

# Quercus

a journal of literary and visual art

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(kwûrkûs) Latin. n. The oak genus: a deciduous hardwood tree or shrub.

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*clink clink*  
*click clack crr-shink*



## The Neighbor's Window

Westerly breezes are the worst;  
they usher the brittle sounds

out: the groan of sofa springs  
and clenched voices tumbling

over. Here on the dusky patio  
my guests and I stare at one

another. If we looked up, through  
the curtain, we'd see two shadows

collide. Like in a cheap movie,  
the sound and image would be

off: a split-second delay between  
the hand coming down and the slap

off-screen. Praying for the wind  
to shift, we let these movies play.

*—Jeff T. Dick '77*

## Early Morning, in Ones and Twos

The trim-ankled deer step into their reflections  
to drink from the lake. Where they stand opposite  
each other on the bank, the silver-rilled basin tips  
toward neither. They are that much in accord.  
A wordless breeze moves over the water  
unpinning mist from the shirtsleeves  
of the scotch pine and blue spruce. Almost  
I can make out what the far trees are signing.  
But not quite. The light from my kitchen washes out  
into the dawn light. I unfold my gloves on the table.  
I wonder if I shall be lonely. I wonder if when  
the sun pushes out from the dock and I step  
toward the drive, I will find none of these conversations  
involve me, the trees and deer and lake crimped  
inward as I pass. The eight o'clock road empty  
but for cars. Perhaps, though, it is enough to have stood  
at the window, to have breathed in secret as a sparrow  
watching under her wing—had not a doe just now  
shivered along her withers, a chill rebounding  
down my own nervous vertebrae, our matching alphabet.

—Sarah Gardner



from a distance      it brightens

this branch like any other  
what does it mean in Texas  
missing your lost mother  
a river uprooted by trees?

*I am suffering but*  
to answer with a postcard  
*with Crows*, a smear  
broken angles  
*what can you tell me*  
in response: August  
and locusts dying  
brightly fanned  
then the nest  
in it, two eggs broken  
a branch, slightly bent  
where I had not passed—

honeyed with thorns  
in the summer  
every night dreaming  
St. Therese wrote  
*am I suffering well?* I want  
Van Gogh's *Wheatfield*  
of dark sky, crusted gold  
as birds, *Therese*  
*about this?*  
all the anagrams of heat  
brittle bodies  
into sudden silence  
desiccated on the ground  
shells sieving air and above  
starkly rocking  
a blue jay, just landed

—Sarah Gardner

## Broken Beautiful

I.

Thousands of cockleburbs  
swallow him whole  
as he lies on the floor,  
April morning light spilling  
through the open shades.  
Oddly enough, he looks  
peaceful, relaxed:

                                  legs crossed  
                                  in someone else's old  
                                  Sunday best.

One cocklebur for each  
sin, each tragic flaw.  
Consumed, he doesn't seem  
to mind the sudden end  
of who he was.

II.

In the corner of the back room  
on the old tabletop sits  
the sewing machine:

                                  white  
                                  with confessional black  
                                  cracks and holes.

Tracing its lines  
with my fingers,  
examining the revelatory black  
fissures of its until now forgotten  
shell, I am oblivious  
that it was once  
a tool, an extension  
of my desires.

III.

She told me everything  
I never wanted to know  
about anyone—  
Not an Option  
tattooed above the scars

across her wrist,  
her smile full  
of false teeth. She wears  
her cracks and flaws  
like jewels.  
I hide mine away  
in the bottoms of drawers  
with mismatched socks  
and dirty magazines.

IV.  
She rolls over.  
I run  
my hand through her dark  
hair, admiring a long strand framing  
her ear:

    a tiny, little secret  
    I want to explore.  
She rolls back toward me,  
rests her arm across my chest.  
My head falls back  
to our pillow, but I can't  
sleep so stare  
at the cobwebs  
in corner of the ceiling.  
I feel the cockleburrs  
beginning to swallow me.  
Peering through the dry,  
brown barbed seeds,  
all I can see are the beautiful,  
black fractures  
in a white sewing machine.

—Jeremy Burke '99

## Seven Holes Carved in an Old Bur Oak

There are no mountains here  
so the old bur oak,  
odd and alone  
on an otherwise grassy plain,  
will have to do.

I've driven fifty miles or so  
to get here  
this cool fall evening—  
took the back roads:

    Old highway 61  
    then the Humeston  
    and a little gravel road  
    I've traveled over more than any other.  
    Finally a left turn onto the home blacktop.

    My sister had once stood alone  
        in her little, red spring jacket  
        in the middle  
        of the still gravel pass  
        as a truck bore down  
        on her—spared  
        by the defiance  
        in her stubborn blue eyes.  
    It was exciting  
    when they paved it.

I park in the driveway  
and hike into the back forty.  
The gate-hook unlatches  
easily; I smile:

    It used to be too hard for me,  
    so I'd just roll under the barbed wire fence.

Boone, our black lab,  
has gray fur now  
around his mouth.

His eyes, once eager, are now wise,  
    sympathetic—  
    a little tired these days.

He limps,  
but still comes along,  
I think out of habit.  
We cross the dike.  
The pond settles  
in the little valley to my left.  
The right is all grass and cattails.  
At the end of the dike is a grove of trees  
and some old fencing, all down,  
just a few posts sticking  
up from the ground.

I always wonder what the fence kept  
and what happened to it,  
but never ask.  
Maybe there were cattle  
here at one time,  
but farming is for my grandfathers.

Boone and I make our way  
through the high, brown switch grass,  
following deer paths when we can.  
Finally, we make it to the old bur oak.  
I sit down. Lean my back  
against the tree, and stare out  
at the pond and my childhood  
home on the other side.  
Twilight's fortune will not fail—

the sun down,  
the day chasing after it.  
Night is marching in from the east.

It's a new moon, and this saddens me.  
I had wanted her company this evening.  
But my secret won't wait any longer.

I stand up,  
pull out my pocketknife,  
place my hand on the old bur oak,  
close my eyes,  
apologize for what I'm about to do,  
then open the blade

and start to carve a hole in his trunk.  
My eyes mist up and I feel bad,  
but I keep carving.  
When I finish,  
the hole is as deep as I can reach  
and about the size of a small child's fist.  
I fold up my blade  
and return it to my pocket.  
Go on, Boone, I whisper,  
and shoo and point him away.  
I pat the old bur oak  
gently on the trunk  
and ask if he's ready,  
but I'm probably asking myself.  
I take a deep breath  
and close my eyes.  
Leaning in close,  
I place my mouth to the hole  
and whisper my secret.  
When I'm done  
I lightly pat his trunk again  
and thank him.  
Ignoring my tears, I turn  
to pick my way through  
grass and darkness.

*—Jeremy Burke '99*

## Talking with Dead Men

I've had thoughts,  
while the sun rests itself on the horizon,  
of ripping pages from great books  
to form my own history,  
a new American classic  
that bleeds forgotten.

I've measured out moments of my life,  
color-coded by emotional entanglement,  
with Prufrock's coffee spoons  
dissolving plastic recollections  
of sexuality, of self—

submerged my limbs in Whitman's unfurling waves,  
an attempt to drown myself in your mass—  
shades of blues defiling my pores  
until I am nothing,  
absorbed in one—

pressed my skin  
between pages of bound books,  
waiting for ink to seep into  
my fingertips and prints,  
and there's nothing to my thoughts  
but someone else's tattoos  
and overexposed love metaphors.

I want to become your fingers,  
to feel how the sun trickles  
down your arm  
and becomes the page.  
Blank and black pages hidden in books  
begging for air, for acknowledgement  
trapped between skin and marrow.

I still have thoughts,  
and I'd give all of me  
if I had it all to give.

—Alicia Levi '05

## transformation

you work  
patiently to mask the  
traces of night tucked into  
skin's dark crevasses.  
a blinding fluorescent light magnifies  
what time hasn't yet dissolved.

you pour  
a new face from the bottle,  
beige pooling on your fingertip—  
dab, smear, repeat to  
conceal the festered slashes.

you gaze,  
twinkling, naive eyes  
replaced by haunted sockets.  
remember that november night as  
it trickles down your cheek,  
staining like black ink.

*wrists gripped tightly,  
face stuffed into the feathers,  
a heart dropped in shame*

you blink,  
press the lashes together, and  
bead off the night's excess.  
line those eyes, cleopatra  
pretend they've never looked this good.  
so sultry, so smoky, but  
bruised under the left.

you pout—  
lips tasty and delicious,  
so plump and red like  
two ripe summer strawberries  
slightly crusted with blood.



you smile—  
prepare to show the world the  
wall of pearly squares behind which  
you hide.  
the mirror rejects and  
sends pieces of you, your  
battered reflection, spiraling  
downward into a  
mangled mosaic on the  
cold tile below.

—*Amanda Carlson*

## My Grandma Who Turns the Grass Blue

Sometimes after I peddle the four blocks of chipped concrete on my pink and purple bike with the shimmery streamers, the one Santa brought me last Christmas, I open the door and find Grandma seated in her blue leather recliner. Sometimes I find her in the kitchen smoking, taking a long, slow drag and exhaling little circles. She used to be vibrant and playful, but now she gets breathless a lot. She tells me she's sick, but she doesn't have a fever and hardly ever sneezes or coughs.

Grandma likes to watch *The Price is Right* and play Bingo, and I like to curl up and listen to stories from her *Reader's Digest* books. The faint smell of Gonzo Grape Bubblicious on her breath comforts me as I drift off.

At night we color pictures from the tattered pages of coloring books that I drag from her enormous bookcase. She tells me coloring is one of her favorite things to do, but Grandma doesn't know what colors to paint the sky or trees. She picks one crayon from the rickety wooden box and carefully colors the entire picture, gliding the wax side-to-side between her withered fingers.

Grandma drowns Snoopy, the marshmallow clouds, and the grass in a sea of navy. Why did you do that, Grandma? Why did you use only one color? I ask. Everyone knows that grass is green not blue. But her imagination is better than mine.

Grass can be whatever color you want it to be, she informs sweetly. Sometimes it's soft pink, like a delicate rose blossom. Sometimes it echoes yellow from the sun. And sometimes it's blue, like tears. Things are always as they appear in your mind. Always.

I wonder if anyone else knows that on the other side of town the grass grows blue.

—Amanda Carlson

## Divan Fire Sermon into Garden

Film begun, they settled down to  
View the lovers' scripted touch—she  
Answered his look with a frown and  
Stretched across the agéd couch.

Twined in habit's posture, her thighs  
Pressed—his fingers seeking—tight, she  
Watched the scene as if it were not  
She who battled through the night.

Dénouement: her eyes closed, weary,  
Never knowing ecstasy—she,  
Even through a vision blurry,  
Saw what he could never see:

Far past time's two-handed wailing,  
In a grove beyond her yawns, she  
Dreamed of peacocks dancing, trailing  
Feathers 'cross a rainbow dawn.

Garden vision: divan's sorrow—  
Love song of a forlorn sparrow.

– *Carl Herzig*

# On Time

## I. Modulations

He drank all the rum  
and closed all the cupboards  
and told her "You'll see. Just wait.  
In time, you'll see."

And the cock kept crowing,  
the hasty pendulum  
batting and swinging, the pitchers  
pouring, the microwaves beeping  
and the milk, the milk  
congealing.

They stretched out the night: the ashtrays  
were filling the traffic was dimming the lights were broken  
the faucet, sinking.

The minutes were telling  
the hours to stay, as days that laughed  
became years that ran right out of breath.  
And he watched it all give  
like the rum in the cupboard, like the curve  
of her breast, like August to autumn  
just barely, tender.

Things pushed out, and pulled back, the quiet  
almost rolling like waves, Tuesday changing  
its name, love changing///its shape  
like the curve, the cupboard, or milk  
congealing.

