelling like Chanel No. 5. This is dangerous. He has to stick to what he knows or where will any of us be?

“Now Gerald is going to shove all his problem clients off on you, since you were such a big success with these people,” I tell him heatedly, my desperation making me cruel. “He doesn’t need this kind of excuse. How will you like that? How will you like having to talk to people all the time?” I stop myself before I say more and glance guiltily at Ned.

He’s looking down at the towel in his hand. My heart cracks with remorse, but when he looks up,

he’s laughing. “Well I don’t think he wants to do that again soon,” he says. “You see they’re not just going to Hawaii; they’re moving to Hawaii. So we don’t get the contract for his condominiums. That’s over a million dollars down the drain.”

“Sounds like you did too good a job,” I snap, not quite sure what is happening.

“Seems that way. But they were very happy when they came by to see me,” he says grinning wickedly. “The woman said she could never thank me enough, that Gerald had been right when he insisted she talk to me.”

I look at Ned with amazement, new constellations of understanding orbiting furiously around my assumptions of a lifetime about him.

“You knew what Gerald was up to all along,” I sputter.

“It worked,” he says calmly, looking at me with deceptively myopic blue eyes. “I solved their problem

and took care of myself at the same time. Remember that story about the boy who killed two birds with one stone?”



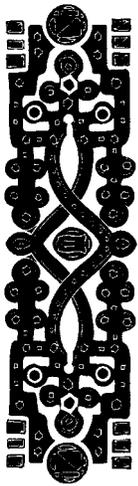
A DAY IN
by James Fowler



awake 5 minutes
before alarm
routine humanizing
teeth shower coffee
article recycled bricks
half read

on drive magnificent dogwood
blooming in tiers
one branch
dead

suddenly
“California Dreamin’”
nostalgia for parents’ youth



morning meeting wetlands trail design team 2 obviously underprepared several
topographical mistakes Terry under breath: “Hikers better bring waders” laugh again
thinking

until noon cubicle
80% at computer
conceiving green spaces
graduated from rest stops
single block Shreveport
groundbreaking park
alterations a hassle
make up minds please
thank god for software

models in grad school
1:50 office buildings
plaza recessed fountain
floreets for shade

thanks to folks
Lincoln Logs
—Wright Jr.—
mechanized Tinkers
girder set
and in high relief
the game of Life



portobello sandwich check good not better than tongue likes its ruts brain too
opinions ideas change almost painful vital though lofts over restaurant with modest
raise downtown living reverse suburban flow

afternoon various sundry
and prospecting
stick with firm 20 yrs.
college master plans
corporate campuses
or

strike out in 10
own venture
small vanguard
or

big leap arty
C
h
r
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Goldsworthy

dinner date pleasant warm spot in cooling relation 2 months tops perceptible shift
marriage conceivable each woman question mark this one this one poof husband
fatherhood term insurance etc

nightcap novel
Russkies on ice

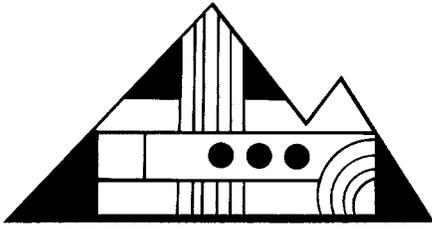
real comradeship
fake comrade state

there but for
accidents of

birth
sense of core

if not self
firmer ground
an end
to
falling





20 YEARS GONE
by Jennifer Phelps

What I remember

a cap of tight dyed curls
an impossible strawberry blonde
at your unconfessed age

pink-framed bifocals
and basement pipes hung heavy with thousands
of bright blouses

your small body made hard
by sadness and
vigorous walking on the steep
streets of San Francisco

tall glass cylinder filled with miniature chocolate bars
and that painstakingly stitched petit point Seurat
proudly frozen in maddeningly
meticulous detail
on your living-room wall

I remember trinkets of ornately carved cinnabar
roses
foggy mornings and
too many stray cats fed faithful

What I cannot forget

late nights
that stretched long and promising with
giddy giggles and shared stories
giving way to a strained and unutterable silence
as I inevitably began to acquire the
trappings of adulthood

and then you were lost to me
stubbornly behaving as if

it was I who was lost to you

I wish I could ask you things

ask you if you were always given
to self-destructive urges
like the strawberry allergy
that spawned in you
an irrepressible craving for the
illicit fruit

you reportedly went on binges
eating one heaping basketful after another
until you were red-mouthed and
miserable with hives

I want to ask you if you
thought I could not see
past your garrisons of levity
and shunned idleness
to the lonely void inside
where could have dwelt
contentment, if not joy

After all, beauty surrounded you

you who were so skilled at creating
intricate, beautiful things
with your doorknob knuckles
and your wooden looms
humming with life like a beehive
birthing placemats, runners

all rashly sold at your shocking moving sale
when you forcibly shed the exoskeleton
of your full but empty existence for pennies on the dollar
sold the house at 19 Hazelwood Avenue and everything in it
to start anew in the
sticky paradise of Honolulu

you cast off all your beloved possessions then
the parquet-topped breakfast table
those tiny silver spoons from
faraway places
the bedroom set you
saved for a year to buy
as a young woman

Did those things cling to you
like an oil slick to matted feathers,
weighing you down,
rendering you flightless?

or did you consider yourself unworthy
the sale another
byproduct of your self-condemnation?

I wonder ...

What is it
you would say to me now
if I could ask you who you are?

So many questions

answers now lost to me
like the sensation of your
glittering brooches crushed
into my breastbone
as you hugged me too tightly
with your ferocious, awkward affection

and of course you loved
and lived
but so painfully and with bitter reproach

so that when your body
let you down in the end—
Lou Gehrig's disease stealing
first your speech, then legs, lungs—
you catalogued
that disappointment with the
spiteful satisfaction of true
self-loathing
leaving me an awful parting gift
of slurred dagger words
on your lonesome hospital deathbed:

“Don't waste your time on me.”

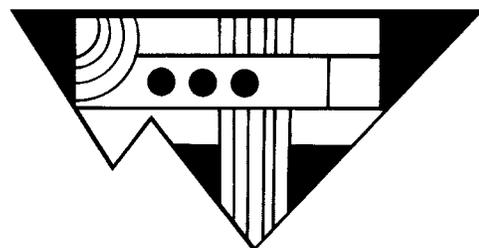
I was of course too young to tell you
even in the face of that cruel dismissal
how much I loved you

how they are your small, graceless feet
that slip into my size six shoes

how, as the great chasm of
loneliness threatens to
engulf me, as it did you,

I, too, aspire to create things of beauty
with these diminutive hands, so like yours
though not with busy looms
and brightly colored threads
but with a pen and paper,
paint and brush,
still

the heart of a weaver beating
always beating
within my chest.



THE STAR MAP GIRL OF QUENTIN AVENUE'S GUIDE TO HOLLYWOOD DEATHS

by Kerry Jones

Actually, Jayne Mansfield wasn't beheaded in the car accident. A photographer snapped a photo of the death scene, and because a wig fell out of the car, well, everyone assumed her head came off with the top of the car after it hit a pesticide truck just outside of New Orleans. Gail Russell drank herself to death, and so did Veronica Lake, more or less. Linda Darnell died after a house fire. Eric Fleming was devoured by piranhas. John Garfield officially died of a heart attack, but most people think he was having sex with Iris Whitney when it happened. I can only imagine the months of "going out on top" jokes after that one. Maria Montez had a heart attack in a bathtub when she was only thirty-three. So much for a long, hot soak.

