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SPOILAGE

VOLUME THREE



SPOILAGE

“A cultural metric of, by, and for the people of Des Moines.”

VOLUME THREE

OCTOBER 2013

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TENDENCIES OF A DISAPPEARING ACTOR

Kelsey Lepperd

We find each other deep in the woods, deep enough so that even at the most quiet of sounds, we do not know. Human or animal? But the sounds don't matter as much because the roots of trees under the earth and the neighboring stems of plants have come out to wrap themselves around our wrists, around our legs, and we are hidden. We are smothered, covered in green, covered by our own skin, covered by the shade of the trees that loomed their shadows over our bodies. As protection, as warning.

Once in a while, there is crackling.

A leaf crunches, a stick snaps, and we twitch. Our arms move, struggling to find each other's amongst the decaying

branches, the browning leaves. I can tell they are taking you. I can feel the stems sprouting from the dirt, attaching themselves to the hairs on your arms. Though you try and say they are not, your voice is covered by the crunching, snapping.

The shadows grow larger. The trees are expanding, and the leaves too. They are growing so large that one leaf's shadow covers my entire body and I can no longer see. And when I reach over through the stems that have now grown like kudzu, I can feel you are not there. I can feel your shape underneath the ground, and I dig into the earth. I dig and I grasp, and now there is still dirt that will fall from underneath my fingernails. No matter how many times I have washed my hands, how hard I have scrubbed with soap, it won't matter; you have already gone.

MOTHER LIQUOR

Saulaman James Schlegel

Jon snapped open the brand new carton of Newports. He cranked on the manual lever to lower the window and tossed plastic wrap outside of his rusting S-10. Taking a whiff of the packs nestled into the box, he lingered in mint and fresh plastic all inside gorgeous design. Evelyn Jonathan “Jon” Mercerny is an alcoholic, addicted to cigarettes, and occasionally smokes joints in the backs of folks’ cars, as long as they offer between pitchers of cheap keg beer. Jon tore through more plastic with his foot on the accelerator, steering, one-handed, three short blocks westward. He thought about fucking that chick that sold him the cigarettes and couldn’t decide whether he liked the highlights in her hair or her lip ring. Lighting up the maiden cigarette in great, bountiful puffs, he sucked in hard and rolled out

tumbleweeds of big blue hovering exhalations, the smoke blinking purple from lights on the dash. Jon took a left down a newly paved alley and parked his tiny truck behind Marke's.

The decrepit saloon was nestled between a space for rent and a barbershop rumored to be a drug front, the open sign always on despite consistent vacancy. Jon had broken the windows a time or two, without remorse or recollection. He switched on the radio, parking the vehicle in between slanting lines disappearing from decade-old paint. "Summer Breeze" ascended out of the speakers, one of them blown and two crackling at opposing times. He thought about McDonald's, but dismissed the idea. He'd get drunk faster if he hurriedly finished the menthol and ordered a pitcher with a frosty mug.

"Beer is liquid bread, it's good for you, it's good for you," he rasped in schoolyard singsong as he swung the door shut.

The incandescent lamps flicked from the ceiling due to a faulty transformer, lavishing the red pleather bar stool and its bursting polyethylene foam in dull, almost constant wattage. One of the seven overhangs gave Jon's beverage an orange, visceral hue. He sat and twirled on the chair, banging dirty Levi's into the lip of the bar counter, already marred by countless patrons lost in similar beguilement. He covered the cushion in back pockets torn with chewing tin circles and overflowing ass. Jon clicked his thick white tongue at the barmaid, Chrystal, and slurred convulsive barks at racist jokes told by acquaintances and toothless strangers while quaffing two pitchers by himself.

Chrystal tapped her foot, bursting her legs out of cotton and two-percent spandex. She leered at Jon and rubbed at

a sticky drool that had leaked from three overturned shot glasses. He reached into his breast pocket nonchalantly and, attempting to rescue himself from the situation, managed to fumble out two packs of his vice. He cracked one open, feeling around with his hairy fingers, lost in stupefied adjudication. Thick fingernails finally lurched forward and crumpled a couple of future butts for the one retrieve. He cursed as he slung the cigarette up through stale air, narrowly missing his mouth.

Through fetid breaths, they locked eyes in a boozed and hussied dog-paddle. Chrystal flipped her champagne hair over her shoulder and squawked with derogation as John thumbed at a lighter. He flailed his arms and stood, posturing his legs in a crooked power stance like a bulldog on a trampoline.

“OK. Chrys-TULL witha lil’ tits!” he bellowed, losing his balance and sending worn Redwings and tattered laces reeling backward. He shook his fist at the pliable floor. Chrystal taunted him with derisive teeth-baring, hoisting her bra, engorging the pair of 26Bs. Cheers, cackles, and salacious grins bounced through “White Trash Beautiful” while Jon slowly clomped by tipsy tables, his tiny chin and wide chest thrust out like a seasoned guide hired to navigate the schlep through inebriation toward the men’s room. Between protracted blinks he stifled a ballooning belch from a gaseous stomach and looked lovingly over the wall of a familiar green hallway.

He threw open a plywood door much too hard, and it delivered its retaliation with keg-strengthened dynamism. Jon’s dimpled, pendulous arm undulated in the aftermath of the self-inflicted wallop, and though the pasty appendage

would be bruised and tender in an hour, he absorbed the loose doorknob's drunken punch with a stunned stoicism donated by the alcohol. He huffed through a yellowing bottom row of teeth and moistened his chapped lips, preparing for the plunge into the closet. Jon circled his newly cloyed lips around the clean white pillar of nicotine and pursed them firmly, preparing for relocation. Closing his eyes, he contemplated a feral cat's maternal instinct to transfer a deaf kitten from a soggy birthing box to hay-strewn pallets. His arms cut through the smell of piss, and his calloused hands gripped the loose trim of the doorway, coalescing inebriated resolve into the five cocksure steps to the toilet. At last, Jon's black woolly curls and furrowed glans were brandished before him, framed by a golden zipper and soiled denim, hovering over his thick knuckles, clinging like sawdust on a secondhand jacket.

