

# INCARNATION

A painting of a snowy landscape. In the foreground, there are several evergreen trees, some with snow on their branches. The ground is covered in snow, with some rocks visible. In the background, a large, dark, spire-like structure, possibly a cathedral or church tower, rises against a hazy, grey sky. The overall tone is somber and atmospheric.

A JOURNAL OF THE MORAL IMAGINATION

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# From the Editor:

There is only the fight to recover what has been lost  
And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions  
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.  
For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.

~ T.S. Eliot, "East Coker"

We are pleased to finally introduce the first issue of *Incarnation*, a journal of the moral imagination in the western tradition. This journal was started, as many good initiatives are, through a mixture of idealism and frustration, regarding, in our case, the deplorable state of contemporary literature, especially the short story. Most fiction has become ugly for the sake of realism, or shallow for the sake of proselytizing, and yet there is a need, now more than ever, for stories that refuse to be either of these things. Preaching may drive the modern man to cynicism and realism may drive him to despair, but his imagination may be stirred to wonder and his mind to thought, and this is the first and finest work of good literature. There is much to be said for storytelling as a primary means of conveying truth, and much that is lost, consequently, when the art of writing, and reading, a good story is lost.

At *Incarnation*, we are attempting, on however small a scale, to salvage something from the wreckage of modern literature. We do not claim to be the first, or the best, to make such an attempt, but we hope to cast our nets more widely than others have done. We have two criteria only: a certain excellence of writing, and a morally sound story. Most of the world will never know that these stories exist, but you, our readers, will know. If a single imagination is kindled by our stories, then our work has been a success. If even one reader is led to think again about the world in which they live, and to wonder at it, then our journal will have contributed, if only slightly, to the rebuilding of western civilization.

As Christmas approaches with the true Incarnation of Word made flesh, we hope that, just as Christ brought joy and hope to a dark and fallen world, so may this endeavor be a source of hope for those who despair of our culture ever coming out of the ruins. Christ is among us, and it is ultimately by Him that all things will be restored. We humbly offer this publication to Him, in the hope that He will do great things with it.

May you be blessed beyond measure this Christmas season. Rejoice – Christ is almost here.

Gaudete Sunday, 17 December, 2023  
Merrimack, NH

## INCARNATION

A JOURNAL OF THE  
MORAL IMAGINATION

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In Imitation of the Weekly Journals of Charles Dickens, we purpose to start each issue with a section of a longer serial story. Our first serial story, *The Way of The Pen*, will be published in four installments of three chapters each.

## *THE WAY OF THE PEN*

By Jamey Toner

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.  
- John 1:1*

### 1: Sonnet

**B**eauty, wisdom, virtue, strength, and love—we call them gifts, but one way or another, we end up having to account for them. I turned out to have a particular talent of my own, neither flashy nor immediately practical, for which it would never have occurred to me to ask and which, if I'd kept the receipt, I would probably have tried to return. Like everyone, I had given thought over the years to my purpose and destiny; but as I was only a junior in high school, the question hadn't yet acquired much in the way of urgency. Once this "gift" business came to light, however, the matter was suddenly all but taken out of my hands.

We came back from Christmas break as princes on the eve of coronation. Only one semester, only one more summer, and then the rampaging ecstasy of seniordom was ours. I'd just turned seventeen (my birthday's on January first), and I was feeling especially wise and ancient as I pulled into the parking lot that frosty morningtide. Emerging from my battered old Civic, I stood with my fists on my hips and gazed proudly upon that training hall of sages and scholars to be, St. John Vianney High. My regal moment lasted for approximately four seconds, and then Sean showed up.

"Joey!" he bellowed, leaping out of the huge red pickup that we simply called, The Vehicle. "We meet again, after all these long years!"

In reality, we'd spent the previous day together playing video games; but rational responses only encouraged Sean's absurdity. (Irrational responses, total non-responsiveness, and radical physical violence encouraged him, too.) So I went for the unexpected approach: I snatched my bag and took off toward St. J at a dead sprint with Sean ululating at my heels. He was a big guy—especially compared to my scrawny ass—but I was just a hair faster. We zipped through the halls, narrowly avoiding a lethal collision with Sister Thérèse, severed a Gordian knot of freshmen clustered around their goony yellow freshman lockers, and almost literally flew down the stairs to Mrs. Talleyrand's homeroom. Bursting through the door, we found her standing perfectly still in the empty room, and skidded to a halt, panting. Somehow she always managed to convey the impression that if one had entered a moment sooner, he would have caught her levitating.

"Hello, boys," she said calmly. "How was your vacation?"

“Jovian, ma’am,” I said, still breathing hard, and headed for my desk. Sean in his oafishness had forgotten his books and had to head back out to The Vehicle—not that it mattered, as we were over ten minutes early. Soon our fellow juniors began to arrive, and we sat chattering until Fr. Brown came over the PA to lead us in the Our Father and the Pledge of Allegiance.

My day started with European History (at present we were learning something about a monarchy of some kind), and continued with Pre-Trig. Then there was a ten-minute break during which I consumed more coffee than was entirely healthy, and then came AP English. Sean was in this one, too, and he had developed the infectious habit of referring to our teacher, Mr. Mark Roland, as Commander Mark. The Commander commenced with polite inquiries about our holiday, and duly received the customary vague mumbles in reply.

“Good, good,” he said. “Then I trust your minds are well-rested and prepared for today’s assignment.” I leaned forward, interested. Roland came up with some pretty challenging stuff sometimes. “Today you will work in assigned pairs to create an original sonnet in the style of one or more of the poets we have studied so far. However! You will not work together in the ordinary sense: rather, you will alternate, one of you writing all the odd-numbered lines and the other writing all the evens. You may consult, of course, but the point of this exercise is to inculcate adaptability to the unforeseen, so don’t cheat yourselves. I want at least a rough draft by the end of class, and please observe the forms of the sonnet—fourteen rhymed lines in iambic pentameter; the octave sets forth a problem and the sestet proposes an answer. I would hate to have to flunk any of you for handing in a haiku.”

The teachers at St. J knew better by now than to put me and Sean together, but I was disheartened at the Commander’s choice of a partner for me: Sylvia Templeton, a slim, dark-eyed girl, very pretty, but more than a little—well—I believe “tempestuous” is the currently accepted nomenclature. She was the editor-in-chief of the *Augury*, our school’s monthly literary magazine. Last semester, we’d all had to compose an original poem and read it aloud to the class. Sylvia had been so impressed with my work that she’d been badgering me for weeks to submit a few poems to the lit mag, and even the Commander had encouraged me to do so; but I had steadily refused. I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do with my life, but I certainly had no desire to be a poet. Everyone knew that the cosmos twirled its celestial mustache inventing horrific tragedies for all poets.

She gave me half a smile and said, “Shall I start?”

I hesitated. I was in a good mood and wanted to write a happy poem; but I remembered that she was partial to the gloomier fellows like Hardy and Housman, and I really didn’t feel that was the correct note on which to begin. “How about rock-paper-scissors?” She shrugged and held out her fist, and we counted to three and fired.

Luck was with me: she threw scissors to my rock. “All right, take it away.”

I figured I’d kick things off with a little Shakespeare. Can’t go wrong with Shakespeare. Editing slightly for metrical purposes, I wrote, *O what a piece of wondrous work’s a man!*

Sylvia didn’t miss a beat. *But Lord, what arrant fools these mortals be.*

“Hey—we’re supposed to be on the same side here.”

“I don’t remember anyone saying that.”

I realized, with a slight frown, that she was technically correct. But surely the Commander wouldn’t simply turn us loose on each other for his own demented amusement—? My frown deepened. “Look, I won the coin toss. I want to construct a paean.”

“Doesn’t mean I have to be your peon.”

Sean turned around in his seat and stage-whispered, “Swish!”

“Sweet holy mercy, Sylvia, how do you live with yourself?”

“A girl could wait a lifetime for another pun like that. Anyway, it’s your serve.”

“Stop it, the both of you. I said ‘coin toss’—we’re doing a football metaphor right now. In fact, Sean, you stay out of this altogether.”

“You got it, buddy. Have a good at-bat.”

I muttered something about the swift wings of death and returned to our—or, at any rate, my—little ode. Before proceeding, I would have to settle on a rhyme scheme: ABAB or ABBA. Pondering possible assonances, I stumbled into an innocent-seeming line: *Stranger than dreamt in our philosophy.*

My esteemed opponent considered that for a few moments and then added, *And oh, how sharper than a serpent's fang.*

This wasn't going so well; clearly, it was time to dial up the optimism. *Yet God is in His Heaven, all is right,* I scrawled.

She scowled. "You're using Browning's defense against me, eh?"

"I thought it fitting, considering the rocky quatrain."

"Naturally. You must expect me to attack with Christopher Marlowe."

"Naturally—but I find that Milton cancels out Christopher Marlowe. Don't you?"

"Unless the enemy has studied Matthew Arnold—" she made a few deft pen-strokes "—which I have."

My Browning assault reference was now followed by this:

*Fall on us, hills, and hide us from His eyes!  
We will not reign below but serve on high  
Where ignorant angel armies clash by night.*

I sighed. Our sonnet was going to end up looking like the work of a serial plagiarist with a split personality.

"All right, little Miss Anthropy. Exactly what problem have we just set forth in our octave?"

Sylvia quickly scanned our work-in-progress and raised her eyebrows. "I think we've confronted the fundamental struggle between light and darkness in the human soul."

"Oh, good. I've been meaning to clear that up anyway."

"Have at it, stud."

"I suppose you'll come down on the side of darkness?"

"The universe comes down on the side of darkness, Joey. Have you looked at it lately?"

"I'm looking at it as we speak. I see a room full of safe, well-fed people learning stuff about poetry. Ghastly enough, I'll grant you, but still—"

"The sugar-coating topping on the abyss."

"Boy, you're a drop of golden sun."

"And you're a thread without a needle. Do the next line already."

"Fine. Jeez."

I bent over the paper again, and clicked my pen a few times. Maybe I could still creep to some kind of acceptable middle ground. I down-shifted from Milton to Pope and wrote hopefully, *To stray is human, to return divine.*

Sylvia rolled her eyes and made the precarious Pope-to-Poe transition: *But we're neither god nor human—we are ghouls.* "So much for papal infallibility."

"Funny."

Plainly, there would be no compromise here: this match was to the death. It suddenly occurred to me that the obvious rhyme for her was *fools*—as in, "Lord, what fools these mortals be"—and that, since the final line of the poem would be hers, she could thus bring the whole thing full circle and render my opening line superfluous. The prospects were looking bright for the pessimistic outlook. I had two moves left; if there were to be any hope, I would have to lure out her king prematurely. Gambling all upon my guess at her fools-based end-game, I reverted to the Bard and made my queen-sacrifice. *Forever out of joint with Heav'nly time.* I was all in now; if this didn't work, the voice of optimism would appear to have defected and the poem's bleakness would be complete. Maintaining a careful poker face, I awaited her penultimate play.

She pounced at the bait. The Hamlet-to-Midsummer bridge was already in place, and she followed it home like a bloodhound. *What weak and aimless mortals be these fools!*

“Nicely put,” I said, smiling.

“Forfeiting?”

“Nope.” And then, rather smugly, I dropped it on her. *Yet, poetry still blossoms from the slime.*

“What? Who the hell said that?”

“Joseph Ambrose Hopkins,” I answered proudly—and, folks, that was my ultimate mistake. Like Odysseus and the Cyclops, I betrayed myself through hubris to my foe. Couldn’t I have just said Keats or Wordsworth or something? But nay, in that moment I named myself irrevocably as poet, and from thence arose all that was to follow.

Sylvia sat glaring at me for a long, silent moment; and then, abruptly, her smile re-surfaced. “Okay. Then let’s wrap this up with an original piece by S.B. Templeton.” She raised her pen and deliberated. I had time to project a few likely scenarios for our closing line—My *partner doesn’t seem to follow rules*, or maybe, *Apparently no justice at this school*—but I was startled by what she actually wrote. *Thus every dragon’s dungeon hides its jewels.*

Before I could frame a response, she raised her hand and said, “Mr. Roland! We’re done here.”

He looked up, surprised. Barely ten minutes had gone by; everyone else was still in their initial quatrains. “Are you sure? You’ve got plenty of time to edit; if you hand it in now, it’s final.”

“Oh, I’m counting on it,” she said, getting up, and the smile was definitely a smirk now. Quickly, as if she expected me to tackle her in the aisle, she loped over to his desk and handed him our sonnet. “We’re calling it, ‘The Soul,’” she added, like a haggler upping his price in the middle of the sealing handshake. The Commander nodded, murmured to himself, and jotted something at the top of the paper—presumably, *Soul, Templeton, Hopkins*, or some such. The poem, in its full bizarreness, now read:

*O what a piece of wondrous work’s a man—  
But Lord, what arrant fools these mortals be!  
Stranger than dreamt in our philosophy,  
And oh, how sharper than a serpent’s fang.*

*Yet God is in His Heaven, all is right;  
Fall on us, hills, and hide us from His eyes!  
We will not reign below but serve on high  
Where ignorant angel armies clash by night.*

*To stray is human, to return divine,  
But we’re neither god nor human—we are ghouls,  
Forever out of joint with Heav’nly time:  
What weak and aimless mortals be these fools!*

*Yet, poetry still blossoms from the slime—  
Thus every dragon’s dungeon hides its jewels.*

“What was that all about?” I asked as she sat back down.

“Oh, nothing,” she said breezily, and pulled out her Calculus book.

I chalked up her behavior to an attempt at losing with good grace and shrugged it off, turning cheerfully to the task of distracting Sean from his assignment for the rest of the class. I had Roland for third period; by the end of

fourth, I'd forgotten all about Sylvia, sonnets, and "The Soul." However—and I expect you've already seen this coming—she and Commander Mark found me in the hall towards the end of lunch, and her smirk had returned like a self-regenerating swamp creature that no mortal weapon could destroy.

Sean and I were arguing heatedly over who would win a Scrabble game between Paul Bunyan and Gilgamesh (I can't remember which side he took, but it was clearly ludicrous). I had just embarked on a series of decidedly ungentlemanly observations about my friend's parentage and personal habits when the Commander approached and said, "Gentlemen." We straightened and greeted him with courteous words. "Ms. Templeton would like a moment."

"Joey," she said briskly. "Our next issue is due in three weeks. I'll need to see you in Mrs. Hennessey's room right after sixth period. We've got a lot of work to do."

"What?"