Weeks after (the coffee, the sugar and cream)  
she wrote him a letter then ripped it to pieces  
(those one hundred sentences  
torn like his t-shirt) and left it  
in the sink.

The words she had written ("In time, you'll see")  
dissolved, after days in the drain, after days  
of water running over after nights  
of love in the shape of the water//in the shape  
of the cupboard//in the shape  
of a death so small  
that everything she stole from him had disappeared.

And when all that was left  
from this death was his name  
he drew words from the coffin  
dropped letters in linens  
went digging through secrets (stored gently away)  
in notebooks containers of paper;  
he found the story that ceaselessly shifted its shape  
its beginning and ending its middle and its name  
from the devil to the deep blue sea  
from tightropes to fishnets to sewing machines  
from cupboards to coffins  
to water milk rum.  
And August became February  
just like that.

## II. Tenderly It Goes

He lets the cardboard ends  
of toilet paper rolls  
pile up, without discarding them.  
This is how he counts the days, as if  
passing in them, or passing between them,  
moves too fast for wastebaskets.  
And he counts the years on an abacus,  
the wooden beads sliding gently  
over, and over, and over,  
until half a century has passed.  
The sadness of time coming and going  
has left its mark  
on his ceilings and floors.  
But even in the blueblackness  
of his days, he pushes into night,  
pulls Rilke from his shelf,  
and sings with him.  
These hours leave their residue,  
the beads of sweat of making love  
on his forehead; he eases them

gently over, and over,  
the lines of his heartsick brow.  
And in the aftermath of perspiring prayers,  
he weeps for things that have gone  
and are going away.

### III. Where the Concrete Falls Out

She knows this number  
by heart, has memorized  
the cracks in the doorway.  
She sings to the weightless  
rumble of the freight  
and counts sheep. Bricks and blinds and lovers  
were always *only* made of numbers.  
She had counted them all:  
light switches ceiling corners sidewalks  
as if highways and houses and her sideways heart  
held measurable burdens.  
But she counted so many hands full, mouths full, for so long  
that the equations of tepid and tenuous days  
began rhyming, and fell into words.  
Some could be written, and some could not.  
It was hard to say which  
made her sadness more complete.  
It was hard to say which  
was heavier, or quieter, or more beautiful.  
When she found pens  
she wrote on doors, walls, billboards, magazines,  
drawing mustaches on women.  
For weeks she couldn't  
see the floor read the signs feel her fingertips.  
It was then that she dreamt  
of a hundred salesmen,  
who sold bibles and bhagavads  
for heroin and wristwatches. And she knew  
that each of these hundred men had been her.  
And the clock treaded much like

the steps of those salesmen,  
and her delicate fingers  
kept strumming, tapping  
to the noise of the numbers that saved  
her life.

There were times when sounds  
were made of different chords, when cracks  
meant other things;  
for a time it was where and how sadness departed,  
rather than where and how it came in.  
She was dreaming memoirs of other men, living the cocaine  
of other dreams, and drumming the marches of death in sleep,  
and sighing “*life*” but she  
had gone.

—Amy Falvey '05

## Daylilies

A paltry almsgiving to start,  
They were a token of his candor.  
Potted buds sealed, keeping mum—  
Puckered and wanting,  
They are too much like him.

Oh, how they upset!  
Quite from the first,  
As they burst from the throat.  
She, imperfect against their whiteness,  
An old, yellowed insult.

There is no break  
From their honesty,  
And their gaping mouths,  
Looming and almost stifling,  
In their sweetness.

Untended and blooms spent,  
Renouncing their futility,  
They will cost her penance.  
And he, shriveling and alien,  
Cannot simply be swept away.

Yet, he is expendable,  
A trifle to be forgotten,  
Like the falling daylilies.  
Those dried, browning,  
Crumpled little fists.

—*Carrie Chesney '02*



## Unspeakable

In his writings he had taken to calling it Penderton's Paraphysical Psychic Pathosis. I guess he liked the alliteration. Fucking egotistical asswipe. Everyone else just calls it brainworm.

When I say "everyone" I'm not really talking about that many people. Maybe four or five people told me the story, and I was sure it was just another spook story—until Rebecca caught it.

It comes on fast. I wasn't there when she caught it, but I know when it happened. Yesterday, I'm talking to her, just watching her fall apart. Sounded like her words were collapsing in her mouth. I didn't even need to be there: she was carrying on a perfectly incomprehensible conversation on her own, peppered with gibberish.

After a few minutes she swooned and collapsed on the floor. I managed to haul her into her bed and left her to sleep it off. At the time, I just figured she got into something nasty the night before, maybe was overtired. Who the hell knows? Rebecca got into some weird shit.

She was looking bad—still babbling quietly to herself even after I got her into bed. So today, I come by, just to check on her and I know it's something else. Right away, soon as I walk into her bedroom, it's obvious. She's dead.

Supposedly he did it by accident. "Exploring the power of words," they said. No one even knows if he actually made the damn thing; he might've just rediscovered it. But words, especially old ones, can do some weird stuff. This old dude I know who hangs out at the bar, he was talking one time about some book that just reading one page would drive you insane.

Point is, Penderton was messing around with old words. Breaking them down to the morphemes and making new ones, toying with the phonetics from all kinds of different languages: especially dead ones. Probably was reading lots of books that drive people mad, too. Story goes, he was looking for a word that was "truly alive." He found it.

During his research, he "borrowed" some crazy-making books from someone. When he "forgot" to return them a hired thug came to break some bones. It was too late for that.

I'm guessing he looked a lot like Rebecca was looking, maybe a little more rotten and smelly. There were little dark spots in her blonde hair and her pillow was stained with blood. As soon as I touched her forehead, it collapsed, her head eaten away from the inside. Bloody greyish sludge oozed out, followed by a few squirming, ink-black worms, each about the size of a baby's finger.

I was totally fucked. Probably.

The worms don't look like much at first, but you can't squish them or anything. Try it. You'll feel a cool stickiness between your fingers. But they just change shape for a moment, then they move with a speed you'd never expect, zipping right up your body and into your mouth, nose, ears, eyes—whatever head-hole they can find.

Story goes that Penderton made the first one here when he said his special little “living word.” Spawned the hungry little fucker right in his mouth. According to the notes and journals the thug found in his place, Penderton actually managed to make it about a week with the thing—supposedly was working on ways to control it, had a few other words that he could use to poke and prod it a bit—but he couldn't stop it from eating completely. It eats when you speak, devouring your words and chewing little tunnels into your brain. Having your grey matter replaced with worm shit makes it a little hard to keep the research on schedule, especially when one effect of the worm's excretions is an urge to say the word. Instead of eggs, I suppose. The urge is extra strong to say it to other people. If no one else is around, I guess you just shout.

Hearing the word was no problem, they said. Penderton said. He tested that, the evil bastard, before he was too far gone to think clearly. It had to be spoken to reproduce. After that you're fucked. Course, you hear some strange word being screamed at you by a madman across the street or, even worse, spit out in the middle of an otherwise reasonable conversation with a friend, and you're not unlikely to say it yourself. Maybe to ask what the hell it means.

There's no cure. Only Penderton had any real chance of coming up with one, but his brain got ate and his notes are gone, probably given to the thug's employer, the insanity-inducing book collector, but if he's still alive he's not talking. Too bad. Those notes make fascinating toilet reading, I'm sure.

So, what do you do when you've had a couple little slugs crawl into your head intent on getting you to talk them up a family and a meal? I started by cutting out my tongue.

—*Brian Peters*

## Epiphany

The summer patio evening  
dusks around the citronella candles  
as conversation lulls, cicadas crescendo,  
katydid saw, and the little ones sag.  
They're loaded into the car,  
back windows down for last kisses,  
when out comes a pudgy fist:  
"For you!" Isobel's thumb and forefinger  
press into my palm something  
too small to see: a speck of lint—  
fluff from her love-worn once-white blankie.  
The rest of her limp loose-knit talisman  
she clutches with her hand,  
smoothing it against her sleepy left cheek.

Silent day: bitter frosting covers even the thinnest twigs,  
chilling their little plant bones.  
Flurries flock squirrels' fur and feathers of puffy birds,  
while snowflake falls on snowflake, blanketing the ground  
with blinding cold. Cicadas sleep beneath.  
It's now our "bleak midwinter"  
with its "snow on snow, snow on snow."  
I muse upon those soulful lines  
from winters "long ago," as well as on my own  
from less-distant sibilant summer nights;  
only now I know the poet's gift,  
the one she finds at last  
to give the holy child.  
A shepherd would have brought a lamb,  
the poet gifts her heart: her song  
pressing word on word,  
word on word smoothed  
into sheets of sweetest sound  
to warm the boy child in the manger.

I'm humbled by the enormity  
of Isobel's gift  
on the hot top side of the year,  
when insects drown out voices  
and no gifts are called for.

—Nancy Hayes

## Lied XV

Ez tuot vil wê, swer herzeliche minnet  
an sô hôher stat, dâ sîn dienst gar versmât.  
Sîn tumber wân vil lützel dar ane gewinnet,  
swer sô vil geklaget, daz ze herzen niht engât.  
Er ist vil wîse, swer sich so wol versinnet,  
daz er dient, dâ man sîn dienst wol enpfât,  
und sich dar lât, da man sîn genâde hât.

Ich bedarf vil wol, daz ich genâde vinde,  
wan ich hab ein wîp ob der sunnen mir erkorn.  
dêst ein not, die ich niemer überwinde,  
sîn gesaehe mich ane, als si tê't hie beborn.  
Si ist mir liep gewest dâ her von kinde,  
wan ich wart dur sî und durch anders niht geborn.  
Ist ir zorn, daz weiz got, so bin ich verlorn.

Wâ ist nu hin mîn liechter morgensterne?  
Wê, waz hilfet mich, daz mîn sunne ist ûf gegân?  
Si ist mir ze hôh und ouch ein teil ze verne  
gegen mittem tage unde wil dâ lange stân.  
Ich gelebte noch den lieben âbent gerne,  
daz si sich her nider mir ze trôste wolte lân,  
wand ich mich hân gar verkapfet ûf ir wân.

—Heinrich von Morungen (late 12<sup>th</sup> century)

## Song XV

He knows much woe who loves wholeheartedly  
    one whose high station disdains his service.  
Foolish hopes win him little  
    whose long lamenting goes not to her heart.  
Much wiser is he who thinks well  
    of serving where his service is well received,  
    of settling where he meets with favor.

I stand in need of winning favor,  
    for I have chosen a lady higher than the sun.  
This choice brings anguish I will never overcome,  
    unless she looks at me as she did before.  
Since childhood I have held her dear,  
    for I was born for her sake alone.  
If she is angry, God knows, I am lost.

Where is now my morning star?  
    Alas, what helps my sun's ascent?  
She stands too high for me,  
    too close to noon, and will remain there long.  
I'd rather see the gentle eventide,  
    when she leans down to comfort me.  
Gazing has cast me in a trance of vain desire.

—*Nancy Hayes, translation*

## Unshoveled Snow

Chuck's pager went off just as he finished replacing a thermocoupler on an old Trane forced air. He packed his tools, completed the invoice, answered all the customer's questions, and then left with a personal check for parts and labor. He called the office and spoke with his boss. His boss told him to make an emergency stop at the home of a Mr. Alessandro Reyes on Jardin Court. Chuck looked at his watch and calculated the overtime.

Chuck parked in front of the house and noticed that Mr. Reyes had not shoveled the sidewalk from the previous week's storm. In fact, judging by the snow's depth, the walk had not been shoveled from any of the early winter storms. He walked to the door in the footsteps of the postman and knocked. He heard coughing before the door opened. A Chaplin-sized elderly man looked at him through thick glasses and invited him inside. Despite the warm house, Mr. Reyes wore a heavy sweater.