As he waited patiently for relaxation to grace his bladder, he noticed new notes on the wall—"Great Sex! Call Sam! 515-555-5649," garnished by a sharpie-etched Old English "G"—and recent chunks taken out of the cream-colored toilet. The bowl sported rashes of climbing corrosion. The lid on the back of the tank was sea-foam green and repaired with grey caulk, dividing it into thirds, raising the fractures like tunnels of burrowing mammals. Mold and cobwebs eased themselves out of dark ceiling corners, spreading across the thick, exposed piping, and crept like gritty moss over aluminum vent covers. Rust stained the floor in red rivers, coursing and coagulating, reaching towards the toilet, running rings around the off-white bowl, depositing layers of forgotten weekends as numerous and diverse as

the wrinkled layers of earth between the Paleocene and eighteenth century. It found its way onto the walls in dirty scuff marks, commingling with dots of blood and shit-stain auras, where monochrome grime collected in amorphous smears, adorning the muted walls alongside dust and oil wiped from fingers.

While his plangent release thundered in subaqueous timbre, flint sparks faltered and naphtha hissed until, in a glorious union of clumsy snaps and flickers, Jon's nose began to bask in apricot heat. It bounced and refracted off the glossy spaces between his wide, dirty pores. He sucked in hard, rewarding himself with gasps of nicotine, which quickly introduced itself into taut capillaries and permeable organ walls. His arms fell to his sides, limply swaying with hushed swats against soporific thighs while thin *plips* met his tufted ears. He instinctively shook off dribbles of excess urine and clenched his sphincter, panting in relief with juvenile glee. Jon's neck popped twice, in time with plosive shower slaps, as he lolled his head back in profound inhalation. Snickering through a puff, he peered down at the crumpled pants that lay in coils around his sullied tube-socks and unshorn calves. His lungs expelled smoke with a feeble hack as he folded over his paunch and reached toward the cheap tile, mildly corroded from the trace of acids in the overspray. He found the bowl much clearer now, lavishly bespeckled with the broken ringlets of other men, kinked like curlicue inchworms.

All at once Jon's nostrils flared, responding to the repugnant smell of ammonia and caustic alcohol, like dying asparagus. Screwing his mouth into upturned heaves, he

gulped back down behind jaundiced eyes. He tried to hold his breath and pick himself up, but the redolence persisted, soaking lashes with rheum, dousing views of turbid gold and scummy ceramic with irritated tears. Petrified by seizurely blinks, Jon groped for stability, his hand finding support in cool porcelain, dotted with the warm droplets he had just left like condensation clinging to a porch floor. He focused on the remedy, the Newport smoldering, suspended and inverted, the filter adhering to his thrashing, apneatic muzzle, sending tendrils of blue exhaust to collect under the brim of his hat. The fog floated down in spectral waves, descending over his Neanderthal brow, and poured itself into his periorbital basin, swelling his eyelids and settling into the bags underneath like wine sloshed in a decanter. His dampened mitts went up, mingling fluids, and pushed palms into his eyes, sending the remainder of the cigarette sailing into the murky bowl where it whispered once in a perfunctory sizzle. It was snuffed. Jon garbled some “shit-fucks,” fastened his pants with an overzealous zip, and stepped uncertainly into the hallway. He passed the dirt dunes that collect where painted concrete meets crumbling drywall, still struggling.

EXIT CENTRAL

Molly McDonald

Sometimes I wonder if I'm the sweatiest I've ever been but then I'm like, *Nahhhh*, 'cause what if it happened when I was swimming and I just didn't realize it at the time or it was when I was a baby and my parents left me in the hot car with the windows closed while they were in the hardware store looking at paint for the patio furniture?

And sometimes I think maybe I'm the only person who's been in a certain place but then I see all the footprints and think, well maybe that's just a conspiracy and God put them there to let me know I'm not alone in the world but then I'm like, *shut up brain*. But sometimes, because I'm dyslexic, I say "Shut up, Brian," and I say it out loud and my brother, Brian, hears me and he punches me in the neck. And then I realize that I can't be the only person who's been here 'cause Brian

was with me all along and we're in the paint aisle at Walmart. And then Brian goes, "Come on, turd," and we go look for our parents who are trying to find the perfect shade of green to make them forget their problems.

And sometimes I'm trying to choose between using the bread that I scraped mold off of to make a sandwich or just licking peanut butter off the spoon and then mom comes in and yells 'cause I'm allergic to peanut butter and I could die and maybe then she'd get some peace and quiet but I shouldn't do it anyway. And I say, "I forgot." And she says "I'll give you something to forget" and punches me in the neck.

And sometimes I'm in the living room, watching the paint dry on the baseboards, and I get dizzy and have a dream where I'm flying and I wonder if this is the way I dissociate from a life that I can't change, and what if we're all distracting ourselves from the reality that it will end and whatever we use to fill the space in between doesn't matter because we're dead anyway and these blue-green walls will outlive us all.

