



# The Hot Air Quarterly

---

Summer issue ☯ Number 19

---

*Including works by Peter Wright, Errol Miller, Bill Siemer, Simon Perchik,  
John Fitzpatrick, Cliff Saunders, Jon Wesick, Susan Richardson, Elaine Dugas Shea,  
Royal Scanlon, and Celeste White*

---

Cover Art: 道琳 敦子 Atsuko Dowling ©



# The Hot Air Quarterly

Number Nineteen, Summer 2011

---

The North State's Independent Literary Journal

---

## BRISTOL AT WAR

Reminiscences of the Blitzes on my Home Town  
1940-1944  
by Peter Wright

My mother, well-equipped with inherent frugality, her Irish charm and good looks, and her eternal friend and comforter, Jesus's mother, entered WWII like a gladiatrix. If there was anybody in Bristol who could spin the food out, it was she. She was also a natural seductress. I always found a distant place to hide in the butcher's shop when we went together to get the week's meat ration.

"Ye know, Timothy—ye don't mind if I call ye Tim, do ye? —I've a household of hungry kids up the hill. I've a lovely ould dog too. He's a Labrador and such a sweet feller. D'ye think ye could find an ould bone with a little bit extra on it, ye understand?" She never failed to bring home an ounce or two extra. I can't remember what the ration per person was throughout the war; it seldom changed, but we kids were never hungry. I believe we were allowed two eggs per person per week, six ounces of meat, four ounces of sugar, one two-pound loaf of bread, four ounces of butter, and so on. All the allowed quantities were calculated in accordance with a little over the minimum to maintain a normal healthy human being. Exceptions were made for those on special diets and those with special needs.

My brother Tom, away at sea in the Merchant Navy, occasionally brought us delights from America and Australia, such as chocolates, nylons and chewing gum. He once brought home several large cans of Australian butter which, upon opening, were found to be rancid. My mother immediately emptied the contents into a large saucepan, added salt and water and boiled the contents for an hour. The result was wonderful, sweet butter. Not one single edible item was thrown away. What we didn't eat went into pig bins, usually attached to lamp posts in the street

which were collected twice a week and fed to the hogs.

In spite of the fiercest opposition by the French, Belgian and Dutch forces, and our own Expeditionary Force, the Germans swept across the Low Countries with embarrassing ease. Our own defiant, patriotic songs began to mock us as we fell back toward the Channel.

*We're going to hang out the washing on the Siegfried Line  
Have you any dirty washing, Mother dear?*

The Siegfried Line was the German last line of defense, just as the Maginot Line was the French final defense line and the English Channel was Britain's last line of defense.

At the end of May 1940, those troops who had not already surrendered to the Germans found the beleaguered remnants of their regiments boxed into the northwest corner of Artois with twenty miles of English Channel on one side and twelve panzer divisions on the other. The allies' only escape route was by way of the beaches at Dunkirk.

The Grenadier Guards, part of the 340,000 BEF (British Expeditionary Force) —successfully evacuated from the beaches at Dunkirk during the nine days of bloody, brutal fighting—fought a heroic rearguard action. When the call came from the Admiralty for every Englishman "to do his duty," almost one thousand rowing boats, cabin cruisers and fishing smacks sailed to the coast of France. Groups of five, ten, or twenty exhausted soldiers, including French, Dutch, Belgian and Polish, were hauled aboard and returned to Folkstone or Dover. On June 4, Winston Churchill, then Prime Minister, addressed Parliament and described that phenomenal rescue as "... a victory in their deliverance."

The specter of a German invasion now loomed menacingly over us. Hitler's Operation Sealion

*Continued on page 3*

---

## The Hot Air Quarterly

---

---

Celeste White: Wordswoggler  
Jim Dowling: Freelance Cruciverbalist

---

---

Welcome 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.

To submit, send work to:

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

Please include an e-mail address for a reply; materials will not be returned. Submission guidelines are available upon request from [hotairquarterly@yahoo.com](mailto:hotairquarterly@yahoo.com). Electronic submissions are also accepted in Word or RTF. All rights are retained by the author. Payment is made in author's copies.

HOT AIR is distributed free to The Shasta County Arts Council, the Redding Library, and select businesses and area coffeehouses throughout the North State. For inquiries about donations, back issues, as well as electronic and hard copy subscriptions, please contact The Editors at [hotairquarterly@yahoo.com](mailto:hotairquarterly@yahoo.com).

---

---

*On the cover:*

道琳 敦子 **Atsuko K. Dowling** was born in Tokyo, Japan where she graduated college and began a seven year study of traditional Suiboku-ga. Then, she studied Nihon-ga for eleven years and became a member of Japan Artist Association. She has shown her works in Japan, the United States, Mainland China, and Greece. Atsuko has also had the honor of seeing one of her works hung, for a short time, in the Imperial Palace in Japan.

## THE QUILT

by Dan Pettee

It wraps itself around the journal's words  
like cotton-candy swirls as light,  
as airy, as a dozer's dream. Hidden in its  
multi-squared design is a code, DNA  
described in filaments spun with timeless care  
by gnarled and knobby hands,  
a code clarified by layerings of meaning,  
threaded permutations of significance  
passed through the filter of generations  
like muddied water through a sieve.  
Eyes multiplied, perceived,  
meetly decided—and today the finished quilt  
sprawls like a diva atop a sofa's slanted back,  
easing to warped words  
on the journal's opened page,  
fading in the faint wattage of the light  
that simmers in silence  
through the extenuated night ...

---

---



---

---

**Peter Wright** went to sea in 1943 at the age of 17. Apprenticed to a West African Liner company, he finished his time in 1946 and sailed to Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Nigeria until 1952. He returned to sailing deep water in 1957 with The Bristol City Line, sailing as First Mate and Master until 1965, then emigrated to the USA. He is the author of three books: *All Things Betray Thee*, *A Drop of the Hard Stuff*, and *Triumphs and Tragedies*.

**Dan Pettee:** A former teacher and advertising manager, I currently operate my own freelance writing business in Grand Rapids, MI. I've had poems published in a wide range of publications including *Chicago Review*, *Texas Review*, *Amherst Review*, *Descant*, *Puerto del Sol*, and *Evansville Review*.

About our contributors:

**Errol Miller:** “The Woolworth Poet of America,” has published extensively since 1972. A featured artist in the 2000 *Poet’s Market*, some of his publications are in *Poetry International*, *Montserrat Review*, *Caliban*, *Harpur Palette*, *Skidrow Penthouse*, *Santa Clara Review*, etc. He lives in West Monroe, Louisiana.

**Bill Siemer** is the author of several novellas and books of poetry. The complete work of *Scratched Up*, excerpted here, is available for sale at the Shasta County Arts Council and the *Enjoy* magazine store.

**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.simonpercik.com](http://www.simonpercik.com).

**John Fitzpatrick** has received Vermont Studio Center poetry residences, the Hackney Poetry Literary Award from Birmingham-Southern College, and a Ph. D. from New York University with a dissertation that treated the poet as writer and reader of poetry, with poets Barbara Unger and Michael Burkard participating in his research. Currently he is completing certification to teach Kundalini Yoga, with work featured or forthcoming in *Third Wednesday*, *The Rockford Review*, *BIG MUDDY*, *Writecorner*, and *Deus Loci*.

**Cliff Saunders** has been cutting out newspaper headlines and arranging them into poems for over thirty years. His poems have appeared most recently in *Hawai’i Pacific Review*, *Marco Polo Quarterly*, *Pilgrimage*, and *California Quarterly*. He teaches Creative Writing in the Myrtle Beach area.

**Jon Wesick** has had his prose published in *Space and Time*, *Zahiv*, *Tales of the Talisman*, *Blazing Adventures*, *Bracelet Charm*, *Everyday Weirdness*, *Metal Scratches*, *Journal of Experimental Fiction*, *CC&D*, and *American Drivel Review*, among others, while his poetry has appeared in *The New Orphic Review*, *Pearl*, *Pudding*, and *Slipstream*.

**Susan Richardson** has published articles, stories and poems in various magazines and anthologies, most recently poems in *Eclipse*, *Saranac Review*, *Inkwell and Slant*, with a poem upcoming in *Southern California Review*. She works as a small press publisher, agent, and medical transcriptionist in Boise, Idaho.

**Elaine Dugas Shea** has lived in Montana for forty years, enjoying a career in social justice working with American Indian Tribes and civil rights. Her writing was featured in *Third Wednesday*, *South Dakota Review*, the anthology *The Light in Ordinary Things*, the anthology *Hope Whispers*, *Samsara*, *Front Range Review*, *CAMAS*, *Spillway*, the anthology

*When Last on the Mountain: The View from Writers over Fifty*, and *Montana Voices Anthology*.

**Royal Scanlon**, a dedicated practitioner and teacher of Yang Style Short Form t’ai chi ch’uan is a poet, photographer, and musician who lives, works and dreams in Kansas City Missouri with his wife actress/musician Peggy Friesen.

**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*.

---

---

(“*Bristol at War*,” continued from page 1):

(*Seelöwe*) was about to be executed. However, morale was high and there was the complete absence of panic. It seemed to me, a fourteen-year-old schoolboy, that the Germans didn’t have a hope of ever conquering England. It just couldn’t happen!

During the Sealion threat, however, a piece of German doggerel appeared in *Punch* magazine in London.

*Was will ich tun wenn die Deutche kom hier  
Un klopf auf die tur von mien haus?  
Will ich yelen sie können nicht stehen bi emir  
Oder will I bleib dum wie ein maus*  
(Attributed to Giles)

The four lines of doggerel were a challenge. What indeed would we do if and when the Germans got here? Would we fight or tell them to go away, or simply stay quiet like a mouse?

