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# The Aldebaran

***This Issue of The Aldebaran is  
dedicated to Ariel Goldberg.***

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**\*\* Thank You Ina! \*\***

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**ALDEBARAN i**

**THE CONTENTS :**

*-- FICTION --*

The Night of Trees  
By -- **Jeff Clark**                      Page 1

Desert Gardens  
By -- **Catherine de Cuir**      Page 4

Thrifting  
By -- **Kathleen O'Sullivan** Page 14

The Magic Number  
By -- **Ina Chadwick**              Page 23

*-- POETRY --*

**Charles Bigelow**                      Page 25

**Clarita Felhoelter**                  Page 26

**John Grey**                              Page 27

**Phoebe Grigg**                         Page 29

**Jennifer Jordan**                      Page 30

**Joan Payne Kincaid**                 Page 31

**Thomas Kretz**                         Page 32

<b>B. Z. Niditch</b>	Page 34
<b>James Proffitt</b>	Page 35
<b>Tom Riley</b>	Page 37
<b>April Selley</b>	Page 38
<b>Irv Rosenthal</b>	Page 40
<b>Humberto Sequeira</b>	Page 41
<b>T. Sheehan</b>	Page 43

Geoffrey Clark

An Appreciation Of, THE NIGHT OF TREES

By -- Geoffrey Clark

Thomas Williams' 1961 novel *The Night of Trees* has proven to be that hoped-for rarity, a book that won't die: first published in 1961 but then and afterward hard to find due to a production and distribution snafu which resulted in the book's being unavailable after positive reviews had excited interest, it was republished in 1978 by Richard Marek in hardback; and now Ampersand Press has reprinted it in an excellent trade paperback edition which, it is to be hoped, will remain in print for years to come.

There are many reasons to be glad for its existence, beyond the obvious: that anything Thomas Williams writes is worth careful reading and that the returning to the public of an early and neglected work is a signal piece of luck for the cause of literature.

*The Night of Trees* is a long novella rather than a short novel like, say, *The Great Gatsby*. Though around 135,000 words, it is tightly restricted in time, setting and characters: three days elapse in the course of the story, the setting is a farmhouse and the hunting country of rural New Hampshire which Williams has written so well and so often about in other works, and there are two central characters, father and son, and two minor, host and hostess. Though a number of other characters appear, mostly in flashbacks, they are there to illuminate the main characters and the central story line rather than augment it.

In his introduction to the new edition, John Irving notes that *The Night of Trees* is "one of our most painful stories in our literature ... there is a classical symmetry ... nothing happens accidentally" – and in agreeing one may as well invoke Hamlet's notion of there being a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. Indeed, the horror of the novel is of Oedipal proportions: a father whose only son is an

*Geoffrey Clark*

extraordinarily fine young man of twenty, a Billy Budd without the stutter – "his son, to a man who liked craft and perfection in things, was the only perfect thing he had ever seen" – is instrumental in that son's death; and while there is nothing in the world Richard Grimald would not have sacrificed to prevent his son Murray's death, he must in one of literature's most frightening confrontations with self ultimately acknowledge his role in bringing the tragedy about and endure an almost insupportable synthesis of grief and guilt. In fact, there is something of the poetic symmetry of a medieval revenge tale to this novel, though there is no conscious desire on anyone's part for revenge: no character ever wishes anything bad to befall any other character. Nonetheless, a sense of horror and fatedness permeate the work: it is as if in the tale of Abraham and Isaac God didn't ultimately relent and indeed made Abraham slaughter the hapless, trusting Isaac, who shares many qualities with Murray Grimald.

Though Richard Grimald cuckolds Shim Buzzell, the man who is the instrument of Murray Grimald's death, the real culprit lies in Richard's character. Shim may be a perverse man of stunted affinities who, in the bowels of the old New Hampshire farmhouse where the Grimalds have come, Richard to re-establish contact with his son, his son to indulge his father in a last hunt before setting out on what was to have been a voyage of self-discovery, labors in a secret meat locker by night, performing a kind of unspeakable surgery on doe carcasses: but on the level of pure cause and effect Murray's death by gunshot is an accident. When Shim tells us, "Believe me, I'd rather shot myself," we believe him. Certainly it is Richard's overweening aggressive male arrogance and his impulse to dominate and his pride in himself and his prowess that sets the *machine infernale* into motion. Richard's pride leaves its palimpsest script on everything in the book but it is most strongly manifested in the chase and pursuit of both his host's wife and the beautiful deer he is



*Geoffrey Clark*

compelled to seek and slaughter. Richard Grimald enjoys his manliness, his power of body and strength of nerve, his sexual pursuits and his God-like powers as the dispenser of life or death. And his fall is the more powerful because, as Irving notes, he "possesses an uncommon honesty." After debating its fate with himself, he kills a porcupine, after which it occurs to him that "the violent act was a certain one, at least, and its symmetry – the form of the giving of death – called, in a satisfying way, to an impulse way back and deep."