"I don't care that you know this stuff," my mother once said to me when we were watching *Airport*. "But do you have to tell me what kind of *car* Jean Seberg's body was found in, or that it was decomposing when they found it? Knowing so much of that kind of thing can't be healthy. Besides, I'm just trying to watch the damn movie."

It was a Renault. She was living in Paris at the time.

Most people say Romy Schneider died of a broken heart. Her only son accidentally impaled himself on a wrought-iron fence. She committed suicide, though. She didn't just die, that's way too romantic. But she probably *did* have a broken heart. At least, I wouldn't doubt that part of the story. And when I tell a story, especially about the stars, I try to make it real. I like to think it's my tribute to them. Think about it--they spent so much of their lives giving us what wasn't real, to the point where I think a lot of them started to wonder what the hell was real themselves, until some of them just gave up.

James Dean's last words were, "He's *got* to see us."

It was my own brush with death, my little waltz with the Grim Reaper himself, that led me to my obsession. That, and my mother. It's not funny, really. I shouldn't kid around like that, because two things are for certain: God and the Grim Reaper are always listening, and quite frankly I don't think either



one of them has a very good sense of humor. When I was three I nearly died of viral pneumonia, and as a result I was left with a slightly damaged left mitral valve.

Operative word: *slightly*.

My mother didn't see it that way at all. The doctors told her that the valve would probably heal on its own, but even as I got older I was never allowed to play outdoors for very long, never allowed to run, and I was always excused from gym class. That made most of my girlfriends envious, but of course when you can't do something, that's just the sort of thing you want to do the most.

During the summers I could only play outside for about three hours in the morning, and then I had to stay inside and rest from noon until after dinner, so naturally I became addicted to television, which wasn't so bad. My parents didn't really need a TV guide, which came with our Sunday paper, because by Tuesday at the latest I had the whole damn thing memorized. Channels 5, 11, and 48, all out of New York, showed all the really good black-and-white movies, and they led me to Bette Davis and *Dark Victory*, *Jezebel*, and *Now, Voyager*. On Saturday afternoons I could just bet Channel 48 would have an afternoon full of all the so-bad-you-have-to-love-them Hammer horror flicks, like *The House That Dripped Blood* and *To Love a Vampire*. On Saturday evenings I could catch something like *Mildred Pierce* or *The Maltese Falcon*. For a while I was into the disaster films, like *The Towering Inferno* and *The Poseidon Adventure*.

When I was eleven my mother walked into the living room one afternoon and snapped the television off, right in the middle of *Splendor in the Grass*.

"Enough," she said. "I'm sick of this. I'm sick of you just sitting here watching television all day long. Your mind is going to turn into a pile of mush and movies. Can't you read a book or something?"

"I've read all the books in this goofy house."

"Well ... find something new to read."

"Where?" I said.

"Oh, for heaven's sake. I don't know. And this is *not* a goofy house."

"Can I ride my bike?" I said.

"Of course you can't ride your bike. It's eighty-two degrees outside. You'll drop dead."

I had to think fast. "I won't drop dead if I ride it to the library. It's not very far, and it's air-conditioned."

That got her. She thought for a moment, then

said, "Just to library? You'll promise me? To the library and then home when you're done?" She was as suspicious of me as Joan Fontaine had been of Cary Grant.

In *Suspicion*. Alfred Hitchcock. He had a thing for blondes: Grace Kelly, Tippi Hedren, Janet Leigh.

I raised my right hand. "I swear."

"Take your book bag," she said. "And I expect you to bring some books home with you."

The library was across town, but our town was so small it didn't matter. Still--I took the longest route I could think of, and when I got there, I was sweating and panting, but I hadn't dropped dead. The doctors had already told my mother that what I needed more than anything else was exercise, but she was a slow learner. I was exhausted when I walked through the door, and my legs were wobbly. I could feel the slow slide of sweat trails working their way down the sides of my face. It was exhilarating. I vowed I'd bike to the library whenever I could. And I would always take the longest way to and back. One day I'd run the Boston Marathon, I promised myself. I'd bike the Tour de France. But for the time being I was just a tired, smelly, sweaty girl in the lobby of a small town library.

Looking at all the stacks of books, I couldn't imagine where to begin. I didn't feel like reading any Shakespeare or *Anne of Green Gables* bullshit, so when I could I marched right up to the librarian and asked, "Where do you keep your books on movies and movie stars? Biographies of them and that sort of thing?"

She was more than happy to show me, and I figured if I couldn't watch as many movies as I wanted, I'd at least read about them. That day I came home with *A Complete History of MGM Musicals* and *My Wicked, Wicked Ways*, by Errol Flynn, which the librarian told me was much too mature for a girl my age, so I told her I was getting it for my mother, and she stamped it and handed it to me.

"Meet Me in St. Louis," she said.

"Excuse me?"

"It was made in 1945. An MGM musical. Judy Garland met her husband, Vincente Minnelli, during that picture. It's simply wonderful," the librarian said. "A girl your age would love it."

"Well," I said. "Thank you very much."

A few years later I saw it and didn't love it. As a matter of fact, I didn't enjoy any MGM musicals. Too damn happy. But I did enjoy reading biographies about Judy Garland, and I learned that Vincente Minnelli was only one of many, many husbands.

Judy Garland died of an accidental overdose in England, or so the English coroner declared, but she had enough pills in her to knock over a moose. In addition to pills and booze, she had a nasty little habit of marrying homosexuals, and if you're a woman that will get you every time. Her fifth husband, Mickey Deans, found her dead one morning in June of 1969.

She died sitting on the john. Ding ding ding went the trolley.

By the time I was thirteen my mother had loosened up the reins quite a bit, then the Amish had to go and screw it all up with an outbreak of polio.

"Polio?" I said to my mother as she dragged a suitcase down from the attic. I remembered seeing black-and-

white photographs of little children with their heads sticking out of iron lungs. "Didn't that go out of style in the 1940s?"

"Well, for the most part. It hasn't been a problem since the vaccine was developed."

"So what's with the Amish kids?"

"The Amish don't believe in inoculations, so now we have this mess to deal with. Please turn that radio down for a minute."

I shut it off. I'd been listening to Casey Kasem, who I thought was an ass, and the Weekly Top Forty. "I Love Rock n'Roll" was going to be number one again anyway, so what did I care? All the guys at school had a hard-on for Joan Jett, which I thought



was hilarious. They liked to think they were tough, and since she was such a badass, she was their ideal girl. Right. She'd have her foot up their asses before any of them could get their pants down.

"I've been inoculated, right?"

My mother looked at me like I was stupid. I hated that look. "Well of *course* you've been inoculated. What kind of a question is that?"

I pointed at the suitcase. "Well, why the hell are you sending me up to Aunt Amanda's? Besides, Lancaster is like, an hour away."

"It doesn't hurt to be safe," she said. "And watch that mouth."

"Great," I said. "Now we're back to all this junk nonsense again."

"This isn't nonsense."

"The doctors have already told you the valve is ninety-percent healed."

My mother stared at me, hard, then nodded her head. "That's all fine and good. It's that other ten percent I'm worried about."

I flopped down on my bed and stared at the ceiling. "Why don't you just build a wall around me and get it over with?"

"I would if I could."

"Did you know Mia Farrow got polio when she was nine? She made a full recovery."

My mother was suddenly towering over me, hands on her hips. "Could you please find something, anything, worthwhile to do? Maybe something to help me get you packed?"

"But it's true," I said. "She made a full recovery."

"Ellen, I really don't give a shit."

"Watch your mouth," I said.