"The *Augury*, Mr. Hopkins," the Commander enthused. "In today's assignment, you quoted yourself—thereby staking your claim to poethood in the ranks of Shakespeare, Browning, and the rest. Unlike Ms. Templeton, you have never voluntarily offered your work to the public eye, which made me question the validity of your claim; but she has convinced me to let you justify it, as it were, retroactively."

"You're now our staff poet," said she. "Congratulations."

"I—but, but—but I. . ." I glowered. "You two planned this from the start!"

Sylvia scoffed, but the Commander merely assumed a mien of injured innocence.

My new editor-in-chief punched me on the shoulder. "Welcome aboard, Hopkins. Let's see what blossoms from your slime."

With that, they walked away and left me to survey the smoldering wreckage of my leisure time. "Damn, dude," Sean said gravely. "You got served."

## 2: Augury

**A**nd that's the mysterious cursed gift to which I referred at the outset: nothing awesome like dark-elven blood or lycanthropy—just a poet's tongue, apparently. But as it turned out, that was more than enough to keep me in trouble.

After lunch I had Biology for fifth period, Music Theory for sixth, and that was it for the day—or, at any rate, it used to be. Today, with my teeth grimly set and my pen and notebook in hand like a lance and buckler, I trod the shadowed halls to Room 114. There sat Sylvia among her notes, a spider-queen brooding and grumbling over dusty bones. "Joey," she said, without looking up, as I entered. "You're right on time. Have a seat."

Mrs. Hennessey taught math in its various forms (I had her for second period). The *Augury* kept its headquarters in her room—rather than, say, Commander Mark's—solely because she had the biggest blackboards, and Sylvia liked to construct sprawling elucidations of each prospective issue as it took shape through the editorial process. Our hostess smiled at me as I sat down and said, "Hello, Joey. I'm glad to see you're getting involved in the magazine."

"Yes, ma'am. Sylvia batted her eyes at me until I capitulated."

"She *can* be charming."

"No, I mean winged rodents literally came flying out of her sockets. It was horrible."

"Joey, for goodness' sake," Mrs. Hennessey reproved, failing utterly to keep a straight face.

The lady in question ignored this whole exchange. "Maven—where do we stand on the Shandy interview?"

"I finally got an appointment, but it's not till the twenty-third. It'll have to go in the February issue." Maven Rothschild was a fair-haired lass with a sunny smile, who was trying to wrangle an interview with our town's newly elected mayor. Had I been a mayor, I would have canceled some fairly hefty appointments for the chance to talk with



her; but then, that was precisely why I would never be a mayor.

Our illustrious leader nodded and rifled through some notes. “That’s fine. We’ll run your article on the Jesuits in the meantime. Tommy?”

Tommy Gorham wrote bizarre short stories, perhaps better called vignettes, featuring elaborately normal protagonists who found themselves beset by drunken minotaurs or angry asphalt golems. He had bright orange hair so violently untidy that he always appeared to have escaped from the electric chair just minutes earlier. “New story’s comin’ along good! Touching tale of a man whose toilet unexpectedly achieves total sentience.”

“That’s profoundly grotesque, my friend,” I said approvingly.

“Thanks, man.”

Sylvia accepted this without comment. Tommy’s yarns were consistently popular with the student body, and there was no arguing with the bottom line. “Where’s Lily?”

Maven glanced at the door. “Dunno. I think she was arguing with her boyfriend about something. She’ll probably be along in a few minutes.”

“This’ll be their fourth break-up. I just hope she can channel the angst.” Lily Hart was a very talented photographer, for whose personal travails her editor showed little sympathy. In justice to Sylvia, Lily did harbor a penchant for the melodramatic.

“All right, Joey—let’s talk poetry. What’ve you got?”

“Well, I naturally spent the last two periods composing a national epic of no fewer than five hundred stanzas. The real question is whether it will fit in this little rag of yours.”

“Of ours, Hopkins. If you don’t have any pre-existing work to contribute, you’ll just have to write something new. What do you propose to write about?”

“Isn’t it your job to tell me that?”

“My job is to make sure your submissions are ready to meet the public eye. Your job is to rummage through the rainbows and lollipops in your skull and find something that moves you enough to inspire verse. If Williams could drag a poem out of a red wheelbarrow, I’m sure you can find something worth a few lines.”

“So you are prepared to admit that poetry can be valid even if it’s not calculated to make its readers fling themselves into the nearest convenient fiery crevasse?”

“I’d rather not publish fluff, but I’m prepared to tolerate froth.”

I was about to unleash a rejoinder which I can’t exactly recall but which I know to have been devastating, when the door of the classroom opened. We all turned, expecting to see Lily in some manner of histrionic state; but instead, two seniors walked in with an air of ownership that Sylvia and I regarded with envy and Tommy, a sophomore, with muted awe. Maven was a senior herself, and paid scant heed.

I knew these two from of old. Steven Graveling and Peter Zahn by name, they were physics wizards who had flourished in this strange new world in which Hollywood had made comic books cool and the geeks of the land held their heads up high. We should have been allies, comrades-in-arms; but Steve and Pete didn’t seem to feel that way.

“Oh,” Graveling said as he saw us at our table. “I forgot *they* were in here.”

“Every Monday for the last four months,” Sylvia told him, adding diplomatically, “if you can count that high.”

“Having fun with our bird entrails, are we?” Zahn asked.

Instantly, I found my loyalties shifting. Five seconds ago, the *Augury* had been a prison to me, a Bastille; but the moment it came under alien attack, it became a bastion, and my family crest flew above the parapets. “Hey—Sturm and Drang. Has it occurred to either of you that every single term you use in physics is a hundred percent metaphorical? That without the poetic instinct you couldn’t even think coherently about your ideas, let alone communicate them to anyone?”

Graveling furrowed his brow, but Zahn retorted immediately, “That’s not true!”

“Seriously? That’s what you’re going with for a comeback—‘nuh-uh’? Ask Mrs. Hennessey, if you don’t be-

lieve me.” I jerked a thumb towards her desk, where she was grading papers with Olympian detachment.

“Forget it,” Graveling said irascibly. “Let’s just go to the computer lab.”

They departed therewith; but I sensed the incipency of antagonism to come. After the door closed behind them, there was silence in the room for a few moments, and then Sylvia met my gaze with an infinitesimal increase in warmth. “So—any chance you can have a draft of something by next Monday?”

“I’m on it.”

\*\*\*\*

Noelle was in my room when I got home. My little sister, and only sibling, was four years my junior and was at this time in her final semester at St. Francis K-8, across town from St. J. She was looking forward to our being school-mates the next year, and—although I carefully concealed the fact—so was I. Slight-framed and sharp-eyed, Noelle was the kind of person who brightened a room by her presence even when she was actively trying to be unpleasant. “Hello, knave,” she said cheerily as I entered.

“Hello, harridan. How’s your first day back?”

“Easy. I can’t wait for high school. I crave new conquests.”

“That would be creepy even if it weren’t coming from a thirteen-year-old girl. Incidentally, have we discussed the reason you’re in my room right now?”

She made a face. “My computer’s acting up again.”

“You downloaded another virus, didn’t you?”

“Not. . . necessarily. It might be. . . more like a tape-worm.”

“I’ll have Sean fix it the next time he comes over. In the meantime you’ll have to make do with mere books, like some naked Paleolithic savage. I need my work space.”

“Why, did they suddenly realize you haven’t done a homework assignment in the last eleven years?”

“It’s not homework, it’s—” I paused, then sighed. “I kind of got shanghaied into writing for the *Augury*.”

“By that Sylvia girl you told me about?”

“Her and Commander Mark.”

“Ooh, bad combo.” Noelle had yet to meet the Commander in person, but she’d been very impressed by my tales and had high expectations for his classes. Frankly, he was going to have to work to keep up with her.

“Yep. Now amscray. I gots to do me some poetizin’.”

“Whatcha gonna write about?”

“The thousand uses I have for your corpse.”

She stuck out her tongue and scuttled for the door. I closed it firmly behind her, turned out the lights, drew my curtains, and settled down in the primeval darkness which precedes creation. What *was* I going to write about? I’d always been subject to fits of creativity—drawing cartoons, making up jingles, writing little stories and poems—but they came and went at will, like lightning. The idea of attempting to harness such energies was new to me. Also, unlike the ravings of the Muse, it sounded rather like work.

I sat motionless for a while in a semi-meditative state, vaguely hoping that something professional-sounding would simply appear in my brain. When this failed to occur, I started browsing through possible topics in my head: love, war, faith, mortality, pancakes. . . Nothing came of this either. I turned on some Bach and spent the next half hour or so flipping through random books on my shelf. A few phrases and images seemed resonant, and I kept them simmering in the back of my head; but none of them yielded inspiration to my prodding. Finally I rose and began to pace.

Sometime around five, our mom called us to dinner. I cursed my empty notebook and acquiesced with resignation. The thought tends to linger that if one had only five more minutes, the heavens would have opened wide; but on the other hand, the occasional break is probably healthy, and I was feeling peckish. Also, one didn’t trifle with Ma Hopkins at feeding time.

Dad had just gotten home. My parents were both teachers, but Dad taught college and Mom high school, so in the old days she would usually get home first and fix us all dinner. Occasionally Noelle and I tried to help, but we lacked the knack. When Mom went off to visit friends or family out of state from time to time, we mainly subsisted on take-out. I suppose it was a more or less typical domestic arrangement in that regard.

Hearty was the provender that night: Mom cooked a fettuccini alfredo such as might honor the table of an earl. We said grace and chatted a bit, but most of the table-talk consisted of munching and ravening noises until we all reached our second or third helping. At last we leaned back and conversed a bit more composedly, and the topic of my indenturing arose.

“I suspect this will be extremely good for you,” said Dad. “You need to learn to apply yourself to things you don’t want to do, from time to time.”

“But writing’s supposed to be fun.”

“Nothing’s fun unless you take the effort to get good at it; even those imbecilic video games of yours.”

Dad was always right, and it pissed me off.

“So, is Sylvia pretty?” Mom asked, inevitably.

“The human host in whom she’s taken up residence is easy on the eyes, but I believe Sylvia herself to be an insectile alien parasite.”

Noelle giggled; Mom scolded me. Dad said nothing and looked leonine. Delicately, I turned the discussion toward Paul Robeson High, where Mom taught English, and we all deplored the state of American letters for a while. “Honestly, I think everyone should have to contribute to a school paper of some kind, at least once or twice a year,” Mom ruminated.

“Well,” Noelle said, “once Sylvia’s brain-eating insect species takes over the planet—”

I burst out laughing, and our mother thundered anathemas. Dad rose to signal the onset of dessert, and returned to the table laden with ice cream and a tray of fudge, caramel, whipped cream, and various tropical fruits. All told, it was a good night’s supper. Soon after, I returned to my room and devoted about twenty minutes to my actual homework, then focused my powers once more upon the problem of poetry.

This time I decided to try forcing the issue. I sat at my desk, set pen to paper, and just wrote things. In a couple of hours, I filled five pages with abortive doggerel. *I shot a goose hypotenuse. Walking down through Belgium town. Drink a drink and pee in sink.* I tried to be deep. *Wisdom blossoms in the rain of old uncertainty and pain.* I tried to be prophetic. *In sixteen hundred years, the moon will disappear.* I switched gears and tried thinking up a catchy title. “*One Day at the Fair.*” “*The Sorrows of Werther’s Original.*” “*Beethoven’s Tenth.*” Finally, I just started spelling out words. *Adjudicate. Quotidian. Narcolepsy.* Then I picked up my head off the desk, brushed my teeth, and went to sleep.

And when I woke up the next morning, I was glowing. It didn’t even come in a dream: it was simply there, from nothing at all. A single line—or wait, no, two lines. They went, *I wandered long and wandered far / Before I washed up on the bar, / A lowly, lonely, lorn Jack Tar / Upon the wand’ring waves.* I had no idea what it meant, but it seemed to be a scrap of a sea-farer’s tale, probably one who got lost on the ocean like the Ancient Mariner. Except the rhyme scheme appeared to be set up more like “The Raven.” What rhymed with “waves”? Saves, graves. . . paves, maybe, but nobody paves anything at sea, that’s the whole point, there’s no roads, you just go where the sea takes you. What was this guy’s name? Or, no—better keep him nameless, at once mysterious and universal. “Graves” made the most sense—something something all my comrades met their graves, or found their graves, or all my friends had found their graves—depending on what verb tense we ended up with. What was the name of the ship? Something cool, but not unrealistically cool—something like the, the *Wave Treader*, or the *Phantom*—or—*the Phantom Treader*—no, that didn’t make any sense—

I almost literally found myself at school an hour later, as if I had teleported there. I must have eaten, dressed, and driven, but all I remembered was the tiny, radiating sapphire in my mind. I ghost-walked through first and sec-

ond periods, rough-housing with phrase and image while the world around me went its timeless round, watering my shining little poem-seed with the molten gold of all that I had learned. I was in love with this thing. It was half a stanza long and it was already the best thing I'd ever written. (In fact, I hadn't even written anything yet, on paper; I just kept the lines rolling on the back of my tongue. I could as easily have forgotten my own name.) By the end of Pre-Trig, I had worked up a full stanza and a rudimentary plot. I'd also realized that my initial lines were actually the very end of the poem.

As I was walking out of 114, I bumped into Steve Graveling. "Watch where you're going," he snapped.

"You watch where I'm going. I don't calculate trajectories."

"Not successfully, anyway. You know, people like you would starve in the jungle if there weren't someone around to invent engineering and agriculture."

"And people like you would starve if there weren't someone to inspire the people who do the actual work. I've never been on a farm, but I'm guessing they don't keep their spirits up by singing propositions of Euclid all day."

Graveling took a step closer. "My grandfather was a farmer, Hopkins."

"Good. You may not have grasped my point, but I was comparing both of us unfavorably to any average laborer."

It sank in, and his expression changed a little. "Oh. Well—good, then." Further rejoinders failed us, and he strode off down the hall; but I had a moment in which to reflect that I was beginning to like this guy.

Then Sean came along, and all coherent thought ended. "Hopkins-san!" he shouted. "Let us drink tea and commit seppuku!"

"I'm a coffee man, heavy cream and sugar, and hold the hara-kiri." With eight precious minutes of break remaining to us, we headed for the cafeteria.

"Hey, so, what happened with the lit mag yesterday?"

"Actually, it might end up being pretty cool. I've got this idea for a poem, and—man—I haven't been this excited about writing anything for a long time. Maybe ever."

"Huh. I can't help wondering which part of your body Sylvia snipped off to make her voodoo doll."