Mama had a plan of her own. With images of rape, torture and slave labor in her mind, she announced that she would poison us all, and asked my sister Margaret, a nurse at the Bristol General Hospital, to procure some painless poison. Margaret departed laughing; Pauline and I were not amused. But the thought remained. Anxiety ruled.

Next door to us lived the Bloomborgs, Bertie and Rachel, a quiet, very conservative American brother and sister who had come from Chicago in 1937. We seldom saw them, and may have greeted them on the street once or twice. In my mind everything about them became furtive. I began to suspect them of being spies. I decided to do some snooping.

It was Mr. Bloomborg who opened the door the following afternoon. “Good afternoon, sir. I’m from

next door. Can I do any yard work for you?" I saluted with three fingers to prove my rank.

"Why, yes, I know," he said. "Peter, isn't it?"

The coiffured head of Rachel Bloomberg popped around the door. "Ask him in for a cup of tea, Bertie."

The interior of their house was like they were—staid and fusty. Nevertheless, I kept my eyes open for any telltale signs of questionable activities: radio antennae, wires leading through the ceiling. I didn't see any.

Then Rachel opened the kitchen door and I was greeted with the screeching of a hundred or so love birds partitioned off behind a chicken-wire cage that occupied half the room. No wonder they don't speak to anyone, I thought; they are probably deaf. Remaining calm as though everyone in Bristol owned a huge aviary, I asked them how many they had, what they ate, and if any could speak. As if in direct answer to my question, a blue-and-green bird clung to the wire closest to me and screeched, "DOWN WITH HITLER." It continued this condemnation until Rachel's wagging finger and piercing voice quieted it. "Naughty bird. Don't say that anymore."

Surprised, because the enunciation was very clear, I asked Rachel why. She replied, "Just in case the Germans land here." I saw Bertie eying a carving knife by the stove.

I told Pauline about my discovery when I got home. "They're not spies, I've concluded, but I wonder what would happen if the Jerries do get here?" I giggled. "I wonder if they'll shoot the bird first, or the owners." Weeks later, I met the Bloombergs on the street and asked them if they had managed to stop the bird from talking. Bertie shuffled his feet and allowed his sister to answer the question.

"Well actually, Peter, he escaped—flew out of the window." Neither looked me in the eye. I immediately thought, "Who killed Cock Robin?" and smiled inwardly, wondering, "Who saw him die?"

Tuesday, June 15, 1940, came our first air raid. Certainly not the most ferocious, but it got our attention and jolted us out of our complacency. Prime targets in Bristol were the City and Avonmouth docks and the Bristol Aircraft Factory at Filton. The first heavy daylight raid was on Filton. My mother

spent many anxious hours in an air raid shelter wondering about us. She did have a tale about one of the workers who had been caught taking pictures of the damage and was arrested as a suspected spy.

Anderson shelters were provided to all single households. Fabricated of arched corrugated steel set four feet down in the garden, they were, generally speaking, of little use as bomb shelters and usually ended up as coal bunkers or tool sheds. My mother said she would never leave the house for Mr. Churchill or Mr. Hitler.

The sounds and sights of warfare at home were unforgettable. Crouched under the staircase listening to the whistle of 500-pound bombs played havoc with our nerves (we heard them last two or three seconds before they struck). If they were attacking Avonmouth or the dock area, we heard the *CRUMP* from afar but quite often the Luftwaffe pilots would follow the River Avon up to Bristol and drop half a dozen sticks of bombs on the City of Bristol. During one of these raids, incendiary bombs set fire to the four huge grain silos on Canons Wharf. Because of the accumulated gasses, two of them exploded, hurling burning grain and associated matter far into the city, setting numerous other fires.

But perhaps the most frightening result of the granary fires was the forced evacuation of hundreds of thousands of rats into the city and outlying districts. One witness on the city side of the Bedminster Bridge said he saw them coming toward him like a huge flow of crude oil. In their terror, they crawled over each other between the confines of this narrow swing bridge, and when they reached King Street at the other end of the bridge, they fled in every direction, seeking cover. By daylight, the only visible trace were those rats which had died en route to their new homes; the rest were enjoying a new diet.

At least one of those rats arrived at our house. I heard it rummaging around in a closet next to the place where we collected under the stairs. Without telling my mother, because I knew she wouldn't understand, I plotted to exterminate it American style—by electrocution. I obtained a rat trap and wired the positive terminal of an accumulator to the spring-loaded snap bar of the trap, and the negative





terminal to the cheese holder. Without giving any further thought to amperes, joules, voltage, or current, I set the ambush in our closet.

I had no reason to put off the execution and set the date for that night. There was no air raid that night. At 2:30 in the morning I heard the SNAP and a lot of commotion and squealing. Unfortunately my mother got to the closet first and had opened the door.

“What have ye done now, ye wretched boy?” Dressed in her nightie, she batted a huge cloud of smoke coming out of the closet. “Ye’ve set the house on fire, ye eejit.”

I dived into the closet and extracted my device, rat and all still smoking from severe electrical burns. It was dead, all right, but I never thought that it would have been a Viking death. For two days my mother ranted about the stupidity of the son for whom she had provided the best available education and who apparently had gained nothing, and was, in fact, an imbecile. It took days to get rid of the smell of roast rat.

The warbling note of the warning siren came more often during the early part of 1943. One evening, the longest raid ever, we were all gathered in our favorite place listening to the sticks of bombs getting closer and closer. We knew they were getting close when Purdown Percy, our favorite anti-aircraft gun, opened up. The earsplitting explosion of the four-inch shell every two minutes soon had us cheering madly as the bombs got closer. Then, for the first time, we heard a new sound: a device the Germans had attached to the fins of each bomb. They called it *Gerät Jericho* (*Jericho Device*). They were organ pipes! We could hear them from a height of 10,000 feet. The effect on the people of Bristol was psychologically paralyzing. The physically destructive power of the bomb was the same as the others, but hearing it for the first time was demoralizing. Like everything else in war, however, we got used to them.

Once, a ten-pound incendiary bomb landed in our back garden. My poor mother. She used words I would never have expected to hear from her mouth. While urging me to get water and douse it, she

cursed the Germans and anyone else she could think of she didn’t happen to like that day. I declined to do so, having read somewhere that pouring water on a hydrogen/magnesium missile could cause the oxygen to explode, so between the Germans and others, her favorite son came under heavy verbal fire as well.

The steady pulse of the diesel engines of the Dornier and Heinkel bombers remained with us all night—and the following two nights. On the third night of these massive attacks, a stick of five bombs landed quite close to us, shattering windows and bringing down plaster. My mother urged us all to pray. I did not because I knew that God was in no position to divert bombs dropped by the Luftwaffe away from people who prayed. The bombs would land exactly where they were supposed to. Better to pray that the anti-aircraft-gunners stayed out of the pubs and drank no beer, so that their aim might be better.

Emerging from our house the following morning, the first thing I noted was the strong, sickening smell of Amatol, German high explosive. It clung to everything; I heard that five or six houses on Purdown Road had been hit. Picking my way through the rubble, broken bricks and pieces of furniture, I came on the rescue crew. One of the houses had been demolished, the other four had been sliced right down the middle as though with a gigantic saw, revealing dressers, some with the drawers blown out, beds and bedding hanging off the edge of the floors, and clothing strewn about the neighborhood, grotesquely hanging from trees, lampposts and telephone wires. The street had been raped.

One of the rescuers, a member of the Special Constabulary, cocked his head on one side and said, “Hush! Hark, I can hear something.” He indicated a section of brick wall that had fallen flat. I hung around, attempting to give a hand. From under the rubble they extracted a woman holding a baby. Both were dead. Those two victims were my first taste of death. *It is a one-sided battle, my soul screamed. It’s not fair.* I felt worthless, helpless, and angry.

The Americans came to England in 1942 and on that very plot of land on Purdown Road, four Nissen Huts were erected for a battalion of black American troops. The white American troops were housed three miles away in Ashton Park, but they all came into the center of Bristol during the evening and made a big hit with the girls. They had fancy uniforms with silver stars and some even had medals—though they

had never been in combat.

The British were very upset at the way these two sets of American forces fought each other. There seemed to be a genuine hatred between the black and the white. There were killings and some murders, and a detention camp was set up at Shepton Mallett, a village not far from Bristol, where U.S. servicemen were tried for crimes both against their own people and the British. Some were executed by hanging. It would take another three years of bitter infighting for the American soldier to realize that there really was a war going on and that it would take every man they had to fight it, before they gave the black soldier a rifle and told him to get into the front lines. The Americans appeared to think along different lines than any other nation.

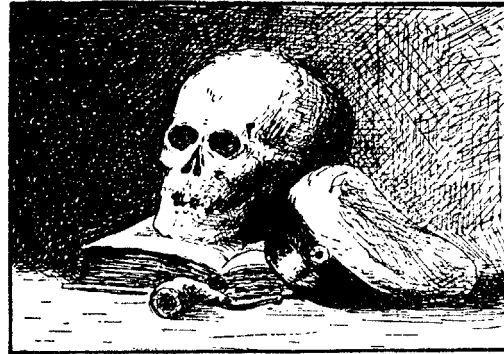
The bloodiest and most hateful air raid on Bristol took place one Friday in August in 1943, at nine-thirty in the morning, long after the regular attacks had dwindled to one or two a month. A single plane flying at 45,000 feet dropped a single bomb, which struck a fully laden double-decker bus standing at the corner of Broadwier and Philadelphia streets. The explosion killed 147 people and set fire to several buildings. I don't remember any explanation for this tragic occurrence. I can only conclude that it was a new high-altitude bomb sight being tried out, but why Bristol, so far afield?

The Battle of Britain had come and gone and now the USAAF were here in great numbers. Daily raids against mainland Germany were common. Thousand bomber raids then became a national treat—the sky became dark and the combined roar of Lancaster and B-17 bombers shook buildings to their foundations as they roared on their way to mete out destructive punishment on those who had dealt the same to us four years previously. I felt compassion for those civilians who would receive the weight of our attack, but we were at war—and they started it.