It may be true as Murray surmises, that his father is "made of nobler material, that his guts were harder, his tendons stronger, his honor more durable than his own." But his father also bears a tragic flaw, a product of his pride, an inability to change, to let himself conform to events and people rather than dominate them; in short, an inflexibility. A haunting line of Norman Mailer's seems apt: "There was that law of nature, so cruel and so just, that one had to change or else pay more for remaining the same." And the price Richard must ultimately pay is no less than the pain – this is too meager a word – that Oedipus had to claim as his own. As John Irving noted, "it is terrifying to contemplate the author even imagining such a story – not to mention rendering it."

*de Cuir*

## DESERT GARDENS

By -- Catherine de Cuir

Heat shakes my vision the minute the plane lands in Phoenix. I want to go home – even LA isn't this hot. But then I see them waiting for me, wearing shorts, Hawaiian shirts, and straw hats.

"How are you, honey," Nan says, reaching up to kiss me on the cheek, and Gramp says, "Sol, where's that girlfriend of yours?"

"I couldn't talk Mattie into it this time of year, Gramp."

That's not exactly true. "I love your grandparents," Mattie told me. "But you're impossible! You make me so mad. I'm not going to visit them again when I'm afraid we're breaking up."

Nan fans herself. "Mattie hates the heat. She's fair, like I am."

"More kreplech for me," Gramp says.

It's good to be back. They fuss over whether to put my suitcase in the trunk or just set it on the back seat next to Nan. Since I turned twelve she's insisted I sit in front so I can stretch out my legs.

"Good. You can't bug me about my driving from back there," Gramp tells her. Already we're in the realm of ritual. I'd bug him if I had the nerve. He can barely see over the hood. He pokes along, honking his horn when he should stop, stopping when he should honk his horn. Camelback Mountain shimmers with heat. I'm glad it's a short drive to Sun City.

"So how's our future rabbi? Any more wedding plans? Looking forward to your studies this year?"

I clear my throat. I could tell them everything's fine. Or I could tell them Mattie and I are having trouble. Maybe they'd even be relieved.

Nan saves me. "Are you eating enough, dear?" she asks.

*de Cuir*

"Does he look thin to you?" Gramp says. "Samson should look so good."

We laugh. I have a slender build, but I'm not so thin anymore. I've grown a beard. I look like a rabbi, matter of fact.

Eventually we arrive at their complex in Sun City – small ranch houses landscaped with cactus and gravel. The patio furniture is what they had back in Syracuse, whitened now with age and sun.

Familiar stuff inside, too: the table with the hanging leaves that I played Indians under, quite a few visits back. Gramp's chair, which I liked for serious thinking when I was a teenager. The white walls are covered with Nan's art projects – gold sprayed macaroni and bright watercolors, the outpouring of a good heart with sudden leisure. My brother Nate calls it the Sarah Gold School of Shlock.

Nan has finally decided she doesn't have to do all the cooking herself. She tells me she's had a college student in all day ("What a nice girl. If you were still unattached, I'd have asked her to stay!") helping her cook, so all she has to do tonight is serve. I'm glad she got help. And I'm sorry she had to. Out of the refrigerator come uncooked kreplech in a bag (Jewish ravioli, for our Gentile friends – hold the tomato sauce), ready to go when I pull the big frying pan out for Nan; chopped liver, wheat thins, cut celery and carrots, olives.

"Look at all this food!" I say, although it shouldn't surprise me. I've had the same pre-dinner spread here for as long as I've been eating.

"You shouldn't have gone to such trouble, Nan," I say.

"I told you, honey, I didn't make it. I have angina just making the bed. I'm getting old, damn it. Sy, what do you want to drink, sweetheart?"

Gramp wants one scotch with ginger ale, just like he's wanted every night since the crash of '29. But she always asks him just in case. Someday he might change

*de Cuir*

his mind. I missed the wedding anniversary party last month because I had finals. They call it platinum, I think: sixty years. Nan pours herself a drink, takes two sips, and then puts it into the refrigerator.

"Atta girl, Nan," I say. "Give her one drink and it lasts all week."

She hands me a beer. Gramp steers me toward the sofa. He wants to hear about school. He wanted me to be a lawyer like he was, but he never said so. A rabbi's almost as good.

"Do whatever you want," he's always said. "Just be the best." But his eyes light up when I tell him I took a seminar in tax law. A crazy course for a rabbinical student to take. I don't know why I did, except to lengthen my conversations with Gramp. Nan is scurrying around in the kitchen while we talk.