"I'm serious." I started dumping sugar into my coffee. "This whole 'staff poet' gig may just work out after all."

"Are you gonna want some coffee in that morass of sweeteners?"

I slurped placidly. "Nope."

"Anyway, keep rockin' the poetry, by all means. Just don't let psycho-lady push you around."

"Aw, she's not so bad."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Don't even start. She's not my type."

"You don't have a type. You've never dated."

"Unless you count my torrid affair with your mom."

"Oops—you've just uttered my activation phrase." He set down his tea and started leaping from table to table, shrieking, "The Red-coats are coming! The Red-coats are coming!" I pitched in by singing, "Rule, Britannia" at the top of my lungs until the lunch-ladies shooed us away.

Thereupon, we ventured forth to the mystical realm of Commander Mark. I don't remember what we did in his class that morning, although it must have been awesome because it was Commander Mark; my only memory is of the deepening and ramifying poem. By this time it had a title, "Jack Tar's Woe," and I knew exactly how many stanzas it was to contain and (roughly) what task each stanza must accomplish. Perfect little word-combinations were coming to me in spurts, but I still had to carve a path through the chaos of the unsaid before they could be maneuvered; and then I had to haul them, like the blocks of the Giza pyramids, into place. It was an incredibly intense exertion, and by lunchtime (which flickered by unnoticed) I was physically weary with it. Yet it was also a sacred and luminous joy.

At day's end, I went straight home and smashed through my homework, then cracked open a Dr. Pepper, found some chips, and unwound with some mindless video games until suppertime. After the meal, I shut my door and wheeled the cosmos into my work-place. Everything was now set. All that remained was the composing of a few key lines which I had bracketed off with, "expl. about eels" or "insert soliloquy here." Dr. Frankenstein was I, sewing together the pieces and awaiting the thunderbolt.

It was well past midnight when I finished. Too fatigued to edit or even proof-read, I flopped into bed with my clothes still on. At least I knew what I'd be wearing tomorrow.

Tomorrow came, and it was a more relaxed day now that the fever of the forge had faded; but the glow remained. I spent that evening and the next tinkering with the finish, and pronounced "JT's Woe" complete late Thursday night. Sean and I spent our weekend reading the classics and building orphanages—okay, no, we spent it blowing up digital zombies. On Monday afternoon, I returned to Mrs. Hennessey's room for the weekly conclave.

To her credit, Sylvia had not badgered me about my work since the last meeting. As we gathered today, she consulted calmly with each of the others in turn. Lily was there this time, and had some good photos to contribute. Tommy had most of his story written, Maven had already submitted the article we were going to run in this issue, and there were a couple of free-lancers present who occasionally gave us pieces as well. Nick, another sophomore, was on cover design duty and reported that the work was progressing apace. Once everyone else had spoken, Sylvia turned to me. "All right, Hopkins. As this will be your first issue with us, I hope you've got something impressive to bring you out of the gate."

I smiled modestly and handed her a single type-written sheet. She took it with impassive mien and glanced through the first few lines; then she set it down and hunched over it for a minute or two while the room sat quiet. At length her face rose again, and it wore an actual smile. "Wow, Joey. This is fantastic. I'm impressed."

"Thanks."

There was a clamor of "lemme see's," and Sylvia handed the sheet to Maven. "I don't know why you fought this for so long. You've obviously got a gift."

"It was really hard, Sylvia."

"It'll get easier. I expect something as good or better, next month."

"Well, dude," Tommy said with a big grin, "it looks like you've been—*inaugurated!*" Then he flung back his head and wailed with laughter.

I grinned back at him. "Bring on the entrails."

### 3: Training

He was right; it did get easier. Over the next few weeks, I produced several quite creditable little works (though I say it who shouldn't). We ran one of my humorous pieces in the February issue, and it turned out to be extremely popular with our schoolfellows. Then in March I did another serious one, and I started getting compliments in the halls.

Interestingly, one of the nicest remarks—or, at any rate, one of the most gratifying—came from my physicist foemen. The March poem contained a couplet about the cosmic order: *The universal mathematic, leavened / By holy unheard harmonies of Heaven*. The theme was that the world was a kind of symphony, with every soul playing a variation on the divine leitmotif. Not a ground-breaking idea, but nonetheless worth saying for having been said before. A few days after that month's issue came out, Graveling and Zahn passed me in the cafeteria and the latter turned on me abruptly and said, "Hey, Hopkins—you're almost making sense."

"Quite well, thanks for asking. And how are you today?"



“He’s talking about that poem you did,” Graveling supplied. “It *sounded* like you were saying that the universe was based on mathematics, but we figured we might be reading too much logic into it.”

I shrugged. “Math is music in numbers; poetry’s music in words. I hate to say it, boys, but we are in fact on the same side.”

Zahn looked unhappy about it, but Graveling came close to cracking a smile. “Only because you’re a tiny bit less dumb than you come across.”

“Don’t say that too loud. My editor will start tapping you for blurbs.”

By early April, I was feeling really good about the whole poet thing—even developing a suspicion that my path in life might just involve rhyme and meter after all. That was when I smashed head-on into my first major failure.

Easter was late that year. The *Augury*’s next issue was due out almost as soon as we came back from the break, and I thought it would be nice to write a poem about the holy day. I came home on Friday with a whole week of Easter vacation ahead of me, filled with plans for cranking out epic poetry and defeating the pixilated monstrosities that had kidnapped the princess yet again. I spent the evening poring over a blank sheet, scribbling the occasional line and scribbling it back out; but that didn’t concern me, as I had discovered that my best work often bloomed from such unpromising soil. The next morning I read a bunch of poetry in the hopes of priming the pumps, then took another stab at writing something—still to no avail. I decided my faculties must be fatigued after mid-terms, and resolved to depart from the literary sphere altogether until Monday.

So, I cruised on over to the Crusoes’ house (Sean’s place, that is). My big, loud friend was the third of seven young Crusoes, four of whom were as big and loud as he was. The eldest and the youngest were girls: Veronica, who was now a junior at Notre Dame, and Mary, who was three or four grades below Noelle at St. Francis. Ronny was rather a heart-breaker (my first crush, in fact), and had the sweetest temperament you’d ever care to encounter; Mary was shaping up to have her sister’s looks and her brothers’ disposition, and was certain to be a handful for any young man caught in her path. Danny, Sean’s older brother, was in the Marines, and the other lads—Terry, Will, and Timmy—were spaced out over about half a dozen years behind us.

Mama C. greeted me at the door with a big hug. She was a plump, bustling lady of the sort that naturally attracted strays; every time a Crusoe brought home a friend, he or she became a de facto Crusoe. The man of the clan was a construction foreman by trade, the biggest and loudest of the lot and jollier than St. Nicholas after a bowl of spiked eggnog. I could tell he wasn’t home yet by the mere fact that his voice, audible from any corner of the house, was not to be heard. “Hiya, Mama,” I said, smiling.

“Hello, Joey dear. Come in, come in! Sean’s in the shower; the boys’ve been at it again. He’ll be out in a bit. Would you like some tea? You drink too much soda, you know; it’s not good for you.”

It was ultimately futile to decline anything offered by Mama C.—she would have made a fortune as a card dealer in Vegas. I took the tea and told her about my week and my current writing project, and she was just telling me about the latest depredations of her litter when the main subject of the tale walked into the kitchen.

“Yo, Joe!” he proclaimed, and we bumped fists.

“I hear you’ve been roughing up the chillins again.”

“Gotta protect my status quo! I’m the alpha now, baby.”

Sean and his brothers engaged in some pretty violent wrestling matches on an almost daily basis. Their father made no attempt whatsoever to prevent this, but had at least confined them to the basement where the walls could take a pounding and the furniture was expendable. I’d gotten sucked into quite a few of these conflicts myself over the years, and although I had never yet won a match, it had done a great deal for my physical confidence.

“I hope you’re not too tired to combat the rising peril of the Ogre-lord.”

“Nonsense! I’m officially warmed up. Let’s do this thing.”

We dug some Cokes out of the fridge, heedless of Mama C.’s admonitions, and headed for Sean’s room to work out our adolescent frustrations upon the enemies of justice. Terry stuck his head in after a few minutes and said,

“Hey, Joey. I thought I heard you in here. Wanna wrestle?”

“Sean Blaisius Crusoe is my acting representative in these matters, young Terrence. If he has defeated you—I have defeated you.”

“Psssh, yeah.”

“Come in and shut the door or go away and shut the door, ass,” Sean growled.

Terry sighed and took a chair. “You know you can get an extra life in the squid room, right?”

Soon all the brothers Crusoe were piled in there with us, and not long afterwards Mary pushed her way in as well. “Why in tarnation did you run into those spears?” she demanded at one point—a maid of no more than ten winters, mind you—when I had suffered a particularly ignominious demise.

“It’s all part of my grand scheme,” said I, with fathomless tranquility.

“Yeah, your grand scheme to suck,” Will put in.

“Silence, knaves,” Sean commanded. “You are as the buzzing of flies to us.”

At length, Mr. Crusoe came home and we were all bidden out to the dining room for supper. Mama C. was more straightforward than my own mother: any more than five people at the table meant pizza. It was actually rare to see the whole family gathered thus, as the kids were endlessly busy with their own comings and goings—sports, theater, vocational auto maintenance, Taekwondo, Irish dancing, and general hullabaloo. “So, Joey!” Mr. Crusoe boomed. “How’s the writing coming along?” He loved my humorous stuff; apparently he had a copy of my February poem on his door at his latest site.

“Pretty well, sir. I’m trying to cook up something special for Easter.”

“Good! Good for you. Let us know how it turns out.”

“Will do.”

I spent the weekend at Sean’s and returned to Hopkins Hall late Sunday. After bantering with my sister for a few minutes, I retired to my chambers and resumed the mantle of the wordsmith. At last, as I had hoped, the powers of creation seemed to have aligned in my favor, and I wrote four or five stanzas before I paused to re-read. Upon inspection, however, they proved uninspired: not bad, just not especially good. Anyone might have written them. I hesitated a bit, then salvaged one line that had a nice ring to it and scratched out the rest. Round two: I got about twenty lines in and finally had to admit to myself that I was clearly writing a Christmas poem here. It got the axe. After another hour of this, I went out and watched cop shows with Mom for a while. Then I returned, wrote some more and deleted some more, and finally went to bed.

The whole rest of the week was like that—long periods of dissipation followed by spurts of mediocrity. I ended up with about ten lines that were decent, culled from about twenty whole poems that were wretched, but they were all in different rhyme schemes and metrical styles, and could by no labors be grafted together. In the end, I punched my wall and declared the whole thing hopeless.

Monday’s meeting rolled around, and I slumped into my seat in quiet despair. Everyone else submitted their glittering successes, and I slid a poem across the table into the stack. Sylvia picked it up and read it through quickly. “Excellent, as always. Thank you, Joey.”

I mumbled something.

“What’s that?” She peered at me. “Hey—are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I just. . . I really wanted to do an Easter poem.” I had given up the struggle and exhumed something I wrote in late January. It was a good poem. It just wasn’t *the poem*.

“Writer’s block, huh?”

“I dunno. I guess.”

“Well. For what it’s worth, I’m very happy with your contribution here. Anyway, now you’ve got a whole year to write something for next Easter.”

“Thanks, Sylvia.”

She gave me that smile of hers. “Any time.”

In May I did another silly poem, which was very well received by our readers. When the time came for the last issue of the school year in June, I thought I might coast by with yet another one. But this time, that lovely young thorn in my heart put forth her editorial authority and nixed my tetrametric retrospective on the history of Scottish were-sheep.

“Yes, Joey, it’s very funny. Maybe we’ll run it in September. But this is the last hurrah for your junior year. Don’t you want to do something a little more significant?”

“Not really, no.”

“Tough. You’re doing a serious poem for our June issue, and you’ve got three days to do it in. You’ll thank me when it’s over.”

“If by ‘thank’ you mean ‘wish I could disembowel’ . . .”

She leaned forward and held my gaze intently. “Look—six months ago, you didn’t want to write poetry at all. Turns out you’re not only great at it, but you love it. Don’t you?”

I sighed. “I suppose.”

“Then trust me. Go home and write something meaningful. Something you have to work for. Grow.”

Well, I did trust her; but I didn’t go home. Instead I hopped in my trusty old Civic (Dave by name) and went for a long drive. A great many things went through my mind, in no particular order, but I didn’t really think about any of them—just watched them go by like the darkening road signs outside in the gathering fog of dusk. At last I parked by the shores of Lake Evendim, and walked in the sand beneath the summer stars. Something meaningful. My last hurrah.

It was only junior year, I reflected. A very small change, another bend in the rushing watercourse of time. Next year, a greater change—from the lords of our school to the doe-eyed neophytes of the larger world beyond. A little death, a birth into a mysterious new existence. The end of our current year brought us closer to the end of next year, our senior year. Each day—each moment, even the time taken by this very thought—brought us closer to the next great bend in the river, and just a little closer to the absolute cataract that poured forever out of time into the sea.

This time it wasn’t like “Jack Tar’s Woe.” I wasn’t suddenly hit with a blaze of inspiration. Instead I seemed to become gradually aware of something colossal standing all around me—like a man lost in thought, slowly realizing he’s wandered out of the woods into the ruins of an ancient castle. I drove straight home, wrote all night, and found Sylvia first thing in the morning to hand her my final poem as a junior at St. J. It was called “The Path,” and it was my first serious stab at free verse.

*Sempiternally the time-wheel turns, and death and life revolve,  
And nothing seems to change, and nothing seems to change—  
But a wheel revolves in order to advance.  
All nature hurtles forward, blind and helpless in the grooves of time,  
Yet one small beast can pause the ponderous flux, the entropy stampede,  
And like a seraph rise to heights unguessed, to glimpse the path behind us and before.  
Clay-scion, baked by heaven-fire; in the world, not of the world,  
Beholding from afar the destined portals where the wheel-turn bears us to  
(By time destroyed and by destruction born).  
So let us step out of the unbending track into the clearing, this supernal glade,  
Where you in my future and I in your past meet in a disconnected present,  
And let us celebrate together  
The passing of another year, the birthing of another year,  
For every moment brings us closer to that which lies beyond the road of years.*

Sylvia liked it. Our June issue came out the day before finals. Then we had two long and hideous days of tests, and then there was one last morning, a half-day for the clearing out of lockers and the turning in of books and what-not. By ten o'clock that morn, I was as keyed up as everyone else: one more hour—no, fifty-nine more minutes—and the summer was ours. All was sailing smoothly along, with nary a wisp on the vista; and then, from the cerulean calm, there came the lightning strike.