"I hear your furnace isn't working," Chuck said.

The old man pointed to Chuck's shirt with his name stenciled above the pocket. "Chuck," Mr. Reyes said in a Spanish accent. He acted like he wanted to shake hands.

Surprised because no customer ever wanted to shake hands, Chuck held out his own.

"No, it works, but—" Mr. Reyes shrugged. "My wife. She wants it looked at. Stay; I will get the key."

Mr. Reyes went into another room, leaving Chuck alone. The furnishings, he noticed, were old and the carpet worn, but otherwise the Reyeses kept a well-ordered home. On the wall in the living room hung a crucifix and a framed picture of President Kennedy. The only signs of active life were the coloring books and crayons on the dining room table. Grandchildren, Chuck thought. Then movement in his periphery made him turn and he saw in the dark hallway a woman looking at him. Once she knew Chuck had seen her, she stepped away and disappeared so quietly that he considered for a moment that he must have imagined her. A clock somewhere in the house ticked loud enough to be heard.

Chuck heard Mr. Reyes cough and say, "The key, Maria. ¿Dónde está?" A response followed, but Chuck could not hear the words. Mr. Reyes said, "Bueno, bueno. Gracias."

Mr. Reyes returned holding his sweater against his neck as if he were cold. "Everything okay?" Chuck asked.

"Sí," he shrugged. "Yes. Everything is fine."

Chuck followed Mr. Reyes into the kitchen and stood to the side while he unlocked the basement door, flipped the light switch, and said, without having to, “Come, it is below.”

Since graduating from vocational school, Chuck had descended into many basements in the modest homes built long ago in the unincorporated part of Adams County. He knew their smell, where the furnace and hot water tank would be, and who had manufactured them (Lennox 80,000 BTU forced-air furnaces and A.O. Smith 40-gallon water heaters). Chuck knew that some basements were clean and organized but that most were not. He knew that some families in need of space had made dens with pressed wood paneling and drop ceilings, and he knew that snow melt and spring rains made carpeting unwise. He knew a lot about basements, but he knew no one who locked theirs.

Chuck suspected that Mr. Reyes’s basement would be tidy like his upstairs, and he was right.

“There, Chuck,” Mr. Reyes said, pointing towards the back wall. He remained to watch while Chuck tested the draft, the burn cycle, and the heat exchanger and checked for gas leaks and carbon monoxide. Chuck heard voices upstairs and realized that someone besides the man’s wife was in the house.

“You have company,” Chuck said, pointing his wrench at the ceiling.

Mr. Reyes tightened his sweater around his neck. “My wife,” he said. “And my son.”

“Your son? I didn’t hear anyone come in.”

Mr. Reyes removed a rag from his pocket and coughed into it. In a soft voice he said, “He lives with us.”

Remembering the coloring books, Chuck said, “He must be young.” Mr. Reyes looked down at his shoes and shrugged. “Not so young.” Fifteen minutes later Chuck finished inspecting the furnace and began putting away his tools.

“So?” Mr. Reyes asked, anxious to learn what Chuck had found. “Nothing’s wrong,” Chuck said. “It’s an old furnace, but there’s no leaks. The heat exchanger is sound, the draft strong. It’s not efficient, but it’s not worth replacing either. My boss would love to sell you a new one, but right now there’s no reason to.”

Mr. Reyes listened without expression, as if good news and bad carried the same value. Chuck thought maybe he had not understood. “With old furnaces you got to pay attention to the heat exchanger. If it cracks, you’ll get carbon monoxide leaking into the house. That’s bad. Last year a man died not far from here.”

Mr. Reyes shook his head as if recalling the incident and clutched his sweater around his neck. “Sí, yes. I remember.”

“Same with the flue here.” Chuck rapped his knuckles on the duct leading from the furnace. “You see where I re-taped the seams? This duct gets plugged or disconnected, it’s pretty much over for you.” Mr. Reyes looked confused. “If that happens, the house fills with carbon monoxide. You won’t know it, you won’t smell a thing, and you’ll fall asleep and never wake up.”

The old man looked away, “Like that man.”

“But that’s not going to happen,” Chuck said. “You might want to get a CO alarm. I can sell you one now, but you can get one for half the price at Logan’s.”

Mr. Reyes nodded and repeated as if thinking out loud. “Logan’s.”

Chuck followed him upstairs to the kitchen and waited as he locked the door. He was done for the day, so when Mr. Reyes offered him coffee he said, “Sure, with a little milk if you have it.” He sat at the kitchen table and worked on the invoice while Mr. Reyes poured the coffee. A plastic sheet covered the floral-patterned table cloth. Chuck noticed a half-dozen pill containers beside the vase holding a fake bouquet. In the other room he heard Mrs. Reyes’s soft Spanish and a bathtub filling with water.

Mr. Reyes placed the coffee cup and a can of evaporated milk beside Chuck. Chuck showed him the bill. “I don’t like having to charge you anything,” Chuck said. “But my boss hates to have me return with nothing to show for it.”

Mr. Reyes smiled and said, “Sugar?”

“Milk’s fine,” he answered, pouring in several drops from the can.

Mr. Reyes looked at the bill. His shoulders make a tiny shrug as if in an instant he had calculated the burden and how the money could have been otherwise spent.

“I don’t need it today,” Chuck said. “End of the month is fine.” In truth, the boss always wanted the money in hand before the technician left the job. The boss also knew not everyone had it to give.



Chuck heard Mrs. Reyes singing a child's song from the other room, and this time he could hear a reply of sorts, a babble more than words.

"Your son?" Chuck said.

"Our son." When Chuck looked confused, he said, "He is a man now, but he is like a child."

"He's retarded?" Chuck said.

He nodded. "We care for him. His bath. His food. We must watch him all the time."

"Does he go to a special program?"

Mr. Reyes removed his scratched glasses and rubbed his eyes. "He stays here, with us. We are his parents."

"My cousin's retarded," Chuck said. "A Down's kid about my age. He lives in Ohio." Mr. Reyes poured himself coffee. The water stopped running in the other room and Chuck heard the son's babbling more clearly. "He lives in a group home." When Mr. Reyes showed no interest, Chuck said, "What's wrong with him?"

Mr. Reyes blew across his coffee. "Fever. Very bad fever. He was a baby." He coughed in his handkerchief and pulled his sweater tight. "We went very late to the doctor."

"Joey, that's my cousin, he likes where he's living. They do things, go places. Every birthday's a reason to party. He has friends. The counselors make him do dishes and keep his room clean."

Mr. Reyes sat across the table holding his coffee in both hands. "We are his parents," he said at last. "We care for him."

Chuck stirred more milk into his coffee and looked out the kitchen window into the back yard. An old Chevy rested in the driveway, covered with snow. Chuck glanced at the pills: Lisinopril, Prandin, Amoxicillin, Dilantin, Dogoxin, and another he could not pronounce.

"My son makes music with them. Like maracas." Mr. Reyes shook his hand in pantomime. He poured Chuck more coffee without asking if he wanted any, and poured more for himself. Chuck reached for the evaporated milk.

"A woman stopped by here many years ago," Mr. Reyes said. "Told us of where Beto could go. A good place, she called it, where he would be helped. So we bring Beto." He shook his head and sipped from his cup. "My wife, she cried at what she saw. 'We can do better,' she said, so we never went back. Now Beto is a man and we care for him."

Mr. Reyes showed the young man, Chuck, to the door after Chuck had insisted he could drink no more coffee. The repairman shook hands with Mr. Reyes as he left, which Mr. Reyes appreciated.

He sat on the couch and straightened the cloth covering the worn armrest. In the west, the sun went behind the mountains, darkening the front room. He thought about turning on the light but felt too tired to get up. He heard his wife help Beto on with his clothes. He pictured Beto wearing his pajamas, the ones stamped with action heroes as in the movie Beto liked.

“The furnace is fine,” Mr. Reyes said to his wife. “He found no problems.”

“Beto complains about it being too cold,” she said.

“We must keep the furnace down, remember. The cost.”

Maria Reyes joined her husband on the couch. She was a large woman now, not the tiny girl with thick beautiful hair Alessandro had married long ago. She’d been seventeen, he twenty-one. Their other children were now gone. Tomas lived in the city and worked for the Parks Department. Katrina had two sons and a husband who replaced windows. Willie, their youngest, had moved to California and never wrote. Then there was Beto, their oldest.

“The furnace is safe,” Mr. Reyes said. “That is what the young man said.”

“I heard you talking. You kept him a long time, Alessandro. You liked him.”

Mr. Reyes removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. He had enjoyed talking with the young man. “We visited. He answered my questions. He listened.”

“Nothing wrong with the furnace—why did he give us a bill?”

“His time, Maria. I told you it would not be free. He did not make me pay now.”

“We need Beto’s medicine. And he is not well. We should take him to the clinic.”

Mr. Reyes nodded. “Chuck, that was the man’s name, said his cousin is like our son. He lives in a home.”

Mrs. Reyes crossed her arms. “We saw a home—and a school.” “We could have looked at others.”

“What kind of parents would we be, Alessandro?” We know what is best.”

“Our son is a man now, and we are—” Mr. Reyes paused. “What will become—”

“Hush, Alessandro.” She took her husband’s head in her arms and held him. “Things work out. They always have.”

That night after Beto was asleep and Johnny Carson had said goodnight to his last guest, Alessandro and Maria Reyes went to bed. Mr. Reyes set the thermostat to fifty degrees, then made sure his son still had his blankets around him. He kissed Beto on the forehead and brushed his hair to the side, noting how his son’s hair had receded just like his had at the same age. He knew Beto would need to be shaved in the morning.

Maria had her reading lamp off and had turned so that her back was to him. He listened to her breathing and knew by its depth and length that she was asleep. He rubbed hand lotion onto his feet and turned off his own lamp before getting under the cold sheets.

That night Mr. Reyes could not sleep. He got up and looked in on his son, straightening the blankets to cover him. He found the key and unlocked the basement door. On the automotive shelf he found a rag he had once used to polish his car. The cloth still smelled of wax. Guided by the orange glow from the pilot light, he went to the old furnace and felt the duct going from it. The flue, Chuck had called it. He had done a nice job of taping the seams, Mr. Reyes thought.

Later, Maria was awakened by her husband’s return to bed. She rolled over. “Is everything okay?” she said. “I heard you wash your hands.”

“Yes, everything is fine.”

“Beto?”

“Asleep. The blankets are tight.”

“I hear the furnace running,” she said. “You turned it up? That is not like you.”

“Beto felt cold. I thought we should have more heat.”

“You go downstairs? I heard something downstairs.”

“I checked the furnace. The young man said to check it.”

“You always look out for us,” she said. “I always feel safe.” They faced each other and he stroked her hair that was no longer thick or so black, remembering her at seventeen.

“We will be okay, Maria. Everything will be okay.”

“Have I not always said so?”