BIDDIES

Michael Wellman

While I mowed the grass out front
Grandma Wellman was in the back
taking her hatchet to
weeds that dared sprout in her garden.
She was eighty-something then,
a bowed five feet or so
and retired from her teaching days.
She still walked a couple miles to church
where her whisper carried from narthex to altar.
Sometimes she slept over
with her teeth in a glass on the nightstand
like a shark's jawbone.
Four bucks I got for her lawn
and she'd serve me the cash

along with some lemonade, neat,
and a plate of sandy cookies
while I waited for the youngest of her boys
to fetch me in our Chevy wagon
with a three-speed on the column.
That lemonade was feeble
and I never acquired the taste for it,
unlike most everything Grandma Hillestad made.
I never saw her toil outdoors
but she ironed
like a paver working a trowel.
Sometimes we shared a bedroom
and her whisper was bewitching.
She wore thick-heeled shoes that tied
and a thunderhead of pinned white hair.
Pictured together
they're like grim heads of state
meeting on their common ground of children
who are all growing old,
we hope now,
as them someday.

MISPLACING PAM

Tom Formaro

As I stand in line at Caffé D'Oro among the Swiss and English and Japanese tourists, I realize that in the two hours I've been in Florence, I've already smiled more than I have in the last month. I step up to the counter. "*Uno espresso, per favore.*" Moments later, the barista, an older man with yellowed and crooked teeth, hands me a black demitasse of coffee with a thin layer of brown foam. The small cup lightly burns my fingers as the smell of the espresso seeps into my memory. I'm here—thirty-seven and alone—to take stock of my life, to clear my head and understand what's important. Simple things like good coffee: very important. So I'm starting small. But you can't lead with things like love and loss. They're too complex. They take understanding. Awareness. Context. Right now, the espresso is a place to start.

Espresso is how I met my friend, Pam, in July of 2005. At this very café. Pam with her bleach blonde hair and oversized fake breasts. Pam with her year-round tan and perfectly manicured fingers and toes. Her too-white teeth and too-much mascara. But also Pam with her gentle blue eyes, who could take an hour to tell you how she rescued a feral kitten and you'd never think she'd been talking for more than ten minutes. And Pam, who could make you laugh even when you thought there was no joy left in the world.

When she walked into the café, I was sitting at the small table in the corner, under the window with the rosary plant hanging in front of it. When I saw that she had no place to sit, I asked if she would like to join me at my table.

Within minutes, our conversation was well beyond small talk. "I love to travel alone," she said. "I like that I can be someone different."

I raised an eyebrow. "Your name's not Pam Smith?"

She laughed and assured me her real name was Pam Smith, then explained that being someone different wasn't really about identity, but about actions. She could do the things she wouldn't at home and therefore *be* someone she wasn't at home. When I needed an example, she told me. And I practically spit out my coffee. "You did not!"

"Yes," she said, "I really came to Italy to meet a hot Italian guy and get properly laid."

"And?"

Her lips formed a tight little smile and she slowly nodded her head. "Mission accomplished." By a strapping rugby player in Milan named Marco. And the best part, she said, was that he thought he'd bagged another American tourist, when it was she who had bagged an Italian stud.

We left the café and walked along the streets of Florence. I took her picture in front of Ghiberti's doors. We walked by Dante's apartment, browsed the shops on the Ponte Vecchio. By the time evening came, my face ached from smiling and laughing. Maybe she looked like everything I wasn't, but she was a kindred spirit, and I think we both recognized a connection. Maybe I had a little crush on her, too. It seemed innocent enough. She lived in Des Moines and I lived in San Francisco. We couldn't really start a relationship. So we settled for hanging out the next two days until I had to go home.

I asked for her e-mail address, and when she said she didn't do e-mail, I took it as a hint that she wasn't interested in keeping in touch. Then she handed me her phone number and said I should give her a call. So I gave her my number and told her to do the same. But I knew we probably wouldn't contact each other once we got back to our real lives. I'd have classes to teach, Pam would have houses to sell. She'd have her horse, I'd have my dogs. We'd get into our routines and eventually only remember that we'd once met someone fun on a trip to Italy a long time ago.

To my surprise, she called a few days after she got back. From then on, we talked at least once a week, if not more. She came to San Francisco, I went to Des Moines. We even talked about going back to Italy together. Maybe someplace new like Costa Rica or Thailand.

Most people judged Pam with one glance and assumed she was all glitter and no guts. They looked at her as if her "shallowness" was the essence of what was wrong in the world.

Once, we were in a horse supply shop. Saddles and bridles and crops and such. The place smelled of leather and Mane and Tail. Pam, looking for a particular bit, was, as usual, dressed in designer everything. The pointy-nosed woman behind the counter in a brown tank top, her bra straps digging into her fleshy shoulders, watched Pam the entire time with a look like she smelled fresh manure. If that woman had bothered to ask if she could help Pam, she might have discovered how much they had in common.

Most people didn't bother to get to know Pam. Men decided right away what they wanted from her. You could see it in their eyes. Even the ones who managed not to stare directly at her breasts. I'm not sure what women wanted from her, if anything. She kept a safe distance from most people, though a few managed to slip past her guard and take what they needed before discarding her.

I guess you could say I did the same when I misplaced Pam in January of 2011. Well, I misplaced my phone. And with it went all the phone numbers of my friends and family. I posted on Facebook and asked all my friends to call me or text me their numbers, and soon I had everyone who was anything to me.

Except Pam. She had moved from Des Moines to Tulsa the previous October. When she moved, she switched her mobile phone provider and decided not to take her Des Moines number with her. And, of course, when I lost my phone, I didn't have her new number written down on anything undigital.

Pam didn't Facebook, so she would be unaware of my predicament. I hoped she'd call so I could have her number

again and record it someplace I wouldn't lose it. But she never did call. I tried to find her online, but the three Pam Smiths in Tulsa had no idea who I was. One thought I was Baxter, trying to weasel my way back into her life. I didn't want to weasel my way anywhere, I just wanted to find my friend, Pam.