My Aunt Amanda lived on Quentin Avenue in Tunkhannock, which to me was just as podunk as the town I lived in, but at least there were the Blue Mountains to look at, and the Susquehanna River was practically in her backyard. My aunt wasn't so bad, but my Uncle George spoke in monosyllables and had a habit of farting at the dinner table, which everyone just ignored, but I mean, come on. They had a nice, respectable ranch house and my uncle

made enough money so my aunt never had to work a day in her life, although the family whisper was she'd done a little time in a few mental wards in the early years of their marriage. I never quite understood what had happened, since the one wedding photograph I'd seen of the two of them was beautiful. My Uncle George is smiling, thin, and proper, and my aunt had a big fluffy wedding dress like something out of *Gone with the Wind*. She was quite thin herself, and

pretty. Then again, I'm not sure when all his grunting and farting started, and since my aunt comes from good Catholic stock, like my mother, and doesn't believe in divorce, once she took the rose-colored glasses off, it's no wonder she went a little crazy. We all go a little mad sometimes, right?

Over the years my aunt, while pleasant to me and very kind, had managed to morph into the sort of person who reminded me of an eggplant. An eggplant is one of those vegetables no one has an opinion about. You just can't. It is what it is. It doesn't stink up the house like cauliflower, it doesn't

get mealy and wormy like tomatoes, it doesn't leave tiny green shit in between your teeth like broccoli, and it doesn't send you running for toothpicks like corn does. It is what it is, and it's an eggplant. End of story. Other than Eggplant Parmesan, most people don't even know what the hell to do with an eggplant. That was my aunt. The eggplant.

Now when you cross an eggplant with a farting, grunting blob, you're in for some interesting times. Or, rather, not. Belinda was four years older than I, and Melanie was two years older, and they were so uninteresting and nondescript I found them utterly fascinating by default. My aunt and uncle had managed to produce two sound bytes of white noise. For instance, if I said to the two of them:

"So what do you think of the fact that John Hinckley tried to assassinate Reagan just to impress Jodie Foster? Is that wild, or what?"

One of them would look at me and the other might say:

"Could you please pass the mashed potatoes? They're really good. Mom always mixes cheddar cheese in with them."



And Aunt Eggplant would say nothing as she smiled over a forkful of green beans, Uncle George would fart, and I'd sit there silently, mentally cursing mashed potatoes and the Amish. And I'd think what a long summer it was going to be and how I'd much rather, almost, spend it in an iron lung.

I got up very early one morning in July to watch Lady Di marry Prince Charles. I started watching the coverage at seven in the morning. Aunt Eggplant sort of kept me company. She sat on the sofa by the picture window, but that was where she spent most of her days anyway. Later on Belinda and Melanie stumbled out of their bedrooms and got themselves some cereal and plunked down next to me on the living room floor.

"You really like to watch the television, don't you?" Belinda said.

She and Melanie were eating Shredded Wheat. They couldn't even eat interesting cereal.

"I like to watch movies," I said. "Not television necessarily. I don't like many television shows. But this is different."

"How?" Belinda muffled.

"This is history."

"Oh," Melanie said.

"Oh, come on," I said. "Everybody's getting Lady Di haircuts, and everybody wants to look like Lady Di." I pointed at the television. "This is the best thing since Grace Kelly got married."

"Who's Grace Kelly?" Melanie said.

"Princess Grace," I said.

"Oh. Her."

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out for a few seconds. I couldn't believe it. "This is ridiculous," I finally said to the ceiling. "Haven't you guys ever seen *The Country Girl? To Catch a Thief? High Noon?*"

They shook their heads.

"Rear Window, for God's sake?"

"Nope," Belinda said.

"They're too young," my aunt said.

I turned to her. "But I'm younger than--"

It was no use. Aunt Eggplant was smiling and filing her nails and watching the footage, and so were Belinda and Melanie as they happily shoveled air with milk into the mouths. I sat back and resigned myself to the television and held my breath until later that morning, when the horse-drawn carriage made its way to Westminster Abbey and Lady

Di finally emerged, looking more like an uncertain cream-puff than the confident Cinderella I'd hoped for.

Grace Kelly attended the wedding. Two months later, Princess Diana's first official business as the Princess of Wales was to attend the funeral of Princess Grace of Monaco. But I'd read enough Grimm's brothers fairytales to know that fairytales don't always have happy endings. I just wasn't all that surprised.

Quentin Avenue snaked around a sharp bend just past my aunt's house and became Rural Route 4. My cousins both had male 8-speed Huffy bikes, which we all initially agreed were cool, who needed that female slant-bar shit? I had to ride one of Belinda's older bikes, which was fine, and my cousins' bikes were cooler until the day Melanie had to make a sudden stop and slid off her bike seat and onto the straight-bar, and it got her where she lived. She fell over and skinned the hell out of her outer right thigh and both of her elbows, and she held onto her crotch for nearly an hour like she had to pee.

"Goddamn it," she said, with more emotion than I'd ever heard come out of her. "I hope I don't start to bleed. I'm still a virgin, right?"

Belinda and I looked at each other and rolled our eyes.

"Of course you're still a virgin," Belinda said. "Don't be an ass."

"You're a virgin," I said. "You're just a clutzy virgin."

After that I didn't envy their cool bikes so much, but we loved taking the bikes out and riding them to the start of Quentin Avenue, just off Route 6. It was all mostly downhill from there. We'd start at the stop sign and pedal as hard as we could. My mother would have thrown a fit if she knew what I was doing, but Aunt Eggplant never watched us or knew what we were doing on any given day until afterward, and even that was based on what we told her.

Once we started on our bikes we'd pump hard, get our bikes really going, and then once we hit the start of the downhill slope we'd just hang on for dear life with the momentum and navigate the turn as best we could. Melanie managed to impress me a few times: she could lean into the turn and almost touch the road with her left shoulder, then lean back to the right just in



time. I never had the nerve to try it. One wrong move on my part could get back to Aunt Eggplant, and that might mean it might get back to my mother.

Our object of destination was their mutual friend, Marie, who was as odd as Belinda and Melanie. She had bad eyesight, miserable sinuses, and a host of crazy allergies. Even though she was fourteen, she never carried tissues and constantly wiped her nose on her right forearm. Constantly. The lenses on her glasses were as thick as the bottom of a Pepsi bottle, and she was allergic to everything from dust and feathers to white bread. I never actually got inside what I figured was the bubble she lived in, because once we landed on her front lawn with our bikes she'd already be making her way outside to us, rubbing her nose on her arm and sniveling, "Hey guys. Was goig on?"

And that was where we ended up after we'd all had enough of the royal wedding, even me, and even though my aunt and uncle had the luxury of all luxuries of pre-cable fantasies, HBO and Prism, I didn't stick around to see if anything interesting was coming on. That was a routine for the evenings, after dinner and the dishes, after re-runs of *The Odd Couple* went off at eleven-thirty and my uncle farted himself off to bed. After my cousins decided there was no reason to stay up anymore. That was when I'd curl up against the sofa next to Aunt Eggplant and we'd watch something like *Body Heat* together. "Don't tell your mother I let you watch this," she said. And I said, "It's our secret." And she wrapped her arm briefly around my shoulders, and I briefly thought she wasn't an eggplant after all.

The first time I met Marie she pointed a snotty slick forearm and index finger at me and said, "Who she? Was she doig heah?"

I didn't care how much older she was, which wasn't much. If you don't have the good sense to carry tissues with you to properly blow your nose, don't go around treating me like the infant.

"I'm Ellen," I said. "I'm their younger cousin. I'm staying with them for a while."

