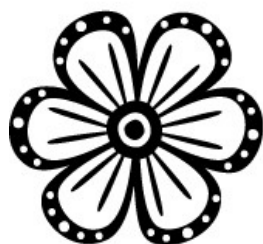
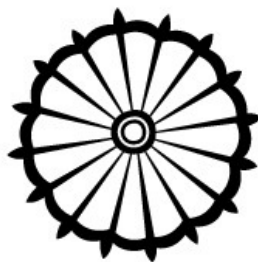
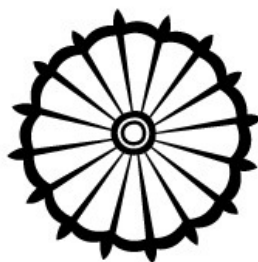


# decades review

Issue Twelve



July 2014



*Summer is here.*



# Poetry and Photography

## Poetry and Suicide

by Brian Glaser

My uncle killed himself in a park—a public park, others in the family would say,  
as if to demonstrate that they could bear the shame  
by adding their own note of judgment to the band, the real and imagined band,  
of voices with which life pauses and lets fall its remark.

He would take the cousins, five or six of us, on what he called expeditions  
including one to storm a closed wing of the Cleveland airport with toy guns  
and another wading against the current in the Cuyahoga River.

His daughter came to visit me as I was finishing a project  
into which I had almost disappeared

and she slept in my bed while I spent the night on the floor beneath her.

We said nothing of him.

The art of poetry cannot retract his terrible bullet

and whatever art could do

failed him,

and I find in an empty glazed cup

the difference between drama and play.

**{{Brian Glaser** an assistant professor of English at Chapman University. His poems have been published in *Ploughshares*, *North American Review*, *Ecozon@*, *Literary Imagination*, *Five Fingers Review* and other journals.}}

### 3 am

by Janet Butler

I walk into night. My mind shakes the frazzle of day  
like a dog tossing water that clings after a swim.

I step into pools of perception, my thoughts ripples  
that rush to shadows, dark beaches stars flow into.

I swim to that edge where you are  
a tangle of seaweed pulling me under.

I glide cavernous rooms, a labyrinth of false leads  
I twist and turn through, pulled by a watery gleam of star

that floats on my bedroom window  
as I break surface and wake.

### Loose Change

by Janet Butler

Summer shimmers -  
a tease in the bright white light  
of a spring day.

My dreams are pennies  
tossed into the center  
of desire

hope rippling outwards  
towards edges  
I drink from.

{{**Janet Butler** teaches Italian and will offer a poetry workshop at the Frank Bette Art Center in Alameda, California. "Upheaval" was one of three national winners in the Red Ochre Press 2012 Chapbook contest. She is moderator of the monthly Poetry & Prose at the Blue Danube cafe.}}

# We Built Our Churches Using Borrowed Nails

by Courie Johnson

When he fucks you  
the right way  
you think you see God.  
But its only ever the reflection  
of yourself, fogged, distorted in  
the warped mirror of the vanity  
you bought secondhand—cheap,  
because mice had gnawed holes  
in it, and it was weak enough  
to fall apart. You wanted it,  
so I lent you the money,  
and did not ask for it back.

You needed it, to see  
yourself feel like shit,  
until he's in you.  
Then it's all oh gods,  
dear gods,  
Lord. I sit in my room and  
count your devotions, run  
my tongue round the rosary  
of my teeth. He will leave

and we will sit together out  
on the cramped and slanted  
stoop, the smoke blooming  
between us, a screen to  
filter your confessions.

At least he treats me right,  
You will say, and I will understand.  
Right is no longer  
Good, but a gauge for  
how less horrible it is, after.

I will grind my teeth  
to dust damning him,  
damning them all while  
you struggle to bless yourself.

**{{Couri Johnson** is a graduate student of the NeoMFA. She lives in Youngstown, Ohio and is the current head editor of *Jenny*. While her major passion is fiction, she also enjoys writing a poem or two every now and again.}}





***"The Back Door"***  
by Thomas Michael Gillaspay

{{Thomas Michael Gillaspay is a northern California based photographer with an interest in urban minimalism.}}

## Stirred. Not Shaken.

by Rose Woodson

We bottle ghosts.  
A bit of carbonation &  
the dead sparkle fine.  
Glitter, smoldering.

Bottles. Not cans.  
We need to see what we cannot bury,

broken-wing words lingering in  
the dusk,  
fluttering on some low hanging branch in the brain;  
the simmering just below  
the simmering  
pot, bubbles high-fire whipped  
to thick, silent steam hanging  
in the air of the small  
kitchen like cross Spanish moss,  
the prism  
of promises sprinkling  
rainbows over us like confectioner's sugar  
though we, unleavened,  
could not rise,

like ghosts on the edge of voice,  
plain as white butterflies, threading  
light through our eyes,  
sewing stories to soul,  
as if we would last,  
an unscattered flock.

{{Poems by **Rose Maria Woodson** have appeared in *Foliate Oak*, *Magnolia: A Journal of Women's Socially Engaged Literature*, *Volume II*, *Quantum Poetry Magazine*, *OVS Magazine*, *Jet Fuel Review*, *Stirring*, *The Mojave River Review* and *Scapegoat Review*.}}

## Syllabic Binding

by James White

Language is a patent still pending, included:  
the method of how to criss-cross the internal  
structure of paper, and identify the curled up  
corner of a tin panel to the daylight  
that scatters in the absence of large numbers.

What if the crop circles in the seabed  
are nature's own method of intelligent needlepoint,  
or gravity's relative youth to how large  
our greater mass. What if in the womb you were taught

intimacy is simply to touch shoulders  
with the V formation of birds, how taken they are  
with the way water splits on rocks,  
or how aerodynamic panic moves

exactly the way it sounds, at sleep in the canal  
of the sky's ear. It bolts the black to the white  
in an image, since in movement it hunts  
for a skin-like surface,

in this case the book still open to  
the last page last read twenty-something  
years ago that explains how to leave  
an idea on paper; how to

criss-cross internal structures. But  
after the sixth time through, it all lets go. Everything:  
the strands, the connective tissue, it all erodes and  
like dark matter, becomes a blue notebook without a name.

## This Kind of Hollow Sugar Sand

by James White

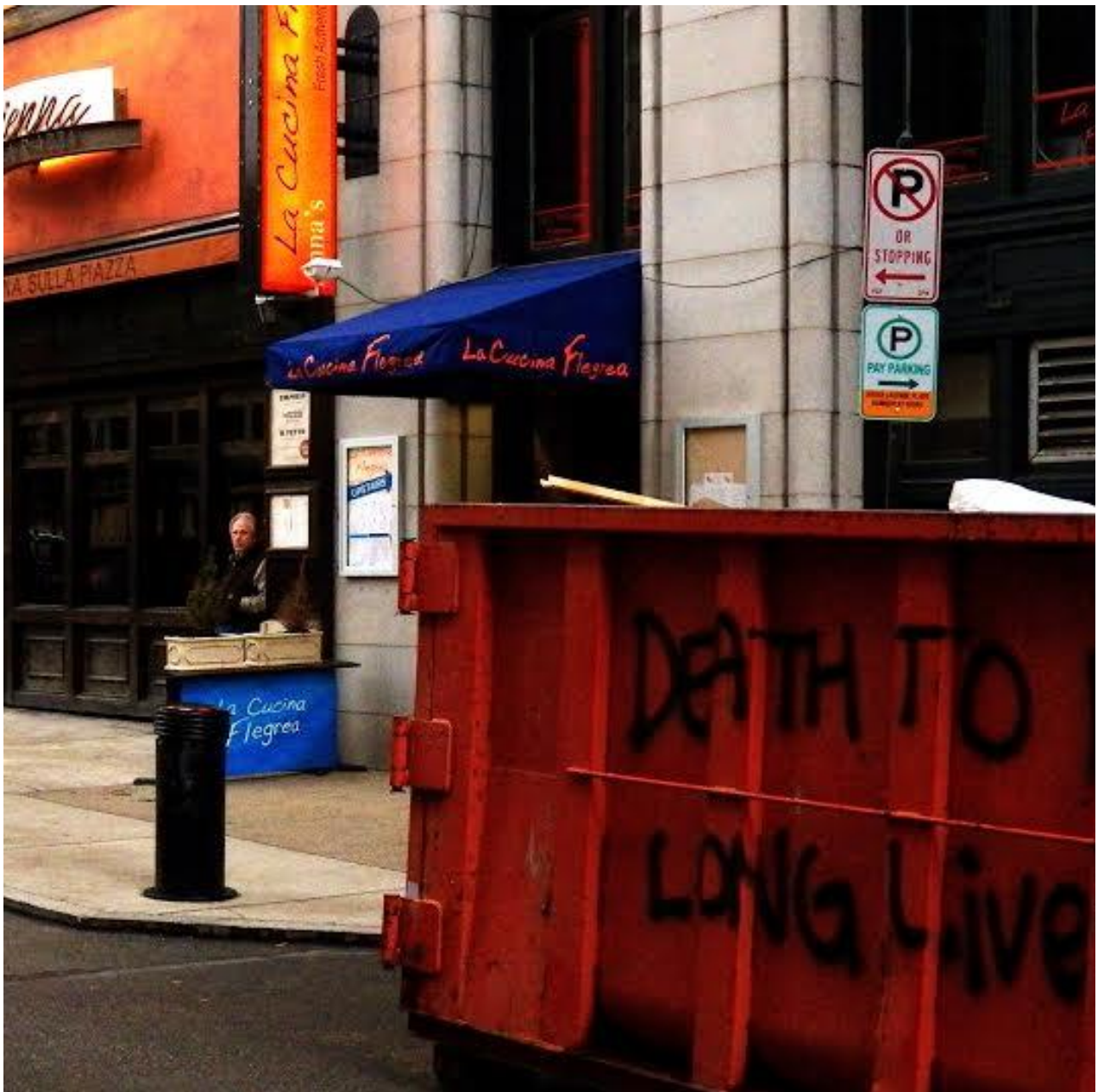
must have tailed around the sun and translated  
Earth's dales, considering how they once were  
the gateway to countless natural ends. One trick,  
creased between the gait of the colt  
and the half-moon arch of the garden,  
where young boys talk of S.E.X. with tattoos  
that circle their forearms, speaks to alchemy  
and how it outdates derivation; unlike the solar  
sand that touched everything but God's  
smallest tinkering (armored plates, Mancala  
marbles, the landing aches of inner curves).  
I heard, maybe, the heat beneath us is the preservation tool.  
Our cooking skin meant to watch through the banana leaves  
the shadows of the clouds blush across the moon face.