* * *

As I stand to leave the coffee shop, an American couple enters. They're holding hands. Smiling. Their eyes are animated with affection for each other. They order two cappuccinos in English and the barista smiles and nods, even though it's afternoon and cappuccino really shouldn't be enjoyed after breakfast. The young man's thumb caresses the young woman's. She fingers the big diamond ring on her free left hand.

* * *

I met my future ex-wife, Teri, on New Year's Day of 2009. Teri with light skin and chestnut hair. Her big brown eyes that pulled me in the moment I looked into them. Teri with her battered 1990 Ford Escort and beat up sneakers. We eloped the following New Year's Eve.

Teri met Pam once and immediately hated her. She could never figure out what I saw in her. Her breasts? Her ass? I tried to explain it wasn't physical with Pam, but Teri never bought it. Her disdain for Pam should have been my first clue that Teri and I were destined for failure. If she couldn't accept one of my best friends, what did that say about her?

What did that say about me? But I clung to the idea that once Teri got to know Pam, she'd love her as much as I did.

When Pam had her heart ripped out by her boyfriend, Eric, I should have gone to Des Moines to be there with her. To help her through what she described as the hardest thing she'd ever dealt with. A couple of days after I mentioned a possible trip to Des Moines, however, Teri had a crisis of her own. She showed up at my door in tears because she had a fight with her roommate. Weeping almost uncontrollably on my couch, Teri asked if she could stay with me until she found a new place. But money was tight. The bookstore wasn't the highest paying gig in the city—at twenty-nine, her career choices were another source of the despondency crashing in on her. She couldn't afford to get an apartment of her own, and was wary of moving into another bad roommate situation.

She never found a new place. In fact, she's still in my old flat, because I'm the one who moved out nine months ago.

I never did go to Des Moines to see Pam. Not with Teri moving in. I can imagine how that conversation would have gone. I'm sure Teri would have played the *you-just-want-to-go-there-and-fuck-her-now-that-she-doesn't-have-a-boyfriend* card. But I didn't want to go there to have sex with Pam. I just wanted to help my friend.

* * *

After I stop to buy a postcard with a shot of the Ponte Vecchio at sunset, I walk past a woman sitting alone on the steps of the Duomo. She must be in her twenties. Her dark hair is pulled back in a ponytail, revealing the beautiful line

of her neck. She looks up and smiles. Even at a distance of ten feet, the bright blue of her eyes absorbs me. There's a sadness in those eyes. Maybe loneliness.

* * *

I knew Pam felt isolated in Des Moines after the idiot, Eric, dumped her. All of her family was in Tulsa, and she didn't have a lot of friends. I did try to be there for her by telephone, but whenever I would talk to Pam, Teri would sit on the other side of the room, sighing and looking as though she was about to cry. I'd get off the phone and Teri would go on for hours about how she felt like everything in her life was going to pieces (except with me, of course) and how she felt worthless because she made so little money and couldn't even afford to live on her own. She would thank me for being so kind and generous and say she'd never known anyone like me.

I bought all of it. The whole thing. And I fell hard. Teri needed me like no one else had. I was her big and brave and handsome man. She was adrift, but I gave her hope. "I so appreciate your strength," she said. "When I'm with you, I know everything will be okay."

While Teri embedded herself more deeply into my life, I could feel Pam slipping away. She rarely called, and when I called her (which also happened less frequently), the conversations lacked the kind of life they'd always had. I told myself the reason for the weirdness was that things were in a state of flux for both of us. I was getting into this serious relationship while she was getting out of a bad one. Once things settled, I knew everything would go back to normal between us.

When Pam told me she was thinking about moving back to Tulsa, I should have known she was having a much tougher time with all of it. But I believed her when she said she missed her home and her family. It didn't make much difference from my perspective where she lived—Tulsa had an airport and telephones.

A couple months after Pam moved, I married Teri. Within a year, I realized whatever I thought I'd loved about Teri was gone. I stayed another year to see if I could find it. But there was no finding something that never really existed. Last month, the legal recognition that I had made a mistake became official.

I let Pam drop out of my life. I'm sure I could argue that Pam had let me drop out of hers as well. But that would be a lie. Her friendship was a gift I took for granted. Even ignored. Standing here, watching the Arno river flow under this bridge, it hits me that I let go of more than a friendship with Pam.

It wasn't simply a mistake on my part. There's something passive about mistakes, something you can't quite control. But I hadn't made a mistake by letting Pam go; I had made the wrong choice.

When I look at my watch, I realize I've been staring at the water for nearly an hour. And there's a longing I can't make go away. I take the postcard from its bag and a pen from my jacket. I address it to Pam Smith. Just her name because I don't even know if she's still in Tulsa. I stand for another half hour, thinking of all the things I want to tell her, all the things I want her to know. It should be part admission, part confession, part declaration. I should bare

my heart. But I know she'll never see it. Never know how I feel. I close my eyes and my chest aches when I realize Pam will remain lost to me.

Finally, I open my eyes, put the pen to the card and write: *Wish you were here.*

A SHORT BUT ESSENTIAL LIST OF THE THINGS LOST TO ME IN IOWA CITY, JUNE 2013

Carol J. Matthews

1. A ring.¹
2. A memory stick.²
3. Sunglasses clips.³

1. The red-stoned Gaelic ring purchased impulsively in Houston at a gem wholesale lot in the shaky aftermath of Dan's death, the miasmatic heat and ice-cubed fluorescence of the place so disorienting and debilitating I could barely breathe.