"Why?" she said. "Are your parents getting divorced or somethig?"

"No, stupid," Belinda said. "There's a polio epidemic where she lives and she has a bad heart."

"No, I don't," I said. I stared at Snot-Face. "My

heart is just fine. I had a little trouble when I was very small and my mother freaks out over everything. I'm well. I'm fine. The polio epidemic is the Amish's problem, not mine, but my stupid mother doesn't see it that way. So I'm here for now."

Snot-Nose took it all in and finally nodded. "Thas cool. My mother fweaks out, too." She looked at Belinda and Melanie. "So. We gonna ride bikes or what? Or we can go to the rivah and see who's down there. There might be some beer." She dragged her arm across her nose.

"You ever hear of this little invention called a Kleenex?" I said.

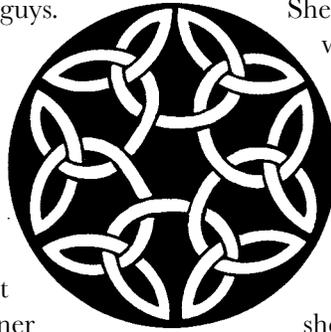
She stared at me hard through those bottle-thick lenses of hers, then smiled, but it wasn't friendly.

She sucked up through her nose hard. There was a disgusting gurgle and a sort of catch, and the sound made me wince and will my stomach to keep lunch where it was instead of spilling onto the road. Then she spoke without a misstep.

"Is the little virgin girl going to come with us or does she have to play it safe and stay where her aunt can see her so she doesn't get into trouble or have a heart attack?"

I knew where I stood. She was Marie after that. I was almost done with thinking I was better than any of them, because I suspected they all might just be a little more intelligent than I'd thought. Marie got her bike, and Belinda and Melanie rode alongside of her. I followed behind, but I was there, and I wasn't going to let them forget it.

The river. The Susquehanna. Right there at the bottom of Quentin Avenue. Just beyond the treeline. Fast-moving and dangerous after the first thaw of winter, when it was filled by all the tributaries and prone to spilling its banks. Sometimes it flooded my aunt and uncle's garage, it got so high. That would happen in late March or all through the month of April if the conditions were right. But then there was always midsummer, when the river hung low and murky as a three-day-old cup of coffee with cream. It bred mosquitoes so thick some days you could only get so close. Otherwise you'd swear they'd suck you bloodless. It had a feral smell, peppered with rotting driftwood that slowly cruised the currents. It was almost harmless, if you stayed away from the water



snakes and watched out for copperheads that might sun themselves along its banks.

That was really their world, Melanie and Belinda and Marie. And I learned that summer there were as many misfit boys as there were misfit girls.

The boys that came down to the river to hang out were not attractive in the least, and there weren't that many of them. I got to know their names, or the names they went by. There was Kyle, Stevie, Red Eye, Asshat, Billy, Fape (which I eventually learned was short for "Fucking Ape"), and Marvin, who introduced himself to me as Stiff, but everyone just laughed when he'd said that. Billy slapped him on the shoulders and had said, "Stiff? *Stiff?* Fuck that, man. This here's *Marvin*, and he fucking knows it."

They followed their own code of protocol, which was to completely ignore me, before they gradually acknowledged my existence. It didn't bother me, not at all. I'd never met anyone like them before, and I was a dutiful student. I didn't feel slighted, not even when Belinda or Melanie or even Marie would just disappear with one of them for a while, and the girls would come back looking as cool and aloof as they could and the guys would come back smiling, sometimes making a point of zipping up their flies so everyone could see, as if we hadn't already guessed what had happened, as if we needed that much visual proof. As if we were all completely stupid or something.

"Hey, Marvin." He turned and looked at me as though he'd noticed me for the very first time.

"Hand me that pole you're not using and pass the fucking worms you're letting boil in that container. I can fish. Let me show you a thing or two."

He and Red Eye looked at each and grinned.

"Think so?" Marvin said.

"Hell yeah," I said.

He handed me the worms.

"Show me a fucking thing or two," he said.

"Fuck, yeah," I said.

"Fuck yeah is right," he said, and smiled.

I was taking the plastic lid off the Styrofoam container of worms, but I glanced at him sideways, not sure if I'd asked for more than I'd bargained for.

"Nothing doing, Short Stiff," Red Eye said, and I looked at him.

Red Eye didn't smile. He didn't even look at me. He kept his eyes on his line. "You come over here

and fish next to me, little girl."

That made me mad. But I did what I was told. I grabbed the container of worms, crouched down next to Red Eye, and baited the worm as fast as I could. I didn't even flinch when worm guts squirted out next to my mouth.

"No need to prove anything, Little Girl," he said as he checked his line, then reeled in. Red Eye took his cigarette out of his mouth and flicked his ashes next to me. "You and me," he said, and he pulled another cigarette out of the soft pack he had tucked in his jeans, plunked it in his mouth, and lit it. "Hey. That's just my nickname for you. Be glad you got one." He looked over at Marvin. "Some people ain't worthy. You. You're Little Girl, and I like that.

Now show me how you cast."

I showed him.

"Not so bad. Here," he said, and put a cigarette in my mouth. "You ever smoke?"

I nodded "no."

"You really got a bad heart?" he said.

I didn't know anything anymore. I shrugged at him.

"Well," he said. "Now's as good as time as any to find out."

He lit the cigarette and I puffed and blew, but then he told me to inhale and I did and coughed so hard the cigarette fell on the ground. Red Eye picked the butt up and patted me on the back, then stuck it back in my mouth and told me to try again.

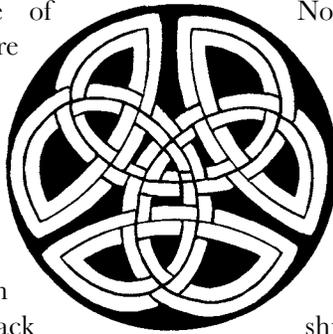
"Don't you throw up now," he said. "I can't handle none of that."

I thought of Marie and inhaled again and held my stomach down yet again, then blew out the smoke and smiled at him. "Not so bad," I coughed.

Marie had gone off with Stevie, Belinda had gone off with Asshat, and Melanie had gone off with Kyle. Marvin was still fishing, but wasn't paying any attention to his line. He was just looking off down the river. Red Eye put his arm around me. I wasn't afraid.

"Now," he said. "In case you don't already know, you got to pay attention when you fish. You got to take care. You got to love it. You can't just want one thing out of it. You have to love it. Keep your finger on the line and we can talk. Keep your finger on the line."

We both looked up. One of the girls and one of



the boys were moving out of the brush. I felt my finger slip off the line.

“Don’t do that,” Red Eye said, even though he was watching, too. “Don’t ever get distracted or let your guard down. Stay focused.”

I wanted him. It was the first time I’d ever felt that way. I wanted him more than anything. I’d never known that kind of want. I didn’t care about the river, or its smell, or the way they talked, or the fish I pretended I wanted. I wanted him, and I didn’t care about sneaking off somewhere or what he would say or do afterward or anything. I just wanted him. Feral. In any way I could. I wanted Red Eye, with his shaggy, greasy brown hair that more often than not had flakes of dandruff in it. He had a sharp nose and weasily eyes that could never stay focused, and I wasn’t sure how often he bothered to change his clothes or take a shower, but there was something kind and rough about him, something that made me feel, oddly, safe. I decided to be daring and I reached up and touched his cheek.

He took my hand and held it, and I saw him close his eyes. I looked toward Marvin, but he was looking downriver. I wanted Red Eye to kiss me. I understood. Anything could happen. I wanted it to. I felt feral, desperate.