As we were sitting in homeroom organizing the textbooks that we would soon bequeath to next year's crop of juniors, the PA crackled into life. "Joseph Hopkins. Joseph Hopkins. Please report to the principal's office. Joseph Hopkins."

"Oooh, busted!" Sean observed with his trademark subtlety. "They must've found out about the orphans you poisoned for their gold."

"If I go down, I'm taking you with me." Curious, but not alarmed, I headed for the office. Miss Nancy the secretary smiled and waved me by her desk to Fr. Brown's room: the office within the office, as no one ever called it until this very moment. I knocked and was bidden inside.

The padre was a little fellow, somewhere in his sixties, with a quietly intense presence of kindly wisdom. If the tales were true, he had been a missionary in the Soviet Union during the worst of the persecutions, and had even met Pope John Paul II on a handful of occasions. Some might have thought his current place as the principal of a small parochial school was a sort of pre-retirement retirement, but he took it very seriously and had brought St. J back from the brink of financial dissolution within a few years of taking the helm, just under a decade previously. He rose courteously from behind his desk as I entered and offered me a chair.

"Thank you, Father," I said, sitting down. I had met him as a freshman, of course, and had exchanged amiable words with him several times over the past three years; but we weren't particularly close. I wondered what this was about, but it seemed impolite to rush him.

"So," he said, sitting back down as well, "how has your year been, my friend?"

"Oh, er, pretty good, I think. I mean, I think I'm getting a C in Pre-Trig, but other than that, I, you know, I think I did pretty well."

"Excellent. I understand you had a bit of a rivalry with Steven Graveling." His tone was grave, but there was mirth in his eyes.

"Well, I wouldn't—I mean, it wasn't anything serious." *How in the world does he know about that?*

"Good. I believe Mr. Graveling has actually grown rather fond of you, although I doubt he would admit as much."

"He's a good guy. I feel like we've gotten to the point that we're more bantering than bickering."

He nodded. "You're a magnanimous young man, Joey. For someone your age, just discovering the extent of his gifts, you show remarkably little arrogance."

"I'm, uh—I'm still working on that. Most of my friends are bigger than me."

He laughed merrily. "Believe me, I know what you mean. Five foot four—it does tend to humble one somewhat. Although of course, human nature and Satan's cunning being what they are, there's always a temptation to compensate with intellectual pride. I trust you're aware of the peril."

I nodded. It'd never occurred to me before, but what do you say?

"I've been reading your work in the *Augury*. It's extraordinarily impressive for a high school student. I hope you don't mind my asking, but have you given any consideration to how you might develop your talents in the future?"

"Oh—definitely. I mean, I—I figured I would sort of—study things and then. . . Okay, no. I really haven't thought about it much."

"That's nothing whatsoever to be embarrassed about. It would be nice if we could all step out of high school into college and out of college directly into our life's vocation; but sometimes the path is a very great deal rockier than

that. To speak in truth, my friend, I suspect that the Lord has some rather special expectations for you and will therefore be particularly hard on you in the years to come.”

“That’s a little ominous, Father.”

He shrugged. “Such is the nature of an omen. What are your plans for the summer?”

This conversation was a maze. “My—plans? I usually work at Papa Frank’s Diner in the summer. Other than that. . .” I trailed off, and a grisly surmise came into my fervid brain. “Why?”

“Joey, I think you should take a summer course at Winchester University. My very good friend Dr. Claviger teaches a six-week poetry seminar there and I feel strongly that it would be of the utmost value to you. The credits will be transferable to any college, and the class will be a laurel in your transcript—but more importantly, Dr. Claviger will almost certainly be able to help you grow as a poet.”

Why did everybody want me to grow? Frankly, I thought I was pretty good already. “I don’t know if I can afford it.”

He smiled. “I’ve taken the liberty of showing the good doctor your latest contribution to the *Augury*. You already have a spot in the class reserved, and tuition waived—partially as a favor to me, and partially because he knows potential when he sees it.”

I stared at him.

“Take the class, son. It’s only two hours a day, for a grand total of thirty days. With a little overtime, you can make that up in a week at Papa Frank’s. Take a master. Hone your skills.”

“I’ll—I’ll think about it,” I said heavily; but I already knew I would take the stupid class. I’m a sucker for priestly advice.

So! We wrapped up our final day and headed for home, and I had three weeks of indolence before being waylaid by more schooling. Sean and I wasted time together with the rigor and acumen of old professionals, and I slung pasta at the diner four days a week to fund my unnatural lust for junk food and Dave’s natural lust for gasoline. Report cards rolled in, and I did better than I’d expected: a B- in Pre-Trig, and that was my lowest grade. Noelle did much better than me, because—well—she’s much smarter than I am. But she had enough tact not to rub it in.

“What kind of a course do you think it’s gonna be?” she asked (again) on the morning of my first class, as I was trying to get my socks on. She was fascinated by Fr. Brown’s intervention in my literary career.

“I don’t know, little grotesquerie. Probably just a lot of reading and writing. How else do you get good, except by practice?”

“Hey, you sounded like Dad just then.”

“Stuff it, Noelle.”

“It was a compliment,” she said, sounding injured.

I kissed her forehead and grabbed my bag. “I’ll see you tonight.”

“Good luck!”

Winchester U. was a small campus about twenty miles outside of town. I had done some perfunctory reconnoitering the week before, so I at least knew what building to go to. Things were quiet in the July heat as I paced across the quad beneath the evergreens. Duffman Hall was an old and venerable brick building, a trifle weathered but with an air of enduring hard times with geologic patience. I headed up the stairs and down the hall and stepped into Room 16B, ready to be bored.

The room itself was too collegiately standard to bear much description—desks, windows, blackboard, podium. Dr. Claviger wasn’t in yet—I was a few minutes early—but five of my fellow students were lounging about as I came in, and they were right in the middle of some kind of word game. A red-headed guy sitting on top of his desk was just saying, “There was once a young lass from Peru”—and as he finished speaking, he made a throwing gesture with his hand as if tossing a ball across the room.

The heavy-set girl at whom he had aimed raised her hands to catch the idea, hesitated for a couple of seconds,



and then said, “Who desired to be trained in kung-fu.” Then she repeated the tossing gesture towards a Slavic-looking fellow at the back.

He caught it and said, “So she learned drunken style,” and passed it back to the red-head.

Red thought briefly and added, “And she said with a smile—” Then he turned toward the door and heaved his arm at me like a man lobbing a grenade.

Instinctively, I mimicked the catching motion. A few seconds went by. Ten eyes watched me with amused expectation. I opened my mouth and out popped, “I could drink Bruce Lee under the loo’?”

The room erupted in applause. “Not bad, new kid!” cried Red. “Toss it back.” I cocked my arm to throw, but he interrupted, “No, no, no, start it off first.”

“Er—there once was a man from Zimbabwe.” I tossed the nascent limerick to the heavy-set girl, who laughed and came back with, “Who liked to eat corn on the cobwe.”

She passed it to another girl, who said, “He spat out his corn,” and passed it to the Slavic guy, who said, “One atypical morn,” and passed it right back to me.

I cogitated for an instant and concluded, “And his grandmother called him a slobwe.”

They clapped again, and I found myself laughing as well. “You got the moves, my man,” Red approved. “What’s your name?”

I took a desk. “Hopkins. Joey Hopkins.”

“I’m Gene. This here’s Danielle, Fred-O, Pavel, and Foxy Roxy; but any of us’ll answer to ‘hey!’”

Danielle, she of the “corn on the cobwe” line, asked, “Do you go to Winchester?”

“No, I’m about to be a senior at St. John Vianney. My principal thought I should take a class with Dr. Claviger.”

“Wow, you must be smart. We’re all fixin’ to be sophomores here. Dr. C. taught us the limerick game last semester.”

At these words, as if summoned by a conjuror, the doctor himself walked in. “Let us begin,” he said, instantly, before even closing the classroom door. Without actually getting to their feet, everyone nevertheless snapped to attention, and I found myself fumbling for a pen and taking rapid notes before I had a chance to form any impression of my new poet-sensei.

“Art is the pursuit of truth through beauty,” he said, moving to the podium. A quick glance revealed him to be tall and lean, silver-haired and academically dressed, and somewhere in the neighborhood of Fr. Brown’s age. He spoke evenly and with great assurance. “Poetry is the art of refining words to their purest and most powerful form. A strong poem can alter the mind and heart of a free-willed human being; and that, my friends, is nothing more, less, nor other than magic.”

He strode to the blackboard and began dashing out names. Most of them I recognized, but there were a few I’d never heard of. “In this class, you will take a few toddling steps towards discovering your own writer’s voice. You will read voluminous amounts, by numerous poets with widely differing styles, and you will begin as all learning begins, by imitation. Like Edison, you will discover ten thousand approaches which fail to illuminate, and at last—perhaps—you will gain a glimpse of the one approach that may someday succeed.” He whirled back toward us. “Time is short! We commence with the master himself: William Shakespeare. For the next three days you will be writing. . . sonnets.”

I barely managed to suppress a groan. *Sonnets*, I thought. *Why did it have to be sonnets?*

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The next few weeks exist in my memory as a perfect cinematic training montage. The days went swirling by, ababble with endless reams of poetry in all imaginable shapes and sizes, and the interstices teemed with Dr. Claviger’s terse pronouncements of meaning and verity. Somehow he always made us feel that time was running out, that we

weren't writing fast enough. "Remember that truth and falsehood are at war in our universe. At any moment you may be called upon to strike a blow."

After we finished studying sonnets, we wrote clerihews, a comic form invented by E.C. Bentley, close friend of the great G.K. Chesterton. My best one went:

*Erwin Schrödinger  
Couldn't be forbodinger.  
He boxed up a feline  
And split the space-time continuum  
Into A-line and B-line.*

Next we did grommets, a form invented by Dr. Claviger himself: a regular haiku—three lines of five, seven, and five syllables—but each line was a self-contained palindrome. I wrote on Lady Macbeth:

*Red dame, none madder  
Doom-gal on a no-lag mood  
Work raw, li'l war-krow!*

Then we got to learn about double dactyls, invented by the American poets Anthony Hecht and John Hollander. This was my favorite of all, and I wrote quite a few—but the most relevant one went like this:

*Higgledy-piggledy  
Training in poetry  
Dactylic push-ups and  
Limerick laps.  
Building up brain-muscle  
Verboaerobically  
Right up until we all  
Fry a synapse.*

"This is just boot camp," he told us once, sternly. "Don't imagine that when you finish this class you will have accomplished something; this is merely your preparation for accomplishments to come. A poet who studies only poetry is no poet—you must go forth from here and study science and history and philosophy and romance and sports and music and beer. Thus comes wisdom, and if you have power without wisdom then you're only a loony on a soapbox in the park. And power? That comes through living life—through fun and faith and fighting, and travel and love, and most especially through pain. If you have wisdom without power then you're only an entomologist, pinning dead specimens to an empty page."

I could say with total certainty that I'd never had a teacher like this before.

Meanwhile, the summer went along in the usual way, with this new plane of perception oddly juxtaposed on top of my daily rounds. I wrought verse in my head while bussing tables at Papa Frank's, and I spent hours driving through the countryside with my conscious brain switched off, simply being in the world. Sean, a closet intellectual who pretended to take nothing seriously, once remarked, "This class is a pretty big deal to you, huh?"

We were downtown with a couple of other friends at the time, poking around some abandoned buildings. No one had mentioned writing of any kind, in any connection. "What makes you think the class is a big deal?" I asked, puzzled.

“Because you’re speaking in iambic pentameter. You’ve been doing it for the last hour straight.”

“. . . Oh.” We were doing blank verse that week. (To this day, while Tennyson isn’t my favorite poet overall, “Ulysses” remains my favorite single poem.) “Thanks. I didn’t even realize.”

“I figured. Whattaya say we have a *Magnum, P.I.* marathon this weekend— disengage your literary faculties for a while?”

“It’s only two more weeks.”

“Yeah, sure. I just hope you don’t cut your ear off before then.”

“Dude, I’m not a painter.”

At that moment, Bobby Sanger came lunging laboriously around the corner at us, firing twin imaginary handguns in extreme slo-mo. We had no choice but to respond in kind, and the deadly dance was joined. Many of our imaginary comrades fell that day.

In the fifth week, we were finally greenlit for free verse. “Young poets like free verse because they think it requires no effort,” Dr. Claviger said irritably. “They don’t grasp the enormity of rigor and erudition that underlies the work of someone like Eliot. You can’t transcend the rules until you’ve mastered them—until they’ve become not second nature but first nature. That’s why we cut our teeth on sonnets. But the time for free verse has come.” (I think it took a conscious exertion for him not to conclude that sentence with, “you maggots!”) “Let’s begin.”

I wrote three new poems that week, and recycled an unpublished one I’d written back in March (thrift, Horatio). By the end of it, I was just about through with writing: I’d reached the point of absolute fatigue, where all the fibers break down. Of course, that’s exactly where the work gets done. He gave us a single assignment for the weekend: one last poem, in any style and on any subject we chose. “Take Monday off,” he added. “On Tuesday we start our last week. We’ll spend it sharing our work—yes, even I’ll write something—and critiquing one another. Thus far, no one’s seen your words but me; next week, everyone sees everyone’s. So put your hearts into it.”

As we were filing out of the room, Gene called us all together in the hallway. “Guys—I think a brain-storming session is in order here. We’re all gonna be seeing each other’s stuff anyway; I say we grab some chow and bounce some ideas around.”

To this, all agreed. We fell back and regrouped at the nearest Denny’s, and there over coffee and grease we laid our plans. Pavel talked about reverting to the sonnet form for some old-fashioned love poetry. Gene and Roxy wanted to try more free verse. I was thinking of doing double dactyls again—maybe chaining two or three together into a longer piece.

“Honestly,” Danielle said, “Dr. Seuss is still my favorite—I don’t care what anyone says. I think I’ll try doing something in his, you know, his idiom. Might even illustrate it.”

“I didn’t know you could draw,” said Roxy.

“I can’t! Not even a little. But hey, no guts, no glory.”

“I can draw,” Pavel offered. “I could be your staff artist, if you like.”

“That’d be fun. Although I don’t know if we’re allowed to collaborate.”

Gene shrugged. “He never said we couldn’t.”

“Wait a minute,” I said slowly. “Wait a minute. What if we—we, the six mighty chosen ones of 16B—what if we all collaborated? What if we got together and did one long corporate poem?”

Pavel looked skeptical. “I don’t know, man. Writers and artists working together is one thing, because they each have separate fields, but I think composing poetry is kind of a lone wolf gig.”