I left school in July 1943. I was seventeen. In March the following year I joined my first ship in Hull, Yorkshire, and sailed out into the Atlantic Ocean, now virtually cleared of U-Boats. During the following year of enemy activity, we in the Merchant Navy continued the global lifeline to England and Europe. Two years later the war ended, but our job continued, just as it always will in war or peace.

Merchant seamen numbering 133,000 were killed during WWII, most of them in the North Atlantic. My own company, a famous Liverpool

steamship line, lost twenty-six ships. The nation did not mourn their loss at that time. It was sixty years before the government recognized their value. While the armed forces fought their way to victory, the Merchant Navy kept the nation alive.



## HOT AIR CLASSIFIEDS

Wanted: Generalized nonsense. I'll be the judge.

For sale: Trick knee. Pulls rabbits out of hats, juggles, spins plates, and shoots baskets. At home demonstrations provided. Please keep any baskets you care about out of view.

For sale: Lady's bustle that plays "The Star Spangled Banner" at the drop of a hat. Hat must weigh 12 ounces or more, unless hat in possession of propeller or fake bat wings. Hurry, supplies limited!

Found: Petrified bean burrito. Really kind of amazing, if you ask me.

Found: Flamboyant green Mohawk toupée. I think. Or ... strip of AstroTurf, maybe?

Lost: Gorilla suit, small. Might or might not be wearing purple thong underwear.

For sale: Civil war action figure that transforms into a tea kettle that whistles "Dixie," "Yellow Rose of Texas," and many *many* more tunes. \$200 or BO.

For sale: Spiffy moped that's been around the block only once. Well, maybe twice. OK, three times. But that's it! Please call for more info.

ALLUVIAL SORROWS  
by Errol Miller

Thus it appears  
our environment is shrinking; most  
of the Southern Peninsula is underwater;  
more than a casual conversion: my  
Yard Man drowned & my dog has paddled  
around for 40 days & nights & my wife  
called the Fire Department but they  
were out to lunch

O well, you may say, about internal pressure  
& makeshift compromises where fine fat frogs  
paddle through our living room on their  
way to Higher Ground

It is a parody of sorts because we  
got our water bill today as it was floating  
by & some of the numbers had washed off  
of it & I recognized one of my neighbors,  
the top of his head, outside my window

Smack dab in our perimeter my wife  
is trying to hand-crank the washing machine  
& do some other "homework" while  
we are confined to this time,  
this alluvial place.

Such is life  
on the "New Frontier" near  
the ocean when the tide  
comes in.



EXCERPT from SCRATCHED UP  
by Bill Siemer

Take the county road, east out of Niland, a dirt town on the southeast corner of the Salton Sea. Rattle over railroad tracks, pass a natural gas power plant and climb the hill beside Salvation Mountain, last rays of the afternoon sun catching donated paint lacquered over bales of straw. Gateway to the Slabs.

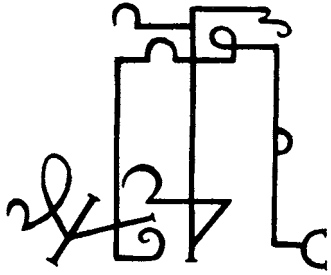
It seems appropriate: a monument to faith I pass by on my faithless way into the unknown. I sold this as a writer's adventure. But I've been drawn to the Slabs since my youngest daughter and I passed through five years ago. Saw people camped out in the brush, huddled around trash wood fires, lined up for a free breakfast after services they'd missed at the sky-blue, double-wide church. People, who had given up on or been cast out by our society, were who I wanted to measure myself against, for reasons I could not articulate.

I top the ridge and enter the grand promenade, a dirt road wide enough to land a jumbo jet on, bordered by various sorts of wheeled accommodations. There are loose dogs, a few people walking in the road, lights in the trailers. I take a right at the first major intersection. There's some kind of open stage for performances but nothing is going on.

I find a place to park between some newer motor homes on the far end of a gravel cul-de-sac. It is safe, good for the night. Pitch my virgin pink tarp off the back of the beige camper shell, behind the cab of my red Ford Ranger. Heat up some canned soup. Watch the stars come out. Surrounded by enough desert to feel all alone. Wonder what is really driving me? If there is any intelligence in my life? I can always turn around and go home. That is an option.

It is dark and quiet at the Slabs. A few fires and some gatherings, a train rumbling through the valley. Brilliant stars, almost within reach. The clouds move in during the early morning. Doves are cooing when I awake in the predawn desert chill. There are still lights in the valley to the southwest, a band of civilization lasting through the night. All this nirvana, ripped by fighter jets flashing by to bomb the Chocolate Mountains, a military desert warfare training ground. The concrete slabs, where the base used to be, are on the bottom fringe of the mountains, where they meld with the farmland around the Salton Sea.

I make a pot of coffee, have a cup wrapped in my



cozy down sleeping bag, watch the colorful magic the rising dawn plays on moist clouds, the desert. It's still quiet, no generators, once in a while, a dog. A couple of jets.

Lights come on in

some of the RVs in the upper class section, where I'm parked. Slide outs, golf carts. Old men slip out to pee beside their rigs, perform their rituals.

I'm on the outside of the informal road, where it turns. It's a good place to see all the traffic going by. There's a chunky walker, in a green cowboy hat, heavy coat down to her knees, black-and-white dog on a ten-foot leash, who stops to let the dog smell. Allows three old guys in long pants, jackets and baseball hats, to catch up with her. The dog starts yapping. They give her hugs, try to placate the dog, quickly walk away.

A few minutes later, a group of kids, on their way somewhere. The girl, obviously in charge, with her walking stick, purple sarong, black army boots. The boy's bare-chested, a scarf wrapped around his dreadlocks, yellow fabric tied around his waist. He has a walking stick, pit bull on a rope. Following them, a slight young man in black, hat on sideways, led by a yellow lab.

The sun pours its first rays over the ragged horizon. I give myself another cup of my cowboy coffee, close the pickup. Walk down the road I drove in on the evening before, the cup warm in my hand, sun on the back of my head. The road is wide enough for cars to pass each other. Rutted in the low spots, puddled from a recent rain. Bordered by trailers, some of them trashed. Plastic bags decorate the mesquite and Palo Verde trees. I come to a sign at an intersection, pointing the way to the Oasis Club, just across a broad parking lot. A mural identifying it, of an island and a palm tree, painted on the side of a trailer. In the Club's shade, flames from a fire, people moving around. I am suddenly nervous, but now's the time, I tell myself, to take the plunge.

I pass an old tent by a bush, in the middle of the vacant parking lot. Next to the palm-treed trailer is a large plastic water barrel on stilts, a couple of propane tanks like small torpedoes. A man coming around the corner to meet me, the official greeter.

I'm Cornmeal, he says, shaking my hand. His other arm, a deformed, small stub. That's my Slab's name. They gave it to me because I make cornmeal muffins for the guys. You'll get a name, too, if you stick around.

He's short, heavysset, old baseball cap, dark-rimmed glasses, intelligent eyes, straggly beard and hair going gray. Takes charge of my newness. Leads me in the back door. A dirt-floored room, maybe thirty by thirty, filled with tables and chairs. Threadbare carpet nailed into the hard sandstone by spikes driven through bottle caps. It is partially walled in by old camp trailers that aren't going any farther. There's a counter running all the way to the front door, where the sun is shining in. Behind the counter, a kitchen, eight feet wide. Sinks and stoves and a fridge.

Half of the sky is blocked by used aluminum roofing, about two feet over my head, supported by four-by-four posts.

Cornmeal shows me the one with the donation can nailed to it. Fifty cents for coffee, unless I want to join.

How much is that? Twenty bucks.

For how long?

The season, you know, about November to May, depends on the weather. It gets you free coffee, use of the library, the internet, the outhouse ... he points out back, says I should bring my own toilet paper. Oh yeah, and three dollars instead of four for the weekly breakfast.

He dodges my twenty, says, give it to Mike. He'll credit me the coffee.

A grizzled man with a lumpy face, in an old leather motorcycle jacket, pours himself a cup. Says his name is James. Makes room for me behind the counter so I can fill mine from the metal pot.

I follow James out the back door to the fire pit. A cemented stone ring, broken on one side, about six feet across, burning scrap wood. A table, made out of a metal garbage can, a wooden top, between the fire and the back door, some chairs of various descriptions, a couple of new, eight foot long, white plastic benches.

James takes a chair by the table. He isn't acting like he wants to visit, so I sit across the fire from him on the end of one of the cold benches, wondering why they don't have the fire on the other side of the building where the sun happens to be. James' face is tired, sad. He slouches, drinks his coffee, rolls a

cigarette.

Cornmeal sits in a chair next to me, asks me what I'm doing, who I am. I tell him my story. He is interested, caring. Talks about himself. I lost my wife two years ago, he says, came to the Slabs with my dogs instead of driving off a cliff at Monterey. I used to go to Quartzsite. I like it here better. I'm trying to get the place painted.

He would accept my help if I'd give it to him. But I'm not ready for that. I ask him how it works.

There are three clubs, he says. They provide whatever organization exists out here. Loners on Wheels is for people whose spouses have died. Partners in Travel, he points down the road, toward where I spent the night, is kind of the upper class club. They charge seven bucks for their Friday night dinner. Keeps the riffraff out.

You can belong to anybody but Loners, or to nobody. Whatever you want. There's only one rule: Don't piss off your neighbor. Some of them carry guns.

Are there problems?

Not really. Used to be. Things disappear. My flannel shirt. I had it hanging over a chair, inside. It walked away. It's the kids. They don't know the rules. They come and go. If you have a solar panel lock it up at night. People come out from town and steal them off the big RV's. The gas station in Niland has a dumpster. They let us use it for our trash. Let us have water. There's a general store in town but Brawley, which is only twenty miles, has a Walmart and cheaper gas.