Red Eye took my hand and kissed the center of it, and I almost leaped into him. I didn’t care. I was tired of everything, of feeling dead, of knowing the dead too closely.

He kissed the center of my palm and whispered, “No. Watch your line.”

And when I stiffened he said held me close and said, “Don’t be mad. I’d take you if I could, and I know I could, but we’re fishing, and if you’re going to fish with me, we’re fishing. Let’s just do that, Little Girl. And let’s not tell anyone I call you that. ‘Sides. You’re only thirteen and I think I could get my ass seriously arrested.”

It was getting close to three o’clock, and the air felt thick as a wool blanket. Marvin was asleep on the bank, and the girls were sitting on a fallen log peeling bark off it. That seemed about right to me; in that kind of weather that’s all you had the energy for.

Finally Red Eye said, “Hey guys. Fuck this shit. Let’s go to Cinemas 6 and catch a movie.”

Asshat said, “We don’t even know what’s playing.”



“I give a fuck if it’s *Bambi*,” Red Eye said. “Just anywhere that’s cool.”

“I wouldn’t mind an Orange Julius,” Belinda said, and stretched.

“I’ll say it again,” Red Eye said. “I don’t give a fuck. Let’s just get off our asses and get out of *here*.”

Asshat and Marvin wanted to see *Stripes*, but since it was rated R there was some doubt on whether or not I’d be able to get in.

Red Eye scrutinized me. “She ain’t gonna pass for seventeen. No way. She ain’t got a driver’s license and no one’s gonna believe anyone in this group. Let’s go see *Clash of the Titans*.”

“Already seen it,” Fape said.

“Was it good?”

“I guess so,” he said.

“Well since you can’t remember, go see it again,” Red Eye said.

“Fuck. All right. The special effects were cool.”

Red Eye paid for my ticket and the girls went off to get some popcorn and Mike ‘n Ikes. I sat with Red Eye on a bench while the other guys went into the arcade to play a few games before the movies. No one seemed worried about catching the previews.

“What’s with you and movies?” Red Eye asked. “You watch too many of them. You’ll end up with bad eyesight or something.”

“It was the only thing I could really do when I was little. My mother was too scared of my heart. So I watched movies. I like them. But I like the really old ones.”

“How come?” Red Eye asked, but I could tell he wasn’t all that interested. He was watching a girl with blonde hair talk to her friends. She wore short-shorts and she could; she looked good in them. She had on a pink halter-top and wore gold hoop earrings and a gold necklace that had a heart charm on it. She sure was pretty, but she had an innocence about her. I could tell she wasn’t the kind of girl to go around with anyone in the group I was with, and she’d never let someone like Red Eye feel her up in the backseat of his parents’ car.

“They’re just different. They’re classics. There will never be another James Dean or Marilyn Monroe or Gary Cooper or John Wayne.”



“You don’t know that,” Red Eye said. He was still looking at the blonde, who had by

now caught him looking at her and turned her back on him. Every once in a while she looked over her shoulder, but she just gave him a disdainful sneer and turned back to her friends. One of the other girls looked at Red Eye, and we soon heard a high-pitched laugh.

“Bunch of fucking cats,” Red Eye said. “Why are girls like that? I swear. Either fucking stupid or fucking cats with their tails all up in the fucking air. I’d love to bring one of them down a notch or two.”

He was serious, so I said, “I’m not like that.”

Red Eye turned to me and looked at me, really looked at me. Then he said, “No. You’re not.” He looked down at the floor and said, “How long does it take to get fucking popcorn? All those people you just mentioned. They’re all dead. I’ll bet you can’t tell me how each and every one of them died.”

I smiled. “Sure. Dean died in a care accident, Marilyn Monroe from an overdose--they’re not sure whether it was suicide or an accident, but I think it was suicide--and Cooper and Wayne had cancer.”

Red Eye nodded. “You got a death wish or something?”

“No,” I said. “I just find it interesting.”

“But how come you know so much about how they died? Do you know as much about how they lived?”

I shrugged. “Some of them. It’s just for some reason, I find how some of them died more interesting than how they lived.”

“That’s twisted,” Red Eye said. “Life’s a pretty special thing. That heart of yours--you should be happy it wasn’t something worse that *would* have hustled you off to your grave at twenty-five.” He nodded in the direction of the girl he’d had his eye on. “Look at her. Thinks she knows everything. You probably know more about living than she does.”

He was missing the point. “That’s *us*,” I said. “We’re ordinary.”

“For now. You don’t know what you’re going to grow up to do. Who’s to say you can’t grow to be a famous actress? You want people waiting around for you die young?”

“I’m not going to grow up to be famous.”

“Why not try? Get the fuck out of here. Out of this place and this state and the same old, same old. Do something different.”

“What about you?” I said.

He smiled. “Nah. Not me. Guys like me don’t do nothing special. I’ll be lucky if I graduate, and

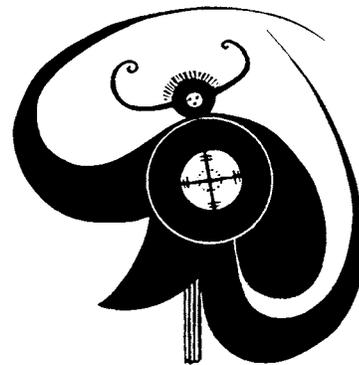
even then it doesn’t matter. I’ll end up getting a job with my old man and working at the Herr’s Chip plant. I’ll marry the first girl who loves me back even just a little bit, settle down, have a couple of kids, get drunk on the weekends and piss the wife off and probably spend my weekends working on the car or fishing with Asshat and Marvin. My life is crystal clear. Always has been.”

I couldn’t stop staring at him. Suddenly I wanted to say something stupid and poetic, maybe something about Shakespeare and soliloquies, about how there’s a little bit of poetry in all of us, something about the surprises we can find in a heart, but that seemed too much, so I stared at the blonde sexy girl as she walked away laughing with her friends, took in the scent of popcorn and butter, and waited for the rest of the gang to show up.

We walked into the cool theater and found seats and the lights dimmed. When I saw Laurence Olivier’s name in the opening credits, I immediately thought of Vivien Leigh, and how enthralled the world had been with their marriage, and how long it had lasted before her mental illness broke it up. But she didn’t commit suicide or anything like that. Vivien Leigh suffocated to death in 1967. Tuberculosis.

And then I felt Red Eye’s hand on mine. I squeezed it, and he didn’t squeeze back, but I turned to him, I could see he was smiling. And then I thought, *Being alive. Not so bad. Not when you can find poetry in the strangest places, places not all that far away from Quentin Avenue.*

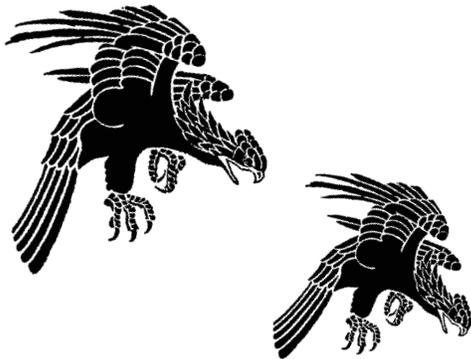
Still. Dying from tuberculosis. I can’t even imagine.



ASYLUM
by Zara Raab

In times of illness, dry and listless,
we seek asylum in our parents' town,
where death and weather rarely visit.
Summer air is heavy there; though down
the sky, darkness pours, no rains come,
as we lounge among the crickets.
We lend a hand but to smooth our hair,
content in our suits of white linen,
click-et-click, click-et-click in our ears.
The men wear button-downs and brogans,
the streets run on like silky ribbons,
dogs nuzzle the sparkling gutters there.