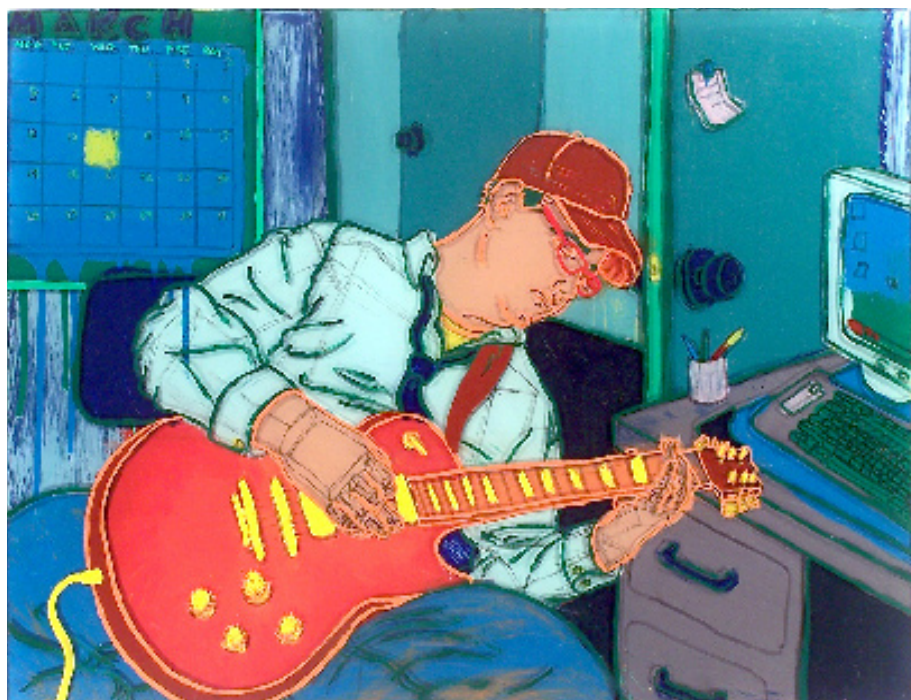
“Sí, you have. Now, let us go back to sleep.”

—James O’Gorman



**Tien Chang**  
*Tension*

2007, oil on canvas, 16 inches x 20 inches



**Eric Reiter '07**  
*Another Life*

2007, enamel oil on plexiglass, 18 inches x 24 inches



**Carl Herzig**  
*Jaya Sri Radhe*

2007, digital photography



**Carl Herzig**  
*Vraja-vasi Laughter*

2008, digital photography



**Katie Seiz**  
*Brides of Our Own Frankenstein? #3*

2007, acrylic, spray paint and oil on canvas, 30 inches x 24 inches





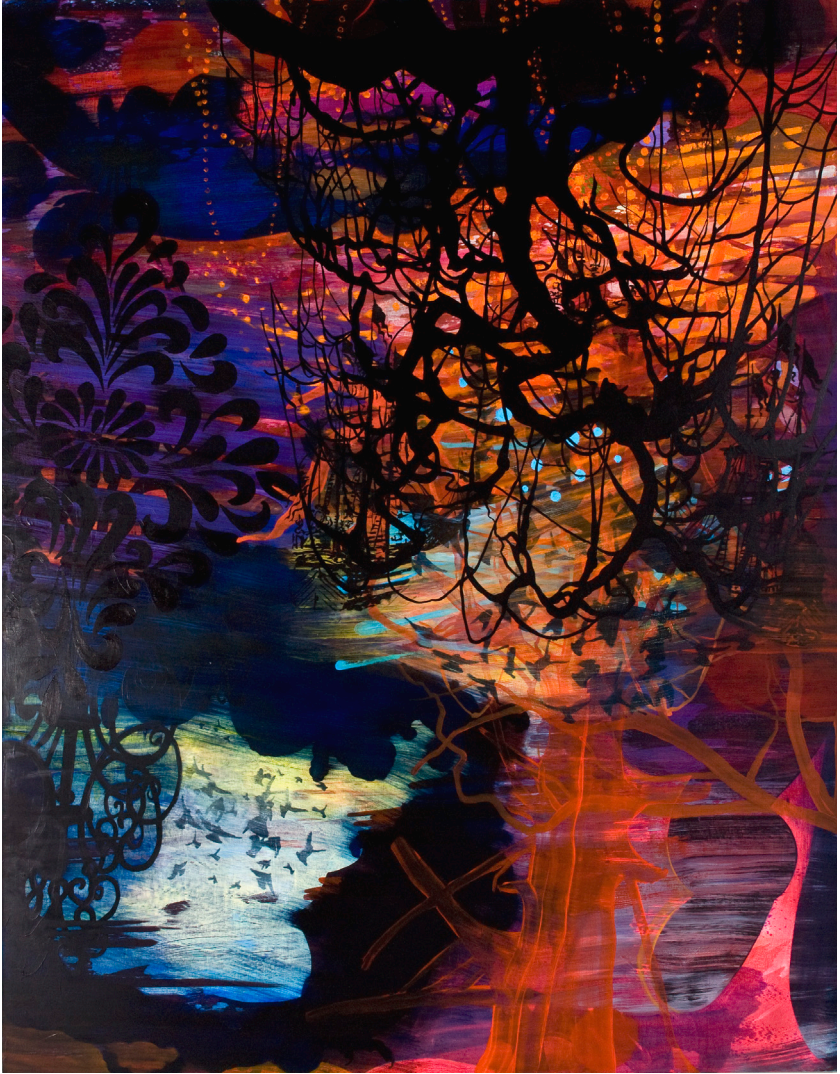
**Grant Legan**  
*SplAsh*

2006, digital photography



**Kristin Quinn**  
*Calliope Suite*

2007, oil on canvas, 72 inches x 60 inches



**Kristin Quinn**  
*Vertical Migration*

2007, oil on canvas, 72 inches x 60 inches



**Kathryn Anderson**

*Herstoryhistory: Volume II - Dada #2*

2008, digital photo-collage illustration



**Kathryn Anderson**  
*Black and Blue Mirror*

2008, digital photo-collage illustration



**Eric Tuftee '07**  
*Two Up, One Down*

2007, oil on masonite, 72 inches x 36 inches



Margaret O'Reilly '07  
*Ethical Insight*

2008, mixed media on canvas, 12 inches x 9 inches



Steve Banks  
*Carnival*

2006-07, oil on canvas, 66 inches x 44 inches



**Andrew Moeller '05**  
*Delicate Realm*

2008, acrylic, transfer on paper, 11.25 inches x 14 inches



Leslie Bell '72  
*Four Strong Winds*

2007, oil on canvas, 48 inches x 55 inches



**Leslie Bell '72**  
*Little Artist and Their Models*

2007, oil on canvas, 48 inches x 55 inches



p1, k1

clink clink  
click clack crr-shink  
swivel - slip - yarn over  
retreat - slip - pull  
seed two rows  
garter nine  
eye,  
then try  
to replicate:  
technique  
tension  
how she makes the needles  
dance  
drop a stitch—  
start over  
yarn's too taut—  
try again  
*Careful, now, watch my hands.*  
cast-on  
begin  
*Be patient.*  
joints scream  
wrists ache  
nearby, she kitchenettes with ease  
how long before my hands  
are sheer like tissue paper  
until my hands  
are spry like hers

—Leah Christensen

## Lindsay Park

With cool fire in his gray eyes  
he walks to the edge of the lamp  
and dusts off a late volume

from the Book of Shadows.  
He's missing dinner, his mother  
is weaving smoke in the kitchen:

they say this has diminished his brows.  
Dogfish rise from the Mississippi,  
watched as a child from a hill

layered with the arc of saddle swings.  
Arrowheads encountered him there,  
and pine trees with tendrils of sap

collected dust in bitter sweetness  
that attaches to his skin forever.  
It's 1960, Kennedy is still alive

in an open motorcade on River Drive,  
surviving Iowa longer than Buddy Holly  
and the Big Bopper. A boy's mind

is calmed that autumn, breathing in  
rows of milkweeds, fetching baseballs  
and Things from another world.

It would take over twenty years  
for the riverboats to dock at the levee,  
gamblers enter town triumphant.

There would be many heroes, all  
riding somewhere closer, closing in  
on spills from the rusted factories,

fathers spreading waters to fountains  
that speak freely, and rains widen  
the sidewalks and whistles sharpen

memories everywhere they travel:  
wherever they go the river empties  
into the scared bodies of necessity.

—*Chuck Blair '76*

## The Ones Like a Sea in the Woods

. . . being three arguments from the Witch's verses . . .

*The unbearable loss is not really in itself unbearable;  
what we cannot bear is that in being stripped of an  
external object we stand denuded and see the intolerable  
abyss of the self yawn at our feet.*

—Sören Kierkegaard

### Round 1: The Prince

I only dreamed of her my true love in those  
mottled larks of gray as she slept entombed  
with the permafrost, her sweet voice singing  
from a glass coffin beneath the restless fields—

her veins had leaked away and grown down  
among the roots tugging on her grave. I awoke  
with gasps of forged light and wandered chambers  
echoing, my hands spread before me and damned

at first light like moats enshrined in deepest fog.  
I tried the fool to shave with a dagger, footprints  
returning, overlapped in sands - God help me -  
washed up in golden drifts on the parlor mirror.

After her burial I stood in the plaza at a fairies' table  
preparing to storm statues on guard at hell's gate.  
We made love here one dusk, her fingers still part  
of my back, grasping endlessly, working the bells

like a heart, her ample locks clasped to my lips.  
She took my palms and placed them with care  
on the soft underside of her flesh, and spoke of  
the twins she would suckle through our nights.

Even in the vastness of a late hour the blind  
washer woman known as the Witch in shrewd  
disguise sat tight upon a speckled stone bench  
in contemplation of my Father's prized pigeons.

From the coppice I leaned and spied her dispensing  
frail bits of silver light like seeds out of sackcloth  
half-eaten by grease and use, her knotted fingers



more eager to please than sin again. Looking up

she sneezed into a bright smudge of moonlight  
and swept away piles of cloud that were never there.  
Finally alone, a spell cast, delivering to such light  
unbearable loss - I, tomorrow's king, fought back

pigeon hordes and stumbled over a jester's reason,  
islands of dried blood cast from the scarred wrists,  
the ascent once again along beauty's unbound plaits.  
Her sweet voice still singing down to my far earth.

## Round 2: Rapunzel

"And at his feet her denuded eyes yawned like  
red apples plucked [sic] from a sow's roast."  
And you think madness bled from the legs of her  
desk where she wrote her spells, but I tell you

it pours from her bitter soul with a splendid hiss  
of lightning reaching for the oak's proud branch.  
There is no elegy for that soul, taken from lies  
and planted in a gnome's grave on a laurel of hair.

Happiness is the spit of our passion, the bone  
in a lair. But I digress from the pull and the fall  
of our last hours. Tempers are my duration and  
the creak of my bed always fit your ear like a tick.

And now my Prince, wake to the puppet show  
and the children visiting without their rhymes.  
The distances between us once rested here,  
and what came old to the eye gave to the wolf.  
When I tell you this, I'm reading from her pages  
spared from fire's failed visions and a call to arms.  
See, prisoners coming home from the old war  
with kept hats move along my outer wall and gaze.

Their ghosts unwashed and gathering silhouettes  
to wipe torn hearts - infinity still knows death  
and wraps her tight, and only now breaks ranks.

“Rapunzel! Rapunzel! Let down your hair!”

I could scarcely bear it, the mad growth spilling  
like salt - the words remaindered in garden air,  
when all I wanted were drops of candle wax to keep  
me whole and the bell's toll to bridge my abyss.

Don't take my words to heart. Love a proof, a needful  
wing, light for his lamp and more than a spell's spin.  
A bad haircut is not ruinous in winter's pall, and when  
I say my aura is rising, rest assured I keep it pinned.

### Round 3: The Witch

The Two were the brook turning in the woods  
weightless and beautiful and innumerable  
applied to the flow of their clasped hands  
with the ease of time - the lifelines growing

so faded at the crawl of horizon's fence -  
and here where the rivers have now fallen  
into the stronghold of a barren sea  
you arrive as far regions of the soul . . .

Wherever they are they will find you, poet  
in what passes for the garden's green eye  
in what passes for the strangeness of the moon  
in what comes to a stop and still passes

they will find you and you led them begging  
to the mirror the abyss the proximate fall . . .  
Fair sisters, just remember the pool of my eye  
as surmised in the discovery of paradise.

—Chuck Blair '76

## Tango

She danced the tango, and  
tried to teach me—  
she a lady from the land of pampas and  
broad beaches where lovers gathered—  
tried to teach me, heavy-footed,  
to dip and whirl, serious and unsmiling,  
and to surrender to the passion of the dance.

