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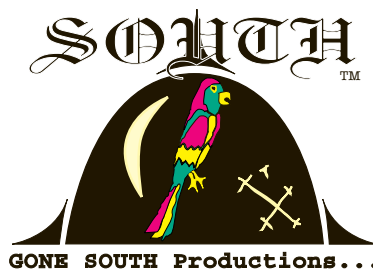
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PERCEPTION

Marianne Culbertson

I.



Morgan stood pale faced in the rain which hung on her dark lashes and pooled about her feet. Burnt umber hair in thick wet tendrils wound it's way down her lean back. She drank steadily from a covered insulated coffee mug and shifted her weight slightly to the left. It was rather silly standing this way because her left knee was not well put together and often gave out. This did not stop her from enjoying the weather and the view from the rooftop. The buildings surrounding her apartment had a lovely sullen expression on their windows and doors. She liked rain in the city; sidewalks were barren except for the few struggling people rushing fearfully to their destination as if a few drops of water would spoil their mask. Often when the sky opened it's eyes she would climb to the third floor and slip out onto the roof through a large window in the hall. Of course she would find the neighbors staring in brute wonder at her dark figure. Surely they created ignorant stories that depicted her as insane, perhaps even suicidal. Never would any of them realize the possibility that she might actually enjoy the feel of water smashing down against her skin.

Three deep inhales with her lids closed open to everything around her, then she turned to go inside. The hallway was dark and she stepped slowly down the stairs to her second floor apartment. Hector rubbed up against her as she stood at her bedroom closet peeling off baggy denim and sticky gray t-shirt. After a soothing ritual in the rain it was always nice she thought, to pull on her warm chenille robe and have a cup of tea. She lit a fir tree scented candle as she walked down the hall to put the water on. Three tall wax vanilla pillars with wicks were soon flickering on the wooden table near the window. Rocking quietly her pupils caught drops as they shot past the window, her head tilted slightly listening for the teapot to whistle. Steaming clay fired mug in hand, she curled back into the rocking chair with Hector purring in her lap.

Abruptly she sat up nearly spilling her Lemon Zinger and Hector jumped startled from her lap. Moving swiftly to the door she ran down her small list of friends and found no answer as to who it could be. She peered out the safety hole in her door. All she could see was something black and dripping filling her vision. The chain lock was fastened so she opened the door cautiously.

"Good-evening." He said. "I'm Gabriel Lassair, I live in the building across the alley."

"Oh?" She looked up to meet eyes of brown.

"I know this is strange," hesitation, "but I saw you on the roof this afternoon."

"Yes?" This was most unusual. A man observing her and then coming to her door to tell her about it?

"Well, I was wondering," lifting a dark bottle, "if you'd be interested in sharing a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon?"

"I really don't know," pausing, "I have no idea who you are." She pulled her robe closed at the top and noted the gaze which followed protective movement.

"You're afraid of me. I'm sorry I disturbed you."

"I'm fine." She looked up. "Good-evening." The door clicked shut and she stood staring at the dark wood.

When she heard the footsteps descending she moved swiftly to the window to see which building he would enter. A few seconds later his lithe dark form emerged from the back doorway. She almost felt guilty for sending him off so quickly. With long measured steps he crossed the quiet alley and instead of going in another door, he pulled down the ladder to the fire escape and began to climb. What a strange man she thought. Once he reached the third level he climbed in an open window and thick glass slid to the sill underneath. Interesting. She walked into the bathroom, her features reflected in the mirror.

"Morgan, how is it that someone you don't know can knock on your door...you say three words to him and he tells you you're afraid...how could he know that? It's natural when talking to a strange man to cover up bare flesh...and look, here you are again talking to yourself." She sat down on the cold porcelain and tried to let the nerve wracking experience run out of her body. Her robe fell into place as she turned to the glass again. "He was wearing a tailored woolen cloak and you let him go!" Hair moved from side to side in disappointment. Noble Hector pushed his way through the cracked door. She scooped him up, turned out the light, and walked back to the window by her rocking chair.

There aren't any lights on over there, her breath clouding cold glass. But then I have only candles, surely there should be a soft glow coming from his apartment at this time of night. Perhaps he had the light off so she wouldn't be able to see him watching. She leaned over the chair and blew out the flames. Standing back up, eyes straining, still nothing. She sat down. Rocked for a bit. Resigning herself to discard the entire encounter she picked up the book from the end table, turned on the lamp and began to read. Five pages later she fought with herself, then looked up. A light! Immediately she extinguished the lamp and stood up to the window. She jumped the moment her nose touched the glass. He was there, looking right back in her direction.

Sliding frantically down the hall to her bedroom she tried to remember where she'd left her glasses. Desk? Nightstand? Dresser. Back at the window

with improved vision she watched as he raised a wine glass to his lips. He didn't seem to notice her at all, it looked as if his eyes were focused on the alley way below. She wanted him to see her. A cold breeze played shadows on the wall to the right and the corners of her mouth turned up sardonically. "Yes," she sighed, "do look up just a bit sir." Perhaps there was something to be said for his medieval manners. She walked to the center of the room and pulled a maiden's wreath of flowers off the thick oaken table, placing it on her head. At the window again she peered out and found an empty glass facing her. 'Just as well,' she thought, 'I am tired.'

Feathers sank with her shape and she watched the white curtains flicker back from the crack in the glass. The room was all white with royal blue trim. High ceilings complemented the french doors to the small porch outside. There was no furniture save for a queen sized bed flush against the opposite wall, plush with down, covered in blue. Beautifully finished wood floors lined the apartment and her room, paper white eyelet curtains hung down from above portals to the outside. Lush green vines crawled down the walls from corner shelves seven feet up. It had taken only a week for her to pull this place together as she pleased. She focused on the swish liquid movement of cloth and closed her lids to sleep. It was 3:00 a.m. when she turned over on her side. Her eyes opened slightly to note her clock. Something knocked over a metal can in the alley. She rolled on her stomach, pulled a knee up at her side and fell back to dreams.

Shinning sun streaming softly a ladders ray of dust from the windows to the floor. Morgan's face warmed with light as she stood up out of bed. The wind was blowing the panes back and forth within their tiny frames. It was the kind of sunny day that burnt skin with cold air instead of rays. Her eyes glanced down as she started to turn, when a newspaper smashed into the corner of the porch and twirled around the railing come into view. She made the annual winter wish that the trash men would be more careful when empty the cans. Quickly the doors flew open and bare feet hit hard concrete. Her hands grasped that paper and pulled it from between the railings as she pushed up to stand. Green eyes widened with curiosity, behind it was a bottle of cabernet with a large white silk ribbon tied in a bow at the slope of it's neck. She balled the paper up noisily and stepped inside after dropping the dirty wad over the porch to blow madly mashing against the asphalt.

Ritually she lit three white candles on her altar and set the bottle in the center of the triad. She asked for blessing from the Goddess and blew out the flames. He must have been on the roof last night. She had heard something and woken up. What if it was the spineless, pale faced moron from the bookstore where she worked? What a nightmare that would be. The alley was deserted and the glare made it difficult to see anything in his apartment. She had to be at work soon, later she could think more about Gabriel. Forty-five minutes past eight she locked the front door behind her and trudged downstairs. Her simple long sleeved black dress was neatly sheltered by her cloak and she walked down the street, arms tucked neatly inside dark wool.