“You’re absolutely right, but remember what the doc says: this is just boot camp here. After next week, we’ll go on to start writing our own new stuff, but for now we’re still doing training exercises. We should try things that force us to look at the writing process differently. Lemme tell you how I got started in all this.” Briefly, I described Sylvia and the little sonnet we made back in Commander Mark’s class. “Why do you think Dr. C. taught us the limerick game? To help us look at a developing work from a perspective other than our own.”

There was a short silence. “You know,” Danielle said after a few moments, “that’s actually a pretty good point.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Fred said, frowning. “But how are we going to find something we can all agree to write about?”

“We’ll have Cindy pick a topic.” Cindy was our waitress. “By the way, you never said what you were planning for your poem.”

He played with his knife. “Ever hear of Allen Cromwell?”

“Nope.”

Danielle scowled. “I’ve heard of him. He’s an up-and-coming poet from somewhere out west. He writes for *The Dark* and weirdo magazines like that—real creepy stuff.”

“He might be creepy, but he’s got power,” Fred retorted. “He stays in your head.”

At that moment, Cindy came back to refill our coffee cups. “Hey, can you do us a favor?” I asked.

“Sure, hon. What do you need?”

“We need a topic. Any topic at all—first thing that pops into your head.”

“Um. . . okay. How about that salt shaker?”

“Perfect! Thank you, Cindy.”

She smiled. “Glad I could help.”

“So there it is,” I said. “In the whole history of human language, has there ever been a poem about a salt shaker constructed by not one but half a dozen trained, expert writers?”

“Quite probably not,” Gene admitted. “What the heck, I’m in.”

Danielle nodded. “Me too.”

Pavel and Roxy acquiesced, and the five of us eventually badgered Fred into joining our crack team. We spent the next couple of hours kicking ideas around, went home, and returned to the same Denny’s the next day. By Saturday afternoon, we had a more or less finished product. I fear to allow it to fall into the hands of posterity, but I suppose I can reveal the first few lines to give a general impression. They were written by myself, Danielle, and Fred in turn, and went: “*It is an ancient Salt-shaker, it stoppeth one of three. / It flabberflams and swogglebams the very sanity. / And like the hopes of mortal man, it shaketh aft agley.*” The poem itself wasn’t fantastic, but we ended up having a lot of fun with it. Pavel even illustrated it, anthropomorphizing our shaker into a rather debonair little sodium dispenser, replete with top hat and cane (the latter of which I feel sure contained a hidden sword). I spent Sunday and Monday carousing with the Crusoes, and on Tuesday we returned to face the judgment of Dr. Claviger.

He himself had written a grommet about mummies, which he transcribed on the board to start things off. We spent about ten minutes discussing the merits and flaws of the piece, and of the form as a whole; he admitted that its chief use was as an exercise for the brain, and that it was unlikely ever to produce immortal gems of literature. “Still,” he said, “it’s fun; and let us never forget the importance of plain, simple fun when it comes to reading and writing. And now, if we’ve finished with my little contribution—who would like to be the next to share his or her handiwork with the class?”

The others had agreed that, as the collaboration was my idea, the onus of reading should be mine. I had accepted with due solemnity, and I now came to my feet to read “The Shaker” aloud. “This is by all of us,” I said by way of introduction, and that seemed to catch the doctor’s attention. It was three pages long, so I read it through and then brought it up to his desk so he could peruse it at leisure (and gaze upon the Pavel-drawn visage of Rufus Shakeadoo). His head was bowed, and his shoulders were trembling slightly. I wondered if he might be having an apoplectic fit.

Then he raised his face, and it was bright red with merriment. “That is one of the stupidest poems I have ever heard. Let me see if I can guess who wrote what.”

We spent the rest of that class and the next analyzing the various masters whose techniques we had co-opted, and which parts of our poem worked and which didn’t, and why. Dr. Claviger was satisfied with our efforts—indeed,

he remarked that we were the first class who had ever done such a thing. “Originality for its own sake is gibberish. But if you can find a new way to utter the old sagacities, then you’ve done something worthwhile.”

On Thursday he brought us pizza. “This is it,” he said. “No class tomorrow. Your grades will be emailed out by Monday, but I can tell you in advance that I’m very pleased with all of you. It’s been an excellent summer.”

So, we feasted and talked and laughed, and at last began to drift away. Soon only Gene, Danielle, and I remained, playing the old limerick game with the good doctor; and after I finished the last piece of sausage and green pepper, I too rose to depart.

“See you around, Joey,” Danielle said, and hugged me.

“Definitely. Take care.”

“Hey, before you go,” Gene said, “—There was once a young man from Sri Lanka.”

I smiled. “To whom all the Germans said *danke*. Dr. Claviger, thank you for everything.”

He took my hand in a firm grip. “Thank *you*, Joseph. You’re a hard worker, and you have tremendous talent. I’ll be watching the *Augury* with interest.”

“Yes, sir.”

Danielle added, “For he gave them all beer. . .”

“See ya, guys,” I said, and headed for the door.

Behind me, Gene shouted, “And good chocolates, bought dear—heads up, Hopkins!”

I didn’t even turn around: just slammed it over my shoulder like a backfist. “And the severed head of Willy Wonka.”

My training was complete.

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*Jamey Toner is the co-author of Brides of Christ, a picture book from the Benedictine Sisters of Mary Queen of Apostles. He was also involved in the creation of three beautiful children, although his wife did the lion(ess)'s share of the work. Toner can never be sufficiently thankful for these things, but he is working very hard at being still and knowing that God is God.*





# *FALLING WITH THE RAIN*

By Madeline Conner

“Can you pass the syrup, Margery?” Richard asked.  
“There you go. Calm down kids; Charles, stop hitting your sister. Laura, stop screeching.”  
Richard and Margery Bogsford’s house had been crowded ever since their son Toby and his family had come to live and work with them on the family farm.

“We have to get to those cows now, Toby, so let’s get a move on,” Richard said. They finished breakfast, and left the women-folk to do the dishes while they went out to start the long day’s work.

After the cows were milked, Richard went to pat his son on the back, but somehow his hand seemed to go right through him.

“That was strange,” he thought, and hesitantly tried again. This time nothing out of the ordinary happened, so he decided he must have imagined it and continued with his work. He did not mention the incident to his son, and soon forgot about it. “Can you fetch me the pitchfork, from the barn, please, Toby?” he asked when they had finished with the milking. Toby nodded and went off to get the pitchfork, but a moment later Richard realized that he himself was bringing the pitchfork from the barn. Toby was nowhere to be seen, not back in the barn, and not across the field towards the house.

“Well now, that’s curious. He doesn’t usually leave in the middle of a job.” Richard went back to the house to see if Toby was there. As he approached the house, he thought he saw Toby’s wife, Olivia, through the screen door, but inside he found no one. He made himself a cup of coffee and sat down in his living room chair. Glancing at the mantelpiece, he noticed that in the place where the family picture had been, there was only an empty frame. He blinked and looked again; it was as it always had been. He heard young Charles come stomping in.

“Charles,” Margery said from the kitchen.

“Huh, no one was in the kitchen a moment ago,” Richard thought.

“Take your boots off this instant, Charles,” Margery continued. “You know your mother has told you...”  
Richard got up and went to put his cup back in the kitchen. As he walked through the first floor, Margery’s voice grew fainter, and when he got to the kitchen, he found it empty.

“How many times have I told you to put your cup back in the kitchen?” came Margery’s voice from the living room. “Anyway, why are you in here? Toby has been waiting in the field for you for the past ten minutes.”

“I thought he came in here,” Richard called, looking at the cup in his hand.

“Nonsense,” said Margery, as she walked into the kitchen holding a big brown mug. They only owned one of those mugs, and Richard was holding it. He shuddered and put down the cup.

“I think I’m imagining things,” he said, and went to the door.

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Lying in bed that night, he considered the different unusual happenings, close to tears.

"I'm certainly imagining things," he thought. "But why? I just need some sleep. What's happening? No, no, I'm fine. Where's Margery? Where's Toby?" Outside the window, an owl called in the dark cloudy night. "But surely, surely I'm...dreaming. I'm...I don't know! It's probably a dream. Or a trick. They are here." But he got up and went downstairs and sat down in his chair.

"I must be going insane. My family is here. There's no question about it. I'm just imagining this; they're real," he repeated, in a vain attempt to convince himself. "Of course they're real." Yet, when he looked at the coffee table next to him, he saw that all the pictures of the family were gone: only frames, nothing else. "Impossible!" he exclaimed. He ran to the bedrooms; they were all empty. He went back to bed and lay in shock, not knowing what to think, unable to fall asleep. When at last he succumbed to exhaustion, his dreams were as strange as his waking thoughts.

Richard woke to the sound of rain on the roof, and a dull, sad feeling. He walked downstairs slowly, hoping desperately that he had dreamed the previous day's terrors, but no one was anywhere in the house.

"I can't believe it," he mumbled, sitting with his head in his hands. "I must be going insane. I'm just imagining this. They are real. They're here. I must be mad. Where are they?" The lowing of the cows reminded him that, mad or not, there was farm work to be done. He pulled on his boots and trudged out to the barn. Car headlights on the road nearby shone through the fog and drizzly damp as he plodded past the chicken coop, where the hens stood inside, peering into the rain, as if deciding whether it was too wet to go out.

"Be right there," he replied to their hungry clucking. "Wonder if I'm imagining my animals," he laughed gruffly, then sighed. "I'm not. Not imagining anything."

The rain had still not let up by the time he had finished his chores, so he waited in the barn as the storm got heavier. Thunder rumbled nearby, and lightning flashed over the now deserted road. The cows munched their hay calmly, and Mr. Boggsford stood in the big barn doorway, looking out at the downpour. As he stood by the cattle, he remembered his son's wedding, when they had danced in this barn. He thought of the family Christmas parties they'd had there. He remembered how his son had moved in with them, and how fun that had been, and Laura's birth soon after. He recalled when little Charles had been born, and the parties they had thrown on both occasions. He remembered the birthdays of the young grandchildren, and other joyful events, until he reached the end of the happy memories; then, for a moment, he thought he was dancing with them, with his whole family, up in the sky, but he had a terrible cold, dark feeling that told him that it was all imaginary, and suddenly he was falling, falling with the rain. He found himself lying on the cold barn floor, crying.

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Soon the thunder moved away, but the rain drearily continued. Mr. Boggsford realized that it was past noon, and went to the house to get some lunch. Back at the house, he wearily confronted the lonely years ahead of him.

"I can't believe it," he thought to himself. "But it must be true. Farewell," he whispered to the fading memories of his imagination.

"Richard?" he heard Margery calling him. "Richard," she said faintly, as if from far away.

"Be right there," he said, "but you won't."

Margery called again. The rain continued slowly.

"Richard!" Margery exclaimed. Richard felt like he was waking up. He was in bed and Margery was standing over him. As he looked at her, his vision wavered and, for a moment, it seemed as though he was viewing her reflection in water. The sun streamed in through the window. "It's 7:30; Toby and the cows are waiting. You need to get up."

He stared at her. "Margery. Are you-?"

“It’s about time you got up,” she repeated. He didn’t know what to make of it. She turned and left the room. He heard her walking down the hall, heard Olivia rattling pots and pans in the kitchen. He heard the children playing below his open window, and Toby whistling on the stairs.

“It’s impossible,” he thought. “They’re not real. Are they real? They are! They’re here! I was dreaming!”

“Margery,” he called, but there was no answer except the quiet, steady rhythm of falling rain.

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*Madeline Conner is a senior in high school, and can usually be found singing, reading, writing, or playing banjo.*



# *THE LAST DANCE OF MARILYN RODRIGUEZ*

By Hannah Simmons

**M**arilyn Rodriguez was turning 102. This was considered an impressive achievement, especially in her family where most people got sick or suffered unfortunate deaths before they reached the age of fifty. Some people thought the Rodriguez family was cursed, but Marilyn knew better. They were not cursed with anything except perhaps weak immunity and stupidity. Unlike many other people who married in, she had escaped both of these faults and was reaping the benefits. As it was, many people saw her as blessed or lucky. *Rubbish*, Marilyn thought. *I just worked harder to attain this. Most of them did not care.*

Her fingers trembled as she tied the red ribbon into her white hair. Years ago, she had twisted her long hair into elaborate buns or braids but recently she had found herself unable to do more than pull it back with a simple ribbon. Some days she struggled even to do that, but she would never allow anyone to help her. On days like that, she simply wore her hair down like a young child.

She turned to face her mirror. As a young woman she had been thought beautiful, and even in her old age she retained a kind of grace that many of her younger relations lacked. Her cheeks were wrinkled, and her eyelids sagged as if weary of looking at the world. Though cracked and dry, her lips still curled into an enchanting smile and her eyes sparkled with unspoken wit.

There was a timid knock on her bedroom door. Marilyn turned from the mirror. “Come in.” Her voice sounded frail in the ensuing silence. The door opened to reveal Evelyn, her granddaughter and caretaker, by name at least. Both of them knew that Marilyn was almost entirely independent still.

“Yes?”

Evelyn frowned as she caught sight of the dress Marilyn was wearing. “Why are you wearing that?” She asked.

Marilyn fixed her with a frosty stare. “This is my party dress. There is going to be a party, right?”

Evelyn scowled and tightened her grip on the doorknob, swinging the door gently backwards and forwards. “Of course, there is going to be a party! It’s just...that dress looks fifty years old,” she said defensively. Her eyes drifted to the open window behind Marilyn and her scowl deepened. Despite Evelyn’s best arguments, Marilyn would let the fresh air into her bedroom.

Marilyn saw her frown at the window and continued the conversation to avoid more conflict. “Well, *I* am over fifty. Now did you have something to tell me, or did you simply come in to criticize my taste in clothes?”

Evelyn sighed and turned away. “Everyone will be arriving soon. I just thought I’d make sure you were

ready.”

Marilyn gave her a frosty nod. She thought Evelyn was too nosy for her own good.

“I will be out in a minute.” She made sure to pronounce each word separately. *None of that slang of these days*, she thought. *Honestly, people are just being lazy*. Evelyn left the door open as she went. Marilyn turned back to the mirror.

Perhaps the blue dress was outdated with its ruffles and bows, but it had been very stylish when she first got it. *Besides*, she thought with a shake of her head, *I am outdated*. Even when she first bought it, her relatives had thought her vain. “No one over the age of fifty should be indulging in fancy dresses,” one particularly annoying cousin had said. Marilyn had laughed then as she did now. Even at fifty, she had been able to wear the dress as if she were in her early twenties; besides, her husband, Roberto, had loved the dress.