They are like gods in heaven, parents,
offering all response to our whys,
and some relief from our vigilance.
We serve them a bit of blame for lives
like our own, rife with error and lies,
thus we come home when the heat is on.
No mayhem spins in those curtained rooms,
beside the fathers' spring tine harrows,
where shooting stars and wild lupine bloom.
We'll soon admire the five string banjos
sunning themselves in all the windows,
there where death and rain so rarely come.



DESERT MOUNTAIN SUNDAY
by Jeffrey Alfier

Through cauterized hollows of campsite
fire pits, the raspy breath of an alpine
breeze is surmounted by hawks that rally
their wings in primal echelons. They marshal
beneath cumulus buildups in white mimic
of barges – clouds that'll soon shade field mice
who learn late that nothing riding updrafts starves.
In the Santa Cruz valley below, a grandson
and grandfather put the hours in abeyance
for a gas grill and cooler. The boy watches
the man wipe smoky sweat from his eyes
with the back of a hand that grips a greasy
spatula. Shielding his own eyes, the boy gazes
up the Santa Catalina peaks, traces hawks arcing
down the long cool distance of the storm
where high winds thread pitch-dark feathers.
Rain begins to touch his face, and he pulls
his grandfather's free arm round his shoulder
as poplar leaves gust between their footsteps.

GAGNOFF
by Hal White

Gagnoff had been trying for hours to get the spell right—a spell that ought to produce, right before his very eyes, a brilliantly blue and golden medium-sized butterfly. So far, all he had to show for his morning’s work was a slowly melting handful of gravel (the result of his last attempt) and several pieces of paper covered with green flickering writing—writing which informed him (usually more vaguely than less) of various syntacticaql or logical errors in the structure of his incantation. Worse, since he was only an apprentice wizard, the error messages were often insulting and sometimes downright abusive. For instance:

YOU STUPID JERK.
YOU CALL THAT AN INCANTATION?
IT OUGHT TO BE OBVIOUS THAT YOUR
LAST ATTEMPT WAS HOPELESS.
YOU’RE LUCKY TO GET EVEN THIS
BACK!
ENERGY USE: 2.7 ERG
REMAINING IN ACCOUNT: 20.3 ERG

Sometimes the messages were more helpful:

IF YOU WANT A BUTTERFLY, YOU’LL
HAVE TO REMOVE THE FOLLOWING
INCOMPATIBILITIES:

Following this was a list of the offending verses, lines, and syllables.

If only the Master Wizard wasn’t so busy. When Gagnoff had asked for help with the last few lines of the spell (which had to be the source of the error), the Master had gruffly replied: “Look it up in the manual. I can’t be botherED. Don’t you know I have a deadline to meet?” The manuals, which Gagnoff had been through over and over again, were ambiguous and vague. In their attempt to be general, they glossed over many specifics. The examples were useless (“chicken soufflé, materialized at a distance,” “self-replicating obsidian door handles” ...). Truly, wizardry was in a large part an oral tradition. No one could learn from the manuals alone (or at all, Gagnoff thought).

So, Gagnoff was reduced to trying every reasonable combination and permutation of the

last few lines that he could think of or that his fellow apprentice wizards might suggest. But not too many—his energy account was dwindling rapidly and the Master would be angry if he had to ask for more before the project was finished.



Gagnoff was weary and frustrated but doggedly determined. There was something about spell-casting that just kept him at it until he was completely exhausted. Each time, he told himself, the previous error had been fixed, and this time it would work! And, when his failure became apparent, he would carefully re-cast the spell, edging closer to despair with each blundered attempt.

Now Gagnoff walked over to his desk, and began slowly moving his hands in circles in front of himself, the right hand clockwise and the left hand counter-clockwise. Solemnly, he intoned:

O GRA OCT A SYSUT PASS
NAM TAB SUPRA SUB TEM DEL
VOL NOS SER TUM REC DE FER
NOV MOD SUB O PASS QUA NON
MAX LIK CON CODE OR SYS OUT!

Abruptly, he dropped his hands to his sides and sat down to wait. This was the part he hated most—waiting nervously for the results. Sometimes the results would appear within a matter of minutes and sometimes it might take hours. Waiting time was generally short in the morning when only a few apprentice wizards and minor witches were casting spells, but things invariably slowed down in the afternoon as more and more spells were cast. It was absolutely impossible for Gagnoff to get any work done in the evenings, since that was the preferred working time of Master Wizards and Major Witches, who had the highest priority ratings and cast the most complicated spells.

Suddenly, a small blue-white explosion shattered Gagnoff’s unhappy reverie, singeing his elbow, which he had thoughtlessly propped too close to the center of his desk. There, in the middle, sat a small blue and dull gold egg. A few seconds later, in a small puff

of white smoke, the inevitable piece of paper with flickering green writing materialized in mid-air and fluttered to the desk top.

At least the color is right, thought Gagnoff, as he reached over to read the error message:

NO ALLITERATIONS ALLOWED
IN FINAL LINE OF
INSECT INCANTATIONS
NICE TRY, DUMMY.
ENERGY USE: 4.2 ERG
REMAINING IN ACCOUNT: 11.4 ERG



“Goddamn it!” he yelled, pounding the desk with his fist. Now he’d have to find a substitute syllable for CON or CODE in the last line. Would it object to the syllables OR and OUT? True, they were separated

by one syllable, but just to be on the safe side, perhaps he ought to try to find some way to do without them. Angrily, he pulled down manual 12 (Substitutions for Invalid Syllables) and began leafing through.

After half-an-hour he was ready to try again. This time, as Gagnoff went through the chant, he whirled his arms wildly in windmill fashion, building up speed and chanting more and more loudly, until he screeched out the last line:

MAX LIK REN CODE DOR SYS OOT!!

Of course, the hand motions had no effect whatsoever on the outcome of the spell—they were just part of the Wizard Mystique, used to distract and impress the uninitiated. A good wizard could keep a court hypnotized with irrelevant but captivating arm-waving.

After fifteen minutes of weary pacing around his room, Gagnoff was startled when a violent orange-red explosion inside the closet blew the closet door off its hinges. A few seconds later, in a dainty puff of green smoke, a small piece of paper materialized above the desk and floated to the desk top.

“Smart-ass demons,” Gagnoff muttered, getting up off the floor where he had been blown

by the explosion. While the smoke cleared from the closet, he went over to the desk to examine the error message, which informed him:

WARNING: THE COMBINATION
“DOR SYS OOT”
MAY RESULT IN
A VIOLENT ORANGE-RED
EXPLOSION
ENERGY USE: 6.9 ERG
REMAINING IN ACCOUNT: 4.5 ERG

By now, he was so frustrated, tired, and nervous that he hardly had enough energy to be angry. He shuffled over to the closet, hoping against hope that inside he would find a delicate, radiant, blue-and-gold butterfly. As he peered inside through the smoke, he found, nestled among his old sneakers, cowboy boots, and sandals, not a butterfly, but a bottle of Harvey’s Bristol Cream, which had certainly not been there before. Gagnoff stooped over and grabbed the bottle by the neck, and was about to smash it against the door jamb of the closet in frustration. At the last instant, though, he thought better of it, walked over to his bookshelf with it, and put it down next to “Explosions: How to Produce and Avoid Them,” which he now took down.