2. The small thumb drive (full of 9th grade essays on *Lord of the Flies* and *Romeo and Juliet* and my own equally awkward attempts at poetry) loaned to me by Nic, my towering godson, forgotten at Zephyr's on Tuesday. (I haven't told Nic yet.)

3. The special order ones that clip magnetically to my prescription bifocal lenses, which I typically am careful to replace in the case but in my exhaustion forgot. They now decorate a table at some restaurant, a desk in some classroom, or the sidewalk of some well-traveled street.

4. Earrings.⁴
5. Iowa City itself.⁵
6. Terrie's little house.⁶
7. Gunners.⁷
8. The Cottage.⁸
9. Mondo's.⁹

4. A pair of handmade, blown-glass earrings—a navy stripe through metallic white shine—won at a silent auction benefit for my school's ten year anniversary, also purchased impulsively in the aftermath of Dan's death.

5. Or at least my Iowa City, the one that existed in the 80s and 90s (a scruffier, more casual version), now usurped by haughty high rises with high-end stores—wide awnings at their feet—or by gargantuan, sprawling, identical housing units where late nineteenth-century painted ladies once more elegantly claimed space.

6. The one on that little lot on Governor, abutting Ralston Creek, now crushed by lunky development. Cramped.

7. Gone.

8. Buried by brownstone.

9. Its woody black bean soup stolen years ago by suspicious fire.

10. Places to smoke cigarettes.¹⁰
11. 50s Diner.¹¹
12. JC's.¹²
13. Masala.¹³
14. High and Lonesome.¹⁴
15. Pearson's.¹⁵

10. Blown away like so much smoke.

11. I don't remember its name, but where "Hazel You Ain't" sometimes played. Where Dan and I had our first date.

12. That popular breakfast place on the other side of town—a delight for the foodie with a hangover.

13. Technically it's still there, but it's degenerated into a spiceless shadow experience that only disappoints. Lost is the immaculate vegetarian cuisine laced elegantly with cardamom, clove, turmeric, and garam masala; the bubble tea savories; the gulab jamun; the fennel candy goodbye.

14. Dave is still around, writing music with his band, transcendental in the Emersonian sense as ever.

15. With its green river goodness, its soda fountain nostalgia, its small town charm. Don't get me wrong, I'm all for progress, just not when it moves us to places we don't want to be.

16. Any inkling whatsoever of Dan.¹⁶

17. My freedom.¹⁷

18. My slim figure.¹⁸

19. My innocence.¹⁹

16. Except in the arboretum where we once walked hand in hand. Except in the corner of the ped mall where we first spoke, connecting common dots between Cornell and tennis and grad school degrees. Except in his house by the med school, in my apartment on the corner of E Washington and Linn, and in the basement of the old Yacht Club with the ghost whispers of H&L's songs.

17. Stolen forever by getting my MAT and becoming employable after all.

18. Now frosted in layers by years of grading essays and doing lesson plans.

19. But not my virginity (long gone even when I first arrived back in 1991) or my virtue (still intact and perhaps better cultivated through my vast and seemingly growing propensity for loss).

HASTA DESPUÉS

Saulaman James Schlegel

The warming rejuvenation of
sun drew me out. Restless ennui
and head-curing naproxen.
A carriage with rickets bore
me southward, accompanied by
a pencil-tapping song. It
knew where I was rumbling.

I met the withholding outlet
projecting coolness incarnate.
The sheer wall checkered with
second-hand volumes, discarded in
haphazard cleaning frenzies. I
studied them awhile, the lean,
diaphanous categories, like
ancient knowledges canned, turning
to mush on the shelves.
Genuflecting, I picked through
the waning patch of sad words.

Sudden crimson began to bloom
towards my hand. I plucked
it gently from the ground,
a fragile poppy among shabby
foxtail. Crack the binding.
Flip the leaves. It puffs
out an earthy nimbus, echoing
Chilean mountain-ranges and dulce
de leche. The register rings
shrilly.

The next few hours drip down
my throat with black tea;
Autumnal-something. I devour
falling petals from the pages.
I read figs, dates, yellow
tomatillos, and wasabi peas.

Days later, we speak with
lips in breathless Spanish,
writhing on a dying sofa. Our
tongues fluid and thewy. Then, before
leaving, you took my hair
in your hands, fashioning a
wanton braid.

ENTER TO WIN

D. Ryan Allen

I received the notification yesterday in the mail. It arrived in an envelope stamped with the word “WINNER” in big red letters. I nearly tossed it, thinking it was another one of those clearing house scams. Shit, I’ve never won anything in my whole life.

My sophomore year in high school I caught the clap from Trisha Speldman, but I hardly think of that as a prize. Just another fine example of how life pays you back. For twenty minutes of my sixteenth year on this planet, in the sack with Trish, I was a Gold Medalist. Then I got a big case of the crotch gophers and caused my family years of embarrassment.

Isn’t that how life is? One minute you’re walking the red carpet, the next, out goes the rug. What’s the old cliché? Nothing is free? Well, brother, you had best believe it. Looking back I should have tossed that damn envelope. Hell, I should never have entered the contest in the first place.

I came across the contest on the way back from visiting my brother in Texas. I had stopped for gas and something to eat at this little ma-and-pa filling station out in the middle of nowhere. It was nothing more than a shack with two pumps out front.

Just as I was paying for my fuel and feast, I noticed a drop box next to the register. It was one of those setups. You know, a dingy white box with a slit cut in the top, a dried-out Bic tethered to it with a piece of twine, and a stack of entry forms piled to one side.

Standing there in front of the counter, half awake, I read the homemade sign above the box: “ENTER TO WIN CHRISTOPHER WALKEN’S HEAD.” The lettering was written in large, sloppy capitals and was surrounded by headshots of Walken clipped from magazines. It looked like the handy work of a little girl struck with puppy love, or maybe a psychotic member of the actor’s fan club.