Chicken. Rice with mushrooms. Green beans. Jello salad. Biscuits. More chicken. A Friday night dinner for the ages.

"Do you have enough, honey?" Nan asks.

"No. You better get him another plate," Gramp says. "Now there'll be no sound but the gnashing of teeth," he says.

Two stories I know I'll hear at dinner. One is getting married, the other is retiring.

Gramp is the second of seven children, and Nan is the second of eight. Their parents were immigrants from Lithuania and Austria-Hungary. Gramp's older sister married Nan's older brother. Gramp's dad, who actually was quite fond of Nan's brother (Uncle Iz) gave him a hard time when he asked for the hand of great-aunt Fanny (Aunt Great Fanny, Gramp's sister). Made Iz think the answer was going to be no. Is all of this perfectly clear? Nan and Gramp used to draw family trees on paper napkins for me till I got it straight.

They give me the background once more to make sure. And now they take turns telling their story.

Fanny and Iz – the siblings – had married, after threatening to elope. So when Sarah and Sy, Nan and

*de Cuir*

Gramp to me, wanted to marry too, Sarah coached her dad to make it hard on Sy. Sy (Gramp) would report it back to his dad, who'd given Iz that evening of hell: Let old Gold see how it felt.

"Gramp actually got nervous!" Nan tells me, "Even though he was in on the joke. I spied on them from the kitchen. You'd have thought Gramp had forgotten why he'd come over."

Gramp frowns. "I wasn't so sure Nan's father wanted her to marry me after all. I didn't want the answer to be no. Didn't want to elope, or be told to wait." Gramp shakes his head.

Then they start laughing. They've remembered how the story turns out.

"All Nan's father told me, when finally I expressed my intentions, was, 'Vell, I think that can be arranged.' "

They're in hysterics. I am too, for this worry sixty years solved. Maybe my troubles will turn out so well.

I always look, but I don't find it here. I don't find the reason for their children's confusion and restlessness. Uncle Mike's a poet who rails against his three dead marriages in the most original terms. Aunt Hannah married a tyrant who won't let their children – or her – see the grandparents.

My mother is a tormented intellectual, a practicing therapist, and arguably the happiest of Nan and Gramp's kids. She says she's a Jew, "but not so you'd notice." Are Nan and Gramp bullshitting us – maybe they're not so happy? Or maybe it's hard to be the child of so much niceness. Maybe the world has changed too much.

My mother married Simon Morales, a fine man who has never been interested in any religion. That made it easier to tell them who I planned to marry. They've heard it all before.

"Vell, I think that can be arranged." Nan and Gramp are still laughing. They repeat the old man's

*de Cuir*

words to each other, imitating his accent, as if those words were the vows themselves. They laugh till they have to wipe their eyes. Then Nan pushes her plate away and walks slowly over to get the wedding pictures.

"Watch you don't get extra schmaltz on these," she laughs, setting the book between Gramp and me.

These are some pictures. A line of Uncle Mike's comes to mind: "We thought joy arose from the body, sorrow from the mind. That's how young we were."

You've never seen anybody prouder or more beautiful than the woman in the photographs. She's tiny and serious and blonde. She could conquer anybody. Gramp's hair is thick and black; he looks energetic. They're both full of fire in these pictures. I look at the young faces under the canopy, then I look at the real faces, and a surge of fear runs through my gut.

"Oh, she was quite a number, your grandmother." Gramp looks one photo up and down and says, "You haven't changed much, dear."

"Oh!" she says. "My poor husband is going blind." She kisses him.

I had a different problem last trip, six months ago. The good news was, I'd been accepted for the second year at the theological school. I was indeed going to be a rabbi. The bad news was, I planned to marry a priest. You've got to admit, it hasn't been done to death. So why does it sound like a vaudeville bit? Now I don't know what will happen with us. Say good-night, Mattie.

"I wish for you a marriage as happy as ours," Nan says. "Our families were close. We had so much in common."

Yeah, Mattie and I have a lot in common, too. Our profession, for one thing. Her name is Martha O'Hara Halbert, and she's Irish as you please. Or don't please. But she's become Episcopalian, so now she can be a priest. Her folks aren't wild about that. Our families are close, also – too close: They both live in California. Mattie's dad, Brian Halbert, clashed with Simon the

*de Cuir*

minute they met. Fights about dinner plans or where we plan to live or how are big numbers for the likes of us.

Nan and Gramp don't seem to fight. Maybe I'll just tell them it's off, this wedding we were going to perform ourselves. At least we didn't have to worry about who would marry us. But Nan's probably had her aqua dress cleaned already. When Uncle Mike divorced the second time, she said, "A tragedy happened in Syracuse." Do I ruin a nice evening for two old people I love?