The bookstore immediately warmed her cheeks when she stepped through the door. Igraine smiled from behind the counter and Cai shouted his greeting from the coffee bar.

"Hello Lady!"

"Good Afternoon Cai. I trust you too enjoyed the rain yesterday?"

"Of course my lady, but you can't disregard the warmth of the sun!"

He stood tall, black hair in a braid just past his shoulders, white t-shirt and black jeans fit his slim body well. She grasped the clay mug he had given her with both hands and dipped her nose forward to inhale the heady smell of hazelnut.

"Thank you." She breathed. "I didn't have time to make any this morning." He nodded and turned to wash his hands in the sink.

She walked to the back room, hung her cloak in the closet, and picked up a pile of new books to price and place in the stacks. As she walked through the doorway, Martin the idiot that she allowed Igraine to hire, slammed into her spilling everything onto the floor.

"Martin!" She exclaimed. "You never watch where you're going!" Knees popped as she stood up with some of the books.

"I..I'm sorry Miss Fey, are you alright?" He was touching her arm with his hand. The scream was rising from her stomach. She was aware of her inability to let these things go and was shocked at her revulsion as she pulled away. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have..." He mumbled.

"No," she cut in, "it's ok, just get back to work. His blindingly bright eyes fractured her dark pupils as he stared up at her.

"O..ok Miss Fey, I'm sorry about all this."

"Martin," sternly, "just go!" She gestured towards the shelves and dumped the books she was holding into his arms.

There was no explanation for people that incompetent, but then she must accept everyone for what they are. Perhaps there was something great behind the lens of his glasses. He hadn't mentioned anything about the wine so she supposed it was safe to assume it wasn't him. Besides, he would never have enough courage or coordination to do such a thing. She looked up to meet Cai's gentle stare, a smile broadened across his chiseled face and her's. Maybe it was Cai! He was always looking at her and he did call her "Lady" all the time. It always made her feel as if she stepped from the drawbridge of a street into a medieval library.

She walked up and down the aisles of new books, from Nabokov to Hemmingway and back again, placing new paperbacks alphabetically. Query after query crossed the synapse in her mind.

"My Lady?" Cai appeared next to Dickens.

"Yes?" She grinned up at him.

"Have you checked your watch of late?"

"Oh, I can't believe it's closing already." Time once again had slipped

away from her as it seemed to do when she was in her place.

“Igraine, how did we do today?” Her business partner and friend linked arms with Cai.

“We did just fine Morgan. We don’t have much to worry about since we made our last mortgage payment.” She sighed. “We can finally relax.”

Morgan laughed heartily. “Relax? What is that?” She brushed past them easily, grabbed her cloak and bag from the office, and headed for the door. Igraine followed close behind.

“Morgan, would you like to have some tea?” Igraine’s voice caressed her insides. A sister was not something she ever thought she had, but then real family was never blood for her.

“I’m really anxious to get home tonight.” Her smile told all and she laughed at herself as they walked the concrete together.

“Why? What is it?” Igraine prodded her. “You haven’t said anything about a man!”

“It’s nothing really.” Face serious again, “Rather strange actually.” They were nearing her apartment house and she fought with herself about whether to tell her or not.

“Are you going to be alright?” Her arm draped about her shoulder and pulled her close for a walking hug.

“I think so,” she sighed, leaning into Igraine. “Why don’t you come up for a bit.”

They were snuggled deep within the cushions of the couch a half hour later. Two mugs steamed up lemon and honey tea on the coffee table. Morgan had changed into huge worn out jeans that left her naval exposed below a red long sleeve t-shirt. Igraine sat behind her, trailing the brush down long wavy locks. She had long peach tinted hair herself, and freckles dappled her cheeks. Her skills in attentiveness were prominent as ever while her younger sister began to speak.

“So he showed up at your door, just like that?” Igraine reiterated.

“Yes, and his language. It was so different.” Her head leaned forward, creating tension as Igraine began to braid her hair.

“He had an accent?”

“No,” pondering for a moment, “it seemed old somehow.” She paused to pick up her mug. “He enunciated every syllable, I don’t know, I can’t explain it.” Igraine wrapped a scarlet ribbon around the end of her hair.

“I still think you should be wary.” Her hands guided Morgan around to face her. “He was on your porch and you didn’t know it!”

Morgan pulled away. She hated it when her friends made anything unusual into a negative thing. It always happened this way with men. They were always quirky somehow and she never seemed able to have a successful, lasting relationship.

“I don’t think it’s strange.” Retaliation.

“A bottle of cabernet hidden behind a crinkled newspaper isn’t strange?” Exhale. “Morgan, you need to open your eyes. Rely on your intuition at least.” Igraine stood up and took her empty mug to the sink.

“Don’t worry,” she reassured her sister, “I’ll be careful.” Door unlocked, a tight hug from Igraine and she was finally alone again.

II.

Darkness shrouded the walls in a gauze of shadows as she sat back in her rocker. A pine candle burned on the small wood table beside her, filling the room with fragrant forest. Three days had passed since she had seen Gabriel shimmy up the metal ladder and through his window. In her hand rested a warm glass of cabernet from the bottle he had left for her. Wine smoothed down her throat and lit a fire in her belly so that she felt her life force surging. Maybe it would be alright if she crossed the alley and climbed up the fire escape after him. She took another sip and set the glass on the table beneath the window.

Feet warmed by wool socks padded gently around her living room. She waited for some kind of glow to come from the window across the way. Her chest expanded and contracted rapidly as she walked from window to kitchen and back again. Hector attacked her ankles and she shuffled him along for the ride. Chilling air seeped through cracks and settled the cold deep in the floorboards. Down the hall to the bathroom she dropped her robe and turned the hot water handle all the way to the left. Lilac and Jasmine flowed into the stream and foamed out between her thighs as she sank into the water.

In a half hour her skin was red with heat, she raised herself up from the tub and wrapped a thick navy blue towel around her. She plodded into her bedroom where she slid into plaid flannel pajama bottoms and an extra large t-shirt. At the french doors she peered out to see if anything had been left on her porch. She thought it would be sweet if he put something there for her. Across the street the windows were black and her brows furrowed at the trash cans rolling around on the dirty street. Her comforter was chilly as she slid underneath it but soon warmed with her skin.

As she walked to the bookstore the next morning she realized it had been four days since she’d seen Gabriel. Her brain was filled with thoughts that he wasn’t real, or that she had driven him off by her reaction. Black boot heels set themselves sturdily into the sidewalk making the same determined sound each time she stepped. Fingers pushed back the cloak hood and laced through her thick hair. Green eyes glanced behind her and caught a man traveling swiftly in her path. He seemed to resemble her dark friend but she wasn’t sure because it had been awhile since she’d had a close look. She stopped in front of the bookstore and turned around to watch as he passed. Heavy steps loud in her ears, he turned his face to hers as he walked by.

“Good-morning Lady.” Square jaw lowered slightly, pace slowing not in

the least. She smiled and bored a hole in his back with her stare as he continued on his way.

“Hello Cai!” She grinned as she stopped at the coffee bar for her fix.