The bandoneon began—a sigh,  
of noncommittal conversation,  
felt deep within the stomach—  
then its tones came pleading,  
now groaning, and at last beseeching,  
as the music traveled to the toes  
and the toes became sure-footed and defiant.

Those soft brown eyes became stilettos,  
aimed murderously at my heart,  
and never missing their intended target.

¡Ay Dios, que pena!

She gripped me tighter than I gripped her,  
and Carlos Gardel, dead these decades, still wove  
his mesmerizing spell, through scratchy disks that  
even then passed on the majesty, the magic, of his voice.

Then seated at the window, with the city lights  
concealing mysteries in the valley far below,  
we sipped the wine, trying to come calm,  
while yet tied in the bonds of passion, of the music,  
that we (I think the both of us) could not cut free.

¡Ay Dios, que pena!

Now all are gone—the dancers dip and whirl  
to the music of the cosmos, to the applause  
of a billion stars and to the approval of Gardel,  
who watches with a steady eye, now smiling  
at what his music, what his magic, finally wrought.

¡Ay Dios, que pena!

—*Ralph G. Smith '47*

## Siblings Invincible

Hemlock,  
A shady creek  
Not too far from the farm  
We'd go get sand for our sand box  
And take turns jumping off rocks into murk  
We never got hurt, though swimming  
Wasn't allowed - not safe.  
We weren't scared of  
Hemlock.

—*Amelia Rapp*

## Six and two-thirds

*for W.W.*

There was a time—when I walked.

Barefoot, I walked on the crooked sidewalks  
around my grandmama's house,  
a singsong sight, knocking about,  
barely carrying a melody.

One hand placed in my pocket, I jumbled seven jacks  
and three chocolate-covered ants.  
A best-friend necklace that had turned my flesh green  
but was nevertheless still there,  
wound between my fingers.

Walking down the alley, occasionally glancing up  
to look through the trees,  
I spotted a papa squirrel. He began talking to me,  
and I, translating his words, made an attempt to understand.  
I responded in taps of my tongue against the roof of my mouth.  
He followed, but his branch went only so far.

And I continued, walking—  
Unlocked the neighbor girl's gate and went down into a ravine.  
There was a wooden swing suspended from an old oak tree,  
washed white and splintered  
from years of everyday use.  
I would go up/down, up/down, spintwistaround as fast as I could,  
my toes catching on the lowest-hanging leaves,  
curling around, and picking them off—swinging,  
inhaling, until my stomach refused anymore pressure.  
And what seemed like minutes to me had passed.

I looked up.  
The dark of the night was hitting the peak of the last house  
on the street, and I knew it was time to go back.

And I walked—  
Dragged my feet back up the hill, drawing lines

          down and around and into the house,  
          my face dripping dirt and my knees pinched in.  
I leaned my head against the kitchen counter and looked up.  
My grandmama knelt over me, scraping off the afternoon  
          with a wet washcloth—the remains of cherries  
          that had bled all over my face and my soil-smearred lips.

The pleasures half hours could hold—when I walked.

—*Sarah Gless*

## Der Erlkönig

Wer reitet so spät durch Nacht und Wind?  
Es ist der Vater mit seinem Kind;  
Er hat den Knaben wohl in dem Arm,  
Er faßt ihn sicher, er hält ihn warm.

«Mein Sohn, was birgst du so bang dein Gesicht?»  
Siehst, Vater, du den Erlkönig nicht?  
Den Erlenkönig mit Kron und Schweif?  
«Mein Sohn, es ist ein Nebelstreif.»

«Du liebes Kind, komm, geh mit mir!  
Gar schöne Spiele spiel' ich mit dir;  
Manch bunte Blumen sind an dem Strand,  
Meine Mutter hat manch gülden Gewand.»

Mein Vater, mein Vater, und hörest du nicht,  
Was Erlenkönig mir leise verspricht?  
«Sei ruhig, bleibe ruhig, mein Kind;  
In dürren Blättern säuselt der Wind.»

«Willst, feiner Knabe, du mit mir gehn?  
Meine Töchter sollen dich warten schön;  
Meine Töchter führen den nächtlichen Reihn,  
Und wiegen und tanzen und singen dich ein.»

Mein Vater, mein Vater, und siehst du nicht dort  
Erlkönigs Töchter am düstern Ort? –  
«Mein Sohn, mein Sohn, ich seh es genau:  
Es scheinen die alten Weiden so grau.»

«Ich liebe dich, mich reizt deine schöne Gestalt;  
Und bist du nicht willig, so brauch ich Gewalt.»  
Mein Vater, mein Vater, jetzt faßt er mich an!  
Erlkönig hat mir ein Leids getan! –

Dem Vater grauset, er reitet geschwind,  
Er hält in Armen das ächzende Kind,  
Erreicht den Hof mit Mühe und Not;  
In seinen Armen das Kind war tot.

–von Johann Wolfgang von Goethe



## The Erl-king

Who rides so late through the night so wild?  
A father goes there, with his tender child.  
He has the child, in his strong arm;  
He holds him sure, he keeps him warm.

“My son, your face is hidden in fear.”  
Father, oh see, the Erl-king comes near.  
The Erl-king, wearing long robe and crown.  
“My son, it’s only the fog drifting down.”

“Oh dearest child, come, we’ll go away,  
And wonderful games we two will play.  
We’ll see the bright flowers which grow on the shore,  
Put on the gold robes that my mother wore.”

My Father, my father, oh why can’t you hear?  
The Erl-king makes promises, speaks in my ear.  
“My child, don’t worry, don’t make any sound;  
It’s just the dry leaves blowing around.”

“Don’t you want to go with me, my child so fine?  
You’ll be served ev’ry day by daughters of mine.  
Sweet nights of dancing, my daughters will keep  
With rocking and singing they’ll lull you to sleep.”

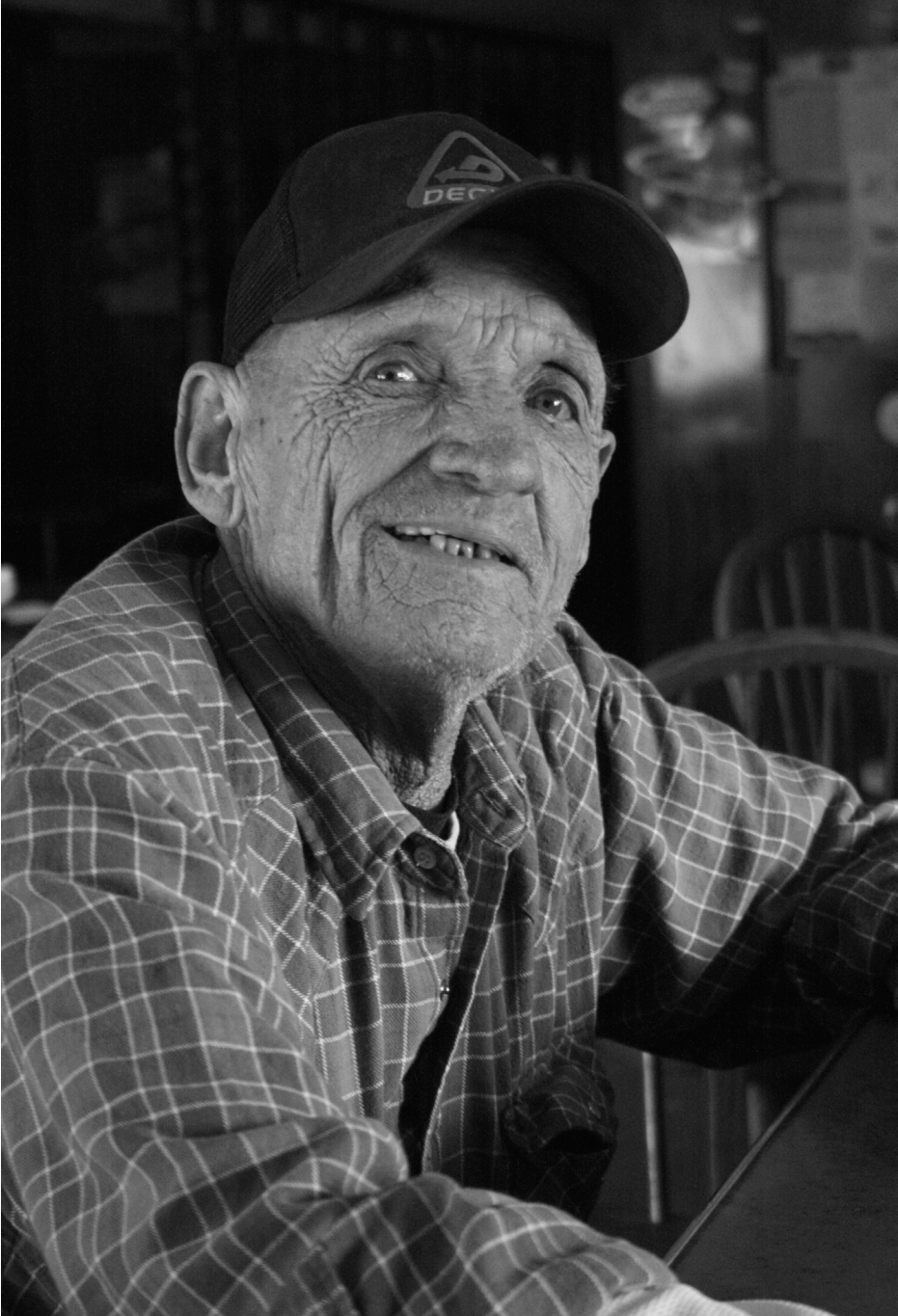
My father, my father, oh see as we race  
The Erl-king’s daughters in ev’ry dark place –  
“My son, my son, it’s clearly I see  
The gray of the bark of an old willow tree.”

“Your charm, your form I find so alluring,  
I will make you come if you still prove unwilling.”  
My father, my father, his hand grasps my arm!  
The Erl-king, he surely intends me great harm.

The father rides swiftly with shudder and groan;  
From the child in his arms he hears a low moan.  
With a last great effort he’s in the farmstead.  
But, still in his arms, the child was dead.

–R. M. Dienesch, translation









## Birth of a Rebel

Their coming was not unexpected. For days we had heard the shelling and shooting creeping ever closer from across the undulating fields and through the woods. Father bid us gather the hogs and cows into the barnyard before he took the only rifle and left. He never came back, and it was a good thing for the rest of us that I disobeyed him, otherwise, after it was all over we'd have starved.

For they did come, and they stayed, and they ate everything they could find. The initial brutality of their assault was immediate and brief. Mother was beaten, Sister was raped, and I was made to watch. There were only three of them that stayed. The rest moved on. We heard the faint rumors that this was going on all over the county—occupying soldiers settling into homes, killing or conscripting the men and boys old enough, and, well, no need to repeat myself.

I guess, in retrospect, that this was not as casual as it seemed at the time, but something of a strategy. The other army had either been defeated or fled—I wouldn't know and never did care: the war was not about us or for us until it bashed in our door and put its muddy boots up on Mother's polished dinner table.

Like I said, they stayed. They ate food that we'd need to get us through the coming winter. They made us butcher chickens that we needed for their eggs. They went through the commodities in the cellar like horses go through oats. They left the milch cow only because they liked fresh cream with the jams they took from our pantry. They took and took and took till there was nothing left. I think that was their strategy.

But they weren't bad men. I know that sounds funny to say, but it is true. They had names, they had families, they had stories. I couldn't make much out of all this, since I didn't speak their language very well, but I could see the nostalgia and longing in their eyes as they sat at the fire, smoked, and spoke quietly, or sang their songs. See? They sang: that proves they were human beings.