She had first worn it when she and Roberto went to a New Year’s Ball hosted by one of her nieces who had seemed to think that it was stylish to stay up to all hours of the night. Marilyn had thought the party overly loud and bright, *though perhaps*, she considered, *this was designed to help everyone stay up late*. Despite these distractions, Marilyn enjoyed herself and danced most of the night. She did so love to dance! A doorbell broke in on her happy reminiscences and she started slightly.

“Grandmother! They’re here!” Evelyn called from the kitchen. Marilyn turned slowly from the mirror. Now she had to go and smile for all her husband’s relatives who never came to see her except for her birthdays. Things were much easier when Roberto was alive. She bit back a sigh and walked out the door into the hallway. She had made one small concession to Evelyn in allowing her bedroom to be moved to the bottom floor; walking up the stairs had become hard on her knees.

In the hallway, Marilyn stumbled slightly and had to catch her balance on the wall. To think that these clumsy feet were the same feet that had won the dancing award in high school or had danced so blithely at that long-ago ball. Her dancing days were over. She regained her balance and kept walking. She could not give Evelyn the satisfaction of knowing exactly how hard walking had become. Already, she could hear Evelyn greeting the guests at the door.

When she entered the living room, she saw a chair set aside for her to sit in while she greeted the relatives. Marilyn stubbornly stood beside it. *I am not so tired as to need a chair yet*, she thought. *Nor do I wish to hasten the day I do*. Footsteps sounded in the hallway, and she summoned up a smile.

“Happy birthday, dearest Great Aunt,” simpered Virginia as she extended her hand cordially to Marilyn. As usual, Marilyn was shocked by the smoothness of her skin and delicacy of her touch; in her days, no woman had soft hands and pale skin. Women really worked then. Virginia lived off the money from her mother and had barely worked a week in her life.

Virginia swept over to sit next to her sister Abigail who looked exhausted; *probably stayed up late again watching one of those new movies*, Marilyn thought with a slight sniff. She had never found excitement in movies. Who would rather stare at a large screen for hours, watching other people live their lives, than go out and do it himself? She turned to greet the next relative, her youngest nephew, Mark.

“How do you feel?” he asked bluntly as he shook her hand. Marilyn stared coldly at him. He looked more tired and worn down than when she saw him last. It had been her last birthday; she never saw him in between. At least he never tried to fake his love for her.

“Good.” She removed her hand. A flicker of annoyance crossed his face, but he moved away with a smile as fake as Marilyn’s, only more obvious.

For the next half-hour, Marilyn greeted guests who seemed to have no real feelings for her and only came in the hope that someday they would be included in her will or perhaps hoping that some of her good luck would rub off on them. The only one of her relations whom she felt completely comfortable with was her great granddaughter, Iris, who was only seven and cared nothing for money. She dashed up to hug Marilyn and cried, “Happy birthday,



Nanna!” The smile that flickered across Marilyn’s face was indeed real, though it vanished quickly. Iris’s mother, Matilda, grimaced, though she quickly twisted it into a smile.

Evelyn hovered in the background, handing out tea to the relatives with cordial politeness. It was obvious that the relatives pitied her for having to take care of Marilyn. Apparently, Evelyn disliked this notion as much as Marilyn. *I do not need her*, Marilyn thought. *It is her own decision to stay. If she does not like it, she can leave.*

When Marilyn had shaken the last hand and been wished happy birthday by the last pretending relative, Evelyn stood up and announced that the cake would be served in the dining room. The relatives flooded from the room, keeping up an endless stream of chatter like the sound of breakers on a beach. Marilyn’s birthday was one of the few times every year that they all got together. Marilyn followed more slowly, her back aching slightly. She was beginning to regret not taking the chair left for her.

Iris led her to the head of the table and squirmed in the chair next to her. The relatives argued over the other seat next to Marilyn and her second cousin once removed, (*or was it her first cousin twice removed?* Marilyn wondered), Eunice, earned the honor by having the loudest voice and sassiest mouth. She gave a sickly smile at Marilyn and said in an overly loud whisper, “Don’t worry, cousin. I’m not going to annoy you. I shall be silent as a grave.” Marilyn graced her with a smile, though she sincerely doubted this. If Eunice had ever managed to be silent for longer than thirty seconds, Marilyn had yet to hear it. “Oooo,” cooed Eunice, turning toward the door. Following her gaze, Marilyn raised her eyebrows.

The doorway framed Evelyn carrying a chocolate cake crowned in flames. Several other relatives gasped and one giggled. Evelyn carried the cake over to where Marilyn sat and she saw that the cake was pierced with at least a hundred candles, and Marilyn had a feeling that if she were to count them there would be 102. She could not accuse Evelyn of doing anything improperly, even if her way of doing things sometimes irritated Marilyn.

The relatives sang happy birthday, their voices mingling with one another in a unification that was rare among them all. In their family it tended to be every man for himself, which perhaps also contributed to their young deaths. Marilyn listened to them singing and thought she could pick out their individual personalities in the way that they sang.

Iris’s voice warbled softly below the others, practically dancing through their words. Eunice belted out at the top of her voice, dominating the tune, driving everyone else at her own pace. Mark slyly inserted annoying changes and octaves with his deep bass voice. Underneath all of these, Evelyn’s steady voice could be heard gently guiding the tone of the song.

When the song ended, Evelyn stepped forward and handed Marilyn the cake knife. She sliced into the cake, noticing as she did so that her hand trembled slightly on the knife, something that she resented strongly. She placed the slices onto plates, which Evelyn whisked down to the other relatives.

Mark began stabbing his cake with his fork almost as soon as it touched the table. His eyes were down, and it couldn’t have been more obvious that he didn’t care at all about being there. Marilyn looked away as he jammed the first bite of cake into his mouth, spraying crumbs everywhere.

Iris began to eat the icing off the cake first, delicately scrapping it from the top and licking it off her fork. Her mother thought this was disgusting and reached for Iris’s hand to stop her. Thinking fast, Marilyn scraped the icing off her own slice and began to eat it the same way as Iris. The sugar seemed to explode in her mouth. She had never tasted this much pure sugar before. She caught Iris smiling at her and smiled back. Iris made it so easy to smile. Matilda withdrew her hand with a sour smile and returned to her own cake.

“Come, Evelyn! Sit with us,” Virginia simpered, gesturing to the empty seat between her and Abigail. Evelyn hesitated a moment, glancing at Marilyn as if wondering if she would need her. Marilyn gave her a gracious and regal smile. Evelyn sat with a thump in the chair.

“I say, sister.” Matilda leaned over and studied her younger sister’s face with something close to pity. Evelyn kept it impassive. “You look ill.” She lowered her voice and covered her mouth with her hand. “Is she over-using

you?”

Marilyn still heard and scoffed.

“I do not *use* Evelyn. I do not *need* her.” Everyone turned to face her. Mark was unable to disguise his skepticism. Virginia gave a polite cough. Anger flooded through Marilyn. She pushed her plate away. “I do not!” An idea struck her. “In fact, Evelyn should take a holiday. Go somewhere else for a change.” Evelyn looked as if she had been struck in the face. All the blood left her face, and she sat completely still.

Matilda leapt on it. “Yes, Evelyn. Come and stay with us. We are hosting a dance tonight. It will be good for you.” Evelyn whispered a thank you, but the mood of the party was destroyed. Marilyn was still boiling with anger that they thought she was overworking Evelyn, as if! Evelyn was quiet, too, and cleared away the plates almost as soon as they were empty. Now that the most important parts of the party were over, the rest of the relatives left quickly, with the exception of Iris and her mother who were waiting for Evelyn.

Marilyn waited in the front hall with them while Evelyn packed her bags. Iris prattled on about the dance. “There will be lots of pretty dresses and flowers and music. Mother said I can stay up for a little so I can see the beginning. I can’t wait! I got a new dress and shoes and I know how to dance. Watch!” She executed a twirl which nearly knocked over a large vase of flowers standing on the side table. Matilda caught them and her eyes flashed.

“Stop annoying her, Iris.” At that moment, Evelyn appeared and all three vanished out the door, leaving Marilyn alone in her silent house. She stood there a moment, enjoying the utter silence.

“At last. A few days to do exactly what *I* want.” She started toward the back door and the garden but suddenly felt incredibly weak. Instead, she fell into the chair Evelyn had left for her earlier. Her weakness made her angry. If only she had half the energy of Iris! The thought of Iris brought to mind her childish prattle about that night’s dance. Marilyn’s heart leapt at the very idea of a dance. How she would love to go!

Then she made a decision. There was no Evelyn to stop her. She would go. She would enjoy one last night of freedom and dancing before her relatives imprisoned her in the house entirely.

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Marilyn looked at herself in the mirror one more time before leaving. At that moment, she saw the dress through Evelyn’s eyes. It *was* too outdated. She would stick out like a sore thumb at the dance. With a soft sigh, she picked up her sewing scissors and began cutting some of the ruffles and bows off until it was sleeker, like the modern dress that Matilda wore today. She took a reel of white lace that she had and would it around her waist to form a bow.

Opening her top dresser drawer, she pulled out the old makeup bag buried underneath her underwear. She couldn’t remember the last time that she had worn it—must have been years. Recently she had no need for it, but tonight she needed to blend in. Her eyes lit up at the sight of the lipstick and eyeshadow. Carefully, she put them on, making sure not to apply too much.

Stepping back, she was satisfied with the result. She seemed to have lost twenty years. Her eyes shone with a new light and a bewitching smile brightened her whole face. Her snow-white hair was the only remaining indication of her age.

Walking to the front hall, she took several flowers from the vase and twisted them into her hair. Her fingers seemed to remember the motion despite their recent struggles. The bright colors of the asters, irises, and lavender drew the eye away from her hair. Marilyn smiled at herself once more in the glass on the front door, then walked out into the street.

She managed to walk to the nearest bus station, though she was desperately out of breath when she arrived. She leaned against the signpost, closed her eyes, and breathed. She heard rather than saw the bus arrive. It groaned to a stop before her, gasping for air just like herself. Clutching her purse closely to her chest, she boarded the bus and handed her change to the driver.

She wove her way unsteadily to the back of the bus, trying to ignore the strange looks of the commuters who goggled at her fancy dress. In her seat, she tried to count the number of stops until she needed to get off, but even that effort was exhausting. *You need to conserve your strength*, she scolded herself. *It would be a shame to get all the way there and no longer be able to dance.* A sudden worry swept through her. She had been assuming it would be a large enough party that her relatives wouldn't notice her, but what if it was small? She crossed her fingers under her purse and prayed silently for a large party.

"Lark Parkway!" The driver called. Marilyn dragged herself to her feet and stumbled down the aisle. The bus stop was just around the corner from Iris's house according to the address on their Christmas cards. Marilyn's feet were getting weary as she walked up their lawn. Several other people were arriving at the same time. She didn't know any of them. Keeping her face low, she walked in with them so that Iris's father Lionel would not recognize her.

She gasped as she entered the house. She had not been in the house since Iris was born. They had converted their overly large living room into a ballroom, complete with orchestra, flowers, and chairs. The dancers filled the space and even spilled into the hallway, dining room, and yard. Marilyn pressed herself against the wall, soaking in the beauty of the scene. Her senses were overwhelmed. The swelling music waltzed around her until she felt dizzy. The scent of flowers and perfume nearly choked her. And the colors! Her eyes were drawn from the bright splash of a blue suit to a stunning yellow tie to a striking scarlet gown. Tears came unbidden to her eyes. How she had missed all of this.

Before she had a chance to do anything else, she felt someone tug her hand. Looking down, she saw Iris, who beamed up at her. Iris was looking especially like her name tonight in a brilliant purple dress with a white lace collar. She leaned in close to Marilyn to whisper, "I like your disguise, Nanna." Marilyn couldn't help giggling like a school-girl. Iris giggled back. "Will you dance with me, Nanna?" Iris asked.

Marilyn nodded her head. "It would be my honor." Iris led her into the middle of the room and began taking steps. She was obviously trying to copy the dancers around her but soon got bored of it and instead begged, "Spin me!" Marilyn obliged, spinning her around and around until she was just a purple blur squealing for joy. Iris eventually got dizzy and tried to show Marilyn some of her other moves. Marilyn got caught up in the music herself. She swayed in place, then executed a spin of her own. The exhilaration of that spin made her giddy. Her weariness slipped away from her. She was twenty-six again, dancing with her husband Roberto Rodriguez at the New Year's Ball.

Someone tapped her shoulder. She spun around and faced a young man in his late twenties. He had intelligent gray eyes and long brown hair. He bowed to her. "May I have the honor of the next dance?" Marilyn glanced at Iris, who grinned and wobbled unsteadily to the side. Facing her partner again, Marilyn gave a slight curtsy in return. Her knees had forgotten how to do it. They cracked and popped on the way down. He steadied her as she rose, then swept her farther onto the dance floor.

Over his shoulder, Marilyn suddenly saw Matilda looking at her. Before she had time to panic, Matilda's eyes panned past her. To her, Marilyn was just another dancer in the crowd. Breath came more easily to Marilyn. Her disguise worked.

Her new partner introduced himself as Joshua. He carried her lightly in his arms so that she barely felt like she was exerting any strength. Every step came as easily as it did in high school. His strength seemed to flow into her. The music wrapped around them like a cocoon. Marilyn was barely aware of the other couples around them. With each twirl, each step, the floor seemed to melt away until it was as if they were floating. He hardly spoke but his eyes mirrored the delight that she felt. Each smile of hers brought a smile to his face.

Marilyn found she was crying. Why and for how long she couldn't say, but she knew it felt right. The song eased to its close and Joshua relaxed Marilyn into one final spin. Her skirt flew out behind her like a crashing ocean wave. Marilyn's heart was pounding fast as Joshua bowed to her one final time. "Thanks for the dance." He kissed her hand. "I hope to see you again soon." Marilyn couldn't do anything except nod. She was too happy to mar the moment with words.

He walked toward a cluster of ladies near the back door and Marilyn turned toward the refreshment table. She felt in desperate need of water. She took four steps before her legs gave out beneath her and she crumpled to the floor. She heard someone scream nearby. She tried desperately to stand but neither of her legs would respond. Panic made it nearly impossible to breathe. Then she heard a familiar scream: the high-pitched squeal of Matilda.

The heat of the room and the lack of oxygen was getting to Marilyn. She felt blackness hovering on the edges of her vision. Before she slipped into the welcoming oblivion, she felt steady hands on her arm and heard Evelyn saying, "Don't worry, Grandmother. I'm here..."