“Well,” he smiled warmly. “You’re looking quite lovely today.” Large calloused hands placed a steaming mug of mocha java in her hand. “Ingraine is in the back placing orders.”

“Good,” she finished pouring the sugar and stirred the thick mixture with a clean spoon. “I expect we’ll be able to stock the shelves more fully now that we’ve paid off the mortgage on this place.”

“Mmm,” he agreed. “You Ladies have done quite a job.”

She laughed in response and glided in-between the shelves to the back room. Igraine’s brick braid sat heavily against her spine as she quibbled with the dealer over shipping fees. The swivel chair whipped around at Morgan’s entrance and she rolled her eyes at the phone. Morgan sat down at the desk next to Igraine’s and pulled out the bookstore’s calendar of events for February. Phone slammed into it’s cradle.

“Those idiots,” she laughed. “They must think shop owners are stupid.”

“We’ve always thought that.” Morgan agreed quietly, eyes dancing.

Igraine looked sarcastically stern for a moment.

“Alright, spit it out.”

“What?” She answered innocently.

“Come on Morgan, something must have happened.” She prodded further, “your face is all flushed!”

She grinned. “I saw Gabriel. He passed me just now on the way in.”

“What did he say?”

“He wished me good morning like any gentleman would.”

Igraine frowned. “He didn’t stop to talk to you?”

“He had no reason to, I sent him on his way the first time he tried.”

“I still think this whole thing is strange Morgan.”

Her cheeks grew redder still and she shut her books and stood up.

“Look, why can’t you just listen and enjoy the things that happen to me?”

“I do but I’m a bit wary of the people you get attached to.”

“What’s wrong with them?” Morgan’s fists were clenched.

“They’re just different,” she said as gently as possible. “I don’t know what it is exactly, just that the things you tell me about them don’t always make sense.”

“Whatever Igraine,” she grabbed her cloak, “I’m taking the day off.”

Storming through the doorway and through the aisles of books she heard Igraine yelling for her to come back and listen. How could she listen to someone who was just jealous because she met interesting men who graced her with artwork and poems. Back on the pavement she pulled her hood up and kept her eyes on the passing cracks as she walked home.

Knees popped as she trudged up the stairs to her small, quiet apartment. She threw her cloak across the sofa back and slumped down on the wood floor, knees drawn to chest, shoulders resting on maroon plush. She had to do something to prove her judgement of character to Igraine. Walking into the bookstore together, her fingers curled around his biceps, having a mug of hazelnut poured by Cai. With Hector curled in her lap she thought of every possible way she could convince Gabriel that she was not afraid. Brain pounding she rose up to cloud the window pane with her ideas. If only the glass were cracked across the street or a glow came from inside. Maybe if she just knocked her knuckles against the wood of his door. Her breath stopped short.

In her room she slid a thin black rayon dress over her head. Fingers twisted leather laces to criss cross tie up her knee high boots. Dark hair hung long and thick with loose curls and she stood for a moment before the mirror in the bathroom. Face dusted with natural powder and laced with blush against her cheekbones she smiled, pushing toothpaste out on the brush. Water rushing white from her mouth down the drain. Eyes wide before the window, she wound a long October scarf loose around her neck, down against the swell of her breasts. Half empty bottle of cabernet in her hand she pulled her woolen cloak on and tied it at her throat.

The alley was deserted. Metal cans thrown against the pavement by hopeless sanitation men, rolled and clashed with the wind that mashed hair against her face. She slipped through the doorway and started slowly up the stairs. On the third floor landing she knocked at the door of the apartment whose windows darkened at hers. A solo violin strung out through the silence. Floorboards creaked behind the door. Chain lock slid back and dead bolt clicked into place. She stepped from the door at the creak of hinges and Gabriel’s dark eyes appeared.

“May I help you?”

“I was wondering,” she paused.

“Yes?” He cut in.

“I’ve seen you walking to work.” She looked up. “Every day you leave just behind me and this morning you said hello...”

“I’m sorry,” he stared back in earnest. “I don’t remember.”

“Well maybe,” her eyes shaded, “you would like to share the rest of this wine.”

“I don’t understand,” his voice reached a strange peak, “I’ve never seen you before,” he stepped back. “You should go home.” The door latched shut.

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bearded skipper, showed up at the dock with one of his girlfriends and, at the last moment, brought her aboard. My father must feel this is either bad luck or that it violates his sense of seagoing protocol for he has been stewing in his deck chair without a word to anyone since we left port. Nobody else seems to mind—especially not Bill, the teenage son of Dave, my father’s lawyer. I look up at her now, stretched out on the bridge, and I can’t say I mind either. If we don’t hit any fish we can all just drink beer and watch her change positions. That, the blue-green ocean and the sun-filled Florida sky would be plenty for me. The girl is taking off her shirt now, revealing a very small bikini and lots of firm, tanned skin. Bill can no longer even pretend to look away, and I see him swallow with his mouth open. Hell, maybe she’ll be good luck despite what my father thinks. It should be fun whatever happens.

We are slowing down now and my excitement begins to build. There has been a large storm the week before and the water is still stirred up. Lots of weeds and other flotsam have clumped together in long floating patches on the surface, and Captain Ted is looking for these and following along beside them whenever he can. On a hot day like this the fish feed in the shade of these weed islands, so there is a greater chance of finding them there. Tommy, the deck hand, is beginning to bait the outriggers-long aluminum struts that hold the lines out away from the boat on each side. He puts a small bait fish, hooked through the head, on each hook, sets the drag on the reels and feeds out fifty to seventy-five feet of line. Then he attends to the rods on the stern, baiting them and placing the butts into deep sockets sunk into the wide gunwales. I watch the outriggers. When the line pops out of a clip at the upper end of one or both outriggers we know we have fish. Tommy is quick, and soon all four rods are baited and set. Captain Ted keeps the boat close to the weed patches and occasional driftwood, trolling at around four knots. We all look at each other knowingly, then back at the rod tips and outriggers. The girl has lain down on her back with her long, dark hair trailing down over the edge of the bridge. Her breasts point straight up at the deep blue sky. My father leans forward in his chair.

“OK. Come on, fish,” he says to no one in particular.

I look at my father and he grins back at me. He is an old hand at these charter trips and seems relaxed, having no doubt forgotten his peevishness about the girl. This is my first deep sea excursion and when he said we were going after dolphin, I naively thought he meant porpoise and voiced my outraged objections. He explained that there is another fish, a sport fish, called dolphin. They are a smaller and primarily tropical variety and are served as mahi-mahi in fine restaurants. They are also great fun to catch. My father had been out here off the Keys last year with my step-brother, Bob, and had run into large numbers of them. Bob had also landed a ten-foot Mako shark which had attacked a big amberjack he was reeling in. When I asked what an amberjack was, my father just smiled cryptically and said maybe I’d find out some day if I was lucky. As I look out to sea now I wonder what he meant by that. Living in New York, I don’t see him that much anymore and am eager to prove myself, to make him somehow proud of me, to strengthen our old bond. Of course I can’t show him this even though I’m swelling with excitement and curiosity. Outwardly I try to appear cool and experienced, the sea-hardened salt. I glance up at the girl who is slowly rubbing her shapely brown legs and torso with suntan oil. Young Bill still can’t keep his eyes off her, though from time to time he adjusts his baseball cap or takes a sip of soda, trying to seem nonchalant. I guess his dad won’t let him drink beer yet. I stand up and maneuver into the cabin, where I open a cool Budweiser. There is a light swell, three to four feet, and it is fairly easy to move around on the boat. Besides, I have always had good sea legs, though I have never been out this far on a boat this small. I look at my watch and see that it is about 10:30. We left port a little after 9:00, so I estimate we must be out about forty miles. Sitting down, I take a short sip of beer and watch the rod tips at the stern. Everything-from the briny sea air and sunshine to the beer going down to the rhythmic vibrations of the “Sumpin’ Special” feels very very good.