I snorted after reading the sign for a second time.

“What’s so funny, Mister?” said the teenager behind the counter. He was a wiry little caricature of a good ol’ country boy, the kind John Denver wrote that song about.

“Ah, your contest... Well, it’s... Look, I’m at a loss for words,” I said, nodding to the sign.

“Yeah, it’s an attention grabber that’s fer sure.” He punched in the prices for the gas, chips, and soda.

“So what’s the actual prize? A dinner with Christopher Walken? A chance to get in his head?” I asked, looking around the box for a copy of the rules.

“I don’t know,” said the clerk. “I guess it’s that Walken fella’s head? The owner set it up.”

“Yeah. Walken’s head. That’s got to be it. Says it right there on the sign.” I rolled my eyes and pulled out my wallet.

“Mister, you makin’ fun?” The clerk’s beady eyes were locked on me and his body language told me if I kept pushing I would find myself on the receiving end of an ass-stomping.

“Oh, no. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean any offense. It’s just that I’ve never seen anything like this before,” I said, attempting damage control.

The clerk stood frozen as he processed what I had said. Was he checking my statement for sincerity? An uncomfortable eternity stretched between us before he finally moved. His eyes still locked on mine, he punched the total key.

“That’ll be \$43.34.” He scooped the food into a wrinkled, second-hand paper sack that bore the logo of a different store.

I handed him a fifty-dollar bill and smiled, hoping that he would sense that I considered everything cool again.

“Is this contest open to everyone?” I asked, grabbing an entry form. I had decided to enter the silly drawing to show him that there were no hard feelings.

“Sure is. People been coming from as far as five counties to enter that contest.” He pulled my change from the register, counted it twice, and dumped it onto the counter.

The pen tied to the box was bone dry. I scribbled in hard circles trying to move the ink. I felt my face flush with embarrassment as the clerk watched.

“Here, use mine.” The clerk pulled a pen from his pocket and handed it to me. His eyes were wide, his sneer even wider.

“Uh... Thanks.” I took the pen and quickly filled out the little form. Folding it once, I dropped it into the slot.

I smiled and nodded to the clerk. Handing his pen back, I scooped up my change and slammed it into my pocket. I grabbed the sack, thanked the kid, and left the store.

Once home, I told several people about the weird contest and the odd exchange with the clerk, then forgot about it. You get busy and the weird shit you experience takes a backseat.

Then, yesterday, I received a letter announcing that I was the winner of the drawing for Christopher Walken’s head. The letter said that a courier would deliver the prize package at noon today and asked me to be present to sign for it.

I used a vacation day to make sure I would be home for the delivery. I had to see what kind of crazy, half-assed prize some backwater filler station could come up with. An old VHS cassette full of Christopher Walken interviews entitled *Walken’s Head*? A large black velvet painting with Walken’s face glowing bright and sexy against the dark fabric? Perhaps a little clay bust of Walken made by the owner’s son during craft day on death row? Whatever the prize, I imagined it would probably be nothing more than some piece of flea market crap.

At a quarter past two there was still no courier or prize package. Maybe it was all a joke? The kid had probably fished my card out of box as soon as had I driven off. He waited six months and now he was giving a big “fuck you” to the city fella. Well, the little asshole got the last laugh.

I grabbed my jacket and headed toward the door. The afternoon was still young enough that I could attempt

to enjoy the remainder of the day. As I reached for the doorknob, the doorbell rang and I nearly jumped out of my skin.

I swore under my breath and yanked the door open. A man the size of a bear filled my porch. I looked from the sewn name patch that declared the mountain's name to be "Gus" up to the ugly that sat on top of his neck.

His head, shaped like a large ham, was wide at the bottom and tapered to a point. His flattened face had a noticeable tick that made his tiny, wide-set eyes water. I sensed that Gus had a disposition for sudden and uncontrollable violence.

"Melvin Palacky?" Gus growled.

"Ah..." was all I could manage for words. I backed up until I was pressed against the entryway closet door.

"You Melvin Palacky?" he said again.

Somehow I managed a nod. If I'd had any courage, it left town, taking my instinct for survival with it.

"Here." The behemoth of a man pulled open the screen door and shoved a large box into my chest. Dropping my jacket, my hands closed about the box, not because I told them too, but because that's what hands are supposed to do. Gus pulled a clipboard from under his arm and read, "On behalf of the Stillwater Gas Mart, congratulations. Out of hundreds of entries you are the lucky Grand Prize Winner."

He held out the clipboard and a pen for me to sign with. I stood there looking up into his black eyes. Placing the pen in my fingers, Gus grasped my right hand in his massive paw. Like a giant teaching an infant to write, he dragged my hand across the bottom of the clipboard. Studying the

scribble, he nodded and pulled the pen from between my fingers.

“I packed it myself. Enjoy,” he said, and flashed a poor attempt at a smile, revealing teeth like those of a chain-smoking shark. Returning the clipboard to under his arm, Gus turned and walked away. Hitting the sidewalk, he turned left and kept going, his massive strides carrying him quickly out of sight.

For several minutes I remained frozen in place, staring out the open front door, wondering if I was experiencing a delusional episode or if the encounter had really happened. The box confirmed it had been real, and I suddenly felt like I was holding a bomb.

Slowly closing the front door, I carried the box to the kitchen with outstretched arms. I slid it onto the kitchen table and backed away from it. In an attempt to muster my courage, I circled the table several times, always with an eye on the box.