**{{James White** is a graduate student at Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing with a concentration in Poetry. James received his BA in Creative Writing from Knox College. Winner of the 2014 AWP Intro Journals Project Award for Poetry.**}}**



**“Alley with Pallet”**  
by Russell Steur





## **“Death to Video Long Live the New Flesh”**

**by Russell Steur**

**{{Russell Steur** is a born-again dissident residing in Johns Creek, Georgia. His poetry has been published in the United States, Europe, Africa, and on certain islands. He operates *The Camel Saloon*, an on-line speakeasy catering to dromedaries, malcontents, and jewels of the world.}}

# Childhood Home

by Barrie Evans

I.  
*What do you want done with the kitchen?*  
Mom wants it all enamel white  
and a color called dusted butter.  
Dad left the light over the stove.  
A piece of string is tied to a chain.  
When I pull it, the tin beads  
rub the porcelain and sound like  
when I yank on a zipper.

Can I stay up and watch TV?  
*Eat everything on your plate,*  
*don't throw out good food.*  
*Then you can watch Moses*  
*and the Ten Commandments.*

The plague against the firstborn  
moves like fog through Egypt.  
It turns away from the doorways  
painted with lamb's blood.

II.  
The north wall of my bedroom  
was guarded by a maple tree.  
A locust tree protected the west.  
High above my window, an owl  
talked through all of August.

My parents watched the news  
downstairs. I had said my prayers,  
*Angel of God, my guardian dear.*  
There was a ting-ting-ting, like  
someone tapping their spoon  
against a glass. I tried not to hear it.  
It was either a ghost—and I prayed  
for it to leave—or, it was Death  
and I asked him to pass over.

**{{Barrie Evans** is a recent MFA graduate. His work has appeared in *Dark Matter* and *No Idea What I'm Doing*. He lives in Mankato, MN, and works as a security guard on the overnight shift.}}

## How to Put a Chicken to Sleep

by Alicia Hoffman

I.

It's easy. One can walk past the growing cluster of Rhode Island Reds foraging for oyster shells in the glistening stack of hay to the nesting rack, take hold of the Jurassic beak and fold the head into plumage and wing. Then, lift up, slowly spin the thing in semi-circles until the eyes, so outwardly addled, drift to the corners of the dusting shed and shutter.

II.

Once, we were young. Now, memory slips clean as rain parades down the eaves of palm. Sluice the salted water from the membrane; remember the moment that shellacked becoming. Soft yellow and gray and white like water dredged from storm drain, the chicks hatched from their shells. Afraid of the flock in the laying mash, I stepped back. It was an accident.

III.

Day after day, the rooster attacks. The neck never looks back at what cuts it, just rolls around as the lolling body runs from the attack. After, the rain comes in quick to stick to the sawdust earth and the yard sprinkled with white feathers specked with globes of red comes clean. Now, we speak a sort of silent grace; stiffly lift to our mouths the bowls of roasted meat and steaming broth and drink in all that's lost.

{{Originally from Pennsylvania, **Alicia Hoffman** now lives, writes, and teaches in Rochester, New York. Author of "Like Stardust in the Peat Moss"(Aldrich Press, 2013), her poems have recently appeared in *Red Paint Hill Quarterly*, *A-Minor Magazine*, *Camroc Press Review*, *Innisfree Poetry Journal*, *SOFTBLOW*, *Orange Room Review*, and elsewhere. A two-time Pushcart Prize nominee, she is currently pursuing her MFA in Poetry at the Rainier Writer's Workshop.}}



## Flown Silver

by Clyde Kessler

You draw a vanishing point  
into a hummingbird among lilies.  
The wings splurge as if bubbling  
from light and up across the sky  
so green-whirling in its speed.

Three cousins twist like astronauts  
through the flower garden, down  
the step stones to climb nothing  
past the lilies and the boxwoods,  
and steadied with their mind-monsters  
in all of space blue-laughing home.

Say, I have burnt the garden.  
Say, I have no lilies. No hummers.  
The sky is spider silk.  
The step stones are whale ribs.  
My cousins are furies crimped from mud.  
And you and I have rolled trick dice  
in free fall. Say, the sun  
has flared like a trillion hummingbirds  
in a lens. We keep falling there.  
Then you draw another vanishing point.

**{{Clyde Kessler** lives in Radford, Virginia with his wife Kendall and their son Alan. He's a founding member of Blue Ridge Discovery Center, an environmental education organization with programs in western North Carolina and southwestern Virginia. Recent publications include poems in *Rose Red*, *Triggerfish*, *Big River*, and *Your Daily Poem*, with poems soon in *Convergence*, *Sow's Ear Poetry Journal*, and *Still: The Journal*.**}}**

## Fairhope, AL – Night 1

by Tom Holmes

I see through my ears  
black waves

on the horizon  
yellow blue and red lights –

the edge of time is like this

## Fairhope, AL – Day 1

by Tom Holmes

fish flop on the bay –  
my congested Hattiesburg  
eyesight unfurls  
through wind  
to Mobile's shore

a seagull arcs up  
drops and loops  
arcs drops and loops –  
I forget how to add  
I acquire subtractions

**{{Tom Holmes** is the editor of *Redactions: Poetry, Poetics, & Prose.***}}**

# Transubstantiation

by Josh Martin

As if to pay tribute to the pantheistic  
nature gods of red soot,  
we stand erect on the river bank  
and let the black mud-suckers  
siphon the first droplets of sweet blood  
from in between our forefingers.  
We solemnly nod to the  
naked roots of the  
soon-to-be baptized hanging  
water tupelo, set about  
collecting and  
burnishing with globs of spit  
the peace offering of river  
stones that will  
be side armed,  
without elegy,  
into the place where the  
river birch accepted  
its fate long ago.  
Between banks  
it extends itself: one end of the shaft  
spears into the window  
of a homestead, its roots  
finding respite in a glass of milk,  
the other end blackens up the bark  
like a dipstick, unshaken.  
Its northward  
branches snake around the rims  
of the rusted car;  
babies breath dies here;  
vines sway like wind chimes.  
It's a sound that doesn't remind  
us of home, or at least one  
we could return to as if  
nothing had happened.  
The cattails are the jury,  
the stream reflects  
a metamorphosis,  
a change sculpted,  
the transubstantiation  
of the largest  
stone into a holy ankh  
which we've each held  
and, for the briefest of moments,  
pretended meant salvation.