“Battle stations, gentlemen!” Captain Ted’s announcement is strident yet mockingly ironic. How many times a day, a week, a year had he mouthed the same timeworn alert to the same sclerotic vacationers. To Captain Ted this was part of the hype, part of the job. The effect on me, however, is instantaneous and electric. Adrenaline pumping, I lean forward in my chair, eyes glancing expectantly from rod tip to rod tip.

“Right rigger!” he shouts, and then after a few seconds, “Left rigger!”

Tommy leaps to the first rod, sets the hook, and hands the rod to my father. Then he does the same to the rod on our left and hands that one to Dave. Both rods bend and quiver as the two men begin playing their fish. Tommy hands me a small rod and single hook pre-baited with a chunk of raw tuna.

“Get ready,” he says. “Here come the schoolies!”

“What do I do?” I ask, trying to sound casual though my heart is racing.

“Just throw it in the water. You won’t have to wait long.”

Tommy is grinning broadly.

I move to the stern and open the bail on my spinning reel, preparing to cast.

“Hang on a second,” Tommy cautions me. “Let them get theirs in first.”

Captain Ted has throttled back and Tommy starts chumming the water at the stern. My father has got his fish almost up to the boat. It is a nice, medium-sized dolphin that shimmers like a shiny rainbow in the blue-green brine of the Gulf.

“Nice one, Dad!” I exclaim, knowing that this small compliment in no way expresses my profound amazement at the glittering, multi-colored spectacle struggling at the end of his line. Tommy jumps to the side of the boat and bends toward the water, positioning the net. Seconds later the fish flaps and flutters on the on the ice inside a large cooler built into the stern. Soon Dave’s fish is in there too and I watch, awestruck, as the sparkling colors fade from their scales as they die.

“Schoolies!” Captain Ted yells from the bridge, one level above the deck. “There’s a mess of them.”

I toss my piece of tuna over the stern, letting it sink a few feet before reeling about three turns. Instantly I feel a tug and the rod comes alive in my hands. It is quite easy to reel the small fish up to the boat, and I lift it out of the water and into the cooler with what I hope looks like one expert motion. Tommy takes it off the hook and smiles up at me.

“Go get another one,” he says.

“What the hell are schoolies?” I ask, slipping another chunk of tuna onto my hook.

“Those are the little ones, the babies,” he replies, throwing more chum from a plastic bucket.

My father, Dave and Bill are baiting small rods now too and we begin the frantic fun of hauling in the schoolies. It reminds me a little of those forties Felix the Cat or Mickey Mouse cartoons where a single action is repeated over and over again without change of nuance or expression in the characters. Bait hook, throw hook in water, yank out fish. Repeat until exhausted or until cooler is full. I have never seen so many fish around a boat before. Blues, greens, reds and yellows flash and shine from the water on all sides. Our lines become tangles for often three or four fish are on at a time. I see a hooked fish, bleeding in the water, attacked by another of its kind and then by a ravenous hoard. The ocean becomes a bloody underwater jungle of churning, gnashing, feeding fish-swimming rainbows that slowly fade to gray on the ice of the cooler. Then, as suddenly as they arrived, they are gone. We pant and sweat, grinning at each other. Captain Ted squints at the water from his lookout.

“There he is, there he is,” he squeals, pointing out to port.

Tommy grabs a heavier rod and expertly casts as far as he can in the indicated direction. There is a hushed pause.

“He’s on! You want him, Jack?” Tommy holds the rod toward my father.

“You take him, Dave. I’ll get the next one.”

Dave takes the rod and starts trying to reel. I can hear the line running out against the drag and know right away this is no schoolie.

“Yeah!” That’s a big ‘ol bull all right,” says Tommy, hands on his hips.

“You better jump, Tommy,” shouts Captain Ted. “There’s the cow.” He points to starboard. Again Tommy gets a directional fix from the skipper’s finger and casts out thirty or forty yards. Again the expectant pause.

“God damn,” he mutters and reels in.

“She’s still there. A little closer in. Lay it out there again, Tommy.”

I watch Dave who is having trouble with his fish.

“Christ, what a monster,” he grunts, straining against his rod. He reels in some line and then hauls the rod slowly back. I hear the drag whining again. “Shit!,” he says over his shoulder.

“She’s on, Jack,” shouts Tommy. “Here you go.”

For the next twenty or thirty minutes the two men fight their fish while Captain Ted keeps the boat positioned. I grab my beer and sit down for a while. Dad gets his dolphin next to the hull first and Tommy grabs the gaff.

“Hold her, Jack. Bring her in a little closer. Keep her tight...OK...OK...”

He lunges and hauls the shaking, glittering fish over the gunwale. Quickly, he flips it into the cooler, closes it and sits on the lid while the fish beats against it from inside.

“Beautiful fish, Jack. Beautiful!” He smiles.

My father slides the rod butt into a socket on the gunwale and sits down, breathing hard.

“Come on, Dave. What are you waiting for?” he laughs.

Dave’s back is arched almost as much as his rod, but he is slowly winning the battle. Soon the tired bull dolphin is flopping in the bloody cooler next to his mate.

“Nice going, gentlemen, nice going,” Captain Ted crows from the bridge. “I think we’re going to find some fish today. Tommy, set the riggers.”

Captain Ted turns out to be quite prophetic and by around two in the afternoon, the “Battle stations” drill has become almost routine. Young Bill and I have had our turns landing bulls and cows, and the large cooler is loaded with scores of dolphin plus a few tuna and wahoo. Young Bill has even lost interest, albeit temporarily, in the skipper’s girlfriend. We have just run through our fifth or sixth large school of fish and Tommy is setting the riggers again while we sit back, sipping beer and feeling satisfied. My father leans back and says casually to the skipper,

“Want to take them to The Hump?”

“Yeah, why not. The cooler’s about full anyhow. Pull ‘em in, Tommy.”

Tommy begins stowing all the rods and Captain Ted turns the boat sharply, throttling up.

“What the hell is The Hump?” I ask innocently.

“Don’t worry. You’ll find out soon enough,” my father replies mysteriously.

During the twenty minutes or so it takes to get there I receive a partial explanation. The Hump is a huge underwater mountain, and we are looking for the point at which it slopes down precipitously to a great depth, perhaps a mile or more. They refuse, however, to tell me what we are going to do once we get there. Captain Ted circles the boat, checking his electronic compass to find an exact intersection of latitude and longitude while Tommy prepares one of the heavy marlin rigs. He cuts off the tail of a three or four pound tuna from the cooler and baits an enormous hook with it. Then he places the rod in a moveable sleeve attached to one of two swivel chairs in the stern and adjusts the drag setting on the heavy Penn reel.