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Marilyn's weakness finally had command of her. She could no longer stir from her bed, and even sitting up was exhausting. She and Evelyn both knew that it would probably only be a few more weeks. When the doctor first came to examine her, Marilyn watched him from under half-closed lids. He only confirmed their fears and left. For a moment, Evelyn covered her face with her hands, then she stood up straighter and began to bustle about the room. Evelyn opened the window to let in the fresh air. She adjusted the vase of flowers that she had bought. Marilyn opened her eyes all the way and pretended that she had just woken up.

"Thanks." She nodded at the vase on the end table. Evelyn gave a small smile. Then she helped Marilyn sit up in bed and explained the official diagnosis without sugarcoating it, exactly the way Marilyn expected her to.

Evelyn never cried about it but poured all her extra energy into care. She cooked every meal, cleaned the sheets, and helped Marilyn use the bathroom. Marilyn subjected herself to all this without complaint. What was wrong with a little help after over a hundred years?

At least one good thing came about because of the incident at the dance: all of her false relatives were so disgusted by her wanton disregard for her own health that they stopped visiting. Evelyn brought Iris over a few times, but Iris's parents refused to come. They thought that Marilyn had embarrassed them all publicly and had practically disowned her.

No one knew who the Joshua was that Marilyn had danced with. Evelyn didn't recall seeing any man that matched his description, but still tried to help Marilyn find him. Matilda denied inviting anyone with that name. No one else remembered dancing with him. It was the general opinion that Marilyn had made him up. No one believed Iris, who was the only other person to have seen him, because she was a child. But Marilyn knew he was real. A dance that beautiful must have been real.

Once Evelyn asked if she regretted her decision to go to the dance. Marilyn shook her head. As Evelyn left the room, Marilyn's gaze shifted to the window. If she closed her eyes, she could slip back into that feeling of floating, flying, whirling. The yearning for that feeling was growing stronger. The weaker Marilyn got, the easier it was to find that feeling.

One day, Evelyn walked back into the bedroom carrying a tray with soup and tea. Marilyn lay motionless in bed, her face toward the window. Her lips curled into a smile. Nearby, the sky-blue curtains danced in the spring breeze.

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*Hannah Simmons is a freshman at Hillsdale College from Austin, Texas. She has been writing from a very young age and is thrilled to have her first piece published.*

# COCKTAIL HOUR

By S.K. Pierzchala

**B**eyond the glass of the sliding patio door, the dull expanse of featureless, overcast sky grumbles with the possibility of a coming storm. The city lights are only starting to wink to life, and the remnants of a brash sunset sear through a rip in the low clouds like a vast, searching, sleepless eye, lighting the sky with an ominous, baleful glow. The woman slides the patio door aside and steps into the malevolent twilight. She slowly makes the circuit of her tiny concrete and metal kingdom, the deck of the small flat. She runs her manicured fingers over the brittle leaves of the parched plants in their ceramic planters.

*I really should water these, she scolds herself. But there's no time. The guests will be here soon.*

She pauses at the metal railing and looks over the city, watching the streams of noiseless vehicles and people far below. She longs for a breeze to lift the clinging folds of her chic polyester paisley-print mini-dress, but none comes.

Something is terribly wrong, but she can't put her finger on it. A question occurs to her: *Why is it so quiet this evening?*

But the moment the thought appears, it is dispelled by another. *That's a silly thing to think, it's always quiet out here.* Except when it isn't. Sometimes she is jerked out of her thoughts by the sound of shrieking metal and thunderous crashing, cries of distress and terror that rise for a moment, then are gone. When she looks outside, she sees nothing amiss.

She lifts her hands to her face in the brooding, dying light, and examines the flawless coating of orange-red lacquer on her long nails. The color coordinates perfectly with the hot pinks and bright greens of her dress, it contrasts nicely with the orange of her tights and the white of her shiny patent leather go-go boots. All these accessories are a comfort to her; they make her feel she is truly an adult.

The woman re-enters the apartment. Glancing at a clock, she calculates that she has less than thirty minutes before she can expect the first guest. Eight invitations were sent; five responses in the affirmative came back—just friends, no family. Her family never visits; she scarcely remembers them. There is some association between them and the horrific sounds of metallic catastrophe, but she can't recall what it might be.

It will be crowded in the apartment, and perhaps uncomfortably warm on this particular evening, but it will be so much fun. She is dying to get together with the old gang and lose herself in laughter and flirting and sparkling drinks.

Passing through the rooms, the woman straightens cushions on sofas and chairs, adjusting the volume on the turntable as it quietly thumps away on a low credenza of dark wood. She pauses a moment, realizing how tiresome that Tom Jones album is becoming, but she has no other records.

She clears some glossy fashion magazines from the coffee table and stows them on the shelf below. Before departing the living room, she gives everything a quick once-over and decides it all looks perfect.

She moves down the corridor to the kitchen, inadvertently brushing her hand against the door to the basement stairwell. She wonders why there was a passage from her rooftop apartment all the way down to the building's basement. Angrily, she shoves the question away and enters the kitchen. A glance at the clock reminds her that she has

barely half an hour before she can expect the first guest.

From the refrigerator, she pulls serving trays laden with hors d'oeuvres, sets them on the countertop, and begins pulling off the protective plastic wrap. As the thin film crumples under her fingers into shiny, silvery balls, she is haunted by the feeling that she's done this a thousand times before; or perhaps just once, in a single act stretched out to fill a thousand years.

Annoyed, she tosses the wrap aside and walks quickly into the dining room. Over the dark veneer buffet, where the liquor bottles and glasses await the guests, the starburst-framed mirror throws back her reflection. Distressed, she glances at the fake bright-pink smile painted on her lips, at the crow's feet at the corners of her blue eyes, heavily accented with wings of black liner. A strand or two of gray shows in the dark roots of her otherwise harshly peroxidized hair. For one terror-struck moment, she has no idea who she is or why she is there.

She toys for a moment with one of the corkscrew curls framing her face; the feel of it restores some sense of self. Then, with a frown of confusion, she slides open the patio door and steps into the unpleasant evening. She slowly makes the circuit of her tiny domain, running her manicured fingers over the brittle leaves of the dying plants.

*I need to water these*, she reminds herself. *But I don't have time.*

*Time*, her mind echoes. What does that word mean? She wrestles with the question a moment longer, then shrugs it off and examines the perfection of her bright nails in the livid, swollen light. So beautiful, she thinks. So adult, so chic.

Stepping back into the apartment, she makes a quick survey of the small rooms, adjusting some throw pillows. Now the record on the turntable is skipping; the mindless thumping of Jones' lyrics hits her like a drill and she moves to stop the needle. In the sudden silence, she pricks her ears, listening for sounds from the other rooms or perhaps from the neighboring flat. Nothing.

On her way to the kitchen, her elbow jostles the handle of the basement door and it pops open invitingly. The darkness beyond is full of velvety coolness. She recoils and moves quickly past.

In the kitchen, the clock reminds her she has barely thirty minutes before the first guests will arrive. She opens the refrigerator and pulls out trays of canapés, setting them on the countertop. As her fingers pull away the plastic film, she pauses with a confused frown.

*Not again.*

Deep within, below the layers of pleasant anticipation of the cocktail party, below the mounting confusion, is a pulsating, writhing, acidic knot of corrosive dread.

Backing away from the countertop, she leaves the kitchen, passes through the dining room and steps through the patio doors into the sweltering evening. The unseen sun's merciless eye is no nearer the horizon. No freshening breeze lifts her hair or stirs the leaves of the dying plants.

*It's so bloody hot*, she thinks. *I need to water these. Do I have time?*

She forces herself to pick up the watering can in the corner of the patio and take it to the tap. Her motions are met with a surprising amount of resistance, but she fights past it and manages to turn on the tap. When the can is full, she pours the water into the dry dirt of the ceramic planters. She watches, entranced, as fresh, living greenness swarms and dances up the dry stems and expands the leaves, which seem to cool the immediate air.

She is filled with a mirroring rush of gladness. It feels good to have helped a living thing. She sets the can down. Suddenly, she remembers a park where she played when a girl. Green and lithe trees had swayed in the wind and the chattering voice of water flowing freely beside cool, mossy stones.

Disconcerted by the memory, she leaves the patio and stands in the living room, listening. Slowly, she moves down the corridor and stops at the basement door. Standing before the cool darkness of the unlit opening, she notes a strange odor wafting up from below. It is spicy, pungent, and thick. Her revulsion is overcome by her curiosity and she inhales more deeply. The mingled scents are maddeningly familiar, a compound of new, sticky leaves, evergreen timber, leaf mold, probing roots and small, shy things burrowing comfortably into the earth.

*What's down there?* she wonders, body trembling with disquiet. From the depths behind the door, she now hears a faint sound. A resonant call, reaching for her and pulling. Melodious and soothing, yet urgent.

Repulsed, she recoils from the door and cowers against the wall. *No, not that! I don't have time for those games, the guests will be here any moment. They'll tell me what a lovely apartment I have, what a wonderful cook I am, how I'm so witty and sophisticated.*

The doorbell sounds, flooding her with relief. She enters the front room and opens the door to greet Skip and Patty, Edith and Doug. They crowd into the room, chattering. She re-starts the turntable and Jones' guttural, vapid crooning joins the general noise. The bell rings again; it's Max, his dark, puffy hair brushed back and arranged perfectly. A possessive, knowing twinkle brightens his gray eyes as he surveys and quickly takes command of the gathering. He heads for the buffet and immediately begins acting the jolly barkeep, pouring drinks and cracking off-color jokes.

Patty and Edith accompany their hostess to the kitchen to take the trays of canapés to the dining room table. They *ooh* and *aah* over the selection she's provided, at how exquisitely she's arranged everything.

"Oh, Celia, these are just too precious! Just like a magazine!" squeals Edith, her comment ending in a prolonged, braying laugh.

With Edith behind her, Celia re-enters the dining room to shouts of approval as the other guests crowd around the food. Max pulls a garish and chintzy plastic tiara from his jacket and places it on her head, pronouncing her the "Queen of Parties" as he plants a kiss on her cheek.

The discordant hum of voices, the clink of glasses, the bursts of shrill laughter, all conspire to keep Celia from paying attention to the faint threads of insistent humming that pulse from behind the basement door. Most of the time, she isn't directly aware of it, but occasionally, during a lull in the din, she catches a strain. When this happens, she makes an arch comment or redoubles her merriment or pours another drink.

Then for one disorienting, stomach-lurching moment, the faces all about her become brittle masks, the eye-holes trackless voids. The apartment appears drab and cramped, coated with dust. It shrinks in on itself like crumpling paper. She responds with a terrified flinch, nearly dropping her glass. Then all returns to normal.

She takes a breath, hoping no one noticed her odd reaction. She excuses herself and goes into the bedroom. After pulling the plastic crown from her hair, she twists it in her hand a moment with a puzzled frown. She thinks it might be connected to the horrific sounds of crashing metal that echo in her memory, and the fresh woodsy scent seeping from the cellar door. But it's too vague to grasp clearly; she feels sick to her stomach if she tries to think about it too hard. She readjusts her hair and smooths her dress, telling herself she is fine, everything is fine.

She jumps at the sound of Max's voice from behind her: "Celia, Love! You alright?"

"I'm fine, merely a bit dizzy," she assures him. She smiles as he stands behind her and begins rubbing her shoulders. His mouth draws close to her ear, and she closes her eyes for a moment as she senses the curve of his mischievous yet insistent smile.

"Let me lock the door, Love," he murmurs. She listens a moment to the music and riotous voices in the other room, then pulls away from Max with a nervous titter.

"Not now. Wait until they're all gone home."

Dissatisfied, he clutches at her arm but she pulls free, crosses the room, and leaves. As she takes up a small desert plate and helps herself to more canapés, she senses Max again behind her, eyes boring into her. She frantically tries to catch up with fragments of conversation swirling about her, but has no idea what her forced laughter is responding to.

Behind all the sounds of shallow, brittle merriment, she can just catch the low but clear trumpeting sound down the corridor, from behind the cellar door.

Thinking, *Perhaps if I shut it tightly, I won't be able to hear anything*, she slips from the room and again approaches the door. In addition to the sounds and scents, there is now a gleam of light thrusting through the crack. It

is a vibrant yellow-green, like fingers of golden sunlight probing through spring leaves.

The light is merry and inviting, in contrast to the musty corridor. Her hand stretches towards the doorknob, but her wrist is violently caught in Max's iron grip.

"Leaving us so soon, Love?"

His twinkling eyes flash noxious red. His frozen smile reveals long teeth, just a shade longer than they should be. The nails he's digging into her wrist feel like iron spikes.

Twisting from his grip, she lunges at the open crack, but he blocks her. He growls, "Get back to the party. Aren't you having fun?"

"I need to check on something," she says, her voice shaking. "Just a sec..."

"Back. To. The. Party." His tongue lengthens and flicks rapidly at her before darting back into his full-lipped mouth. "Your party, all for you. Just what you wanted. Forever."

The party, the never-ending, eternal *Party*. The party that masks all the sounds of shrieking, twisted metal, the party that quelled all the raw pain of confusion and regret. The party that clouded all true sense of self.

"Excuse me—" Consumed with sudden thirst, she pushes past him and returns to the kitchen. Plain water from the tap is more appealing to her than the fancy drinks in the other room, but when she takes a glass at the sink, it is scalding hot, with a foul mineral taste. Celia recalls the fresh water she'd given earlier to the plants, and slips through the glass door and onto the patio. She reaches for the watering can, swallowing in anticipation of getting a few cool drops, but a violent blast of blazing hot air assaults her.

The searing breath races across the rooftops and hurls her back against the wall of her flat; she cries out in startled pain as her skin reddens in the merciless wave. She hears the stalks of the burned plants rattle and hiss all about her. Celia scrambles back into the kitchen and slams the door shut behind her. She goes back to stand in the doorway of the living room, observing the party. For the first time that she can recall, she feels no comfort in any of it. She sees it all as it truly is: tawdry, squalid, minuscule, and empty. Some small part of her abruptly and piercingly wants to see it all blown away, craves wild, wide spaces in which to laugh and run.

Even strolling about in the corridor for a few minutes would be preferable to this infinite yet microscopic banality. Smiling a wide, false smile and nodding to her guests, she slips through the crowd and approaches the front door. She is aware of Max's gaze burning into her back, but he does not try to stop her. She turns the handle, but it seems stuck. She tugs, feeling a strong force on the other side keeping it shut. With a determined wrench, she pulls it open and is confronted by a bewildering void of endless, icy black, howling with gale-force winds. The door slams itself shut, and Celia is again in the midst of the laughter and music.