**{{Joshua Martin** has recently finished his MA in Literature at Clemson University. He's been published in various online magazines, including the *Eunoia Review*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, the *Clemson Chronicle*, and *Red Fez Literary Review*. He currently lives in Charlotte, NC.}}

# His Eyes Were Shades of Blue

by Heather M. Browne

Varied - a changing from light to dark  
open – close  
here and gone  
Bluer than the mourning sky  
Sweeter than berries bluest crush  
Deeper than ocean tides slip, drawing out  
Softer than rain  
drops  
lost

His eyes were shades of blue  
Brighter than any irises' vibrant sight  
Vacantly mirroring the stream of tears pouring out  
She held him close, and blew his only kiss  
Forget-me-not  
blues

Born with eyes perfectly stilled - blue  
Still

**{{Heather M. Browne** is a faith-based psychotherapist and recently emerged poet, published in the *Orange Room*, *Boston Literary Review*, *Page & Spine*, *Eunoia Review*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *The Poetry Bus*, *Red Fez*, *The Muse*, *Deep Water Literary Journal*, *Electric Windmill*, *Maelstrom*, *mad swirl*, and *Dual Coast*. Her first chapbook, "We Look for Magic and Feed the Hungry" has just been published by MCI. She just won the Nantucket Poetry Competition and will be featured on their website. She has been married 20 years to her love, has 2 amazing teens, and can be found frolicking in the waves. Follow her: [www.thehealedheart.net](http://www.thehealedheart.net)}}

# The Bible Will Keep

by Holly Day

I step off the train and shake myself free. My name  
is drawn to your voice, puts me on my back  
later, in the dark. From head to toe  
I am this new woman, one that wants only you  
pressed into the places I spread open  
to God. Confession, it works against me,

there is always so much work to do.

Sparrows and cardinals and whiskey all scream  
my life out on the thin quilt for you to go through, I tell you  
that God has forgiven me my trespasses, that the Bible in my pocket  
is the only thing keeping my dreams  
from leaking out and clattering on the tiles  
noisy as a handful of spent bullet cartridges.

**{{Holly Day** was born in Hereford, Texas, “The Town Without a Toothache.” She and her family currently live in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where she teaches writing classes at the Loft Literary Center. Her published books include the nonfiction books “Music Theory for Dummies”, “Music Composition for Dummies”, and “Guitar All-in-One for Dummies”, and the poetry books “Late-Night Reading for Hardworking Construction Men”, *The Moon Publishing* and “The Smell of Snow”, *ELJ Publications*.}}

# The World Is Insane

by Kevin Acers

A blinded beast with bloodied sockets stumbles,  
bleats in anguish, echoes of its cries haunting the hills.

(As a boy I cringed at olives. They were, I knew,  
the eyeballs of goats.)

{{**Kevin Acers** is a social worker who lives in Oklahoma City with his wife, their cat, and a potted plant named Fronds Kafka. His poetry has been published in numerous journals (including *Decades Review*, issue 10) and in one full-length collection, "Time Machine: Prose Poems and Vignettes." Publication of his second collection, "Dead Mouse Poems," is expected later this year.}}



**"Frogger"**

by Mary Alice Lambert



**"Sight"**

by Mary Alice Lambert





**“D.C.”**

**by Mary Alice Lambert**

**{{Alice Lambert** was raised in the small town of Canby, Oregon. She is now a freshman at Canby High and enjoys playing basketball, acting, and photography.**}}**

## I've Been Wandering into This House for Months

by Brendan Sullivan

In their kitchen jazz plays softly.  
Really.

The light switch in the bathroom has a short,  
and there are always  
dishes in the sink, empty cans on the porch  
guests on the couch.

## Odanachaney

by Brendan Sullivan

I like your tattoos,  
especially the buffalo nickel on your neck  
and the wolf head on your side that smiles when you bend down  
to pick up a quarter.

{{Brendan Sullivan writes poetry on the way to work, because the radio in his truck is broken. He has worked with the Rahnd Table writing workshop as well as other, even less formal things. The coffee here is pretty good.}}

## Magic

by Amy Friedman

Your heart is a turnpike beggar,  
a homeless wanderer boiling like an egg in the midday sun.  
Its yolk center where you keep him suspended in cartoonish perfection  
a freeze frame car crash in which he is the perpetual hero  
hardens with every pitch,  
every dig though his psychic couch cushions  
for undiscovered pockets of sentiment  
not yet bleached to numbness by the blinding daylight  
of another round of your pitiful panhandling  
and your cardboard "WIFE" sign,  
edges rough as the years.

There is a calendar to keep; photos do not take themselves.  
A wide aperture lights your simulated smiles  
hiding rot beneath the Christmas card  
like morticians reanimate the dead for open caskets.  
And tomorrow your vagabond heart will head back out to the streets  
wishing for some of his magic.

**{{Amy Friedman** is a writer and an English instructor at Harper College with an M.A. in Comparative Literature from Northwestern University. One of her creative nonfiction pieces will be featured in the upcoming edition of *Rougarou*. She is currently at work on her second satirical correspondence novel. Amy lives in Chicago with her husband, her daughter, and her three-pound dog, who is often mistaken for a squirrel. **}}**

## Prose and Artwork

## Little Chickens

by Anna Lea Jancewicz

Little chickens, with eyes of real Baltic amber. You made them, thread by thread, stitch by stitch, and now they rustle bloodthirsty. Now they want for dreams. Yours are absent whenever you wake, a murky cavity in your memory. They diagonal golden beaks toward your scars, try to pluck them up like earthworms. They whisper to each other in their suspicious, enigmatic chicken language, and you just know they are seditious.

You thought first about sewing little Viking ships. You sketched a prototype on graph paper with the stub of a yellow pencil that you pocketed at the library. But the idea of its belly bulging with tiny red-bearded menaces all rapey-eyed and in need of mead got you grinding your teeth. Your mouth became a mortar and pestle. You worried about their moral compasses, you worried about your own. You reckoned little chickens were a safer bet.

You thought it would be idyllic. Your old jeans remade with pastoral charm. But they are scratching out a primitive map of your apartment on the denim. You don't know what that's about, but it's eerie. You can't make omelets anymore without noticing the act is accompanied by their uneasy silence. Falling asleep at night, playing your dead grandmother's music box, their snickering wafts out of the hamper. You can hear it over the strains of *The Blue Danube*, no matter how many dirty t-shirts and socks you heap on them.

You are nervous about taking up arms against them. The seam-ripper sits on top of your sewing basket and you steal peripheral glances at it. You play it cool. It could be your war hammer. One rainy evening, after a supper of delivery Chinese and a hot soak in an Epsom salt bath, while your jeans are lying on the damp tiles, you rush for it. A gale of clucking rises up from the bathroom, and they come scuttling across the hallway carpet, squawking bloody murder, your pant legs dancing as if enghosted. You drop your weapon and back up against the closet door, waving your white undies in a gesture of surrender.

You are going to have to be more clever. You start Googling: *What plants are poisonous to chickens?* Daffodils, foxglove, jimson weed, morning glory. Yes, morning glory. Easy to sketch, the heart-shaped leaves. You choose your threads, sky blue and deep, deep purple. You start at the frayed hems. You embroider by the light of your reading lamp well into the night, all week long, and the plants grow taller, tendrils reaching out to grasp the inseams.

The legs are covered soon with a thicket of creeping vines, and bright blooms that open every morning, close by the time the sun hangs high. You read that chickens know better than to eat toxic vegetation, but that they can be fooled when hand fed. You nudge the petals with your thumbs, toward the birds' speckled feathers and red crowns. *Trust me, trust me.* And you wait.

**{{Anna Lea Jancewicz** lives in Norfolk, Virginia, where she homeschools her children and haunts the public libraries. Her writing has appeared or is forthcoming at *Literary Mama*, *Squalorly*, *Bitterzoet*, *Fuck Fiction*, *Black Heart Magazine*, *The Citron Review*, and *Bartleby Snopes*. Yes, you CAN say Jancewicz: Yahnt-SEV-ich. More at: <http://annajancewicz.wordpress.com/>}}

# Cry Quits

by Jonathan Coffelt

As quickly as I could, I let 2<sup>nd</sup> shift line operator, Jimmy Limmert, know there was a problem with the #16 roller. That was after he strolled up carelessly without a hardhat, lackadaisically turning his head to any distinct point except the front. When he got here, without confessing my existence, he went to the nearest roof support beam to hang his jacket in a groove. Jimmy's denial I never took personal. His place here, his future—I represented those terms he hadn't accepted yet. I hoped he soon would or later on, after a lifetime of shift work, have no pride with which to draw strength. Nothing at all like I did.