“Who’s the lucky guy?” smirks Captain Ted.

“How about it, Max? You feeling pretty strong?” my father grins at me.

“What are you guys up to?” I am going along with it but feel mildly apprehensive. Captain Ted has come down from the bridge, leaving his girlfriend at the controls.

“Come on. You’ll love this,” he says, obviously relishing my puzzled look.

I slide into the cushioned fishing chair and grasp the heavy rod which is braced in the moving socket between my legs. He attaches several big sinkers to the line about eight feet above the tuna and drops it over the side, letting it run free. I watch the reel for what feels like minutes as the line runs out, dropping the fresh, bleeding tuna straight down into the depths. Suddenly the line goes slack and Captain Ted sets the reel on strike and tells me to pull it up a bit.

“OK, pardner, hang on!” he warns and starts tugging up and down on the line in long, even pulls. Then in one motion he lets it go and gives a hand signal to the girl at the wheel. The boat surges forward and I feel an incredible weight pulling my rod down toward the water. I try hard to keep my seat and begin to fight the monster we have hooked. The girl throttles back to an idle and Captain Ted sits down on the cooler next to me, comfortably crossing his legs.

“Whenever you feel like it, you can start reeling,” he chuckles.

Straining against this awful weight, I slowly lift the rod tip and get about three turns of the reel as I lower it again. After a few minutes of battling the behemoth, there is a growing ache in my forearms and shoulders and the sting of sweat in my eyes.

“Holy shit,” I gasp. “What in God’s name have I got on here?”

“That, my friend, is an amberjack. Having fun?” Captain Ted is truly in his element now.

“Oh, yeah. A million laughs,” I pant. “You son-of-a-bitch.”

I continue my struggle with this monumentally stubborn fish, laughing and cursing by turn. At first I feel I am the butt of some initiation joke as Captain Ted continues his gently chiding dialog with me. I am reminded of fraternity hazings, of sailors crossing the equator and other familiar rites of passage. But as the grueling minutes pass, I begin to realize that I cannot take this combat entirely lightly. I must remain good natured, but I must also win. This seems to be the secret emerging here, the shared understanding among all on board.

“Hang in there, Max,” I hear my father say. “Don’t let up on him.” There is an edge of gravity to his voice, as if to tell me my conflict is also his, though he cannot fight it for me.

Inch by hard won inch I raise the amberjack toward the boat. I begin to understand that it will come down to which of us tires first and though my arms and back scream with pain and fatigue, I know I will not give in-not now. My motions become mechanical and monotonous as I slowly lift this deep-water giant toward the light. Using the moving socket on the chair as a fulcrum, I lean back and raise the

rod as far as I can, reeling in as I drop it back toward the fish. After fifteen minutes my hands are numb and it feels as if my back will break.

“You’re about halfway there, sport. Piece of cake, huh?” says the skipper.

“I don’t want to have all the fun here. Anyone else want a turn?” I try to sound cavalier.

“Oh, that’s OK. We don’t want to interrupt.” Captain Ted lies back on the cooler. “You let us know when you’re through.”

I laugh gamely through clenched teeth and renew my efforts. I have no idea how much headway I am making. For all I can tell there could still be hundreds of yards between me and the fish. All I can do is keep cranking. I do realize that now it is just a matter of time for the fish is no longer taking line. After a good half hour that seems like a week, I see a dark shape rising slowly beneath the surface and know with a thrill of relief and pride that it is over. I have won. Tommy leans over the side, carefully slips the gaff under this deep-water denizen’s gill and lifts it aboard. I am exhausted and elated at once. My father beams as he takes my picture with the fish. I hold it over my shoulder with one hand under the gill and it extends down past my waist. Because the amberjack has been so deep, Tommy has to puncture its skin with an awl to equalize pressure with the surface. Air hisses out through the small hole in its skin. Then, since they are not good to eat, he throws it back into the sea where it quickly squirms out of sight. Tired but glowing, I become a momentary hero and there are jovial congratulations all around. I have met the challenge of The Hump and survived.

“I think I’ve caught my limit for today,” I say. “Whose turn is it now?”

“One sacrifice a day at The Hump, Maxie. That’s all. Unless of course you’d like to do an encore,” says Captain Ted, his day evidently complete.

“No thanks. Got to leave a few for the next bunch of suckers,” I reply.

“It is now after three and we start back in. I pop another beer and sit back for a well-earned rest while Tommy rigs one of the rods for marlin. The bait is a specially prepared tuna which he has sewn around a huge hook. It has black plastic streamers behind it and he calls it “the witch.” He says he usually trolls back in but rarely raises anything. I finish my beer and climb up to the fish tower, three levels above the main deck. The view from here is magnificent and I bask in the briny breeze, triumphant in my recent exploit. Far below I can see my father, Dave and Bill enjoying the first real relaxation of the day. Dad and Dave face out over the stern while Bill faces the bridge where the girl has resumed sunbathing.

Suddenly I hear screaming from the deck below. Tommy is up on his feet with the marlin rig in his hands looking back at the churning water behind the boat. I glance back fifty yards to where “the witch” skips along the surface and there, following closely, is a gigantic black shape. The boat slows slightly and I can hear Tommy coaxing from the deck.

“Come on, you mother, come ON,” he pleads as he lovingly offers the bait. For a brief eternity the vast marlin toys with the bait, cutting it up with its bill before finally, heartbreakingly, disappearing into the deep. Tommy is devastated as he reels in, but admits later that we are lucky to even see a marlin in these waters. I have the feeling he would give a major body part to land one, but I say nothing. Serious fishermen spend their whole lives just trying to hook a marlin and bringing one in is the widely accepted pinnacle of sport fishing. I feel happy just to have seen this great bill fish.

Back at the dock Tommy counts and cleans our catch-fifty-two dolphin, tuna and wahoo. We take all we can carry and leave the rest with the crew who, my father tells me, will sell them to local restaurants. Later, after pictures and pina coladas, we say our good-byes and head back up the Overseas Highway toward the mainland. My father is first to speak when we are alone in the car.

“Well, Max, that’s one of the best days I’ve seen. I guess we did OK.”

“Yeah,” I say, buzzing inside, “I guess we did.”

###

Give Each Other Presents on Arbor Day

by Benjamin Chadwick

The preacher’s name was Luther Rutherford Byrd III and when he was done lecturing, those who had listened could never look at a tree quite the same way again. He delivered an hour-long sermon on Market Street about five times a day, between which he would rest or take his earnings for food. He earned plenty of money, not from those who believed him, but rather those who pitied him.



There was certainly some merit in what he preached, though, and at worst, people were amused by him. He stood on a wooden crate, with a leather hat to hold his earnings, a leather-bound Holy Bible, and his locked backpack. He always set up his items near the city’s oldest oak tree. Most people thought he was crazy.