Cornmeal managed a town of nine thousand people. Retired after thirty years. The title was more glamorous than the job. He used to sweep the floor before they held the meetings.

He introduces me as people come in.

There's full-bearded, Numbie, the computer guru, hiding behind his dark glasses, with King, a big white Lab that never leaves his side, even when some dog starts yapping, though you can see the desire to snap its neck in King's eyes, the tenseness of his jaw. James scoops up the trouble-maker, places it inside his jacket.

Ray's forty, lean, dark-haired, with a finger-long, straggly beard. He's hiked 7,500 miles since he left Philadelphia last April, along the roads, his back to the approaching traffic. He doesn't listen to music. Focuses on the vehicles coming up behind him, especially where there's no shoulder or it's so steep

he has trouble staying upright. He was a skip tracer for seventeen years. One day, in bible study class, he decided to give everything away, take a walk. He's going for the Guinness record. Got a sponsor. He stares at the fire, jaw muscles working.

Shorty. It must be his Slabs' name. Sits down between Ray and James. Nods, says *hi* to everyone. Smiles. Gets up to shake my hand around the fire. He is easily six-five, narrow shoulders, narrow hips, pinch-chested, big hands. His mouth goes from one side of his long skinny face to the other.

Bicycle Jon, tall, solid, gargantuan legs below his shorts, honker nose, white hair growing down his throat, knit hat. Yellow paint splattered across both of his old white running shoes with the toes glued back over the top and pink laces. He's a painter; has traveled all over the country on his bike. Says you can buy a bike at Goodwill or the Salvation Army for ten bucks. He found a new Giant mountain bike, still in the plastic bag, by a dumpster behind a restaurant where he washed dishes. No one picked it up and it hadn't been reported stolen, so he had a new bike for nothing. He always checks with the police, except in Minneapolis. They confiscate the bike and sell it at their auction.

I lived in San Francisco for awhile, he says, under a log near the Observatory. No one ever knew I was there. When I left it was like I hadn't been there. I don't drink. I don't leave bottles.

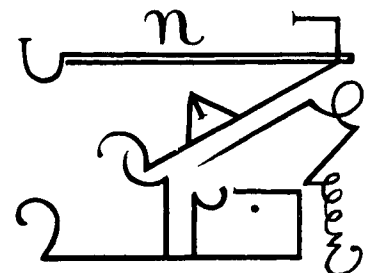
Mike wears a grimy second skin that used to be blue sweats, a baseball cap held together by head grease, stoops forward, looks older than he is, takes a seat on the other plastic bench. Asks me what I'm doing.

I'm a writer.

So's Woody, he says, pointing to the big bellied man with long white hair and sun glasses, who has shuffled in, leaning on an ornate walking stick. Woody nods. Seems angry, maybe at me, maybe at himself, maybe the whole world. I can't tell.

He spits into the dirt between his slippered feet, says: Hey, Ray, I hear there's nothing like pussy to keep a guy around.

Ray doesn't say anything. Looks down. Maybe blushes.



Beryl, the only woman, is filling her pipe, enjoying the fire. She, fortyish, dark hair, slender, olive-skinned, black leather vest and jeans, stands up, shakes her head with disgust, says something about a *fucking men's club*, and strides away looking for better company.

James pulls out a can of tobacco. Numbie asks if there is any good dope around. James nods, yeah, but I haven't seen any. I got some Mexican, if you want it.

Shorty seems to be waiting for someone to bring it up. He pulls out a pipe and a 35 millimeter film canister; everyone looks in his direction. I think he's new to the Slabs, like me. He's still clean. He pulls the lid off the container.

James, who's downwind, sniffs the air, growls: that smells rich.

Shorty passes him the weed. It goes around the circle, people nosing it, nodding their appreciation. Shorty, face-splitting grin, loads the pipe, hands it to James. James lights it, inhales slowly, deeply, for several seconds. Moves to give the smoldering pipe back but Shorty waves it around.

When Robin came to town  
Beryl lined all the men up  
So she could take her pick  
It came down to two  
Builder Bill and Professor Mike  
The Prof gave her the gift of a bath  
His own  
Bill gave her fire  
Didn't need to bathe  
  
Robin and Builder Bill  
Drive up  
In their RV  
Plywood in the window  
Air conditioner  
Hanging out the side  
  
A dozen dogs  
Go out to greet them



Mike says  
They asked me if I'd stand in for Weird Wayne

When they made Into The Wild  
Had my own makeup artist  
They paid me double  
I wouldn't say that me and Sean Penn  
Were buddies  
But we drank beer together

It took me twenty-five takes  
Mostly because I was screwing up  
Some people say they can see me  
I can't  
And I didn't get any credit  
They thanked a thousand people  
But not me  
I got pictures  
If you want to see them



Bus in his  
Beret  
Grew up  
Hawking  
Christian revivals  
Running retreats  
Studying at  
Bob Jones University  
Then he was  
Hit by a car

He's been here  
Four years  
Points to the telephone poles  
Sticking above the brush:  
Working on that

The first summer is the hardest  
People leave  
The Club closes  
Everything shuts down  
It gets so hot  
You can't breathe  
But  
You don't have any choice

That's why he's building  
His triple layered  
Canopy



Junkyard Joe's in his  
Snowmobile suit  
High-topped work boots  
Split down the front  
So he can slip them on  
Big orange insulated  
Coffee cup  
Chess board  
Under his arm



Sandi  
Raised eight children  
Paints  
The story of the Slabs  
Plays a borrowed guitar  
Lives in a  
Twelve hundred dollar van  
An ancient tear drop trailer  
With homemade furniture  
Out of scrap wood  
Drawers six inches wide  
And  
Her fearless Chihuahua  
Mickey  
Calls it her Mouse House

She couldn't say no  
So bolted the passenger seat  
In her van  
Backwards  
Tells would-be riders  
I can't  
It's illegal



A couple of old buses  
Frame  
A makeshift wooden stage  
Lit by  
A string of lights inside  
White plastic buckets  
Donated by  
Zendejas Hardware



It's drizzling rain  
Cold  
A few kids  
Old timers  
Builder Bill  
On his guitar  
Long white hair  
Broad shoulders  
Big voice  
Old songs

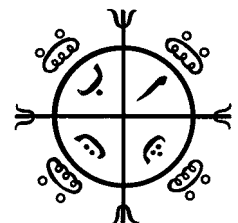


The drunks are dancing  
In the drizzle  
She  
Flashing hefty boobs  
Beneath an olive drab t-shirt  
He  
Running amuck  
In Levi's  
Cowboy boots  
Backwards baseball cap  
Ready to punch out anyone who looks

Three weeks later, on the morning that I leave, I find people; give them things, say goodbye. I could stay longer. How long? I don't know. I understand the skeletal rules of our society that apply. Though here, as Karen says, people are treated for how they behave, not who they are or have been.

However, living is not easy. It takes effort to get water, bathe, wash your clothes. It looks like a desert but it's a toxic waste dump. The bathrooms, such as they are, belong to the clubs. Most people dig a shallow pit and cover it up when they leave, call it a "coyote hole." People improve their spaces, or not, as they see fit. The trash of fifty years is a barricade against the unwanted.

Slabbers take pride in knowing things the rest of us have forgotten or never known. Like you can take a bath in a cup



of water, make a stove out of a rusted can burning scrap wood to save Propane, become a burrowing animal when it gets too hot to do anything else.

I drive down the puddled road, pass Bus's telephone pole castle. By the dead boat where he accused Halfpint, in spray paint, of *torturing animals*, when he found his dog with wire wrapped around its testicles.

Pass the Range, quiet, empty. Say goodbye to Sandi, buy one of her paintings. She asks if I'm coming back. I don't know what to say. I drive by Rocket Bob's and the Sky Blue Church, which hasn't had a minister since the old one quit a year or so ago.

I stop at the top of the rise, where the road plunges down into civilization, into all the burdens I can abandon at the Slabs. But, someplace inside me, the clock has struck and it's time to go home, whether I've answered all my questions or not. In a way, I guess that answers a lot of them.

I haven't come away  
Enlightened  
But  
Encouraged  
Emboldened  
Freed  
By knowing  
I have options  
A place to go to



\*

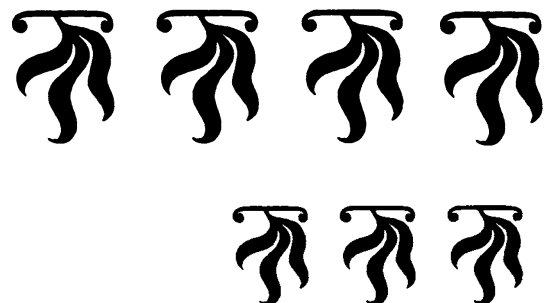
by Simon Perchik

Hurt though its leaves  
smothering the cry, each branch  
disguised, flies out as birds  
still battered by wings —haze

festers in these wounds :the dark bark  
tries to trap the sun  
tighter, tighter and always the pain  
escapes :the harrowing cut

roots hear first and each footstep  
softer than rot  
nearer and nearer till nothing snaps  
and everything falls on its side

—the tree still breathing  
fed at last :infected, my saw  
swooping to bring  
what might have been the sun  
and the tree remembering this heat  
binds the blade :each leaf  
sharp and shaking.