In a hurry to see my friends before they left, especially today, Jimmy and the #16 were in my way. He wasn't surprised when I told him the problem, but he muttered a curse anyhow. I let him stare at the #16 for an instant—too long—others passed by. I quickly reminded him he'd have to apply more grease to the inside joint, and the shift manager said they'd inspect it when the factory paused on Sunday. With uninterested eyes, he put some tobacco in his lip.

I was distracted too—my long-planned vacation began after my shift, which just ended. After a forklift went by, I joined the others in the center lane, walking away from the withering heat of the Bessemer furnaces on that end of the factory.

I said goodbye to those close, raising my voice over an orchestra of piccolo squeaks as metal cauldrons moved overhead. For people further away, I signaled a parting wave. Pam O'Hara, James Staden, and both Dean brothers came to wish me a good trip.

"Frank..." Scotty Peeler shouted from behind. Scotty and I have known each other all our lives. Over 60 years. But I've been working at Freemont Metal longer than him. A sinewy man, he was in far better physical shape. His slim overalls were faded from his wife's incessant washing. "How's the stock market?" he shouted.

"Down. Down for eight days now," I said as I shook Donald Siberlt's hand when he passed swiftly by, and then patted me on the back. I held the touch for a moment in my mind. I was sure it was a 'Have fun' pat, instead of 'Good job' or worse yet, 'Hang in there'—the standard post-shift support exchange meant to encourage ageless hard work and long hours.

Most everyone else walked faster than I could. I tried my hardest to keep up with them, even though it hurt me like hell. Most of the time it was futile. Dealing with a building, daylong pain—the worst kind; the sort that makes a soul surrender—which didn't release until I woke the next day. Been happening for years.

Not today. I brought the bottle of chewable baby aspirin to my mouth.

"Why's it down, you think?" Scotty asked.

I wiped my forehead sweat onto my sleeve. "No idea really, but two weeks ago, the entire market froze, and dived." I paused to catch a little breath. "It's kind of typical."

"Oh, didn't know. Say," he touched my arm, "my grandson is paying attention to the market these days—you know kids. Have any tips I can give him? Anything you watch for?"

We walked on. The rest of the people in pistachio boilersuits were well ahead of us now. They always left in a hurry. They reached their lockers, got their belongings, and were gone before I even made it to the break room. A year ago I decided to say goodbye whenever I got the chance. I said it to the whole gang at least 20 times since I took care to.

The effort was good enough for me.

"No big tips. Tell him to watch it every day."

"I know, but what? Volume? 52-week highs and lows?"

I smiled. "No, don't complicate it. The numbers always move. It's fun just to watch the numbers. That's what I do."

Scotty slowed. "Fun? You own any stock, Frank?" he said from behind.

This time I laughed. “No, and right now I’m glad I don’t!”

He and I had seen a lot together. New management, twice. Within months perhaps a third. Not me.

He came up beside me, put his hand on my right shoulder, and kindly squeezed. He exhaled, and then dimpled. “We’re going to miss you around here. How long you gone for?”

“Awhile. I haven’t taken a full-on vacation since I started.”

He grimaced and shook his head. It was typical here. The wages were low, but steady. Health insurance, a particular problem for me because of my spinal problems, was lacking too. It all caught up with everyone eventually, I figured. It did me.

But, then it didn’t. I buried that nagging thought a year ago.

“Caribbean, right?”

“Yep.” We reached the time recorder attached waist-high on a support beam near one of the outer doors. He punched out for the day. So did I. My name at the top between eyelets and time stamps strewn down the card. A full week’s work. I hoped these cards rested in a filing cabinet. Somewhere. Perhaps not so fallowed and brittle.

He opened the exit and said, “Well, have fun, Frank. See you when you get back.”

I put up my hand as a wave. He never brought anything with him that had to be stored away in the locker room. Time mattered to him. He had family to see and a home to go. My time card went into my right breast pocket.

The break room, a drowsy place lined with government safety placards and a couple vending machines, was empty except for Valerie at one of the five saucer tables. She was almost my age and lived with her two daughters, both in their 40s and recently unmarried. Valerie liked to sit here for a while after her shift to decompress mentally. Knowing the value of this is one of the things we had in common, but we never directly acknowledged it. I sat beside her, and put the bottle in front of me. Ordinarily, I wanted to scream as my hips bent, feeling three to four distinct pops—most as my lower back settled, with a twinge down my right hip. It was good to sit for a moment, but I knew the comfort wouldn’t last long, even with the elevated meds today. I typically had less than five minutes before this position would become worse than the walk over. Then, later while walking, the same would occur after a while, only reversed. Both positions were used as breaks from the other. Today, there was only a deep, but mild, burning sensation easing along my upper legs. I spun the bottle taking in its contours and absence of color. “Long day,” I said with a long audible exhale.

She sighed. “Boy did *Mr. Manager* get on my nerves today. He kept on telling me to hurry with the...Wait a second!” She gleamed at me. “You’re leaving today, right? Trip?”

I nodded.

“Out West, right? Didn’t you mention Yosemite last week?”

“That’s right.”

She exhaled. “So exciting, I bet. Don’t suppose you get paid for that time?” A question echoing meager, but lasting dreams. By now, I hoped she knew the answer. I laid out ten pills and took them.

She said blankly, “Good for you. I bet playing the stock market helped. I should get into that.”

“All it takes is a good, daily newspaper.” I could feel my left hip flexor starting to twist my pelvis and it shot spurts of heat into my spine. The heat was dulled pain. Too bad I couldn’t take large doses every day. I stood to walk away.

“Frank...” I looked back. “June 17<sup>th</sup>?”

My coworkers liked to tease and test my memory. Most everyone knew about my fascination of the stock market. She plucked a date over seven months ago. Since the *Freemont Daily* gave me day-old numbers, June 18<sup>th</sup> was my date of reference. “Nine-thousand five-hundred and forty-two.”

She shook her head. “Damn, you’re good.” She glanced down. “The economy needs to recover more.”

“You shouldn’t worry at all,” I softly assured her. “June 17<sup>th</sup> was the first day of a month-long market rally.”

“Have fun on your trip,” she said.

“I’ll miss you.”

Three, sometimes four, 12-hour shifts every week for the past forty years. Time sure has driven by.

“Send us a postcard,” she said staring blankly at the unfinished ceiling.

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There was a wrought-iron bench about two blocks away along my route home from the factory, and the distance aligned perfectly with escalating pain signals shooting all the way to my ankles. Usually, I paused here. I stopped this time out of habit.

The weather was pleasant—sunny skies encasing a mild temperature, with a few pillowy clouds passing now and then above the rooftops. Buildings around here each had their own visible personality. None were homogeneous—elevated and lean, squat and organic—they were even built of different materials compared to their neighbors. All of them began with this in mind as the owner himself, I imagined, leaned over the drawing table in a time before the forced shared-blueprint period of the 50s and 60s.

Unfortunately, signs of creeping decay also added to their uniqueness. Every so often workforces discovered a locked gate and waited all day for a partial explanation from the evening news. Scotty always wondered how a factory could conceal its closing. He couldn’t understand why an owner would want to give up. This was a repeat subject that occurred during lunch breaks—especially now due to the buzz of eminent bad news. I reminded Scotty that the smart ones get out before it was disgraceful. That way they would be able to look back not with bitterness, but with fondness.

I used to drive, but I had to sell my cherry 1980 pickup truck about two years ago to pay for mounting medical bills. It was, really, all I had left. Then there was a period when I used the city bus to get to work. But a year ago, I decided I would take the bus no more, choosing to walk fifteen blocks to my apartment to soak it all in. Nobody ever took the time to do that anymore.

It was time to move on myself. The pain momentarily reset, I swallowed a palmful of pale pellets to keep it that way.

No kids. Wife left as soon as she came.

Can’t miss something I never had.

In all, the weather was a great send off.

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“How’s the market, Frank?” Gill Gaven, the owner of Gaven Deli, asked between yawns.

“Down. But don’t worry it will be back up soon.”

I picked up every night’s dinner, next day’s lunch, and a copy of the *Daily* here on my way home. Gaven Deli had been around for the last 40 years. I wasn’t sure if he knew it or not, but he was bound to close down too by the looks of the partially stocked shelves and an unplugged ice-cream freezer toward the back. Once a food store stopped drawing youth, it was only a matter of time. Best to get out with ice-cream and dignity, I always thought. Better to take control of the end.

The store wasn’t the only thing he inherited. Like all the males in his family, his voice sounded like he talked with a clothespin clipped to his nose. The nasal tone was enough to throw unaccustomed people into a state of confusion. Not that he had new customers to puzzle. In private, he told me his voice cost him a skirt or two in high school. But he landed the right woman eventually and I told him that on a regular basis. I laid three tall bottles of extra-strength aspirin on the counter, and four packs of cheap menthol cigarettes.