The brutality, like I was saying, was brief, unless you count the slow draining of our foodstuffs. It wasn't that they suddenly regretted their violence but that they tired of it. Or maybe it was just part of their orders, which, once carried out, simply were checked off—finished. For them, at least. After that they were just big, hungry, bossy men who expected us to be as resigned to our circumstances as they were to theirs.

We gave them names—not the names they used for one another, though. First of all, we couldn't really pronounce them; secondly, it

would have been dangerous to be heard talking about them since they were as suspicious of our foreignness as we of theirs. Besides, to use their real names would have been too intimate, too forgiving.

Even so, the names we gave them weren't mean or crude—not like the names Sister and I would make up for some of the kids at school who were fat or lazy or dumb and so deserved such epithets as Cow Eye, Leaky Bucket, or Carp Grass. No, we chose biblical names at random with no secret or mysterious associations. Our soldiers—and after a time, we came to see them as Our Soldiers, comparing them to other families' and even taking a certain pride in the superiority of ours—they were Tobias, Jonah, and Ezra.

These three settled comfortably into our house—we were removed to the loft of the barn and given a few of our own things that they couldn't use. This was, of course, stifling in the summer and bone chilling as the winter came on, but we were allowed to sit in the shade of the yard trees and then were given extra quilts when they saw we needed them. This was better, we heard, than how a lot of others were treated, or maybe those others were just exaggerating their suffering.

Truth is, it wasn't that bad. I often spend days and nights outside anyway so it didn't much bother me. And once I saw the way Our Soldiers were increasingly solicitous after Sister and Mother, I was pretty comfortable. Since we couldn't bear to hear them use our real names, we made up names for ourselves and they spoke them with a tenderness that was comical, since we'd told them we are to be called by phrases they didn't understand. Mother was "My Mother is Ashamed of Me", Sister was "Women are Stronger", and I elected to be called "Not Your Friend".

But it was difficult not to become their friend. I was twelve and had no brothers, and now Father was gone. And the men did seem to like us. I read once that slaves often become fond of their masters, loyal even. I could see that. Sure, we were property to be disposed of, but we developed a kind of pride in them and looked for signs of their superiority over the soldiers of other families in the neighborhood.

Ezra was smart and sentimental. He was the one who found our stash of books and took to learning our language. He used the Bible, since he knew what he expected to read and so could make it out—besides, our languages weren't all that different. After a time he caught on to what we'd told them we were named, but never told the others. With a twinkle in his eye, he would jokingly call Mother "My Mother Loves Me" or call me "Your Friend." Sister's name he never did change

one bit, and spoke it with a kind of deference, even reverence. I think he liked her.

When she got really sick late in the fall, it was Ezra who saved her life. It was after the hard frost, and the barn just wasn't warm enough, what with most of the livestock we'd had around already slaughtered. Ezra made the other two help him line the walls with hay for insulation, then, when Sister's fever got worse, he snapped a bunch of orders to the other two—he was the leader—to make some kind of stove for us while he went off.

He returned the next day with a military doctor in tow. When the medic saw that he had been dragged across the frozen mud roads to treat a local girl, he balked and complained, but Ezra yelled and shook him so violently that the man finally relented. He was sparing with his medicines and none too gentle in his examination, but the fact is, she got better and she wouldn't have had it not been for Ezra.

Jonah was the grumpy one. I could tell that he really hated being here, and for a long time he took it out on us, especially me. He'd punch or swat or slap or kick me whenever I got too close to him. He complained a lot and found fault with everything. Then one day Mother accidentally caught him crying over an old letter he'd taken out of his pocket. It was obvious that the letter meant a lot to him and that it contained the sadness that Jonah translated into bitterness. After that, Mother insisted that we treat him with particular gentleness. She found some sweetener for his tea, and extra stuffing for his mattress. She mended his torn clothes and frayed socks.

At first these gestures just made him even more angry and he would spit out the tea, or rip out the straw. After a time, he pretended not to notice that he was being given special treatment. In the mean time, the swats and punches softened into a bit of a game, like a big brother would treat a kid brother. Toward the end, he started to make slight and easily denied gestures of gratitude: a smile, say, or a nod of the head. His surliness waned and he seemed to settle into a gentle, self-indulgent pity.

What, I often wondered, was in that letter? Was it news of a death? Was it a girlfriend or wife breaking off with him? Was it the judgment of a father or the love of his mother? I eventually had the chance to find out, but when the moment came, I decided to allow Jonah to keep to himself whatever it was that had made him what he was.

Tobias was strong and full of courage. Whenever orders came for the soldiers to gather for a fight, he was always the first to grab his



weapons, set his face grimly, and stride long-stepped down the lane, leaving the other two to scamper after him. He was, I confess, my favorite. He took a liking to me, and once I let him, he would tussle my hair, grip a firm hand on my skinny shoulder, and show me how to do my chores better—more efficiently and with less work.

To keep himself occupied, he set up a kind of gymnasium in the unused part of the barn. He did pull-ups, chin-ups and push-ups and made a set of dead weights out of old tractor parts. Watching him from the corner, I was motioned over and he showed me how to do the lifting without getting hurt. He spotted me and let me spot him. Once he got in trouble: he was showing off and had put too much weight on his bar, and by about the second or third time it was too much and started to settle back onto his chest. I think it might have killed him, but I was there and grabbed it. It wasn't much, but my help was enough for him to lift it off his body. For a while he huffed and puffed, then made a big deal out of me helping him.

After that he took me on his hunting forages. I was like a dog, sent to flush up the birds, since, of course, I never had a gun. He showed me how to gut deer, and since we couldn't store it, Mother, Sister, and I even got to eat some of the meat. I still prefer beef and pork, but in those days it tasted pretty good. He even started to teach me how to fire a gun—not with real ammo. of course, but he showed me how to stand with pistol or rifle, how to breathe, how to sight, how to hold the weapon and line up my body.

He would show off with his own marksmanship; he was amazing. We scrounged up all sorts of things to use for targets and set them at different paces away. He was quick and sure . . . stepping laterally to his targets, pausing, aiming, firing, and stepping to the next with such precision, such confidence, such bravado. My breath caught in my throat and my eyes watered.

One day, us hoping that maybe the last snows were over, Tobias and I were gathering the scraps and refuse we used for targets. I set them on fence posts, propped them up, or nailed them to trees. We rubbed and oiled the weapons, and they were laid out on a rag in the dry grass. We put the guns together—he'd taken to timing me to see how quickly and accurately I could do so, and he'd mixed up bits from different guns to make it more difficult, but I was very fast. He handed me a pistol and had me demonstrate the right stance, he reminded me of proper breathing by putting his hand on my thin chest and applying rhythmic

pressure to illustrate the proper breathing: hold, hold, hold—if you don't fire, relax- breathe, breathe, then hold, hold—fire.

Ezra was reading and dozing on the porch, for the day was the warmest we'd seen in months. Mother was hanging their laundry on a rope, and Sister was rummaging through the cellar looking for the last of the potatoes and parsnips and apples, cutting out the rotten bits with a stub of a paring knife. Jonah was off someplace and not expected till dinner. I remember it was a day of great promise for the coming spring, but just a perfectly normal day, everyone having slipped into very comfortable and even unquestioned rolls. It was as if we were all refugees cooperating for everyone's benefit.

Tobias was full of pride at how quickly I'd assembled his weapons and was obviously pleased with my military bearing and posturing, for I'd taken to mimic him and was desperate to be soldierly—especially to be like Tobias. Then Tobias knelt down in front of me, me holding his pistol properly at rest, straight armed, pointed away and down. He pulled out a single bullet all shiny and brass and showed it to me. He was smiling and said something to the effect that this was a singular day—that I had graduated or something—and he handed me the bullet and pointed at the first target, an old coffee mug that had belonged to Father, hanging closest to us on a nail.

Kneeling beside me, I could feel his delight in me, and I was proud and full of awe. I held the bullet for a long time, rolling it in my fingers for its smoothness, coolness, and brightness. It was beautiful. With near expert smoothness, I popped open the chamber and slipped the bullet into place. A definitive and satisfying click told me that all was now ready. I didn't look at him, but I could feel Tobias, still kneeling beside me, keen eye ready to criticize the smallest mistake but sure I wouldn't miss.

I took a spread-leg stance, hips and shoulders perpendicular to the fence line. I raised the pistol a full arm's length in front of me and, despite its weight, held it straight. I took aim with both eyes open and saw very clearly the chipped enamel of Father's mug clinking against the post in the gentle breeze. I took a breath, a second breath, then held, held, then without the slightest hesitation, swung the pistol around and shot into the face of Tobias.

It was that day I realized I could do anything.

—*Bud Grant '80*

## Nero, My Dog, to Thee

I suppose it was only natural that Alice would go crazy over a dog like that. Alice goes crazy over anything that is a bit strange. When someone tells her that a couple of planets that I have never heard of are in line she will climb some mountain in the moonlight because there is a convergence of cosmic forces there, whatever that is supposed to mean. If she has a problem, like she's getting too fat again or something, she gets out a bunch of Chinese coins and tosses them around to consult the I Ching, and talks about significant hexagrams. Before I met Alice I thought "I Ching" was just a Mexican obscenity.

Lately Alice has been into "channeling," which is supposed to be talking to your dead ancestors, or your previous self in another life, or something like that. It's sort of like the old seances and Ouija boards, except that they don't float tables in the air like they used to.

Anyway, we were just sitting there in the living room. At least I was sitting, watching TV. Alice was on the floor making a real effort to get herself into the lotus position, which she had been trying to do for the last two weeks but she couldn't because she was in one of her fat periods. It was nighttime, so we didn't know what was out there when this scratching came. It was very insistent, not hesitant at all. It was scratching with real authority, so we knew it wasn't the cat. I got up and opened the door a crack, and there he was, this smallish, half-shaggy dark-brown mutt, and he was standing there *smiling!* I know it's hard to believe, because there aren't many dogs around who smile, but he knew how, and it wasn't that fake stuff like they show in the movies. He just pulled back his jowls and showed his teeth and wagged his tail as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Well, when this funny-looking dog came scratching at the front door, it was as if he and Alice were soul-mates, or something, and I really don't like to use that term, the way things turned out.

Alice came up behind me, took one look and almost jumped out of her leotards.

"Oh George, isn't he CUTE! My horoscope said I'd meet a charming dark stranger today and here he is! Come in here, doggie. What's your name? Why are you scratching at our door? You got no home? You lost?"

Alice brought this weird animal inside and was petting him and getting him water and all that. I think he could have been foaming at the mouth and she still would have brought him inside.

The dog was in heaven. I'm not much for animals, and I never

could carry on a decent conversation with one the way Alice could, so I just sighed and went back to Groucho Marx on the late night movies. By now Alice and the dog were old buddies, and I swear that smile had turned into a smirk, or maybe a leer. There was something undoggedly human about that animal.

For the next week or so we tried to find the owner of old Smiley. At least I tried. I watched the Lost column in the paper and put up a notice on the supermarket bulletin board, but no one called. Alice didn't try at all. I think she would have gone hysterical and called her shrink for an emergency session if someone had claimed the creature. So Smiley became part of the family.

Alice is really a friendly type. Not very discerning, and certainly not very selective, but friendly. She's the bubbly blonde lady who smiles at the policeman and who knows the names of all the checkout girls at the supermarket and who helps old people across the street, whether they want to be helped or not. And she has an open mind, although "open" really doesn't do justice to the state of Alice's mind. It's more like "cavernous." She will listen to anyone talk about anything, the more bizarre the better. Like I said before, she is now into channeling.

Alice has this friend who calls himself Amoru-on-Butu because that was his name when he was a resident of Atlantis in a former life. He pronounces the name with great sonority and drama. We call him Morey for short. Morey is tall, dark and nervous and he has a sort of cadaverous look. You know~the sunken cheeks and dark circles under the eyes. The waxed mustache is a little incongruous sitting there in front of all that. Like he bought it at the Fun Shop or something.