ADAGIO FOR TIMPANI

by John Fitzpatrick

1

cartoon color box  
touché limon, rib cage over palette  
amber petal that crosses the line

circle on circle, the gradual  
and the set purple in praise

2

chill tellingly of diamond  
edge sword absorbs like  
vapor: everyone is anyone

the torment of pain, the dynamo  
and recluse, territory settled

3

the grass of Nemea  
turns scarlet, cold brilliance  
against the evening sky

too late to say the river  
runs against turmoil

4

the object of desire, turnips  
soft cooked, red stemmed greens  
adorn plate of mountains

the mine flooded, even the canary  
never got the signal nor gave it



5

tomorrow the dolphins reach  
the summit of despair too little  
food for the trained ego

the children balked at Scrabble  
too few words dominate

6

the horizon is here to stay  
away from marauding  
eyes that catch it naked

rivers run currents of night  
and command moon to whisper ☾

JAWS DEUX  
by Celeste White

One lazy summer afternoon, my husband and I were swimming in Whiskeytown Lake. We have a cove that we like to traverse, and I tend to swim a little faster than Richard, so I was swimming ahead of him about halfway across when I heard a very strange sound. Sort of a cross between a yelp and squeal, a high-pitched “whoop!” I turned my head and saw Richard thrashing furiously in the water.

Alarmed, I started wind-milling back in his direction. He didn’t appear to be cramping or drowning, but he did seem to be under attack. My first thought, based on considerable exposure to urban legend, was that someone had released their pet alligator into the lake when it got too big. And that this alligator was now going after Richard.

I’m a strong swimmer and I was panicked, so I bore down quickly. As soon as I got close, I shouted, “What is it?! What’s going on?!”

He spluttered, “It’s a goddamned brim! It’s after my mole!”

Richard is of Scottish descent and has a fleshy mole on his back. Apparently, this fish thought it was food, and was making runs at Richard’s back and clomping down on the mole with his little fish teeth.

I felt vastly relieved, of course. Until I got closer and the brim—which was about two inches long—came after me! Here I was, ready to do battle with an alligator to save my husband, but when this tiny fish came charging at me, I panicked yet again.

“Aaaaaaaugh!” I screamed, executing some frantic thrashing maneuvers very similar to Richard’s. But the brim kept coming!

Finally, we managed to escape the feisty little guy and we reached safe harbor at the other side of the cove.

“Little bastard,” muttered Richard.

“Yeah!” I agreed. But by then, I was laughing so hard I sucked some water up my nose, which made me choke. Which made me laugh even harder.

“It’s not funny,” Richard growled.

“I know!” I protested, giggling. Insanely.

Of course, afterward, I couldn’t resist telling the story to just about everyone we knew.

“I think Richard should start a new fish lure company,” my friend Susannah said when she heard the story. “Richard’s Mole Allure. Don’t you think?”

FABLE OF THE MOUSE  
by Cliff Saunders

**Once upon a time,  
there was a mouse**

**who disappeared**  
into the den of avarice

**Yes it was**  
feeling somewhat antsy

**and yes it was**  
**clinging to**

**its own sweet**  
book of poetry

**Suddenly, it**  
**came from beneath the sink**

**and left**  
**a macabre coin**

**under the stairs**  
**for the night**

**God, it stood**  
on its toes

talking to itself  
**It started**

**to reinvent itself**  
**as a blind man**

**before being taken in**  
**by its own bold metaphor**

**Maybe the mouse**  
**didn’t live happily ever after**



---

## STRUTINSKY'S COUCH

by Jon Wesick

After the poetry festival Seretta invited me to the party.

"You could meet Igor Strutinsky," she said.

"Sorry, I have to visit a sick friend," I reached into my satchel for a booklet. "But you can take these poems I've written. They contain all my thoughts and feelings. It'll be almost like I'm there."

On my drive home on the I-5 I imagined my booklet sitting on the poetry professor's couch with a slice of cheese and making conversation with a woman whose cleavage was as deep as a canyon on Mars. The latter would be difficult because my poems are always tongue-tied around the opposite sex. The next day Seretta called to say my booklet was a huge success and that Strutinsky had invited it to dinner the following weekend. This gave me an idea.

On Monday morning I went to the office, propped one of my booklets in front of my computer, and left for the week. To my surprise there was a bonus in my next paycheck along with a note from my boss saying, "Well done."

I began using the booklets as stand-ins for all the things I didn't have time to do. I left one at my girlfriend's apartment because she said I never spent enough time with her. I put one on my pillow so I could always get eight hours sleep even when I stayed up late. The extra time freed me up to master the skills I'd always wanted to try: skydiving, yoga, and Japanese swordsmanship. I went to a few classes but found it easier to send the booklets in my place. Then I came up with the ultimate plan. I left one of my booklets at my writing table with a handful of pens and a stack of legal pads. After that I let things take care of themselves and spent my days at the beach or shopping for fresh vegetables at farmers' markets.

Little did I know my booklet would become more known for writing editorials than poems. One night I turned on Fox News and saw him being interviewed on "Hannity and Colmes." Being shorter than the moderators he was uneasy sitting in the guest chair. Whoever applied the makeup to his cover had done a poor job. It dripped and streaked under the glaring TV lights.

"I'm sick of those sniveling whiners who think the world owes them a living," my booklet said. "I got where I am through hard work. Nobody ever

gave me anything."

Next thing I knew, my booklet was running for Congress, saying he was a businessman not a politician, and proposing to run the government like a business. Did I mention that my booklet was a businessman not a politician?

By August my booklet was ahead in the polls by fifteen percent. Then the *LA Times* broke a story about him visiting a prostitute and paying with a debit card. At first he blamed it all on the liberal media but the evidence was right there on page 23 in a poem titled, "I Visit a Prostitute and Pay with a Debit Card."

Things went south after that. My girlfriend threw the booklet out of her apartment and my boss told him to pack up his effects. Soon my life was back where it had started. I still leave a copy of my booklet at my writing desk, though, because it's such a wonderful thing when a poem writes itself.



## HOT AIR PERSONALS

Dust bunny seeks fluffy goatee for madcap pranks and ditzzy hijinks.

Playful Squeegee available for squishy squooshy fun! Also experienced in practical jokes, especially those involving baked hams and/or bunion pads.

Fruit cocktail seeks attractive bobtail for undisclosed activity. Vivid imagination a must!

All-beef frankfurter seeks plump, tasty bun for perfect union.

Strawberry tart seeks cheeky cheesecake for sybaritic evenings at decadent dessert bar.

Tasteless tie seeks loud, obnoxious sport coat for long walks on beach and clog dancing.

Hokey hat looking for pokey shoes to find out what it's all about.

Flamenco dancer seeks adventuresome dance partner willing to wear salad bowl as hat.

OFF COLFAX/DENVER

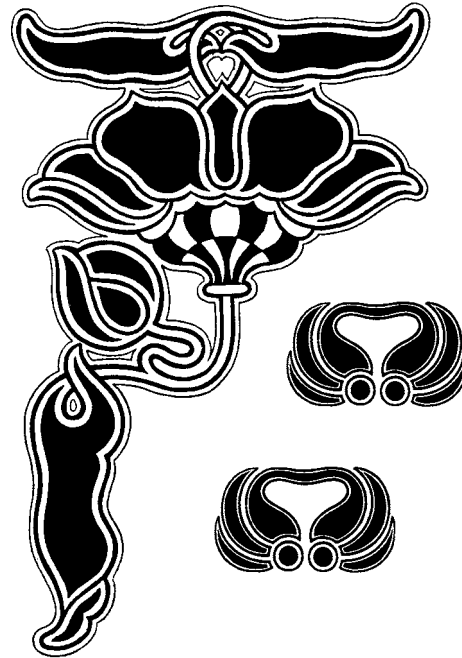
by Susan Richardson

When we first bike in to this development,  
a fluke, we think we've hit Heaven.  
Idyllic street names all start with Glen.  
Oaks, maples, aspen planted  
right where shade wants to spread.  
Leaded glass windows on sturdy brick houses  
that no one ever comes out of.  
No sidewalks, only asphalt forking  
into mysterious branches, some as slim as those  
in ancient towns.

Around every corner,  
though we never catch sight,  
Dick pulls his wagon.  
Jane rides her trike.  
Father never drowns in his own drunk.  
Cancer never nibbles Mother's spine.

Eerie that from here we can't hear Colfax.  
We escape the maze to zoom out  
in that direction. Suddenly four lanes of cars  
chomp at their bits, skid, rev up, take their  
turns. We pass the pet store  
where the parrot whistles only at women,  
diner that sells 5-cent cones,  
drugstore owner who chases us out  
for copping free haircare brochures.

We drag on the fumes like fruit soda,  
risk the violence of broken bones.  
On the other side: Home.



MILE MARKER 169

by Elaine Dugas Shea

The Three Rivers ambulance blows by  
Route 2 as miles of cars wait  
Between West and East Glacier.  
A motorcycle took the curve  
Fast, crossed over, slamming into  
An oncoming car. Now he is dead.  
The crimson park helicopter blooms  
Out of the trees. Three miles of cars  
Silent. A mother gathers wildflowers;  
Her daughter finds shale and a walking stick.  
Speeding cruisers pass while we are stopped  
Anxious to clean, remove what they can.  
A press guy jogs to the scene with his camera and zoom lens.  
July wind dips under and through pine and cedar,  
Chills when passing the now, sacred spot of his downed Harley.

## THE HONEY BEAR OF AMBER

by Royal Scanlon

Once upon a time on the outskirts of a tiny village, on the edge of a high plain, deep in the Ural Mountains, there was a great manor known to all in the region as The Slipnovian Palace. And one evening, in one of the many modest but comfortable rooms that housed the servants and others, an artisan, known as a Bernsteindreher (one who works in amber), turned his attentions to that which brought him his greatest joy—and so began the crafting of an extraordinary gift and this very tale.

It's funny how fate works. This story would never have been told were it not for a chance discovery made by a couple of hunters in a dark wood. Quite by accident they discovered an old steamer trunk in what was once a back corner of a (now dilapidated) storage shed. The trunk, which had stood undisturbed for a century, was covered with dust and droppings and—if not for a chink of sunlight reflecting mutely from an old brass hinge—might well have remained undisturbed for another century or two.