After my tenth trip around the table I began to feel foolish. Before that giant mound of meat darkened my stoop, I was certain the prize would be some hillbilly-chic garbage. Swearing at my stupidity, I grabbed a paring knife from the rack and boldly stepped up to the table.

I pulled the box towards myself, suddenly anxious to see my prize. I smiled when I saw my name and address scrawled in a friendly, loose cursive. It didn't appear to be the handwriting of a homicidal maniac. I put the blade to the tape and my smile faded as I noticed the growing crimson puddle pooling around the base of the box. The knife dropped from my numb fingers and clattered across the kitchen floor.

INSECURITY TO THE
PLASTIC SURGEON AT FACE VALUE
Steven Mildenstein

Build her a sanctuary of stained glass windows
The hue of their reflection
A sunlit chandelier of grace and affection
Make it look like her
Husband's eyes
Gleaming with newfound lust
Like he is staring at her naked body
For the first time again
An iris garden blooming with life
He will pray to it, something he has never done

THE GREAT BALL

DM Hukill

Not but the squeezing of throats was heard over the din of tides as passengers gulped saliva in anticipation of that wretched darkness befalling their vessel. The waves tossed sharply, heaving the boat as knobby hands might lob clay. A lantern remained lit at their feet, in constant danger of being knocked forward and snuffed entirely. Yet they all sat wearily, warily waiting for something else, for shadows to engulf and consume. Glistening eyes momentarily met one another as the huddled mass held itself together with outstretched arms and parched lips. And the blackness persisted.

The ballroom had been all alight with joy and drunkenness just hours prior. From the mighty vaulted ceilings crystal chandeliers gently swung, blazing like

suspended stars, twinkling and chiming with the lull of the waves. Tables were set out tastefully and draped with fine linens, white as driven snow. On each table a candelabra stood with four candles in its arms. The candles burned bright and strong, their gentle, bleached beeswax barely dripping at all onto the gilded arms.

The guests were many and varied and adorned with a plethora of brilliant and bizarre jewels, reflecting each beam of light as a kaleidoscope dazzling the eyes. The men donned piquéd shirts, white bow ties and stiff white vests; black tails hung below their waists. The women bejeweled, beautifully filling colorful, silky, provocative nightgowns, offered contour to curves most pleasant to the eye. The servants wore white gloves and peak lapels, shifty gazes, quickly manicured cuticles, clean teeth, slicked hair.

In the center of the spectacle gathered many dancers, all of whom practiced steps quite freely and with ease. With the sway of each wave, the dancers swung in accord, twirling and laughing, hands in gloved hands and eyes filled with the passion and glory of ecstasy. To the left they danced, their feet shuffling effortlessly. To the right they turned as the wind brushes a leaf forward. The orchestra sang gallantly with their brass throats and whining strings. In each eye, a player beheld the night's music and the traveling dancers. In each eye hung the subtle nervousness so easily mistaken for performer's confidence.

A pause in the music. A hush, a silence. The vessel groaned quietly, deeply. The dancers mechanically craned their necks around in hesitant uncertainty. The conductor wiped his brow and raised his arms. Again, the music struck

forward and the dancers laughed, tossing their hands back into position and resuming the shuffle. Those seated leaned forward with raised glasses, toasted, drank, and then yawned with grins. The servants cleared tables and refilled glasses; the bubbly fermented juice spilled forth and overflowed the cups.

But along the edges of that great hall a chandelier winked momentarily and quietly vanished into darkness. The dancers did not notice. The servants did not see. The orchestra played on. The vessel charged forward into the blackness of night, cutting through the chilly flowing desert dunes.

Forward lunged the orchestra as they whined and rattled like the vessel in the sea. Forward, too, the dancers sprung, lips meeting, eyes gazing, feet tracing the outlines of a jigsaw with a heedless, swarming energy. And with a sudden snap, another chandelier went black. And another. And... yet another. Like breaths sucked and heaved, the lights grew lower as each chandelier slowly died.

The dancers did not see. The servants did not notice. But those in the orchestra turned their eyes up as they played, and sudden gasps were held tightly in chests so as not to raise alarm. On they played, sweetly and beautifully. The *bom-bom* and *ding-ding* swayed forward with the dancers trotting this way and that. Those at the tables produced thin cigarettes from silver cases and lit their ends. From the orchestra, one could mistake the growing darkness and flickering cigarettes as one would behold a village on the ebb of night—tiny hovels lit by fireplace, the sun retreating, a hush proceeding.

Darkness was now evident as the chandeliers doused themselves one after the other, creeping forward from the rear and edging to the front. Now the dancers stopped and stared up, the orchestra stuttered, the servants choked. The hush was deafening, the fear palpable. The lights were going out.

One brave dancer pounced forward and laughed. Holding her hand aloft, she spun and twirled and fell gently to the floor, trickling like a silken waterfall. Gliding back up, she grabbed her partner's hand and danced and sweat on in the growing darkness. The band struck hard and fast, and the brass throats and whining strings anxiously screamed a showy tune, whipping the dancers back into a meringue of cavalier resistance. Those gleaming teeth and wincing grins could not overcome a sickening feeling growing in the pits of their guts, like a rotten seed bearing ill fruit.

The relentless clockwork pushed forward, dousing the final chandelier in an unceremonious gasp. A servant trotted forth with a number of shuttered oil lanterns, placing them on every fourth table, lighting them gently, opening their shutters to the orchestra. Those at the tables sat quietly now, watching the flickering of the lamps, their cigarettes burning softly, the soothing tinder of tobacco assuaging their fear. The dancers rejoiced with the added light and flailed to and fro again, shuffling and twisting.