“TREES!” he would intone, “Trees, trees, trees! God’s children! The eyes and ears of god! Friends of man, givers of oxygen, shade, protection, bearers of fruit... TREES! Yes, people, trees.” Around this time a few people, usually bored businesspersons on their lunch breaks, would stop and listen, chuckling or quietly repeating his phrases in hushed, puzzled tones. When he preached he was an able showman, and he easily drew a crowd of at least ten people for each lesson, usually many more. “Trees are truth. Trees are the TRUTH! Ladies and gentlemen, you see next to me the oldest oak tree in all of Sweetberry County! And this tree-” giving it a friendly pat- “is our friend.”

“Why, you ask? Why are trees so di vinely awe-inspiring? Well let me tell you! They do far more than convert carbon dioxide to oxygen, let me tell you that. They provide more than shelter and shade on hot and rainy days or give us scrumptious apples and pears. And they are far more than decorations, my friends.” he’d pause, and then blast “TREES!” Here he grinned at his audience. “Trees are indeed the very servants of God... God,” and here he would cross himself, “is a busy divinity! He can only see so much by Himself. It is the trees that watch us, record us, keep track of our sins. Hollies! Cherries! Servants of god! Maples! Pines! Seers of our disgusting perversions! Cypresses! Junipers! Cedars! They are the angels, the watchers, they are what see us when we sin against God and humanity! TREES! Sinners repent, this oak is watching us!

“And that is why we must NEVER harm a tree. Nay, we must protect our angels, lest God get angry! For to harm a tree is the greatest sin a man can do! Abhor the sinner who knowingly lets a tree come to harm. And curse those that would hurt a tree. For to hurt a tree, like my friend this oak, is to deliberately step into the very fires of hell, to face eternal damnation and suffering as your IMMORTAL SOUL is made servant to the greatest of tree- haters... must I say it’s name? The Prince of Darkness? The Great Lumberjack? Those who harm trees are making themselves SERVANTS of SATAN!” And then he would go on to describe how those who sinned privately must make confession to trees, and he would enumerate the seven sins against “God and humanity” and finish with a plea for cash, saying donations would be deposited in a fund to stop the destruction of trees and forests. This was the truth, in a manner of speaking The money went directly toward keeping him alive, and sometimes his existence made certain people less inclined toward allowing tree destruction to continue.

After the last speech of the day he would hide the wooden crate in an alley near the oak and grab his goods and head off for dinner. Bundling himself up in his grimy raincoat, pack slung over a shoulder, he would find a quiet fast food restaurant in which to stick to himself. He didn’t have any friends, but he didn’t expect to, because he was a pioneer of a noble cause. Some day, he thought, many people would lie and say that they had been his friend, once his belief became the mainstream of Christianity.

On a particular windy evening he wandered into a Japanese-run Burger King a few blocks from his outdoor stage. He ordered two Whoppers, although he was really only hungry for one. He had done well this day, and so he wanted to celebrate. Once seated, he carefully glanced into his pack, making sure no tree could see. His Jack Daniels and the old Penthouse were in there, with the bible. He grinned slyly, and showed the other diners, morbidly curious about the scraggly old man, his scarcity of teeth.

He wolfed down the juicy hamburgers as if he hadn’t eaten all day, although he had, and then he retired to the bathroom. Sitting on the closed lid he retrieved his whiskey from his pack and pulled out the battered Penthouse, the pages of which were torn from age. He flipped it open to a carnal portrait and then he jumped... the goddamn owners of this dirty grease pit had put a banzai tree in the bathroom! A spy! He hid his face under his raincoat and smacked the little tree with the magazine, and the tree fell, tumbled off the sink and smashed on the ground in a sickening splash of thick soil, and he reeled back in horror of his murder, and crossed himself. Thick brown liquid ran out of the banzai corpse and drooled into the bathroom drain. He hurriedly put everything back in the pack and rushed out of the bathroom at high speed, getting more odd looks from the diners. Outside, he gasped and clutched his heart, and his pace slowed down. He had been betrayed and he would never venture into the Burger King again.

He huffed and puffed for a while outside the restaurant and then decided

he could use some relief. He wandered the streets for a while until he found what he wanted. The man in the leather pants promised beautiful girls but the one he got was really rather old and too experienced for his tastes, with a rough and wrinkly face like dogwood bark, and tangly hair like a weeping willow. But she was cheap. She wanted to use a pre-chosen motel but he insisted that they go somewhere else after he saw the small birch trees in the lobby. He chose a small, oily parking garage and he led her by her hand and there he felt safe and relaxed and was relieved, and afterwards he paid and she left, and he sat down between a BMW and a Chevy waiting for his heart to slow down. God how he hated trees! He envied the lucky bastards who didn’t know what trees were all about. He could live normally if only he didn’t know the truth. But he did. His skin crawled; there was surely a tree hidden somewhere that he hadn’t seen, turning its leaves to look at him with disgust and shaking its trunk with disapproval.

He finished his whiskey, stood, and looked into the old BMW. An air freshener dangled from the mirror, shaped like a flat pine tree. Fools! The non-believers! All of them fools! He looked at his empty bottle and smashed it spitefully through the window of the Beamer. And suddenly the loudest shriek he had ever heard, the banshee wail of the car alarm, oh agony! Stop it! He held one hand over one ear and reached through the shattered glass, grabbed the air freshener and crushed it in his palm! But the noise didn’t stop! God damn the trees! He fell to his knees but the sound just got louder. He heard footsteps running his way but then his heart... oh God, his heart... struggling... as he lay seizing he felt like he was being clobbered by fruits from enormous apple and pear trees. But the CPR failed, and so he died.

“You tried, Lord how you tried. And now look at you.” the voice was a boom and he simply knew he was in heaven. It seemed like the most gorgeous rainforest, except there were no sounds of gibbering simians and squawking avians, just this one gorgeous macaw, with rainbow plumage, beautiful and brighter than the sun, talking in a distinctly un-birdlike alto, a sweet and full voice like that of a clarinet. “You lived a double life, a sham, as two-faced as a Roman coin. You believe in the seven deadly sins, right...? Could you list them for me?”

Luther Rutherford Byrd III tried to talk but found his voice was a pathetic screech compared to the holy macaw. “Wrath,” he squawked. “greed, pride, sloth.” the bird/divinity held up a foot with its three pointy toes elevated. “Um, lust.” one more toe went down. “Gluttony. Oh yeah, envy.” The foot returned to its perch.

“You weren’t supposed to know about the trees, Byrd the Third. That was a very lucky guess on your part. Around here we have to maintain secrecy and it simply wouldn’t do for everyone to know that eternal damnation could be avoided by chopping down all the trees. Now we’ve decided to give you another chance. This time remember your sins while you’re doing them. Or hide them. We don’t care! Just keep quiet. Do you know what ironic punishment is?”

Luther Rutherford Byrd III shook his head no. The macaw appeared to smile. There was a flash of green light.

The little island was rich with clams, and there was lots of deadwood washed up on the shore. Food and fire. All told, the place was about the same size and shape as a basketball court. But he had never seen a basketball court that was circled by sharks.

The woman was luscious, her tanned body full and ripe, like a banana ready to be picked. He saw her, her feet half submerged in the shallow water, beached and sleeping lazily in the sun. Her skin looked smooth like silk. Her clothes had long ago proved more of a nuisance than a necessity, so it appeared, for she lay in her natural state, a Venus resting under the shade of the enormous coconut tree that dominated the isle.