This next spell had better be right, he thought grimly as he paged through the well-worn manual. He only had 4.5 ERGs left—enough for one more try and no mistakes. After forty-five minutes of careful checking and cross-checking, referencing and cross-referencing, he was finally ready. This was it. Slowly, he stood up and began waving his arms up and down, chanting:

O GRA OCT A SYSUT PASS
NAM TAB SUPRA SUB TEM DEL
VOL NOS SER TUM REC DE FER
NOV MOD SUB P PASS QUA NON
MAK LIKE CON TOAD FOR SYS OOT!

Since it was now well into the afternoon, Gagnoff fully expected to have to wait half-an-hour to an hour. He sat down again and had just begun to morosely turn over in his mind how he would explain to the Master that he needed his energy account replenished when he was startled by a pinkish mini-explosion in the exact center of his desk.

He couldn’t believe his eyes. There, in front of

him, in glowing blue and dazzling gold was the most resplendent butterfly he had ever seen! Wait 'til the Master Wizard saw this!

And—it was alive! Gagnoff felt overjoyed as he watched the butterfly slowly begin to move its wings up and down. Then solemnly, and barely in the range of human hearing, the butterfly began to chant:

IN SEL FER TEM
PASS TEM DEC
UT NAM
PUK

Two seconds later, Gagnoff disappeared in a searing purple explosion.



HOT AIR LOST AND FOUND

Found: Apple that apparently fell quite a ways from the tree. No apple trees anywhere close by. Just this apple. On the ground. No bruising or bad spots.

Found: Bee in bonnet. Rather fetching bee, actually. Well-groomed and friendly. Sound familiar? Please call the Shasta Apiary Society.

Lost: Designer Whoopee cushion, in somebody's couch somewhere. If found, stop blaming the dog and call me. Significant sentimental value; offering reward.

Found: Bird in bush. Firmly settled in bush. I'd wager every bit as good as a bird in the hand, if you don't procrastinate and you contact me right away at Box 4999.

WINTER AFTERNOON

by Askold Skalsky

Himes Avenue—spectral
in January light, a thrall
of glints and slivers wrested

from the pale blue guttering
of sky dipped in Butterfly
Lane's perpendicular fringe

as if two intercrossed seekers
had nowhere to go and stopped
by the hanging traffic canister

changing its beamed eye
across the fields of rinsed out
grass in pale indetermination

like an absent sea
beating with an outpost
heart a hundred miles away,

cheerful and cold,
a last outcropping
of the sun entering

the window of the eyes
to ask whether the invitation
can still bring its promise home,

bidding it in, pushing words
stilled into the empty street
below with fenders gleaming,

spiked rimless irises
of flashing spots posing
themselves into a cipher:

*here—a world you never
asked for, fickle, exquisite,
at one slim moment disappearing*

its bright traces of a stranger, friend.

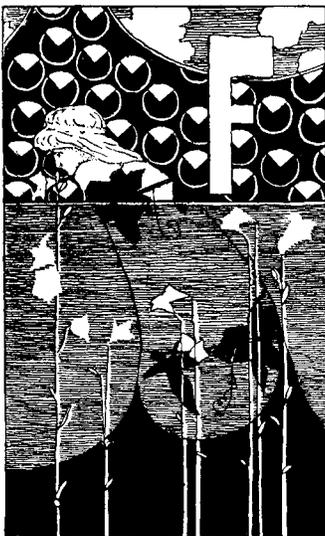


THE LISTENER

by Celeste White

— Seventeenth Installment —

Violet Beaulieu lives in the town of Clear Springs where she works as a Listener, lending an accomplished ear to her fellow townspeople's dreams, fantasies, and secrets. One day, a mysterious stranger comes into her practice; but instead of having a story to tell, he is trying to find his story, which somehow, in the past, he has lost. Christopher's appearance heralds a number of strange and disturbing developments in Clear Springs and puts Violet squarely in the middle of the developing tale. In the previous chapters, Christopher and Violet have encountered a sinister couple who appear to have some connection to his hidden past. Christopher resolves to leave town in order to spare the townspeople any harm and to see if he can't elucidate some of his forgotten tale. Violet has offered to accompany him. (This is Chapter 17 of The Listener. Readers who would like previous chapters may e-mail me at keswickhouse@earthlink.net.)



or Mrs. Kapinsky, I brewed a nice cup of Ancient Beauty jasmine tea. We settled in the solarium with our tea; she couldn't get enough, Mrs. Kapinsky said, of this beautiful spring sunlight. After the sparse light of winter, the lengthening days did her heart and soul good, she told me. I was dying to know what she had brought me, but

she took her impish time in telling me, filling me in on the doings of her son, who was thinking about moving back to Clear Springs.

"And why is that?" I asked. I knew that Donald had always preferred city life to that of a small town. As content as he always seemed to be growing up here, he couldn't wait to move to the city when he got old enough. And as far as I knew, until now, he had been quite happy there.

"Oh, he said that it just seems as if all the crowding and stress of urban life is starting to get to people. He says that people just aren't the way they used to be when he moved there."

"And ... how is that?"

"Well, he said that people seem angrier these days. He got into a tussle with someone over a parking space the other day and I could tell that he was shaken by the encounter."

"Over a parking space?" I said.

"Well, these things take on greater importance in cities."

"Yes, true," I mused.

"He's going to try giving up his car and see if that helps."

"It could, I suppose. I mean, at least he wouldn't be in the position of facing competition in that arena."

"Yes. He says the only problem with taking public transportation are the aggressive street performers."

"Aggressive street performers?" I echoed. "I don't understand. How does that happen?"

"Well, he says that street performers come and perform while people are waiting for the bus. And then they pass around their hat when they see the bus coming. If you don't give them any money, Donald says they can become quite nasty."

"Oh, dear. They don't have money from other sources?" I asked.

Mrs. Kapinsky reached over and laid her hand on my knee. "Violet, dear, the rest of the world is not like Clear Springs. Now, in general, that's a good thing. We don't want the world to be all alike, do we? But life is harder other places. Often much harder. It'll be good to keep that in mind during your travels. People are basically good, I believe, in their deepest, core selves. But any number of things can twist a person, contort their goodness into something quite unrecognizable."

"I know," I murmured, thinking about Melody's warning.

Mrs. Kapinsky took a deep breath. "I think travel is broadening, and that's a good thing. But you're setting out during what would seem to be a dark time. And that's why I think you should take this with you." She reached into her pocket and drew out an object about the size of a TV remote, enclosed in a leather case.

I stared at it, wondering if this was what I thought it was. "Mrs. Kapinsky," I stammered. "Is that—? Could that possibly be—? Have you succeeded in—?"

She sighed. "Well, it's the closest I've gotten so far. This is actually a prototype of the universal

magnet. It has a few bugs—you should know that before accepting it.”

“What kind of bugs?”

“Well, it doesn’t always attract what you dial in. Sometimes it won’t attract anything at all, and sometimes it attracts something completely different from what you want. Apparently, I haven’t gotten that completely worked out yet. And sometimes, instead of attracting whatever it is you want, it repels it. Quite violently, in some cases.”

I took the magnet from Mrs. Kapinsky, slipping it out of its case. It had a small screen at the top and a dial in the center. Two buttons were located at the bottom.

Mrs. Kapinsky scooted closer to me so that she could show me the features of her invention. “You use the dial to select the substance you’re interested in—wood, plastic, metal, silk, whatever,” she said, pointing. “The names of the substances appear in the screen as you dial through them. I haven’t had time to enter everything, of course. But I’ve included, I believe, most of the common substances and a number of the uncommon

ones. To select one, you press one of the buttons at the bottom. One button, marked ‘A,’ is to attract the substance, and the one marked ‘R’ is to repel it. Although, as I said, for some reason I haven’t quite worked out yet, sometimes the opposite happens.”