Thus, forward plowed their vessel into the deep night, and onward trudged the orchestra. The dancers accelerated bravely, their jingling jewels still filled with the dim light of oil lanterns and candelabras, shining red and blue, purple and green. Those weary feet did start to ache and those

tired arms wanted to fail. But on with the song, and on with the dance, and faster yet they danced and spun into that darkening night.

The back tables, unoccupied, began to fail. With a sigh, the candelabras blinked out one by one, the beat of a heart. And one by one the rear of the room grew dark. The orchestra now raised to fervor over the crushing noise of the waves outside and the nearing darkness pushing closer. One by one the candles died, the dancers danced looking out of the corners of their eyes. The smokers smoked. Breath. Out. Breath. Out. In exhalation, the blue-gray smoke turned dark, turned black, and lights doused faster until finally not a single candle blazed with life.

The orchestra paused, the dancers stopped, the smokers twisted round in certain fear. Now all that remained were the oil lanterns dredged from below, shining through shuttered gazes onto the raised contours and faces of wide-eyed beasts. Shadows played softly and faces formed and changed with the darkness. The orchestra was the first to quit, laying their instruments down and producing cigarettes of their own. The dancers quietly took seats and held hands, gazing worriedly into each others' eyes. The vessel pushed forward.

Now there was silence and illness. The sobering blackness engulfed, and beget a heavy breathing; the skin began to clam and sweat. Eyes searched for exits in the blackness, but bodies remained seated. Up went the vessel as it tossed with a wave. Down it groaned into the pitch. Side it rolled, and side, came back.

Some voices whinnied in terror, others stoically held on. The bright orange points of burning cigarettes relieved even

the avid physician, as sad, cold breaths exhaled into that darkness. One hand found another hand and held tightly, while some passengers huddled closer to one another for heat, for companionship.

Now the lanterns were doused one after the other, slowly, relentlessly. Just beyond the edge of the ringed light disappeared each passenger as they smoked or gazed dispassionately. No voices now, no music. The gayety and merriment subsided—nay—*extinguished* itself into that ocean below. And with the dousing of lanterns was drowned the flame of life into the veil of blackness, until utter silence could be heard just beyond.

Not but the squeezing of throats was heard over the din of tides as passengers gulped saliva in anticipation of that wretched darkness befalling their vessel. The waves tossed sharply, but the weary travelers did not move. A single lantern remained lit at the feet of the remaining few. Glistening eyes momentarily met and choked words of despair were mouthed in that silence, that darkness, that death.

And the blackness devoured.

I REMEMBER

Carol J. Matthews

Healing is a habit designed only for the brave
It double stitches the heart with reinforced stems
Like the armed hands of ancient oaks in spring
It sends rhizomes of hope in artful abandon, no plan
Just prolific pronouncements in unfathomable green
It says that beginning anew is the only path that makes sense.
Haphazard as new growth may be.

Yet I at home am lost in the lonely clutter
Of this memory-soaked heart
Waiting, waiting for a Now to usurp the Then.
And then to begin again in virile greens
Blooming from my woody stemmed core.
Patience is my supplication to stingy fate's fickle rains
And your remembered love the fullness of my thick-barked trunk.
Like pollinating bees you buzzed back then, just dropping in
On my full-petaled heart.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

D. Ryan Allen is a writer and an artist. He draws, paints, and sculpts. His creative endeavors are fueled by his love of horror, science fiction, fantasy and the weird. Once, asked by a woman appalled by his art, “Are you into grotesqueries?” Ryan said, “Yes.” infernalengines@aol.com

Tom Formaro is a writer, drummer, and dad. He’s published a few stories, and is the co-author (with his lovely wife) of a children’s book, *Alfonso, the Christmas Pumpkin*. After 14 years away, Tom returned to Des Moines with his wife and beautiful daughter. They recently adopted a rescue puppy.

DM Hukill is a novelist and co-founder of the Disciples of Des Moines literary group. Traversing the graveyards and abandoned buildings, he suffers this vanishing city one last breath. He possesses a BA in English and has previously collaborated with *The Des Moines Register*.

Kelsey Lepperd lives and studies in Des Moines, Iowa. She writes character-oriented short fiction—stories about the human things humans do. As an editor, she’s worked for *The Rumpus* as well as *Periphery Art & Literary Journal*, where she served as the publication’s editor-in-chief.

Carol J. Matthews, a local teacher and writer, is also a managing editor for the online literary magazine *3Elements Review*. She enjoys live music, elegant food, bold red wine, and her two little dogs, Hercules and Hucklebee.

Molly McDonald will write you a poem if you send three words to mccardoor@gmail.com! Whatta deal!

Steven Mildenstein is 24 years old and attended Simpson College in Indianola. He performs his work at a few venues in the Des Moines and Ames areas when he can, and is a mentor for the Movement 515 poetry workshop.

Saulaman James Schlegel is a Des Moines resident with a Bachelor's in Visual Arts and concentration in Creative Writing. He has sung in professional choirs for eight years, paints and draws, and loafs in the grass at every opportunity. He does his best to leave nothing out, except for the meaning.

Michael Wellman's new novel is *Versus the Demons*, a story from the bush leagues that's full of local history and famous Iowans, among other stuff. He writes lots of poems but this is the first one that's ever been published. He hopes it won't be the last.

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SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

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Submissions are accepted on an ongoing basis and are published on a quarterly schedule in the months of January, April, July, and October. To be considered for the upcoming issue, send submissions at least one month prior to the month of publication.

Please send submissions to SpoilageDSM@gmail.com as attachments, with the subject line "Submission." Cartoons must be black-and-white, formatted for a vertical half-page, and in the highest resolution possible.

Please submit only pieces you believe to be publication-ready. Editors will authorize any and all changes to submissions prior to publication.

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