Morey is a channeler, and a more entertaining one you never saw. Alice met Morey at a meeting of the Friends of Life in Parapsychology (FLIP). Morey channeled at our place after that.

During Morey's conversation with some fellow Atlantian about the twelve spheres of unconscious consciousness that scruffy dog lay there with his chin on his paws, smiling up a storm. I actually thought he was going to laugh. After Morey got through the part about the twelfth sphere Smiley got up and howled. Just a nice, melodious one-note high howl. Then he sat there and smiled. It seemed to unnerve Morey, because he hadn't seen too many smiling dogs either, but he didn't say anything; he just shook a little.

Morey came back quite a bit after that. I didn't mind, because it was more entertaining than TV sometimes. After all, it was live, in a manner

of speaking. Another thing about it was that you never knew what to expect, because Smiley was always there. That dog would do something different every time Morey got there.

Alice and Smiley were fascinated by each other. They would hold long conversations together—Alice doing the talking, of course. At least I think Alice was doing all the talking, but now I'm not even real sure about that. Anyway, Alice would talk to Smiley, and Smiley would sit there nodding his head. Alice said it was just like talking to me, and maybe it was, because I almost forgot how to talk after I married Alice. It takes practice to talk, or you forget how, and it was hard to practice with Alice around. You can squeeze in a nod of the head sometimes, though. I got pretty good at that.

Fall was coming on and one evening we built a fire in the fireplace. Smiley loved it, but not the way dogs generally love fireplaces. Usually, you know, they just lie down there and sleep and move their paws a little as they dream. Not Smiley. Smiley wanted to be a part of it or something. You could tell he was a participant type, not a spectator. He sat there wide awake, staring into the fire and sometimes he got up and walked slowly back and forth in front of the flames. His smile had an edge on it now. Alice thought it was cute, of course, but she did look a little pensive when Smiley grabbed the end of a small burning log and tried to drag it out into the living room. I guess that was what got her to thinking, and the next time Morey came over they had a long discussion about animal reincarnation.

Everyone knows that people are reincarnated, and come back after death as other people in other times. At least Alice and Morey know it. Alice was curious about animals, and whether they come back as animals, or whether humans can come back as animals and animals as humans. I could see where this discussion was going to lead, so I just sat there nodding my head and trying to figure out which lottery numbers I would try for next Saturday's drawing. At that point I had a vision of both Alice and Morey in a former life. They both had bushy tails and were running up and down trees and hiding nuts for the winter.

After a bit I got tired of nodding, and I had all my lottery numbers figured out, and the discussion about reincarnation was becoming morbidly fascinating, the way it is when you watch the guy at the carnival sideshow who chews up glass bottles and swallows them. At this point Alice and Morey were swallowing each other's ideas about the Great Beyond. You see, Alice got this idea that Smiley, who was so smart, must

be a reincarnation of someone special, and because of the business with the fireplace, she figured the pushy little fleabag must be Nero, the guy who burned down Rome and fiddled. It seemed to me he might just as well be a slow moving Dalmatian who got run over by a fire truck, but obviously that wasn't at all what Alice had in mind.

By this time Morey was also sitting there nodding his head. You could see his eyes shining way back there behind the bushy eyebrows. This was new ground to be broken, and I think he looked up the address of the editor of the National Enquirer that night. He had been channeling dead people or live people who used to be dead, or whatever. Now he got the idea that he could go into one of his trances and channel our canine firewatcher, and find out about this once and for all. Of course, Smiley couldn't talk back out loud, so Morey would let us know from the cosmic vibrations what Smiley, or whoever or whatever he was in his former life, had to say.

Talk about excitement! Alice could hardly wait for the seance to come up, and she got Smiley all shampooed and trimmed by Mr. Charles at the Zodiac Pet Trimmery. As for me, I got a set of those heavy glass doors installed in front of the fireplace.

Well, the big day arrived, and Morey brought several of his weird friends along to give him moral support. We had Sister Hannah, the palm reader, and a fellow named Bobbo who had a thing about these little crystals of quartz and who wore an Australian bush hat at all times. We had a Gypsy who actually carried around one of those crystal balls, and a couple of astrologers. I expected them all to arrive in black robes covered with moons and stars, but they didn't. Morey wore his puffy-sleeved shirt with a shoestring tie. He did have fresh wax on his mustache, though.

You could tell he was nervous. Alice served cranberry herbal tea and lit the incense candles and talked about the latest articles in the New Age Times, sort of working up to the main event. Morey didn't join in very much. He kept glancing over his shoulder at Smiley, who was lying on the rug in the corner, with only one eye open. Every time Morey looked over there, that dog winked. I guess it could have been some sort of reflex action, but I don't think so. It looked downright premeditated, especially with that smirk.

Finally Alice turned to Morey with her fluttery watch-me-sparkle look: "Are you ready, Amoru-on-Butu? Mr. Smiley Emperor Nero is ready, aren't you, doggums?"

Smiley got up, marched over to Alice, and let out a little high-pitched moan. Morey was sweating by now. He sat down on a low stool in the center of the room with his legs crossed. Everyone sat around him in a circle and Alice brought Smiley over to Morey, who was now calling himself by his formal name. Alice finally got Smiley to stop smiling and get serious, and he now lay down in front of Morey, still with that one eye open. Morey put his hands on Smiley's head, rolled back his eyes and started in, in this deep voice sounding like he had his mouth full of warm mashed potatoes:

"I am Amoru-on-Butu. Amo-o-ru-on-Bu-ut-ooo! Listen to me, dog Smiley. Listen to me, hear me, heed me, dog Smiley. You are tired. Your paws are heavy. Your ears droop down, dow-w-wn. Your eyelids are like lead. You are sle-e-e-py, sle-e-e-py."

Smiley let out a little whimpering moan and closed both eyes. Morey continued.

"You are sleepy, dog Smiley, sle-e-e-py. You are falling into a deep sleep. Your spirit is falling away, falling away from your body. Your spirit is free, falling, falling, falling."

With all the incense and whatever was in the herbal tea besides cranberries, I was feeling pretty free myself. It would have been no trouble to fall into the lap of the lady astrologer sitting next to me. I mean she had a body that could make you see stars, but I really wanted to see what was going to happen, so I took a deep breath and waited. Morey was going on and on.

"Dog Smiley, let your spirit wander. Go back, back, back in time. You have lived before. Go back in time. Speak through me, Amoru-on-Butu. Go back, back, back. Speak through Amoru-on-Butu. Tell us what you see. Tell us where, tell us when, tell us who you are."

About this time things began to get a little eerie, as if the whole business was not weird enough to begin with, but that's show biz, as they say. Anyway, Morey suddenly jumped and went tense, as if he had backed into a cattle prod, and then he started his shiver and shake routine, with all the deep moans and strangles. It was really pretty remarkable that he could do all this while sitting on that little stool with his legs crossed. Someone gasped, and everyone leaned forward. The lady astrologer's dress wouldn't take too much in the way of a forward lean, but she caught herself in time.

Morey was really into this thing by now. He suddenly calmed down and began to speak, in a very low voice, with very dramatic pauses and hesitations.

“I am . . . a . . . dog . . . small dog . . . why? . . . I am a dog . . . walk . . . the streets . . . but . . . my spirit is . . . free. Back, . . . back. It is . . . evening . . . Alice breaks in: “Where is it? Is it in Rome? Is it the emperor’s garden in Rome?”

“I was fiddling around with my lyre and that night I went up on the roof to watch Rome burn. Beautiful sight. All those dancing flames . . . I needed some diversion. I had just killed my mother . . .”

“How did you die?”

“Like a dog! Hee hee hee hee! *Qualis artifex pereo!*”

At this point Smiley still had his eyes closed, but he had the grin of a cat-the one that ate the canary.

Morey stopped then. He was sweating and sort of gasping. All of a sudden Smiley just got up and walked away. When he did that Morey shook his head a little and seemed to come back to his old self. It was sort of puzzling though, and the more I thought about it, the more I wondered whether Morey was the hypnotizer or the hypnotizee, if you know what I mean.

After the seance, or whatever it was, the whole group was ecstatic. This was a first, apparently. They told Morey he should write a book and go on the late night show. You see, it wasn’t just talking to the dead guy. It was this dog talking through Morey and then channeling the dog’s other life which had been this Roman thing.

They felt that Morey could really latch on to this dead guy and probably make the *National Enquirer* and the *New Age Times* and everything.

Alice got real dreamy after that. When the whole bunch left she just lay down on the floor with a big pillow under her chest and stared into the fire. I began to think that maybe *she* was Nero, but she hadn’t tried to burn anything down yet. She was lying there, just staring, and up comes Smiley, and now he walks up to Alice and just peers into her eyes, looking like one of those old pictures of Cesar Romero, or like one of those pictures would have looked if Cesar was a canine. I guess he thought he was some Latin lover.

Alice moped around a little bit, but the silly dog seemed to bring her out of it. He was with her all the time. I don’t know how she got any work done, even if she had wanted to work.

A few days after the big channel trip a strange thing happened.

Smiley began to snarl.

It was a real surprise to see old Smiley with a mad look on his face,



but he managed it real well once he started. He could snarl as well as he could smile, but the trouble was, the snarling always began when I got near Alice. Now protective is one thing, but this was something else.

Alice said “Humor him, it’s just a phase,” but when he started sleeping at the foot of the bed and I was sleeping on the roll-away because of all that snarling, I began to get a little weary of all this strange stuff. To top it all off, Alice began to think that Smiley had a touch of Don Juan Tenorio in his past. This was too much. Alice was going wacko and I wasn’t getting any sleep, my love life was shot, and this mutt was disrupting the household. And he still stared into the fire and tried to drag out burning sticks and he howled along with fire sirens. I never read anywhere that Don Juan had a fire fetish.

O.K. So maybe he was Don Juan, or Nero, or a combination (I don’t know if the channelers have considered that weird possibility) and here is this dog running around acting as if he owned my wife. I had had enough. I told Alice, either he goes or I go.

Alice’s first reaction was that she could get another man like me anytime, but that a dog like Smiley was very hard to come by. There was some truth to this, so it gave me a few anxious moments. Not many, because I was not exactly sure I wanted to go through life wondering when Alice was going to make the trip through the looking-glass again, but I figured it wasn’t boring, at least, so I was moderately relieved when she agreed, tearfully, to find our toothy home-wrecker another home to demolish.

I was feeling pretty good now. When you can back down a woman like Alice and reduce her to tears, you really feel a sense of accomplishment. I opened the top two buttons of my shirt and practiced making penetrating looks in the mirror while I shaved.

Of course we still had a problem. Where do you find a new home for a dog like Smiley? I suppose we could have taken him out in the country and dumped him, but I didn’t want to disrupt the agricultural economy of the county. Smiley would probably organize the cows and horses and then burn down the haystack, or something like that, at the first farm he hit. And to tell you the truth, the conniving little throwback was kind of lovable in his own way. I just wanted him to be lovable in somebody else’s house.

It wasn’t long before we hit on the obvious answer to the Smiley question. Who could better take care of him than someone who spoke his own language? Who else but Morey? So the next day we brought up

the subject, or rather I did, because Alice was still crestfallen and didn't want to do anything except sit curled up in the big chair-my big chair-looking woebegone. Anyhow, I brought it up with Morey, and he looked even more nervous than usual.

"I don't know, George . . . I just don't know. That condo where I live . . . it has that dinky little patio, and there are all those people with dogs and cats. What if Smiley bites somebody, or forgets which life he is in and does something stupid over by the swimming pool? I just don't know . . . and besides, there is something strange about that dog."