He licked his lips, and found he had all his teeth once again. He felt fresh, rejuvenated, vigorous, powerful, and best of all, young. He started working right away. The girl looked up and smiled at him, and joined him, digging out the roots of the tree.

###



THE LORD OF THE FLIES

by Jary McKinney

Sheets covered the two small windows allowing only the minimum light to see by. For a man so large Duke's fingers moved swiftly tying hackle to the tiny fishing hook. Two boxes of completed flies rested on the floor next to the rumpled mattress.

At seventy five cents a fly Duke wasn't trying to get rich. 'Just enough to get me through the summer.' Duke thought to himself 'If I can get through the summer, and finish the short stories, I should be on my way to getting published.'

Each fly equaled a beer, Two dozen was a damn good time and a damn good time was something to write about. Duke tied off the fly, and removed it from the vise.

"That's four hundred and thirty two." he said aloud, placing the third box next to the other two.

Duke sprawled on the mattress, and fished a camel out of the pack on the floor. He stared at the three boxes "Four hundred and thirty two, if I tie twenty four dozen a week till fishing season that would be plenty for the whole summer. More than a thousand dollars."

Duke opened one of the boxes and peered inside. There were big woolly worms, and little beetles, colorful royal coachmen, hoppers, and a myriad of others, including the powerhouse caddis fly a dozen apiece, twelve dozen to a box.

Duke closed the box, and put out his cigarette. Upstairs he could hear his mother moving around. He went up and sat on the couch.

"How did it go today Duke?" his mother's voice sounded worried like it always did.

"Fine, about fifty"

Duke's father was watching the news, "If you tried you could tie twice that, you know I'm counting on those flies."

"I'm counting on them too."

"You just want to party all summer, when are you going to get a damn job?"

"I've got a job."

"You call tying flies a job?"

"That's not what I meant, and you know it. I'm taking about my work."

"You call that crap you write work, I mean a real job, I could probably get you on at the mill it's good work."

"For you it may be good work, not for me."

"Goddamn it it's been good enough for you as long as it's me doing it. For christ sake you're twenty three, and still living in my house, and my work isn't good enough for you?"

"I'm not going to fight about it right now."

Duke and his father sat in silence, in the kitchen Duke could still hear his mother moving around, she even sounded nervous when she moved. The two parrots took the silence as their cue to start squawking. The birds had never uttered a single distinguishable work i spite of the tireless efforts of Duke's mother 'Those fucking useless bastards' Duke thought 'What the hell is a parrot good for when i won't talk, and only bites fingers?'

"And anyway what the hell kind of fly is this?" Dukes father interrupted his mental tirade against stupid parrots.

"It's a caddis fly, I made some changes."

"Well don't damnit people like caddis flies because they catch fish not because they're art. I don't want to see any more of these damn things. Just tie what's in the book."

"Fine, I'm going down to the river, check on the hatch."

"There ain't no hatch yet, weathers been too cold."

"OK I'm just going."

"Tie me some more caddis flies, and do it right this time."

Duke's mother patted him on the arm as he passed through the kitchen. "I thought it was a fine looking fly."

"He just doesn't understand, there's more to tying flies than copying patterns. You have to be bold."

"It's this long winter, he's on edge, no bonus from the mill, he's really counting on you."

"I know mom but he doesn't understand. When I have a hook in the vise, and some hackle in my hands I feel like I could really do something worthwhile."

"I know Duke but do try to be a good boy."

"I'll try."

"Good-bye son."

Downstairs Duke could hear his parents talking.

"I know, I know." his father's voice drifted down to him.

"I don't really see much difference."

"You don't but if the fish do who will want to by them?"

"Maybe the fish will like them, you'd be famous."

Duke heard his father laugh "Don't want fame, just want to get my back off the wall, been a hell of a winter."

"He is really trying, it's just that he's different, you've seen how he writes, and I wish you wouldn't call it carp. I guess he's and artist or something poor boy."

"Don't care about art neither if you can't catch fish with it."

Duke put a hook in the vise, and picked up a piece of hackle. The parrots started up their squawking again. 'Who can work with that damn racket. Fucking birds, good for nothing.' Then it struck him. A smile spread across Duke's face like ripples on a calm pool when a dry fly settles down on it.

...

The process of hackle recovery had been more difficult than Duke had imagined. It would have been easier if he could have just taken handfuls at a time, but that would have damaged the delicate feathers, and the birds would not have survived. Not that Duke cared really whether or not they survived. While he was working the squawking had nearly burst his drums, but he had restrained himself for the sake of his mother. She loved those birds so Duke wouldn't kill them.

Duke was downstairs sorting his hackle to glory when he heard the front door close.

"Duke, Duke" her voice came cautiously through the house "Duke you home? Du . . . aaahh!"

'I guess she found them' Duke thought. He put away the rest of the parrot feathers, and ran upstairs "What's the matter?" Duke asked as innocently as he could.

"B..B..Birds" she sputtered "They're naked!"

'And quiet' Duke added mentally "I wonder how that happened?" Duke hoped he sounded convincing.

"My God I don't know."

"Maybe they are molting."

"They never looked like this before."

"Parrot leprosy?" Duke offered.

"I don't think so." she turned her gaze accusingly at Duke.

"I know," he said before her unspoken accusations had a chance to air themselves "Must be this long winter.: People usually blamed strange events, and circumstances on the weather, including any personal problems they might be having. People were ready to blame the weather for everything, and the government for the weather. Duke hoped he wouldn't have to take it that far.

"Maybe." she still didn't sound convinced.

"Probably screwed up their metabolism's, made them loose their feathers." Duke was searching for some more scientific terms he could whip on her, but further convincing turned out to be unnecessary.

:That must be it." she said "This damn weird winter, poor little birds. They look so small now."

The birds didn't say anything, just sat on their perches, shivering, and eyeing Duke. 'Be a hell of a time for them to learn how to talk' Duke thought, and laughed to himself. He could picture the birds naked, and shivering down at the cop shop spilling their guts to the L.P.D.. the birds didn't say anything though, and Duke almost felt a little sorry for them now that they weren't squawking.

"Maybe you could knit them some sweaters." Duke suggested.

"I supposed I'll have to, to keep them from freezing."

Duke didn't know if he should stay and comfort her some more or just go away to make sure he didn't blow the story before it had time to crystallize in her mind. It was a touch and go situation, and he could barely keep from laughing at the thought of the stupid parrots wearing sweaters. Duke decided it was time to make an exit. Back downstairs he couldn't help but chuckle. Duke knew his father wouldn't really care one way or the other about the birds really, but he might feel like arguing about how they had lost their feathers. Duke hoped his mother would be able to convince him so he could get to work on his masterpiece.

. . .

In all the parrots had yielded twelve dozen flies, after the rejects had been discarded. For three weeks Duke had studied exotic flies, tied by the masters, slowly his own pattern had begun to emerge in his mind. Duke had continued to tie regular flies for his father who was pleased. Now that Duke was working on his own pattern he had stopped making variations on the other flies.

The parrots had not uttered squawk one in three weeks, Silent testimony to Duke's Genius. The sweaters they wore to cease their constant shivering hadn't improved their looks much. Duke's mother had been in such a hurry to get started lest they freeze to death, she had used scrap yarn that was on hand. The available yarn had been mostly black, with some red, and metallic fleck. The parrots now looked like the ghosts of black birds that had been killed in some gruesome manner. Though Duke's mother still felt sorry for the, she seemed to love them less, and less each day.