“Oh well. I’m not into the market like you. No one is.” Behind the gouged, glass counter, Gill shrugged, then laughed as he marked inventory using a brown clipboard. I gave that to him a month



ago because it was something he could use every day.

"It's not for everyone," I said.

He reached behind him and snagged a copy of the *Daily*. Decades ago, he began putting aside a copy for me if running low. Now in declining times he saved me the trouble of going to get it. He stared at the items on the counter, then at me. "Something's not right here." I waited. Gill was a little slow witted. "No lunch meat? Bread or cheese?" Then he nodded. "That's right! Vacation tomorrow?"

"Yep. Leaving tonight, though." His fingers produced dings and a final chime from the cash register.

He whistled. "Wasting no time at all! Heading to Louisiana, right?" He paused. "Why so much aspirin?"

Shrugging, I said, "All part of the plan, Gill. Need to stock up." I handed him what was left of all my money and he gave me a quarter change.

"Bet you can't wait...love to go with you." His eyes danced and he looked down, but then suddenly perked up. "*Son of a gun, we'll have big fun, on the Bayou!*"

"Hank Williams. Summer of '52."

"An easy one." He put my things into a pager bag and folded down the top three times.

"But a good one," I said.

He slid the brown bag forward but didn't take his hands away. He leaned his body forward like he was about to solicit something daring. My breathing stopped...I glanced at the bag, then him...then the bag...

"First vacation? Over all these years?"

My air released. "A couple of sick days here and there. You know, for doctors' appointments."

"Your back still?" He frowned and finally released his hands from the bag.

I shook my head. "Nothing I can't handle."

Three years ago, I'd had enough. The doctors said the only thing that could help was an operation, from which I would lose months of work, or regular shots of some magical concoction in my spine. The first option wasn't really an option at all. I took the shots many times, but they had nothing but a temporary effect. They only lasted two pitiful days.

He smiled at me. His hair went 20 years ago. Shoulders slouched forward now. He was only in his fifties. Plenty of time before he had to close that mart down.

"You're all set. See you soon, Frank."

"Take care of that woman," I said with a quick double-rap on the counter with the coin.

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Two blocks later, and only three to go—the end was so near. On an average day I couldn't make it home from the deli without stopping to rest. And every other time, I hated resting here. Today I did it because I wanted to. Like clockwork, they came.

Jake arrived first without noticing me as I sat on the street bench outside the parking lot of Freemont Bowling Alley. He got out of his car with a cigarette drooping from his lips. His car keys chimed as he went to the trunk to find his bowling bag. Then a car horn blew and another former teammate, Marty, arm-waved like a railway wigwag to wait for him. After Jake joined him, they came over.

"What do ya know, Frank?"

"Nothing new. How's the team?"

I used to play every other day until problems with my back got the best of my game. It was a throw like all the others. Something dislodged in my spine that shouldn't have. I tried using lighter balls. I tried drinking more beer. Within weeks I couldn't take the long strides needed in the lane anymore, shuffling forward like my shoes laces were tied together. I decided to self-exit before it got

shameful.

Marty nodded. "Pretty good. Jake's son is playing now. In your spot. You'd be impressed, but he can't hook as good as you used to."

"Damn Marty, there's no better cranker than Frank...that's for damn sure."

"You like the wrist guard I gave you?" I asked Marty.

"Yup. And to show you I'm using it," he reached into his bag and pulled out the black, nylon glove, "I'm putting it on right now. Sure does help my rotation and strength." Once on, he opened and closed his hand as much as it would allow for a snug fit.

"Told you." I gave it to him a few months before.

"So," Marty said, "all ready for your trip? How's the market?"

"Trip's still on guys. Excited—real excited. Market's down, but showing positive signs."

"Good, good," Marty said.

Jake asked, "October 5<sup>th</sup>," he leered at Marty and winked, "...of last year?"

Marty rolled his eyes at Jake. Nevertheless, Jake turned to me for an answer. I shook my head slowly and said, "Don't know that one."

Marty's face burst. "WHAT? Holy shit, Jake! You finally got him!"

I smiled. "No. It was a Sunday and markets are closed on Sundays. The Friday before, the market closed at nine-thousand two-hundred and eight."

Marty snickered at Jake for trying. "Never going to work, dumbass. He knows his shit." He jabbed Jake's shoulder for not believing in me.

Their maroon and white bowling shirts had shrunk or their breadbaskets had inflated. Jake's had a beer stain running down the bold white stripe in the center. But the getup still looked smart. I bought those shirts—it took me weeks to decide on the color. They tried to convince me to keep mine when I retired. I knew the unspoken code, and turned it into the group to give to my replacement.

"I'm really glad I ran into you guys today."

"You should come by and watch. Hang out. We don't get too many spectators."

"You guys take care. Wear that wrist guard, Marty."

I stood and put out my hand.

\*\*\*

As I rang Mrs. Wilcox's doorbell, it occurred to me that I was rather excited about the trip. I decided exactly a year ago I'd be leaving today, and that gave me a year to get everything in order. I decided a lot a year ago when the rumors started about the factory closing. The surrounding industrial neighborhood was tumbledown. My back problem was only getting worse. The end, and thus the decision, was unavoidable.

My elderly neighbor, Mrs. Wilcox, answered the door and held it open so I could come in. She had an even more difficult time moving around than me. She told me once that she prepared to get the door, by standing and moving toward the front of the house almost an hour before I arrived. Mrs. Wilcox hadn't been up her flight of stairs in a decade. The thought of her decline kept me away some nights. I promised myself it wouldn't happen to me.

"I worried about you today, Frank." Mrs. Wilcox spent a lot of time dressing up for no apparent reason. She always did her hair, which was impressive due to her lack of motor skills. She had on a fainter hue of lipstick than her usual, alarm clock red. She wore gold earrings and an emerald pendant, which seemed to fit perfectly into a sunken cavity on her gaunt chest. She latched on to my arm to steady herself. Her grip was tight.

"Worried? Why?" I asked cautiously.

"Oh, my yes." She said softly and aloof, with vocal emphasis at the wrong places. "You're running behind in time. I put the TV off for you to call thirty minutes ago. I thought you forgot about me." I handed her the cigarettes. She stuck out a few bills but I shook my head.

"Not today. It's on me. Your Social Security check needs to last until the end of the month."

"You're so sweet," she said with an intimate stare at my chest as she patted my cheek. She hadn't looked at my face in years. Her body turned to the kitchen. "Can I get you some tea...or...?"

"No thanks."

"Why four? I only smoke a pack every couple days."

"I'm going on a trip, Mrs. Wilcox. I gave you Marty's number if you need anything," I pointed to the kitchen table, "It's over there." She glanced down, focusing on the packs, rolling them inelegantly in her hands. Her head trembled. "Let's get you sat down." I led her to the recliner. She fell perfectly into a haggard microfiber imprint.

"Is Marty the boy who used to mow my yard?" she said after a long pause.

"Yes, but he's all grown up now. I've arranged everything for when I'm gone."

She nodded and let me help her to the lounge facing the TV. The focal point of everyday. She said, "Why didn't you buy a house like I did?"

"Mrs. Wilcox, I'm fine with how things turned out. There's a point when you have to cry quits."

She nodded and held on to me. "Then you have a great trip, my dear Frank."

Mrs. Wilcox didn't acknowledge me when I handed her the TV clicker and left.

\*\*\*

I had some things to do before leaving. Eating was not one of them. An empty stomach would help, I figured. I drew some water from the faucet and took the remainder of the bottle while squinting out the kitchen window. Mrs. Wilcox already had on Jeopardy. Dizzy, I refilled my glass, and another.

I sat them on the cherry stand alongside my recliner. I took more with water, finishing a new bottle. Then uncapped another. The paper still smelled fresh as I opened it. No back pain. The first pleasant read since I could remember.

I liked the feel of a good newspaper. I appreciated the ink residue that came off on my fingers and, no matter how simple it looks, there is an art to bending the pages so they don't sag forward or back. A lost art. Within the business section, my eyesight was a little fuzzy. It was hard to read, and I turned on the lamp above me. A bold caret! The stock market did go up! How much...I never cared. Ten-thousand...it was no use—I couldn't make out the closing. I compared it to past performance as always, three Januarys ago, when there were eight days of slump, then it came back for a day, only to go down again. But on February 20<sup>th</sup>, four years ago, it did the same and stayed up that time for a month. Same on July 1<sup>st</sup> of last year. Same in 1989.