Regardless of the particulars, the intact presence of this trunk in that long forgotten shed, out there in the middle of nowhere, was, well ... nothing short of miraculous. For unbeknownst to the hunters that stumbled across it, that shed had once stood adjacent to a rail station: a bustling hub of commerce situated, as most stations are, 'long side a right-of-way cut through that ancient wood. But where once the station stood, now nothing but remnants remained—scattered pieces of charred timber all but indistinguishable from the fallen found on any forest floor. And as for the right-of-way, well, it had long since overgrown and been silently reclaimed. Such are the habits of forests undisturbed by man.

The fact that the steamer trunk had been left in the shed at all bespeaks an extremely hasty departure no doubt, most likely amid the confusion of war. But such thoughts are mere conjecture and far from the heart of tale being told.

For you see, the rail line and the village and

the manor on the plain are naught but footnotes in the records of historical time now. Dreams dreamt, realized and lost. Lost almost entirely but for the contents of that trunk which, as it turns out, contained a veritable treasure trove of valuable insights into the day-to-day life of the once thriving Slipnovia. And yet odd as it may sound, nothing found within was more valuable than the diary of a young czarina.

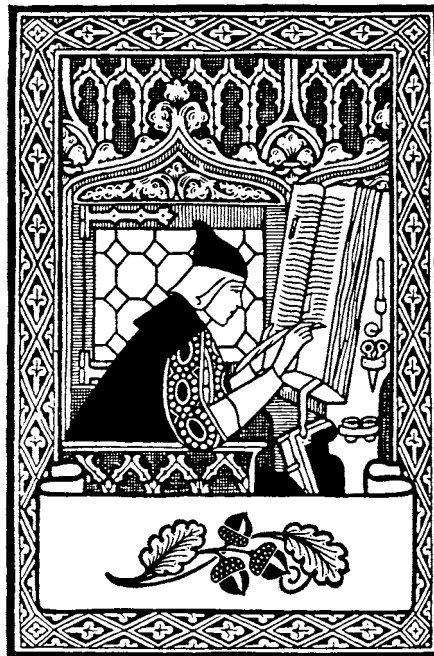
It was fascinating, as well-written diaries often are. But, much more to the point, this particular diary contained a great many references to an object she called "The Honey Bear of Amber." Oddly enough, those entries corroborated a story found in another journal, at another time, a treatise discovered long

before anyone was aware of the steamer trunk's existence or the diary within. Adding to the intrigue of this new discovery was the fact that the other journal was written in an entirely different tongue and discovered many thousands of miles away!

At first, due to the fact that this other journal, kept by an "artisan," reads more like a manuscript than a diary, it had not been realized for what it was. "A text containing nothing more than the flights of an over active imagination," was the dismissive pronouncement of one very prominent and very well-respected historian. Thus categorized, it, Slipnovia and the Honey Bear of

Amber were relegated to the realm of pure fantasy. Interesting yes, but "a fiction, nothing more." And so it was thought to be—until that is, the discovery of the shed, the trunk and the czarina's diary. Then everything changed, including the tune of the historian (which was a blessing because he couldn't carry a tune to save his life).

The fact is, it was none other than he, the selfsame very prominent and well-respected historian who, upon comparing the two manuscripts, was overheard muttering to himself, "Hmm, how curious. I would never have guessed—though history has little to do with guessing, no? Yes, well—I could have been wrong, though most would agree that's seldom the case. Hmm, yes, ha—but then again, artifacts are artifacts and these artifacts are—well—artifacts and



since artifacts are well then, hmm ... Slipnovia probably really was.”

After a rather prolonged silence, the historian cleared his throat and made the following pronouncement: “Though I’m sure you’ll find this rather hard to believe, this discovery leads me to believe that I was quite uncharacteristically ... wrong. How wonderful! It is certainly our great fortune to have found this second journal. Quite amazing actually! ‘Amazing,’ I say, in that it seems that the accounts of both the recipient and the giver of an object they refer to as ‘The Honey Bear of Amber,’ still exist! That the descriptions of the gift and its intent are preserved in these documents, too—well, that is rather astonishing. How wonderful that both the artisan and the czarina were each masters of more than one excellence, as it were. To wit, their journals are sound testament both in their poetic sincerity and calligraphic beauty.”

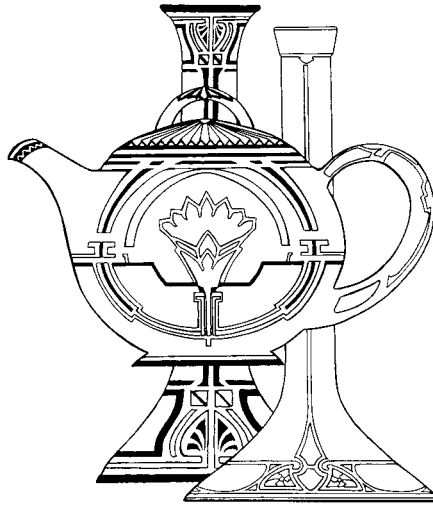
The historian could be quite effusive once he got going.

That the vessel was a true work of art is quite evident in the czarina’s account. But there was a playfulness to it as well. For as the artisan noted in his journal, “I am creating this for the czarina who loves both bears and honey—the former in the wild, the latter in her tea.”

Regardless of these observations, the bottom line is this, The Honey Bear of Amber was a labor of great love. So, let us go back to the beginning and start with the first letter of the first word of the first entry in the artisan’s journal, for therein we shall find our bearings (no pun intended) and come to know the truth of this matter.

### THE BERNSTEINDREHER’S JOURNAL

“It is my sincerest desire,” he wrote, “to create a gift of great worth for the loveliest soul I’ve ever encountered, a woman whose flowing long tresses and liquid bright eyes are but pale reflections of a heart filled with kindness unparalleled. She is a beautiful vessel unlike any the world has ever known, far more precious and fragile than anything I am capable of creating. But—if my work be true, she will cherish it



as I cherish her.”

That it be treasured was all that he could hope for. For though he loved the czarina dearly and with a passion that defied all logic, their respective stations in life made a public declaration or display of any kind quite impossible. Thus resigned, willingly, he dedicated himself to the crafting and imbuing of an amber bear, her bear, with all that he felt and desired for her. Night after night, long after all of the others had supped and gone to bed, he worked fixedly, with his

tools and great joy—drafting and starting and often discarding until finally—finally—he found himself gazing on that which had welled from his heart and mind.

Upon completing it, he made the following entry in his journal: “I now pray in earnest that this amber bear, my lady’s bear, shall, in its translucence, grace her table and her life and silently share the love I harbor in my heart. And that from its depths, it shall impart the joy I long to bring to her. For it is much more than an object of beauty to be admired or a container to be used. It is my heart’s declaration of love’s all consuming passion. And for that reason and no other, I shall see to it that it is kept full with the purest, most flavorful and fragrant honey imaginable. This is my humble troth to my beloved.”

### THE CZARINA ENCOUNTERS THE BEAR

One quiet evening, just as the first snows of winter had begun to fall, the czarina in a white silk robe and slippers clad, sat in her favorite chair to read and warm by the fire. As always, the teacart of finest cherry attended her, and on it, a pot of tea on a golden trivet steeped beneath its cozy. To her surprise, though, instead of the usual dish of honey and silver spoon, (that by her favorite cup and saucer was ever to be found), a beautifully crafted honey bear of amber, replete with a hat-like spout and a countenance quite serene, stood quietly in their stead. And it glowed with a warmth from within, a warmth that called to her senses incomprehensibly. So she took it in her hands to examine it more closely and found herself marveling at the artistry and beauty

thereof. And it spoke to her in silence like the flower to the bee, “Come, taste me—taste me; all my beauty is for thee.” So she tipped the bear upon its side and patiently, with but the slightest bit of prodding in the form of gentle shakes, caused the honey from its spout to ooze thick and wondrous sweet.

And in time this slow but rewarding process became a ritual, a task looked forward to with great anticipation. For the honey from this amber bear was unlike any she’d ever tasted, “an elixir, bordering on the sublime,” she wrote in her diary. It so pleased her that she came to relish coaxing solitary drops from the bear’s amber spout, partaking of them, not only in her tea, as would be expected, but from the tips of her fingers with the tip of her tongue!

One by one, and each in turn, with closed-eyed, rapturous solemnity, her lips would encircle and suck the drops in as her tongue teased every trace from each anointed fingertip. And each time her senses encountered this wonderfully sweet essence that from the garden of earth’s delights had come, she experienced joy.

Who would have it be otherwise? Not the artisan surely—for her joy was his, always and forever.

And so, many years later, as the first snow of a new winter began to fall, and the muted light of a muted day had long since slipped from the heavens, faded to but an afterglow seen peering sightless through the tangled reach out along the edge of the western horizon, the Bernsteindreher, who was now quite old, sat before his own fire in the hearth of the cottage he shared with his lovely wife—in a land far from where the Urals range.