"Something strange about that dog." Wow, talk about the understatement of the year! I kept my cool, though, and turned the penetrating stare I had been practicing on old Morey, and there just wasn't any contest. He wasn't wild about the idea, but he agreed to take Smiley, and we agreed to come see him and sit in on the next big program channeled in from outer space.

Morey went out and bought some sort of dog basket and fancy dog food, and I popped for a collar and leash. I wanted to be sure we could pull the little monster away from the house in case he didn't want to make the big break.

Finally D-Day, for "departure," arrived. I was feeling good. I practiced a couple of the old dance steps in the hallway as I went to answer Morey's knock on the door. The penetrating stare was working fine, and I combined it with the self-confident little half-grin. All that, along with the open shirt, really produced an effect. You know what I mean?

Alice was distraught, of course, crying and hugging Smiley. It was beautiful. I was in command. That hadn't happened in years. I put the collar and leash on Smiley. Of course he just had to get in one of those snarls when I did that, but he didn't bite. I think he knew he'd be down at the pound getting that ultimate rabies test if he did. Anyhow, Morey led him down the walk while Alice and I stood in the doorway.

I should have known not to leave my little classic English MG sports convertible parked at the curb. Morey got Smiley almost to the street, right alongside the MG, and he, Smiley, not Morey, turned around and looked straight at me. Then he lifted his hind leg and peed on the door of my MG. I could see that he had been practicing penetrating stares too. Now most dogs, as you know, will aim for the hubcaps, especially the fancy ones, but Smiley let go all over the door, and it was clear he had been saving up for that one. He didn't fool me, though. I know what the

little fleabag was up to. The MG is really low, and the top was down. He was really aiming for the front seat, but he couldn't get his leg up high enough. He had delusions of grandeur, you know.

Morey was beside himself. He was sweating and dancing around to see if any of our neighbors were watching this little drama, and he was pulling at the leash and at the same time getting ready to jump in case Smiley decided to pick another target. He finally made it, though, and got Smiley into his VW Bug and they took off down the street. I watched until they turned the corner to make sure Morey didn't run into a fireplug or something.

What a difference there was in the house now! I was Mr. Numero Uno Macho-in-Charge, and Alice was actually saying "Yes, Dear," and "No, Dear," and ironing my shirts. She was a little sullen, of course, but the overall effect was great. The change of atmosphere was fine, but after a while, to tell you the truth, I began to miss some of the normal wackiness that Alice used to generate. I guess I'm just a closet masochist at heart.

Alice went over to Morey's to see Smiley a few times, but she didn't talk much to me when she came home. I gathered that Morey and Smiley weren't relating too well. Something about satanic symbols and signs all over the concrete of the patio in the only way Smiley could figure out to make them. I guess that bothered Morey enough, but it was really too much for him when Smiley would sit there with that dirty grin while Morey cleaned it all up with the pooper-scooper.

I kept out of all this as much as I could, not wanting to rock the boat, but then one night about 9:00 P.M. there came this pounding on the door, and it's Morey, and he just has to talk to someone. He is distraught, you know. Not that it takes much to make Morey distraught, but I guess he had gone through a particularly exciting time in his otherwise fairly contemplative life. Anyhow, his hair was all mussed up and his mustache was drooping and his eyes were all red and wild and he kept looking around as if someone was after him. And he smelled like smoke.

"He's gone, George! He's finally gone! The devil-dog has left. Thank God, he didn't drag me down to the fires of Hades with him. I can't tell you what I've been through, George, but I'm going to try. You owe me, George. You knew about that animal all the time. You set me up, George!"

I turned on my half-grin.

“Smiley a ‘devil-dog’? Come on now, Morey. He’s a little strange, I’ll admit, but ‘devil-dog’ is pretty strong, isn’t it?”

“Screw you, George. You knew all the time what he was, and you dumped him on me! I thought you were my friend!”

This was pretty strong language to be coming from a peaceful old introvert like Morey, and even my penetrating stare didn’t faze him, so I knew he had been through something pretty grim. Of course “pretty grim” to Morey might be child’s play to some of us more macho types. Be that as it may, he wouldn’t let go until I heard the story, so I just turned the VCR on to the Dirty Harry movie I was planning to watch and got a Corona out of the fridge and settled down to hear the devil-dog story.

It seems that Morey and Smiley just didn’t hit it off from the word go. Smiley was always sitting there watching everything that Morey did, and this unnerved him. Especially when he had female friends over, like the lady astrologer with the body. Women just went ape over the sleazy little mongrel and before Morey could even get a hand on the knee, Smiley was over there with his *head* on the knee, looking up with those soulful Latin-lover eyes of his. This cut into Morey’s love life quite a bit, of course, and it didn’t stop there. Morey couldn’t get out of the condo and over to the pool without Smiley sneaking along, and of course dogs were not allowed by the pool, but Smiley apparently didn’t want to admit that he was a dog. He would go anyway, and try to make this dog-type time with the women around the pool. This got embarrassing for Morey, not to say downright dangerous, because the men, at least, didn’t want this expletive dog around and the management was threatening to cancel Morey’s lease if he didn’t adhere to Rule No. 16, subsection (c). These were obviously trying times.

In order to try to cope with all this, Morey retreated into his own little shell, his condo shell, that is. He only had people over for channeling or whatever, but Smiley even disrupted that, and he, Smiley would never let Morey channel him again. They just couldn’t get on the same wavelength, I guess.

Eventually, Morey just settled on having people over for barbecues on the back patio, provided he could get all the satanism cleaned up. There was a redwood fence about six feet high around the area, and he had one of these three-legged wheel-around grills he used for the cookouts.

Well, Smiley was fascinated by the grill, and of course that wasn’t anything that Alice and I didn’t know, but Morey found it out the hard

way. Like when he built a fire in the thing and went into the kitchen to get the burgers, and Smiley is nudging the flaming grill up to the wall of the condo. Morey caught that one in time, but then it happened. “Then” turned out to be this very night that Morey was all distraught about.

Morey had invited people over for a barbecue evening, and he was getting everything ready before they arrived. He had the grill away from the wall of the condo. He had learned that much, anyway. It was back away by the fence and he built the fire to start the charcoal and went back inside to fix the steaks. This was going to be a banner evening.

Well, the grill was back by the fence, and down on the ground beside it was the charcoal starter—you know—this inflammable stuff that you pour on to get everything going. So you get the picture—we have a flaming grill, we have a redwood fence, we have charcoal lighter fluid with an open top next to the fence, and we have old devil-dog watching all this.

Morey tried to make the next part dramatic, but it really didn’t take any more imagination than Smiley had, to figure out what was going to happen next, and it did. The grill, as I said, was one of those three-legged things, and it took Smiley only about one nudge per leg to tip it over against the fence, spilling the charcoal starter in the process. Morey was still inside putting Jim Jackson’s Texas Bar-B-Q sauce on the steaks when he smelled the smoke and heard the fire trucks. Someone had called 9-1-1, and someone else was pounding on the front door. Morey didn’t know which way to go, but he finally dashed out back in time to hear Smiley gleefully howling along with the fire sirens, smiling at the same time, if you can imagine that, and the burning fence lighting up the whole area.

I guess peaceful old Morey went dog-icidal at that point, and tried to strangle Smiley, from what he told me. I went to get another Corona so I could hear the last of the story. (I was feeling pretty smug, you know. “There but for the grace of God go I,” and all that sort of thing.) There wasn’t much more to it, though. Smiley was quicker than Morey, and got away very handily, jumping through the flaming hole in the fence. Maybe he was really a reincarnated circus tiger.

The firemen got there and put the flames out and took a report. From what Morey told me, the firemen were smirking just like Smiley when Morey tried to tell them what happened, but what can you expect from a bunch of guys who think channels are those numbers on the TV dial.

For awhile I thought this was the end of it. Alice gradually got back

to her old kookie self, which I have to admit was better than all that moping around, even with the ironed shirts. She began to go to yoga classes again, and even to attend a channeling or so with her friends at FLIP. I even went with her a couple of times.

It was about a month after Smiley had made his flaming dash to freedom, and no one had seen him or heard of him, not that any of us really wanted to, but it was sort of quiet without him around. It was nighttime, and Alice had just finished watching the evening soap opera, and the news came on. We had heard all the fire trucks going by twenty or thirty minutes before, but you never know if something big is going on or if the fire-eaters are just going down to the scene of some fender-bender to point all the hose nozzles at a couple of unfortunate drivers to make sure they don't burst into flame.

Anyhow, here was the 10 o'clock news, and they are reporting a big fire in progress down at the shopping center near Morey's place. It was a big one, all right. The TV cameras were panning around, and it showed the firemen in their yellow coats, shooting water into the air, and the hoses criss-crossing the whole parking lot and the flames going up into the sky.

Then the camera pans around, and the camera guy is obviously trying to get arty and show something different, and he zooms in on this dog. Of course you know who it is. Here is old Smiley, kind of dancing around, like he is overjoyed, and then he sits down there and smiles and smiles and smiles. The cameraman is apparently fascinated by this smile, too, because he just lets the camera sit there for a while. Finally he, the cameraman, that is, wakes up and pans back to the conflagration, and he lights on a storefront going up in flames right in front of Smiley. The flames have pretty well got it, but you can just make out the letters on the sign as it collapses.

It says, "PIZZERIA ROMA."

Well, what the hell. There are probably hundreds of pizza joints called "Roma," but that was all Alice needed to start in again. Here was this whole shopping center going up in flames, and Alice is dancing around just like Smiley, saying "I told you so!" That's about as original as Alice gets with stinging taunts. Like I said, they acted like soul mates, but this was too much.

Coincidences. It made me think a little, of course, but doggie channeling? Come on, now!

After that Smiley disappeared again.

Morey refused to come over to see me or Alice anymore, so we missed the channeling entertainment and the ancient Atlantian hotline. Just for something to do I learned how to toss the I Ching coins, though. Something Alice and I could do together, you know. It wasn't much fun. I never could manage to get any significance into my hexagrams.

Then I decided to get a Tarot reading when I found out that the lady astrologer with the large attributes did that, too. I figured that if you ever wanted a reading to be meaningful, she would be the one to go to. Well, when we got into the reading, the Knight of Wands card came up over the Significator, and she said I should beware of a small dark stranger. When she said it, she smiled just like that dog, and I felt an anxiety attack coming on, even though Smiley had been gone for weeks. She didn't seem nearly as sexy after that, even with her hair in her eyes and panting that way. I gave up Tarot.

This would be the end of the story, but then one night I'm watching TV and I hear this scratching on the door, which gave me instant recall and a panic attack all at the same time. I was running to get a paper bag to breathe in, but Alice had heard the scratching and was gleefully opening the door. Those dog-proof deadbolts weren't any use at all.

Sure enough, there was the little canine home-wrecker, smiling all right, but strangely enough it was sort of a friendly smile this time. Alice was overjoyed and insisted we take him in again, and I knew the garage door was open and all that inflammable stuff was inside, so, nervous as I was, I figured it would be better to have him where we could watch him.

I didn't sleep much that night, and the next day I went to the District 666 Fire Station, right down the street, and tried to get the Captain to take Smiley on as a mascot.

"You don't know much about fire engine mascots, do you?" the Captain said. "We only need spotted Dalmatians, not scruffy mutts like that one. Take him down to the pound if you don't want him."

Of course Smiley heard all this and began to look a little uneasy. He knew I had dumped him once before, and apparently he didn't want to go homeless again. He became positively docile, and he didn't snarl at me anymore. So we kept the little arsonist, but being the cautious type I bricked up the fireplace and called the Hazardous Materials guys to pick up all the lighter fluid, paint thinner and other stuff Smiley might be interested in.

Smiley still gets sort of agitated when he hears those fire sirens, but now he just pulls the rug over his head and moans a little.

You see? Tough love does work sometimes. Both Smiley and Alice would agree with that.

—*Ralph G. Smith '47*