My head pounded, but I could handle it. Tiny regular noises became pulsating drums finished by a crescendo of unpitched clatter. Queasiness in my gut. Thunder and quick claps like fireworks as the newspaper hit the floor, hunched and lay down for good.

I took things in stride. It could have been much worse.

I bet myself, after draining the third bottle, that the market would stay up for at least a week. Just like 19—I was confused. What year? Oh no...confusion! Confusion was the part I knew I wouldn't enjoy. It was only a hump in the final step—one along a long road of humps I practiced more than most. A fear of knowing that in the end, I would lose my mind...the one thing that hadn't been taken from me yet. Once over it, I wouldn't even know I had it.

Can't miss something I never knew I had.

I reclined back into the chair, eased up the footrest, and stared upward. I spun beneath the ceiling. The market pattern...what was the pattern? Six—no eight days of slump. Market movement began last week or so...it followed last week's model exactly...the trough was just like the one that began last week. Was that this week? What week was it?

I bet last week would match last week.

I hoped the market would rally, long into my vacation.

{{**Jonathan Coffelt** writes short stories and novels about community and social matters. Unafraid to premise fiction on social science analysis, nor adding context and appeal with a quirky milieu, he seeks to unearth lost—and sometimes unpleasant—truths. He has a BBA from James Madison University, lives in Virginia, and works as a consultant.}}



**"Theme in Blue"**  
by Clint Inman



## **“Second Thoughts”**

**by Clint Inman**

**{{Clinton Inman:** was born in Walton-on-Thames, England in 1945, raised in the Carolinas, graduated from San Diego State University in 1977, and I am a high school teacher in Tampa Bay. I live in Sun City Center, Florida with my wife, Elba.}}

# Transit of Venus

by Derek Butters

I'm horribly seasick for the first three days. I lie in my bunk at the front of the ship and listen to the splash of waves. When the room grows stifling, I climb the ladder to the deck and hang over the railing. The sun dances in our wake, white and brilliant. I watch the play of light and water in the moments when I'm not throwing up.

My mother has brought me along so she won't feel guilty about spending two weeks on the Aegean in a private sailboat. It's my "classical education," she tells me the first night, in the candlelight and olive-tree shadows of some unspeakably beautiful seaside café. A *private* education, of course—no cities, no crowds, just the quiet gold beauty of the Mediterranean sky. Nothing but the best for her daughter. And if that means the best for herself too, well then so much the better.

Our captain's name is Richard. He has a movie-star face that's past its expiration date, and on the first day he dresses in Navy whites that must have fit him once. As he shows us around the ship, he runs his hands over everything, the ropes, the railings, the wood paneling in the cool darkness belowdecks. The main cabin is filled with pictures. Jungles, rivers, mist and mountains. Richard explains that he served in Vietnam. He points out a picture of a tiny Asian man in one of those big straw hats. "First picture I took." He runs a finger over the glass. "Know how you can tell that fellow's from the South?" My mother shrugs politely and asks how. "I'm still alive!" says Richard. Then he laughs and shows us our cabins.

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My mother sleeps with Richard on the first night. We're anchored in Gocek, a town on the Turkish coast, creaking back and forth on our anchor chain. If this were a novel, or a movie, you'd have some exposition, sidelong glances, witty banter, a little cat-and-mouse before getting down to business. But no. I'm just lying in bed trying not to think about my stomach and the next thing I know there are voices and then moaning and then an extra rattle in the ship, one that doesn't come from the wind and the sea.

I wonder whether there was ever a question in their minds. Is this standard operating procedure on the *Transit of Venus*? A little extra perk included in the premium package—ancient ruins, quaint restaurants, and five-star company in the sack? I wonder how much this cruise costs, anyway. Maybe my mother didn't even look. Just saw the pictures and entered her credit card number. "You can't let money make your choices for you," she told me once, when she realized I always bought the cheapest sneakers I could find. I pointed out that she always bought the most expensive shoes she could find, so we were just about even. She laughed and bought me a pair of strappy gold gladiator sandals that I wore exactly once before giving them to Goodwill.

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On the fourth day, when I'm finally regaining some control over my interior, we hike to Myra. It's an old Greek colony at the top of a big dry hill, all scrub grass and white pebbles. I've unpacked my camera, and I take pictures of the tombs cut into the stone. There are no doors, just black rectangles, like missing teeth in the pink-white face of the hillside. Halfway up, Richard pulls my mother into one. She shrieks and laughs, at the darkness and who knows what else. I stare out at the landscape below, trace the dusty line of the trail down the hills, to the blocky white houses by the harbor. I take a picture of our ship, the last one on the pier. Beyond it, the breakwater sinks down into the sea, its white rocks green underneath the waves. I hear my mother give a little moan, like a wounded animal or a high school cheerleader.

I'm soaked with sweat by the time we make it to the ruins. Richard takes a picture of my mother and me in front of a white pillar that has been carefully boxed off with rope. "Go underneath," he says. "Get right up next to it." So we duck under the rope and pose against the stone, my mother flushed with the thrill of evading the archaeology police. She parts her lips just a



little. The roots of her hair are visible in the sunlight, a crease of brown running down the center of her skull. She runs back to Richard afterward, and I take a picture of the two of them staring down at his camera, examining the picture he just took, his arm around her shoulders, the blue vastness of the sky behind them.

Richard shows us the mosaics next. He takes us to a big flat area and sweeps away the sand and there they are, red and blue and gold. No pictures, no people or animals, just geometric designs that hint at going on forever underneath the sand. My mother asks why the mosaics are covered up like that. "It's the sun," Richard explains. "They'd bleach out if you left them exposed. You'd lose all the color." That's probably true, I decide as he sweeps the sand back into place. But I'll bet the real reason is so tour guides can play archaeologist, brush away the sand and reveal the treasures of the past to middle-aged women. As if it was the first time. As if no one had seen this since the Greeks.

On the way back down the hill, the air is heavy with dust, and the sun is in our eyes. The white pebbles skitter away down through the scrubby plants. We round a switchback and my mother trips—she's wearing heels, for God's sake—and the soil slides away under her. Richard grabs her just in time, they grasp each other's wrists and he heaves her back onto the trail. I wonder if I've ever seen a romantic comedy in which this *doesn't* happen. They just lie there in the dirt, sweating, tangled up together. I consider the possibility that Richard knows this particular spot, times his steps so he can save his lady guests in heroic fashion. One of his many arts, like reading the weather or trimming the sails or telling jokes about Vietnam, honed through years of practice. I leave them in the dirt and walk on down the trail.

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On the seventh day, we eat dinner in the smallest restaurant yet. It's just a single room, dark wood floor and two circular tables which we pull together because they're so small. I sit at one, and my mother and Richard sit at the other, and between us we take up the whole restaurant. The atmosphere is, as always, classic Mediterranean: white clay walls with alcoves for candles, jars of olives lined up on shelves. It's a family affair, run by a big bald middle-aged man and his daughter. She comes in and takes our orders (Richard recommends the lamb and potatoes, so I order the octopus salad), then disappears back into the kitchen, which I can only assume is the size of a closet.

As we eat, Richard describes Hadrian's Granary, a stone building commissioned by the eponymous Roman emperor to feed the people of Lycia. "It's never been dug up," he explains. "The archaeology types don't know about it. If they did, they'd throw up a fence and wouldn't let you get within a mile of the place. But it's my little secret." My mother says she remembers pictures from the website of a place named that, stone walls hidden in high grass. Richard says that's the one, he's glad she liked the pictures, it's even better when you see it for real. "Really is like a time machine," he says. "You half expect to see a legion marching past."

I picture Richard through the years, body doubles with darker hair and a smoother forehead. I imagine them sitting at this very table, giving this same speech to a procession of women, a kaleidoscope of redheads and brunettes and blondes. In the dim light the women can pretend to be twenty years old again, pretend their skin is actually as smooth as the candlelight makes it. They can forget about doctors' visits and divorces and even daughters, lose themselves in Richard's voice and the cool Aegean night.

I pick at my octopus salad. Richard feeds my mother little bites of lamb, which is pink and tender and probably delicious.

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By the ten-day mark, he's reading her poetry before they fuck. The *Illiad*, she tells me over breakfast, which he has memorized ("No, no!" he protests. "Just certain chapters!"). I can hear the murmurs through the walls. He could be reciting in Greek, for all I can hear, a liquid wash of sound that mixes with the rocking of the boat. I wonder if he did this in Vietnam. Maybe it was his way of staying sane, whispering the words to himself at night, speaking the awful beauty of blood and battle



and the gleam of sun on golden spearpoints. Dreaming one war to forget another, stallions and shields instead of mosquitoes and land mines. And when it was finally over, he bought a sailboat in Greece. Not Chicago—Greece was his home now.