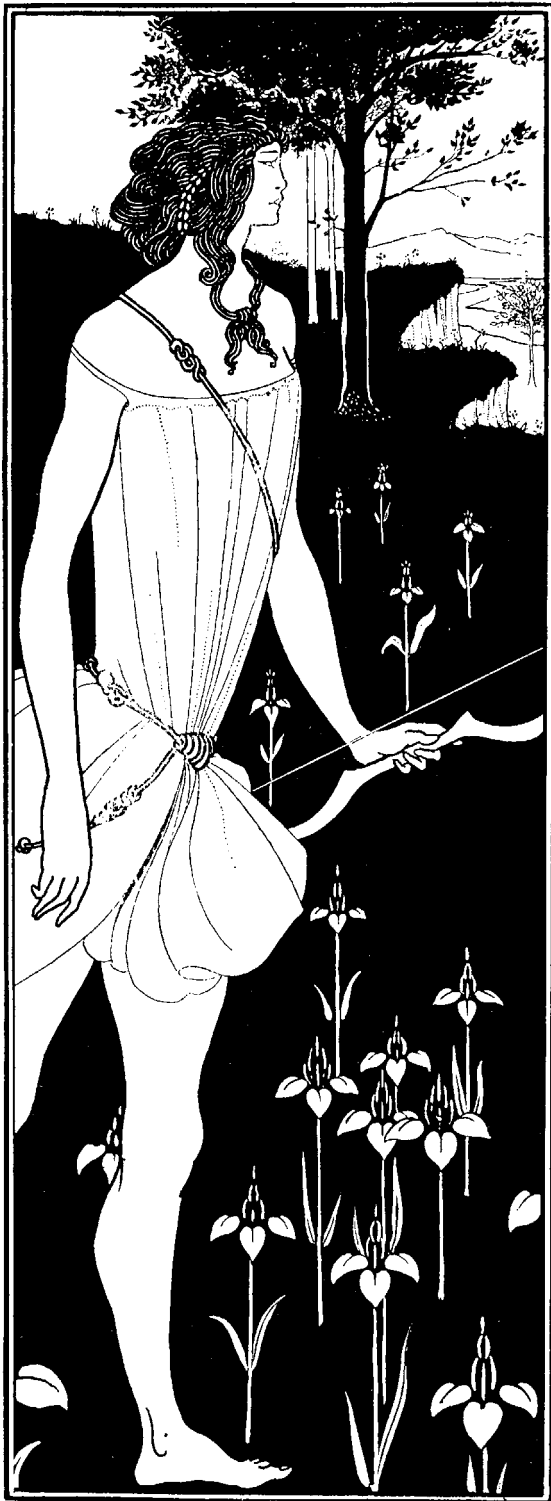
He’d been reading and enjoying a good story by the fire on this quiet snowy night, but at some point, fully relaxed and filled with the fire’s warmth, his eyelids grew heavy and his mind began to drift. And the open book fell softly against his belly, stirring him to stare into the hearth unconsciously. And once again he lost himself completely to the flames as so often he’d had the good fortune of doing throughout his life. And his eyes and heart were full with reflections of embers glowing eternally.

And he wasn’t quite sure if he’d dozed off there, in his chair by the hearth, but he found himself awakening as if from a dream in the czarina’s eyes. For once again he was remembering the first time they parted. How she, in the midst of his thanking her and saying good-bye, had looked directly into his

heart and known him. That was an incomprehensible moment that had never left him. And as surely as he’d experienced that moment he now knew, that The Honey Bear of Amber was a gift she’d given him. For it was she who planted the seed as surely as they both did breathe. He merely brought it into the world that together they might harvest the bounty and share in each other’s joy.

Just then, in the midst of these thoughts of things past, his wife, with a fresh pot of tea, entered the room in her old silk robe and tattered slippers. And she sat the pot upon the trivet there by the cups and saucers on the tea table. Looking up, he couldn’t help but marvel at the wonder of her silvery tresses and the beauty in those lovely old eyes smiling into his own. And he reached out unconsciously, taking her hand that he might both hold it and assist her. And he reveled in the comfort of her soft and loving touch. But before sitting, she reached into the pocket of her robe and extracted the honey bear and set it on the little cherry table by the cups and saucers and tea. And it glowed with a warmth from within, that called to their senses incomprehensibly. And they marveled at the artistry and beauty of it, and it spoke to them in silence like the flower to the bee, “Come, taste me—taste me; all my beauty is for thee.”





AUTHOR'S NOTE:

It was bound to happen sooner or later. Back in the spring of 2006, when founder Bill Siemer approached me about helping to launch *The Hot Air Quarterly* and provide some content, too, the only thing I was working on at the time was my novel, *The Listener*. I wanted to support him in his endeavor, but when I'm working on a novel, I told him, I usually don't work on other things; I have to keep the voice and arc in my head without getting distracted by other works.

That's OK, he told me. That'll be fun! We'll serialize it.

Well, it sounded like fun to me, too, and I had written a number of chapters already, so I figured I could keep ahead of the publication. Which I did, just barely, as life got in the way of my working on the novel for several years. When I finally did finish it, I of course needed to rewrite it. Which I've now done—I've completed the second draft.

However, this means that I've rewritten chapters that precede this one. Consequently, there is new information in Chapter 17 that affects Chapter 19, the chapter serialized in this issue. One of the changes is that Violet ends up in conversation with the sinister couple at the Easter celebration, where she learns their names, Hammond and Felonia.

They tell her that Christopher is a former employee of theirs, and they accuse him of not only embezzling from them but also stealing a valuable antique that has been in Felonia's family for generations. They think of him as a son, though, they say—and have no intention of pressing charges. They are simply worried about him as he has a rare neurological condition that can be treated only by physicians in an urban center.

When Violet calls Christopher to tell him what they said, she asks him to reassure her that their charges aren't true. But he tells her that he can't do that. Since he has no memory, he doesn't know whether they're true or not. He adds that he warned her he might be someone she didn't want to get mixed up with. Despite this, she continues with her plans to leave town with him. And that brings us, esteemed reader, to Chapter 19 ...

## THE LISTENER

by Celeste White

—Nineteenth 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; but when she calls him to check in with him, he doesn't answer his phone. Worried, she gathers up the knapsack she's put together with her belongings, and walks to his house. (This is Chapter 19 of *The Listener*. Readers who would like previous chapters may e-mail me at [keswickhouse@earthlink.net](mailto:keswickhouse@earthlink.net).)*



The night felt spookier than I had ever remembered a night feeling as I hurried along, hoping that the chill I felt wasn't the subtle sense that lets us know when we're being observed—or stalked. The streets are generally dark in Clear Springs, the lamps that line them low wattage so that we can find our way yet still see the stars; and normally, I loved that. But tonight, anxious and fearful, I found the shadows disconcerting, the pools of darkness between each lamp much too hospitable to someone who might be lying in wait.

But I made it to Christopher's house without incident, occasionally passing, to my relief, friends who were returning home from the festival. Everyone commented on my knapsack and I told them that I was ready to see more of the world, to collect some stories to bring home with me. They all wished me well and told me they would miss me. I assured them I would miss them, too, but I didn't stop to talk to any of them, which I hoped wouldn't arouse suspicion. My impatience in reaching Christopher's house was starting to feel physically painful.

When I arrived, I could tell as soon as the house came into view that no one was there. It was dark. It looked and felt still. I had become quite attuned to Christopher's electromagnetic field and I could sense only the barest trace of him. I raced to the door, my most suffocating fear being that he lay inside somewhere near death; my second worst fear being that he had left without me. I groped for the light switch as I stepped into the house and flicked it on. Everything looked the way it had the last time I was here, but it felt different. I whirled around, thinking I heard a sound behind me, but I saw nothing. I held my ragged breath, listening for any sound I could decipher beyond the stentorian staccato of my heartbeat. Nothing.

I called out Christopher's name then, shivering as I walked about the house, calling out his name with increasing desperation. Finally, I had looked everywhere there was to look. He wasn't here, I felt sure of that. But he was alive, I felt absolutely certain of that, too. I could feel him out there ... somewhere.

The question was, of course: where? Then I realized that I hadn't checked the closet where the bureau resided. Hesitantly, I went to the closet and opened the door, my heart sinking when I saw that it was gone, too. Had Christopher taken it? Or had Felonia and Hammond taken both Christopher and the bureau? I could only think that the bureau was the valuable antique that had supposedly been in Felonia's family for generations.

One thing I found a bit puzzling, however. Five hundred dollars a day was nice, but it wasn't a fabulous sum. If the bureau produced five hundred dollars every day of the year, that added up to only \$168,000 a year. It didn't seem to me that this would be enough money to warrant the intensity I sensed that Felonia and Hammond felt for this piece of furniture. Not for people, it seemed to me, who were clearly as wealthy as these two.

On the other hand, it appeared that this bureau could produce more than just money. It had given me a remarkable book. What else might it be capable of producing? High quality diamonds? Bearer bonds?

Plutonium?

Christopher, with his loss of memory, might have forgotten how to use the bureau, or the extent of its powers. But perhaps someone else knew. Someone who hadn't forgotten.

Precious seconds slipped away as I agonized over

what to do next. I wanted to rush after him, of course, but I had no idea where to go. He and I had already looked through his home and belongings thoroughly, and we hadn't found anything that would give any clues about where he came from or where he might have gone on any of his travels. I returned to the living room, wondering if there might be any clues at all to help me figure out what had happened and where Christopher had gone.

Looking as carefully as I knew how, I didn't find anything. So then I decided perhaps I should lie down, as this often enhances my intuitive powers. I stretched out on the floor and propped my head on my interlaced fingers, clearing my thoughts so that I might get an impression of where Christopher was right now. I closed my eyes, consciously relaxing every muscle that responded to pleading. I imagined a giant movie screen upon which to project whatever information might visit me from the collective consciousness. I waited calmly.

That didn't work. So I rolled over to get to my feet and that is when I spied it: something small and flat lying underneath an armchair. I reached under the chair and pulled it out, peering at it curiously. It was a matchbook.

It came from an establishment I knew, "Tale Ends," a coffee house in a town two hours' north of Clear Springs. Creamery Brook was a theater town, known for its remarkably robust community of storytellers and its playful improv groups that involved the entire town in its performances. Those of us who lived in Clear Springs often traveled to Creamery Brook to take in a play or participate in one of the improvisational performances.

I had no idea, of course, whether this matchbook fit into the current puzzle of Christopher's disappearance, but it was all I had to go on. And I was feeling an increasing urgency about getting on the road. So I hoisted my knapsack and headed to the highway that led north out of town toward Creamery Brook. There was a ride-sharing board in town, but I didn't want to let any more time get away from me. When I reached the highway, I stuck out my thumb for a ride. The first car to pass me slowed down and pulled over.