“Does this mean that something you might want to repel could end up being attracted?”

“Well, I suppose so. I haven’t really tested that since I’ve been more interested in the property of attraction. Given the fact that the inverse is true, though, we can’t rule that out. But what’s most important, it seems to me, is that it works much more of the time than it doesn’t. I would say that it works the way it’s supposed to eighty-seven percent of the time. Now, as far as I’m concerned, those are pretty good odds.”

I turned the magnet over in my hand, marveling at how beautiful it was, the sleek housing made from a translucent cherry red Bakelite, the dial and buttons butterscotch. But a universal magnet that sometimes attracted something you weren’t looking to attract,

sometimes, in fact, repelled what you wanted, and might also draw something to you that you were desperately *trying* to repel ... well, that sounded just too delightful to pass up.

I did have a sense that what I was about to embark upon was serious business, of the kind I couldn’t even understand yet. But at the same time, I felt firm in my conviction that, no matter what your narrative trajectory, unpredictability is a good thing. You might think you would want to have everything perfectly planned out down to the last safety pin and train stop. And in a movie or book, this can feel quite satisfying. But in real time and real life, the Butterfly Effect soon makes a mess of any of that kind of planning. In real life, it seemed to me, no matter how serious the stakes, it’s much more practical to be a butterfly than a mastermind.

So I accepted Mrs. Kapinsky’s gift with heartfelt and sincere thanks. She encouraged me to try it out on a couple of things before she left, so that, if I had any questions, I could ask her. She showed me how I could

narrow my target by double-clicking the dial, which would hold one property in its memory and then single-click on the paired property. So, for example, I double-clicked on “brocade fabric” and then clicked on “footstool,” and the footstool I kept in my living room came scooting into the solarium until it gently bumped up against my leg.

“Remarkable!” I exclaimed.

“Pretty slick, isn’t it?” Mrs. Kapinsky agreed.

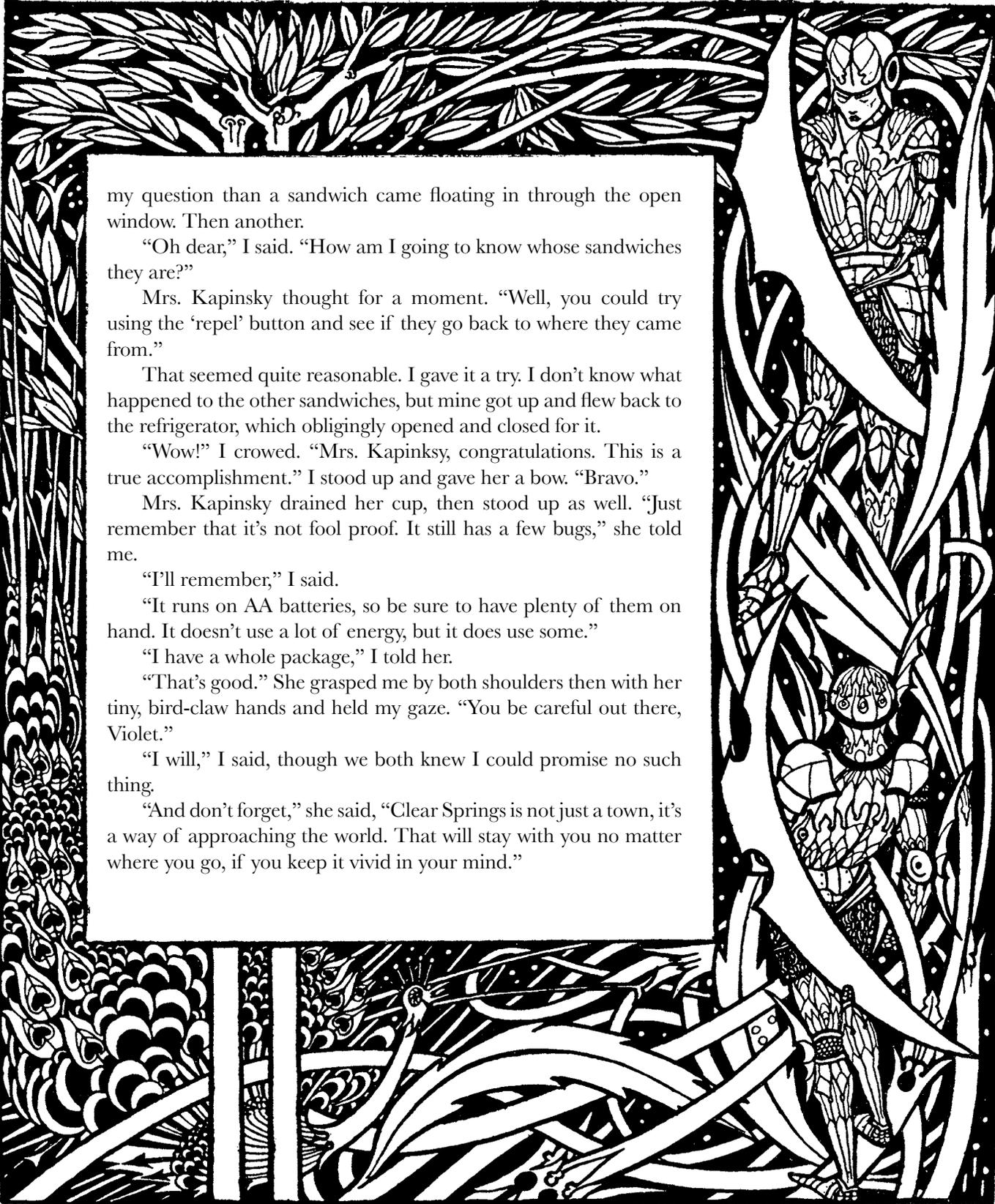
I then double-clicked on “Ham” and single-clicked “Sandwich,” and I heard my refrigerator door open and close. Soon the ham sandwich that I had prepared for my dinner came sailing into the room, then dropped into my lap.

“That’s really quite amazing!” I said. “What is the range?”

“I haven’t really determined that yet,” she replied. “So far, I haven’t discovered the outer limit.”

“Hmm,” I pondered. “What if some of my neighbors had ham sandwiches in their refrigerators? Would I get theirs as well?” No sooner had I finished





my question than a sandwich came floating in through the open window. Then another.

“Oh dear,” I said. “How am I going to know whose sandwiches they are?”

Mrs. Kapinsky thought for a moment. “Well, you could try using the ‘repel’ button and see if they go back to where they came from.”

That seemed quite reasonable. I gave it a try. I don’t know what happened to the other sandwiches, but mine got up and flew back to the refrigerator, which obligingly opened and closed for it.

“Wow!” I crowed. “Mrs. Kapinsky, congratulations. This is a true accomplishment.” I stood up and gave her a bow. “Bravo.”

Mrs. Kapinsky drained her cup, then stood up as well. “Just remember that it’s not fool proof. It still has a few bugs,” she told me.

“I’ll remember,” I said.

“It runs on AA batteries, so be sure to have plenty of them on hand. It doesn’t use a lot of energy, but it does use some.”

“I have a whole package,” I told her.

“That’s good.” She grasped me by both shoulders then with her tiny, bird-claw hands and held my gaze. “You be careful out there, Violet.”

“I will,” I said, though we both knew I could promise no such thing.

“And don’t forget,” she said, “Clear Springs is not just a town, it’s a way of approaching the world. That will stay with you no matter where you go, if you keep it vivid in your mind.”