I go on deck during these recitations. There are stars everywhere, impossibly dense, clouds of stars, and between any two of them are others, smaller, finer-grained. The first time I see this, I try to photograph it, but the camera can't capture the feeling, the sweeping vastness of it all around me.

On the second-to-last night, I go swimming. I leave my camera and my clothes on the deck and climb down the ladder, then push off, away from the ship. The stars are all around, no mast or rigging in the way, light everywhere, in the sky and the water. The night is enormous, stretching off in every direction. As I drift, I can hear Richard speaking, the faint rise and fall of his poetry. Hector and Achilles and Agamemnon, falling like comets towards their inevitable ends. I float, silent. I close my eyes and let the water embrace me, the warm caress of the wine-dark sea.

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Hadrian's Granary is our last stop. Far enough inland that we have to rent a jeep. We spend an hour on the dusty highway. Richard lets my mother drive, and she veers all over the road and laughs when the wind blows hair in her eyes. The road gets smaller and smaller, and soon it's difficult to tell whether it's there at all. "Pretty hard to get to," shouts Richard over the engine. "That's why nobody knows about it!" My mother gives out a whoop as we fly down an incline. Pebbles leap away from the tires and kick up a wake of dust.

And then there it is, not much to see, a couple of stone walls protruding from a marsh. Except it's surrounded yellow caution tape...

"Shit," says Richard. "Shit."

A minute later we're parked by the barricades and a woman in a surprisingly cosmopolitan suit is explaining that no, Richard cannot enter, no, not even if he's been here before. "This dig is in progress," she says. "At some point in the future we hope to make it open to the public." Richard explains that he's a tour guide, that this is part of his promised route. "I'm sorry," repeats the archaeologist. "You'll need to revise your plans." She walks away, and Richard just stares after her. His face looks older, slacker.

"This is my place," he says. "Nobody knows about Hadrian's Granary. How could they know about it?"

"Maybe they saw the pictures on your website," I suggest.

I look at my mother; wait for her to say something. But there's nothing. Her lips are pressed together, her eyes fixed on a black opening in the unreachable stone wall. I walk back to the jeep, get my camera, and take a picture of the two of them, standing apart, staring at the Granary, yellow tape snapping in the wind.

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We anchor back in Athens on the last night, on a big metal pier full of tugboats and whale watchers. There are more people here than we've seen in three weeks, along with seagulls and garbage and young men who go boat to boat and try to sell us olives. We fill out the immigrations paperwork, and then Richard disappears into the city. He comes back with Chinese food, and we eat out of the Styrofoam containers on the deck of the ship. Richard apologizes for how pedestrian it all is. It's the city, he explains. My mother says she understands. We eat in silence, just the snap of lids on the little sauce cups and the rustle of the receipt stapled to the paper bag. I pick at white rice and green beans. I open a fortune cookie. The fortune is in Greek.

I leave them sitting in the twilight and climb below. The harbor water is surprisingly choppy, and I stumble around inside the boat, nearly cracking my head open on one of Richard's picture frames. It's a shot of him standing in the door of a helicopter, smiling, waving at the camera. I finally make it to my room and get the door latched. I was wise enough to forgo the General Gao's, so there's not enough in my stomach to make me sick.

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Later, much later, I wake up. I listen for voices, but there's only the splash of waves. I open the door of my room and walk down the hall, climb the ladder. I don't know what I expect to see. This close to the city, there won't be any stars.

But they're lying there, asleep on the deck, surrounded by a constellation of plastic chopsticks and rice cartons. She has her arm across his chest, her legs twined with his. Their heads are so close their noses almost touch. In the harbor light, their bodies are pale and smooth, like statues. *Paris and Helen*, the piece would be called. Lying in their bedroom in Troy, ten years in, made old by love and war. I can see them breathing, in and out, the rise and fall of their stomachs. My mother's hair splays out on the deck as though she's weightless. I stand there at the top of the ladder and make no noise. They hold each other and I watch, motionless, under the electric light of the sky.

**{{Derek Butterton** is currently a student at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, where he studies English and Philosophy and writes plays with his devised theatre troupe. When not in school, he works as a camp counselor in East Brookfield, Massachusetts.}}



**“Wallflower”**

**by Holly Day**

**{{Holly Day** was born in Hereford, Texas, “The Town Without a Toothache.” She and her family currently live in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where she teaches writing classes at the Loft Literary Center. Her published books include the nonfiction books Music Theory for Dummies, Music Composition for Dummies, and Guitar All-in-One for Dummies, and the poetry books “Late-Night Reading for Hardworking Construction Men” (The Moon Publishing) and “The Smell of Snow” (ELJ Publications).**}}**

# The Rough and Arduous Road of Dusty Rhodes

by T.R. Healy

His face shining with sweat, his arms too, Dusty charged up one of the littered aisles behind home plate, frantically banging the striped snare drum strapped around his waist.

"We want a hit!" he led the few hundred fans at the baseball park in the familiar chant. "We want a hit!"

Hurriedly he charged up another aisle, still banging his drum with a single, sweat-stained hickory stick.

"We want a hit, batter! We want a hit!"

Even without the drum, it would be hard not to notice Dusty roaming the stands. He was so tall he looked like an ostrich with his long neck and gangly arms and chin whiskers and spindly legs. And always he wore a baggy old flannel jersey with a crimson "1" embroidered on the back, yellow socks, apricot-colored Converse High Tops, and a faded Monarchs cap turned around as if he were a catcher.

Down two strikes, the diminutive batter swung at a low pitch and lined a single between first and second base, and Dusty hopped up and down and banged his drum even harder.

"We want another hit! We want another!"

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Oliver James Rhodes was taught how to throw a baseball by his Uncle Artie, a former high school pitcher who was known as much for his lack of control as he was for his blazing fastball. Artie was the first person to call him Dusty, which was the nickname he had when he was playing ball, and he thought it suited his nephew even more because he was a natural low ball pitcher and occasionally even threw balls in the dirt. He was never as wild or fast as his uncle, but fast enough that he was able to achieve considerable success on the mound. Soon he became as fond of the game as his uncle and by the time he started high school he knew that all he wanted to be was a big league pitcher. His dismal grades reflected his lack of interest in school and often he was put on probation but he didn't much care because all that mattered to him was improving his control and reducing the number of bases on balls he issued in a game.

"You've got the makings of a real prospect, Dusty," his uncle told him one afternoon after he threw a three-hit shutout in an American Legion game.

"You really think so?"

"I do, son," he said, wrapping an arm around the boy's shoulders. "Not only do you have the ability to throw strikes but you've got the right attitude too. You'll do damn near whatever it takes to succeed."

"I'll sure try. That's for certain."

"Oh, you'll do more than that, son. You'll get it done. You're a gamer if I've ever seen one."

His high school team was not very good, only once compiled a winning record in the three seasons he played on the varsity, but he was easily one of the best pitchers in the league. He recorded close to a dozen shutouts in his high school career, a couple of two-hitters, and one heartbreaking one-hitter, and every season lowered his earned run average. By his senior year he was throwing almost as fast as his uncle once threw, clocking in at 86 miles per hour on several occasions early in the season. Because of his success he was offered an athletic scholarship to attend Antelope Community College, and though he was tired of going to school he accepted it, convinced he was one step closer to realizing his dream of pitching one day for a major league team.

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Between innings of Monarch home games Dusty often took a break to chat with an usher or a fan except in the third and sixth innings when he went down to the field behind home plate to throw a few rolled-up team T-shirts into the stands. Tonight he was told to throw a couple of dozen shirts

because several employees at a large carpet store downtown were at the game. The store was a major sponsor of the Double A club and management wanted to be sure that some of the employees received shirts. Surprisingly, they were not seated together in one section of the stadium but were scattered throughout the stands so he decided to start throwing shirts along the first base line and work his way over to the third base side.

“Up here, Dusty!” some drunk seated in the top tier of the stands yelled as soon as he started throwing the shirts.

He ignored him, though, knowing there was no way he could throw a ball that high up, let alone a T-shirt.

“Up here, Dusty!”

The third shirt he threw landed in the lap of a burly man with angry sideburns, and as soon as he grabbed it, several people around him burst into cheers, and Dusty smiled, sure all of them worked at the carpet store.

“Can’t you get it up here, Dusty?” the drunk shouted hoarsely. “Is it because you’re off the juice?”