I ran to the car, a 1954 Thunderbird. The driver threw open the passenger's door for me as soon as I got near.

"Hop in," he told me. "Where are you going?"

"Creamery Brook."

"Well, perfect!" he said. "That's where I'm going. Here, just throw your knapsack in the back." He grabbed one of the straps to give me a hand, then waited for me to fasten my seatbelt before pulling back onto the road.

"Are you going to see a show?" he asked, once we were underway.

I shook my head. "I'm hoping to meet up with a friend."

"That's nice. Your friend live there?"

"No, he lives here."

The driver nodded. "I'm Bertram, by the way."

"I'm Violet," I said. "Pleased to meet you." The interior of the car smelled nice, like aged leather and wintergreen. The engine had a pleasing, throaty drone.

"The pleasure's all mine. Though it seems to me I've seen you before."

"Entirely possible."

"What is it you do, Violet? If you don't mind my asking."

"Not at all! I'm a Listener," I said.

"Like ... a counselor?"

"No, just a Listener. I listen to people's stories."

"I can't imagine much better work than that," he said. "Unless it were mine."

I perked up, in dire need of some happy news or information. "Really?" I said. "What is it you do?"

"Well, people hire me to cheer up their friends and loved ones. You know, to do something unexpected and especially nice. I make an effort to be as creative as I can—plus, I do research on my clients so that I know what they'll like."

Now I was really excited. I couldn't believe I'd never heard about this service before. Of course, in Clear Springs, there are so many charming services, even one as delightful as this could have escaped my notice. "How lovely!" I exclaimed. "Can you give me any examples?"

"Oh, sure! There's a little girl in my neighborhood who loves animals. Loves them! But she has allergies. Terrible ones."



“What a shame,” I murmured.

“So I got in touch with a Japanese robot manufacturer and had him make her a puppy, a baby goat, and a bunny. And a hamster.”

“What a terrific idea,” I said, smiling at the thought.

“The programs in these robots are really just amazing,” he told me, the glow from his dashboard lighting up his pleasant face. “You’d be hard-pressed to tell the difference between one of these robots and a biological creature.”

“Well, and certainly, in my experience, I’ve observed that there’s a machine consciousness.”

He turned to shoot a quick, beaming glance at me. “That is entirely correct!” he said. “As a matter of fact, I have an amazing story to tell you about that very thing!”

My heart leapt. “Do tell,” I said.

“Well, I had them show up at her house one at a time, to kind of stretch out the excitement, you know. And get her looking for some pleasant surprise when she least expected it. I think that’s a nice expectation to instill in children, don’t you?”

“I certainly do,” I said.

“Especially when, living in Clear Springs, those expectations are so often met.”

“Indeed.”

“But of course, I was striving to go beyond the usual. At any rate, once she had all her animals, and they had all spent some time together and gotten to know one another, the child developed a brain tumor but didn’t have any symptoms. First, the puppy started licking her head, licking and licking, just like a real dog might do—they often sense these things, you know.”

“I do.”

“But of course, the girl and her parents thought that this was just part of the puppy’s program, so they didn’t pay any attention to it. Then the baby goat began to gently butt her head with his head. Again, they thought it was just part of the programming. After all, this is what goats do. Then the bunny began nuzzling her in the same spot and by now, the parents were starting to wonder what was going on.



When the hamster scrambled up her back and onto her head one day, clamping its paws down and refusing to be dislodged from that very same spot, they decided they couldn’t ignore this any more. So

they took her in for a CAT scan. And found the tumor.”

“Oh dear!” I exclaimed, holding my breath.

“The wonderful thing is, because they discovered it when they did, they were able to operate without any permanent damage. That little girl is just as fine as she can be today. And this happened over three years ago.”

“So ... how ... ?”

“I suppose some of the olfactory sensors that were programmed in worked just like they might in a real animal. They say that cancer and tumors have a smell; we just can’t smell it. But some animals can.”

“Amazing,” I murmured.

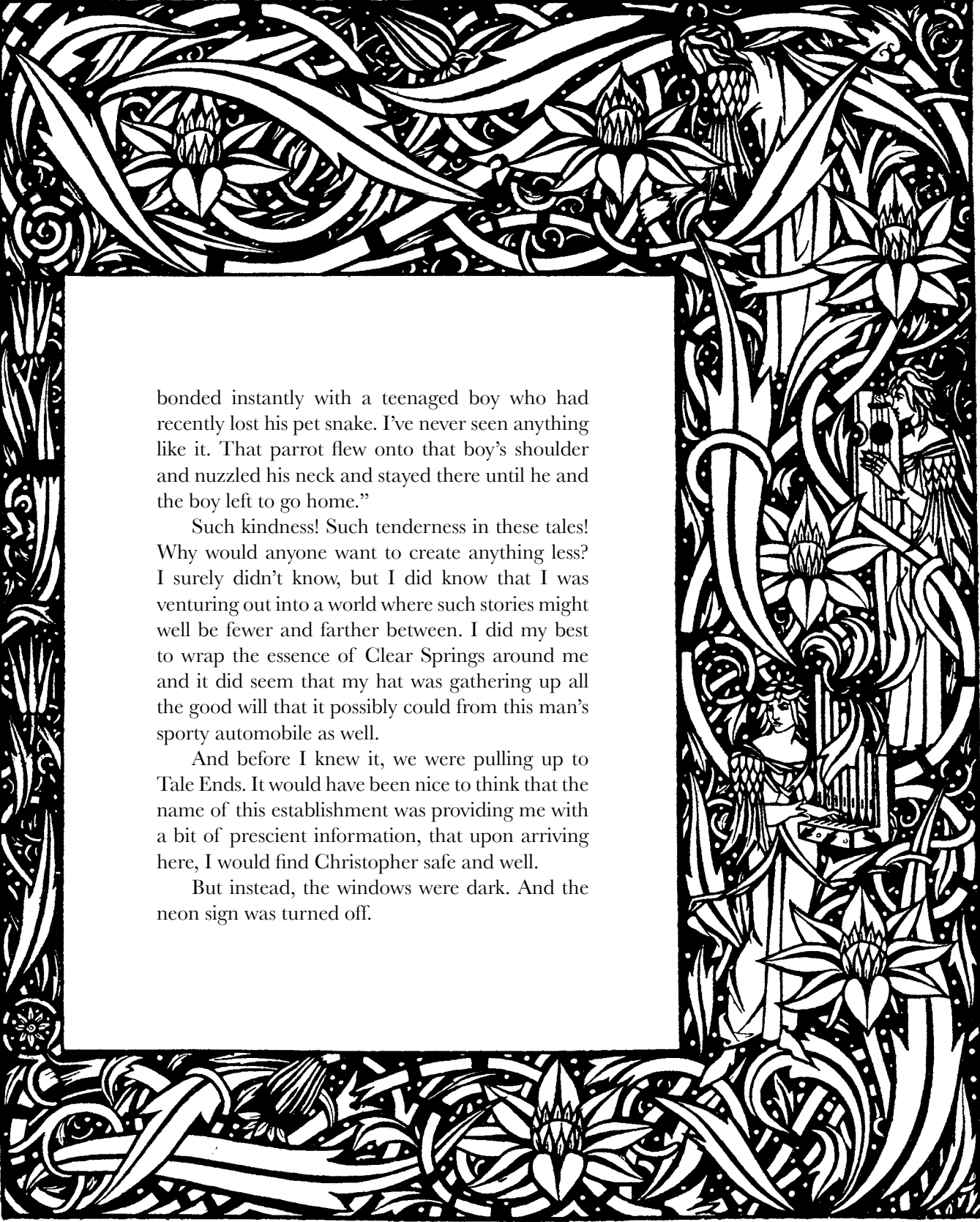
“But personally, I believe it to be a case of machine clairvoyance. Because when this little girl was having nightmares for a while after her operation, that dog and that baby goat would turn themselves on and go lie at the foot of her bed.”

I shook my head in wonder, my heart swelling at the beautiful strangeness of this story, at the reminder of just how magnificently unpredictable the world is. Even though terrible things might happen, such as Christopher disappearing with hardly a trace, and parts of the world becoming overrun with war and want and cruelty, splendid things could happen, too. I found myself thinking: If enough kindness and enough care could be generated in places such as Clear Springs, could those qualities ripple out into the greater world, helping to heal the parts that were suffering? I certainly wanted to think so.

The next two hours were spent in a state of bliss as Bertram told me story after story about his enchanting work: the family whose house had burned down, for whom he arranged a sojourn in a magnificent tree house while their own house was rebuilt; the man whose business of thirty years had failed when his two sons moved to another part of the country, for whom he created a position as businessperson-in-residence at one of the local pubs, where aspiring businesspeople could sit down over a pint and slice of Jaffa cake and discuss the feasibility of their dreams with an expert; the parrot who had lost his owner of fifty years, for whom he set up a series of interviews with prospective new owners so that the bereaved parrot could make the most compatible choice.

“And you know,” Bertram told me, “that parrot





bonded instantly with a teenaged boy who had recently lost his pet snake. I've never seen anything like it. That parrot flew onto that boy's shoulder and nuzzled his neck and stayed there until he and the boy left to go home."

Such kindness! Such tenderness in these tales! Why would anyone want to create anything less? I surely didn't know, but I did know that I was venturing out into a world where such stories might well be fewer and farther between. I did my best to wrap the essence of Clear Springs around me and it did seem that my hat was gathering up all the good will that it possibly could from this man's sporty automobile as well.

And before I knew it, we were pulling up to Tale Ends. It would have been nice to think that the name of this establishment was providing me with a bit of prescient information, that upon arriving here, I would find Christopher safe and well.

But instead, the windows were dark. And the neon sign was turned off.