The winter was starting to show signs of letting up in time for June, but snow still continued to drift down occasionally in the mountains Duke's father grew gloomier as the weather improved

"Gettin' hot too fast, if the hatch comes with all that damn snow in the hills river'll be too muddy to fly fish."

"Duke will be awfully disappointed." Duke's mother said.

"To hell with Duke, he can find a job. Like as not I'll be looking for a summer job myself this year."

"I don't know dear he has been doing well, and I'd hate to see him upset." Duke's mother was beginning to have suspicions about the birds. She had seen the way they watched duke for the last few weeks. Once she had almost go into his room to investigate. She couldn't tell if she would even have the nerve to confront him if she had found anything. Her hand had shaken so, she had turned away from the sheet that served as a door to his room. Breathless she had run back upstairs to collect her wits. She berated herself, how could she not trust him, her only son, especially in such hard times? He seemed to be doing so well, and acting so calm. Why stir him up?

She could never have guessed at the chaos that ravaged Duke's mind continually. He now rarely left his room. The calm she was witnessing was the calm before the storm. Duke no longer counted the flies as money, nor a means of escape. They had become his life his lovelies, and the boxes piled up with their masses. Thousands of flies that he tied night and day, most were in strict accordance with the patterns, but his favorites he took out continually to handle, and marvel at their ingenuity. Duke no longer thought about his father and the selling of the flies. It had

begun to be a disgusting thought. How could he put a price on his work, only to have it used to catch fish? The thought of one of his flies being mauled by a fish appalled him. That would indeed be their fate if Duke’s father ever got his hands on them. Not if Duke had anything to say about it. He looked at the sky each day, and hoped for more rain to swell, and muddy the river. Eventually they would come, the river would be clear, and the fish hungry for flies, but until then Duke and his entourage were safe.

He know in the end that he would probably only be able to save the parrot flies, which he had kept hidden behind his bookshelf since the day he had seen his mother lurking around his curtain door. She had not seen Duke standing in the shadows but must have sensed something, because she had not gone in. Duke wasn’t going to risk blowing it now so he had stepped up security measures. Even so he had become more, and more afraid to leave, and now spent nearly all of his time in the company of the flies.

Had Duke left more often he would have seen the sky making it’s slow change from winter to spring. The river, and streams still muddy from the runoff not longer threatened their banks, and cleared slowly each day. The clouds had ceased to pour rain, and now only the gentle sprinkling of late spring issued forth.

Duke know none of this though or else it is certain he would not have been caught so unprepared when the first waves of fishermen began their invasion.

. . .

Duke sat sweating in his room. The beads broke out on his forehead, and rolled down his nose, and sideburns. he barely felt it trickling down his ribs. ‘Escape: he thought ‘How could I have been so stupid?’ There was no way out now. The boxes of flies had taken over his room. There was no way he could take them all with him, not even a fraction, Two or three boxes at most the rest would be left behind. He couldn’t bear it ‘maybe I could fit them all into a dozen boxes’ Duke started packing and repacking the flies handfuls at a time stuffing, and stomping them tighter into the boxes unmindful of the sharp barbs that stung his hands, unmindful of everything but the possibility of escape.

“It’s okay my darlings, it may be cramped for awhile, but we’re getting out of here.”

Thirteen boxes, he could have done it in twelve, but would not suffer to mash his Hope flies (as he had taken to calling the parrot hackle flies) in with the rest.

Thirteen was still too many to carry. ‘Fuck’ he thought. duke heard his mother upstairs.

“Mom, I need to borrow the car for awhile.”

“I don’t know Duke. You know your father doesn’t like you driving the new car.”

“I know mom, but I just need to deliver the flies.” Duke stifled a giggle that tried to rise up, and betray him.

“I could drive you.”

“I’ll need all the room in the car for the flies.”

“Well, I guess it’s all right.” she said digging the keys out of her purse. “Be careful Duke.”

Duke looked at his mother, and it seemed that for a moment she knew everything that he had been hiding. Duke turned away, and set to packing the car. The Hope flies were the last to be loaded, and occupied the passenger seat. Duke’s mother came out of the house as he was climbing into the drivers seat. she walked to the car. Duke rolled the window down, and rested his arm on the door.

“Good-bye Duke” she said, touching his arm, and for the first time he could remember she sounded absolutely certain of herself.

Duke backed the car slowly out of the drive, his mother stood and watched him. The wind gusting blew her hair around her face. Duke knew he wouldn’t see her again.

Duke drove upwind, and across the river from town. The wind had picked up steadily as he drove. When Duke stopped the car it was on a small hilltop that afforded a good view of the river, and the town that lay beyond. Duke sat for a moment in silence looking at the familiar buildings. The people going about their usual routines.

Duke stepped from the car, and felt the wind buffeting against him, it was perfect. He unloaded the car, and lined the boxes up on the slope.

None on the streets noticed Duke, nor even looked in his directions until it was too late. Duke threw the flies, box, after box into the embrace of the wind which lifted them over the hill, and swept them down the other side with increasing speed toward the unsuspecting town.

The hatch had come right on schedule, but with a sting that none had expected.

Avid fishermen had come out to catch samples after the first flies had passes their windows, only to be caught up in the melee. Duke had saved the Hope flies for the final wave, which he unleashed slowly. As they swept over the hill towards the river the fish who were by now in a frenzy began their jumping, and striking, decimating the Hope fly population. Only one crossed the river safely, and embedded itself in the buttock of the curator of the local museum, who put it in a glass case. Where it resided until it was purchased by a private collector of fine art for a sum no less than twenty thousand dollars.

Non on the street heard Duke laughing or yelling “Fly free, Fly free.”

Afterword

It didn’t take the town very long to figure out what had happened, nor who had done it. The car had been found right were Duke had left it. Though even the finest trackers in the county had lost the trail when it crossed the Mexican border.

The local hospital had made a killing on tetanus shots, and the wounds mostly healed nicely, The whole town prospered when news got out it became a local legend, and a great tourist draw. It alwo gave people something to talk about, and many entertaining hours of comparing scars.

Nobody ever really knew for sure what happened to Duke though there were reported sighting of a strange white man around Baião in the Amazon Basin. Strangely enough that region is also where Dr. S. Cummings professor of ornithology at Birkely U. discovered a strange new subspecies of naked parrots. Due to the rarity of the birds Duke’s mother was able to sell hers for a considerable sum that left the family independently wealthy. She had long since stopped loving them anyway.

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Haiku Tanka
by
Neca
Stroller

tanka	
without a flutter white-tipped wings ride the updraft- joined by spiraling cinders, once your love letters	haiku for a brief moment within the birds’ formation- a silver jet
	twisted vines whiten with the late winter- grandmother’s curls
another tanka tucked between fallen leaves a white chrysanthemum- once pinned to my lapel by your unsteady hands	late afternoon pools of shade harbor the southern snow
a tanka + haiku sequence	
before sunrise pale orange horizon spreads diffusing the night- alone, she turns to the glow for comfort and light	
after sunset a pink reflection lingers- her face still in light	