The sense of claustrophobia begins to throttle the breath out of her; she is bathed in the sweat of uncontrollable panic. *Fresh air, just one breath of cool, fresh air*, she pleads inwardly. *Just one moment of silence, to hear my own thoughts.*

Celia recalls the basement door and moves back down the corridor. If only she could stand on the stairs alone for a few moments and recover her breath, perhaps she could bear the rest of the evening. She stands indecisively before the dreaded, mysterious crack, then sees Max coming towards her, shaking his head in warning.

Defiantly, she lunges for the door, drags it open and darts through. From behind, Max's claws rake into her dress, but she bursts free and rushes down the stairs, boots tapping out a rapid and desperate tattoo, her heart pulsing with terror in her throat.

*Help me! Oh, please, someone help me!*

The cry does not come from her lips or even her mind, but from a spark within her dull, confused heart.

She expects to feel Max's grasp catching her again at any moment, but after a few steps, there is nothing. The staircase into darkness is turning and tipping; she is running up, not down. The air becomes buoyant with freshness and light, the stairs fade beneath her, and she finds herself pushing past rich, earthy soil and feathery grass.

Blinking in the magnificent golden light, she is kneeling in a sea of ecstatic green strewn with a bright galaxy of



wildflowers. The sky above is caught between the fresh pale blue and near-primrose of a summer's dawn. A grove of fir trees rises several yards distant and the rich, resinous scent of their branches is intoxicating as incense. Water from a small stream runs nearby, its merry gushing tinkles like sheep's bells in an alpine meadow.

Dazzled, Celia looks at the flowers all about her and wonders if she is allowed to pick one. As if in answer, the glowing blooms nestle closer and press themselves into her hands. She still feels unworthy, but is aware of a vast sense of loving invitation. Gently, she plucks some of the blossoms, twisting them into a sumptuous crown. The flowers don't wither or fade, but grow more exultant at her touch. They are more glorious than gold or gems.

Celia looks up to see a young man in a white robe standing nearby. He is from such a remote time in her past, she can hardly remember him. An uncle who died when she was little? A neighbor? She is only aware of how much he cared for her then, how he never stopped caring for her. She smiles, and he returns it. She suddenly feels out of sorts and self-conscious.

*It's a mistake, I shouldn't be here,* she confesses without speaking.

His smile deepens as he points to the crown; she understands that he wishes for her to give it to him. She does, and he holds it in both hands as if it weighs nothing and yet is also extremely heavy with import.

He asks, *Are you ready to serve here?*

*It's not too late?*

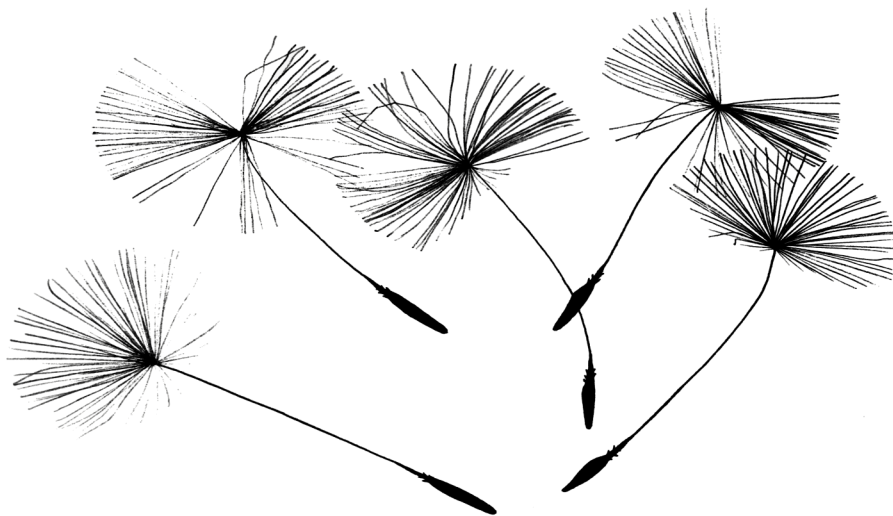
In answer, he lightly places the living wreath on her hair. She can almost hear the flowers sing for joy as they encircle her brow.

He tells her they should move on soon, but she remains kneeling for one blessed moment, breathing deeply of the clear air as if drinking from a spring of fresh, cool water.

Then she rises and follows him toward the perpetual dawn.

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# *THE LAST DAY IS BETTER THAN*

## *THE FIRST*

By C.S. Crane

Arnheim stood in front of the small packing box on his desk, peering down into it with vacant, unseeing eyes. It hadn't taken him long to pack up his cubicle. He was not one of those people who made their offices over into little museums of personal history. Cubicle curators! People like that annoyed him. It had always been his staunch belief, a moral imperative even, that an office was a reflection of the man or it was nothing. In his office, the only exhibit on display was him, a one-man show whose complete oeuvre was himself.

After six years on the job, he had finally been moved into this office. It was not large but it did have a door. Of course, the door was a large glass panel set in a metal frame. Even the wall onto the corridor was made of glass. He had asked for an office because he wanted more privacy, more separation, more recognition. And then when it had happened, he had thought to himself, "Finally, somebody around here appreciates my value." But when Phil, that pathetic excuse for an office manager who spent all day chatting up Gina, their completely inept receptionist; when Phil told him which office he'd been assigned, Arnheim realized they had tricked him; there was no other way to think about it.

With his back to the glass, he could feel his co-workers passing outside, glancing uncomfortably at his hunched-over figure, trying to divine whether his fate might somehow be linked to theirs. To him they were little more than ghosts, shades, pitiable spirits of an underworld he had once inhabited. If they tip-toed now outside his office, like little children past a dark closet, all a-tingle with terrified anticipation that he might turn at any moment to face them, it was only what they deserved. Through the glass, he could sense how his presence discomfited them. He enjoyed the sensation.

But oh, the raging insecurity of the common everyday office drone! Was it possible, he wondered, that he had lived and worked amongst them for six years? That he had danced at Christmas parties with them, gone on company picnics with them, joked and fooled around with them, gone to lunch with them, gone to bars with them after work; that he had sat around the conference room table in meetings with them, as if he were just like them, indistinguishably one of them? Him! Allen Arnheim! However, that was all in the past. Today, he could even smile about it. And, in fact, a smile did break across his face just then, a wild angry squiggle of a smile like a child's crayon drawing of an angry man smiling.

He smiled because he felt like it was time now to leave, to walk out through the glass door into the corridor, across the floor of cubicles to the elevator and out of the building. Deliberately, as if there were some world-historical meaning to it, he pulled his last remaining personal item—a Beretta 92 semi-automatic pistol—out from where he had secured it earlier beneath his belt, between his shirt and his trousers, and placed it gently on top of the stack of books and files. Before closing the flaps on the packing box, he thought how his life would be different from now on, and how, back on his first day, he could not have dreamed of the portents and possibilities he possessed today. People sure did change, Arnheim thought to himself, that was true. What was truer, though, was that people sure did change people. For that insight, he grudgingly admitted, he had his co-workers to thank. You could learn from anyone, he

supposed. But he only half-believed it. It seemed a dismaying thought. A glint from the Beretta's oily black metal frame caught his eye, and the thought died. Once again life's opportunities overwhelmed him, rushed up at him as if shot out of a gun. His heart raced as he folded over the four flaps on the box, locking the first into the space created by the other three. How different his last day of work was from his first! How strange and wonderful and complex, how packed deep and tight with meaning! He lifted the box off the desk and turned. Sammy Chin was frozen there in the corridor.

"Chinny-chin-chin." Arnheim knew he hated that nickname. He smiled his jagged smile and tilted his head up so Sammy could feel the corrosive force of it.

"You know I hate that."

"Yes."

Sammy was half a foot taller and three sizes wider than Arnheim. On any other day, he would have stiff-armed him into a cubicle wall and blown on by. But not today.

"You're a piece of work." Sammy shook his big shaggy head like a frustrated grizzly come late to the salmon run. "You really are."

Roughly, Arnheim brushed past him, unafraid.

"I deserved it."

Arnheim turned.

"What?"

"Everything. All of it. The way you look at me. What you think of me. I just wanted you to know I don't blame you at all. You've taught me a valuable lesson. I know now what an awful person I am. Thanks to you, Arnheim."

Kim, the staff designer, came up behind him.

"Arnheim! Oh, Arnheim! Don't I look cute today?"

"Very cute."

"For you." And she twirled around. "It's your last day. I wanted to look special. This morning, you know, I was getting into the shower? And I look down and see a cockroach ohmygod! But apparently my cat had gotten hold of it first? And its ugly little legs were scattered all over the tub, can you imagine? This revolting cockroach body and these little, like, hairs everywhere? Yuck. And I thought of you."

"That's touching," Sammy Chin said.

"Isn't it? I mean, it was a crisis! And who comes into my mind? Arnheim. Why you? Why today? I don't know! But all I wanted to do, I wanted to rush in here and throw myself at your feet and say sorry-sorry-sorry, Arnheim. It shouldn't have taken a legless cockroach to make me see how awful I've been to you. And now here you are, walking out with a box. Sad."

"Now that's a crisis," Sammy Chin said.

"Tell me about it!" Kim agreed.

Arnheim shifted the box onto his right hip and waded into the cubicle pen. It did his heart good to see all those heads turned toward him, as if he were the big full moon and they were the helplessly attracted tides of small, unmapped streams. Arnheim smiled his angry, crooked, self-satisfied smile. The heads all smiled and nodded in response.

"Good luck, Arnheim."

"I'll miss you, Arnheim."

"Call me sometime, Arnheim."

"The place won't be the same without you, Arnheim."

"Hey Arnheim! Don't be a stranger."

The commotion he caused in transit was something of a novelty in the small office. It was generally a quiet

and reserved place. So Arnheim was not surprised that it attracted the attention of the president, whose office was on the far side of the room. He spotted him, tall, thin, and, as always, encased in his black cashmere turtleneck, emerging from his office.

“I’m sorry it had to come to this, Arnheim. You were the best employee we ever had. I realize that now. I can’t imagine how I could have been so blind all these years. Promoting Elliot over you. What was I thinking? And... and that office. A nasty, nasty trick.”

“Forget about it,” Arnheim said.

“I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to forget about it, but thank you, Arnheim. Thank you.”

Arnheim took one last slow look around. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw movement over by the copier. It was Eddie, the mailroom guy. He’d been watching Arnheim, fearfully, sheepishly, like he always did. Never meeting his eye. Never speaking above a whisper. Never offering any kind of greeting as he timidly dropped the day’s mail on Arnheim’s desk.

Arnheim walked through the double doors to the elevators. He was at peace. There was no more anger in him. It had been pumped out of him like bullets out of a gun and now his chamber was empty.

What was anger? He didn’t know. He could no longer define it or understand it, because he no longer felt it. He was unable to imagine a time or a place that could cause him to feel anger, or summon up the face of a single person who could reignite in him that strange and unfamiliar emotion. His new life had begun. He could feel that.

When the elevator doors opened in the lobby, it was as if the whole world had come to celebrate with him. A great gathering of well-wishers, anxious to receive him into their society. With outstretched arms and loud acclaim, they called to him, and their voices reverberated throughout the glass and marble expanse. A large number rushed to greet him while others kneeled in every corner, looking up at him in adoration. Two of them relieved him of his packing box while two others in their excitement took him roughly by the arms, lifting him off the floor, as if in his ecstasy he needed any help to float!

“Doesn’t look the type, does he?” the one on his right said to the one on his left.

“They never do.”

“They find the gun?”

“Right there in the box with his stuff.”

“That mailroom guy was lucky, that’s all I gotta say.”

“Call the precinct.”

Arnheim let their adulation wash over him, the force of their love carry him. For the first time in his life, he experienced that fountain of gratitude which wells up inside those who have been saved from the pit, redeemed against all hope. His words spilled out of him in a gush of uncontrollable joy.

“The last day is better than the first!”

The one on his right looked at him with surprise. Arnheim desperately wanted to embrace him.

“For you maybe, pal,” he said. “Not for them eight dead people upstairs.”

To Arnheim, at that moment, those were the most beautiful words he had ever heard.

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*C.S. Crane has dreamed of being a writer since he was 15 years old, inspired by a Jesuit priest who taught English at his Catholic boy’s high school in Rochester, NY. Now living and writing in Pittsford, NY, he dreams of his first novel finding a publisher.*

## ~Poetry~

### Music

Music is strong: can take me by storm,  
Whispering, catch me by the throat,  
And bring me to tears: and so I hunt  
For that elusive note, that, once again,  
Pain thrilling in my yearning ears,  
Aching, behind my eyes and in my limbs,  
It may recall to me the most sweet grief  
That love is.

~ Stella Webster

*Stella is one of a family of eight and lives in a small town in Washington. When she's not writing, she is probably reading Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, or Percy, listening to classical music, or investigating things liturgical.*

### To N.H.

To watch your maple in her August bloom  
Of green which is more shades than green can grip  
Is, sadly, to attain in recollection  
The memory of her dark, ill reflection  
When old October forces her to strip  
And weather winter in an open tomb.

~ David Counts

### Loneliness before Thanksgiving

Now the roaring stone saw's mute  
And put away. The chisels all  
Lay silent in the half-built wall.  
Now carhartt coat and steel-toed boot

Retire, having labored well.  
I'll build a fire hastily,  
Pour "Early Times" into my tea,  
And have some quiet for a spell.

November makes a passing try  
Of framing in my windowsill  
Some semblance of December's chill.  
As darkness hides it by and by

And whiskey does her work, I'll think  
Of all the comforts roundabout:  
Friends on the weekends, warmth, songs, stout,  
And plans and hopes right on the brink

Of coming off at last; and then,  
Made soft by drink - my thoughts on bed -  
My arm curls on the couch's head  
And calmly whines to me that men

Ought never find themselves alone  
When everything's been said and done.

~ David Counts

*David Counts works as an assistant chef at Thomas More College in Merrimack, NH, from which he graduated in 2018. He spends his free time gardening, writing, and playing music.*

We would like to thank Dr. Amy Fahey for providing, however unwittingly, the original impetus behind the creation of this journal, the rest of our many professors for our well rounded education, and all our authors for being willing to join this venture in its first and rockiest stages.

This first issue of *Incarnation* is dedicated to the Memory of Dr. Patrick Powers, †2022, who undertook our first collegiate instruction in writing.

~  Sapientia ~