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He pitched well his first year in college, earning six victories as a part-time starter, and pitched even better his second year. He had the lowest E.R.A. on the staff, recorded the most shutouts, and gave up the least number of walks. Several scouts appeared interested in his services, especially the Cincinnati Reds, and at the end of the season he signed with the big league club. A photograph of him signing the contract appeared in the college paper and he barely recognized himself his smile was so enormous.

“I can’t tell you how proud I am of you, Dusty,” Doc Landry, the Antelope pitching coach, said after the signing ceremony. “You now have the chance of a lifetime.”

“I know that, Doc.”

“And, by God, you’ve earned it, kid. I know better than anyone how hard you’ve worked for this opportunity.”

“I know you do.”

“You have the best control of any pitcher I’ve ever coached. It’s damn near perfect. But, as I’ve told you time and again, you’ve got to put some meat on your bones. You’re a damn beanpole. You’re going to have to throw a lot harder if you hope to stay in the game and that means you have to get stronger. Right?”

Docilely he nodded his head, still confident that his pinpoint control would be enough to take him to the big leagues someday.

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“Here, we go, Monarchs, here we go!”

He banged his drum furiously.

“Here we go, Monarchs, here we go!”

Again he banged it, and again and again and again.

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His shirt saturated with sweat, his face flushed, Dusty again lifted the slick bar above his chest, exhaling deeply. For a brief moment, he held it directly above the middle of his chest, trying to ignore the strain on his arms. Then, inhaling, he lowered it back to his chest then lifted it back up until his arms were almost fully extended. He did six more sets then returned the bar to a rack. Exhausted, he lay back on the cushioned bench and just stared at the bright ceiling lights of the noisy fitness center. They were so bright they made his eyes water but he was too tired to look away.

Soon after he signed with the Reds, he was assigned to their Single A affiliate in Dayton. He had been with the club only a couple of weeks but he was well aware that it would be a struggle to crack

the starting rotation. At six foot five inches, he was the tallest member of the pitching staff but weighed less than anyone he was so skinny.

"Hell, I wouldn't be surprised if a strong breeze doesn't blow you off the mound someday," Brady Hazeltine, the manager of the ball club, cracked the first time he set eyes on him. "You're just skin and bones."

He knew, as Doc Landry and others had told him over and over again, he had to put on weight. He had to get stronger if he wanted to throw harder. So every day, after practice, he went to a dingy gym on the east side of town and lifted weights for an hour or more. He had lifted in college but never gained any significant amount of weight and very much doubted if he would gain any now. His control was as sharp as ever but he knew that, because of his height, he was expected to throw heat, and if he didn't, it was unlikely he would realize his dream to pitch in the big leagues.

"So, how are you doing today, ace?" Josh, one of the fitness trainers, asked as he approached Dusty who now was sitting on the edge of the bench.

He shrugged. "About the same as usual."

"You want me to spot for you?"

"Nah," he sighed, sounding discouraged. "It doesn't seem to matter how much weight I add to the bar, I still can't seem to get any stronger."

"It takes time."

He frowned. "It'll take me a damn lifetime."

Josh regarded him a moment. "I can get you something that'll put weight on your right away, ace, if you're in such an almighty hurry."

Dusty looked up at him, not having any doubt what he meant.

"I know someone who can get you whatever you need."

"Is that so?"

"He's helped a lot of folks who work out here."

"I'll have to think about it."

"You do that, ace," he said, tightening the towel around his neck. "You give it some real hard thought."

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"Harder!"

"Faster!"

"Whatever it takes when he hits that ball,"

"We wanna see that bat break!"

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Alone, in the bathroom of his motel room, Dusty glanced at himself in the stained mirror above the sink, scarcely recognizing the person there. His long, wiry arms now were corded with muscles; his chest was as firm as the bark of an oak tree. A hint of a smile flickered across his mouth then quickly dissolved when he took a syringe from the medicine cabinet. Squatting down on the lid of the toilet seat, his back now facing the mirror, he didn't want to see himself as he inserted the needle into a vial and drew in the steroid solution. Grimacing a little, he pulled the needle out of the vial and after making sure there was not any air in the plunger, injected the needle into his left thigh and slowly pressed the solution into the large muscle.

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About halfway through his second season in the Reds' farm system, he was assigned to its Triple A club in Louisville where he quickly became the most dependable starter on the staff. He suffered only one loss and threw three shutouts. By the end of the season he was confident he would make the roster of the parent club after spring training. Not only did he believe that but so did Gus Barcott, the manager of the Louisville team, who told him, "If you don't make it to the majors, Dusty, I sure as hell don't have the eye for talent that I've always thought I've had."

"I appreciate that, Gus."

"Hell, son, it's the goddamn truth," he declared, rotating an unlit cigar in a corner of his mouth. "Some guys are born with the talent to throw a baseball and you're one of them. That's just a plain fact."

Since starting the injections, he had gained close to fifteen pounds and was consistently throwing in the low nineties. He hoped to put on at least ten more pounds and figured then he would be throwing close to 95 miles per hour. There was no doubt then that he would crack the Reds' starting rotation and become the star he had dreamed of becoming since he was a youngster.

No one, not Gus, not any teammate, not anyone connected with the club, once inquired how he was able to throw so much harder than he threw in college. Of course, if anyone had asked, he would have said he was spending more time in the weight room and eating healthier food. He doubted if anyone would believe him, suspected they knew what he was up to, probably were even doing it too. He knew taking steroids was against the rules but knew if he didn't inject himself he would never have got this close to making the roster of a big league club. And that was his dream, that was all he really wanted to do in life. As he told a math teacher once after she reprimanded him for his lack of effort, "I don't care about learning about triangles and theorems. All I want to do is pitch in the major leagues." So even though he knew he was cheating he could not resist the temptation to begin the injections because he knew, better than anyone, he was not strong enough to remain in the game without them. And the thought of returning home as a failure was not something he could let happen.

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Some games he banged his drum so hard he feared he might make a hole in it then no one in the stands would pay any attention to him. Then he might as well not even be there. He was a performer, not a member of the audience.

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The promising young right-hander pitched very well in spring training, threw fourteen scoreless innings which was more than any other pitcher on the staff, but he didn't make the Reds' roster because he suffered a labral tear in his throwing shoulder. It was hoped that after a few weeks of rest and limited rehabilitation he would be able to resume throwing otherwise surgery would be required to mend the tear. He knew if he had surgery he would likely be out the entire season so he decided to increase the dosage of steroids he was taking in order to help him recover more quickly. He also started injecting human growth hormone, after consulting with the fitness trainer he met in Dayton, to facilitate his recovery. However, instead of getting better, he grew worse and suffered further injuries, including a painful tear in his groin. Still he continued to inject himself, convinced that eventually he would regain the strength he had the previous season at Louisville. He didn't, though, his body continued to break down because of all the weight he had gained. He suspected he should stop the injections, for a while at least, but he couldn't because he feared then he would revert to that beanpole whose feeble fastball was barely good enough to make the roster of a Single A club.

Three weeks after he was put on the disabled list, he was informed by one of the Louisville trainers that he had tested positive. He was stunned, never having failed a drug test administered by any team.

"There must be a mistake," he said anxiously.

"All I know is what I was told, Dusty."

"It has to be a mistake," he insisted. "Someone must've tampered with my sample."

The trainer shrugged. "It is what it is."

Immediately he knew his career as a professional pitcher was over, that he had to retire if he didn't want to suffer further embarrassment. Devastated, he didn't have any idea what he was going to do; all he knew was that he couldn't let anyone in his family find out he had cheated. He

loved the game as much as ever and hoped he could still find a place in it someday. And if he did that might prevent anyone in his family from suspecting that he could have done something to tarnish the game.

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In the bottom of the eighth inning, while the pitcher still was taking his warm-up pitches, Dusty stood a few feet to the left of home plate with a huge bottle of water. Then, as soon as the pitcher was through, he stepped behind the plate and took a long swig, tilted his head back and sprayed a cloud of mist into the night air. It was a trick he saw the famous baseball comedian, Max Patkin, perform during a game when he was a kid. Max blew his stack a couple of dozen times that evening with a single gulp of water while he was fortunate to do it a dozen times. Still, the crowd always enjoyed it, and whenever he performed the trick he felt as if he were back on the mound once again the center of attention.

**{{T.R. Healy** was born and raised in the Pacific Northwest, and his stories have appeared in such publications as *Gravel*, *Lily*, *Steel Toe Review*, and *Welter*.**}}**



We hope you enjoyed this issue of *Decades Review*.  
Please keep in mind that October's issue will be Halloween themed.  
Please send those submissions our way!

-DR Team