"When things got bad, Gramp and I would let off steam by singing in harmony," Nan says. They laugh. This does not comfort me. Mattie and I do not sing in harmony. She's got this Irish temper, says I argue like a lawyer. Nan puts more chicken on my plate.

As we're finishing dinner, I hear the second story. This one is set in the late sixties, instead of the roaring twenties. Gramp's a successful lawyer, Nan is his secretary. They both work too hard and smoke too much. Everybody in Syracuse is relying on Sy Gold. Nan has ransomed half of Judea with Israel bonds, and they both have health troubles. One winter they take a vacation in Arizona.

"I looked over the edge of that paddleboat and saw our reflection in the water," Nan says. "Then Gramp had an idea."

"It was you, honey. 'Do you know, there's a way out of this rat race we're in.' That's what she said."

He pauses dramatically. "This story always makes me want a cigar."

She slaps his knee.

"We sold the house," Gramp says. "We didn't have a mortgage. We've paid cash for everything."

"The kids were all married, for the first time, at least. We hated to leave Syracuse, and our brothers and sisters, but we felt our lives depended on it." Nan frowns a moment at water in cut glass.

"Here we are. Twenty years later."

*de Cuir*

It's a story I like: doing what's right for oneself turns out to be best for everybody. If one can figure out what it is.

"After this meal, one corn flake for dinner tomorrow." Gramp says.

"I hope you saved room for sundaes with my homemade topping," Nan says. Gramp and I groan.

"A walk first," Gramp says. "Let dinner settle."

Outside it's twilight. The sky looks like a piece of Nan's favorite china. I broke a cloudy, iridescent blue bowl at ten and haven't been allowed to touch any china since.

"Boys don't have to do dishes," Nan told me.

"Could we get that in writing?" Gramp asked.

We walk out through the toy gardens made of pebbles and succulents and tiny cactus. Gramp looks at the deepening sky. Nan looks down at the neighbor's garden. Maybe I'll tell them.

"Why don't our donkey tails look like this?" she wonders.

"The answer I shouldn't give you," Gramp says.

She looks up, too. "Is that Venus, dear?"

"Evening star." He takes Nan's hand and turns to me. "Sol, these are the best years of my life."

We stop walking. I've never heard this. I've heard happy memories, sure, but never this.

"When the children were little, that was wonderful, too," Nan says.

"Too full of worries," Gramp says. "Too many skinned knees and chicken pox and nightmares. Made the big bills seem even worse."

"Well, I loved working for you, too," Nan says.

"We could never relax. There was always a new problem. But that was what we loved about it."

"But now there's no worries," Gramp says. "I'm with my bride here. And we're in pretty good health. We've done our best by everybody. I wish my whole life had been old age."



*de Cuir*

Nan frowns. Seems she's not sure about this. "I'm glad we're old now," she says.

"Do what you think is best, Sol," Gramp says.

"Listen to yourself."

"But is that what you did?"

"Of course it is. I've always worn the pants in this family. I say, Sarah! Where do you want to go? And then I take her there!"

Another shtik. We laugh. But Gramp isn't finished. "I did exactly what I wanted through the years," he said. "Even if I didn't do what I wanted each minute. Is that the best way? I don't know. Do I have everything I want now? Yes."

The desert gets dark so suddenly. We head back and go into their small house, still hot from the day despite the buzz of the air conditioner. We eat sundaes and look at pictures of great-grandchildren. By nine they're sleepy. They'll be up puttering around again before dawn.

"Anything we need to discuss that can't wait till tomorrow?"

The look in Nan's eyes says she hopes I don't have news – everything's fine right now. How long can anything wait? Twenty years? Sixty? Maybe Mattie and I could put off breaking up.

"No, Nan. Nothing that can't wait."

They offer to sleep together so I can be comfortable in Gramp's bed. They've slept apart for a few years, because of Gramp's snoring.

"Look at these bags under my eyes!" Nan explained. "I need my beauty rest, honey. What's important is what you do together when you're awake."

"When you're asleep, who knows the difference," Gramp said.

Who am I to question it. But one morning one of them won't wake up, and then the other will wonder if being there would have made the difference. Meanwhile they get their sleep, which on the other hand might prolong their lives.

*de Cuir*

They offer me Gramp's room again. I tell them I'll be fine on the sofa. They insist.

At exactly nine-thirty they wish me good night and go off to Nan's room. I read a book I brought in my bag and watch the eleven o'clock news. I hate to hoist myself off the sofa, but around midnight I head for Gramp's room.

Something wakes me in the night. A small earthquake, maybe? No, not here. Nan and Gramp are speaking – too softly to have awakened me, but they're up, too. Maybe Gramp's snoring did it.

"I'm too old," I hear Nan say.

"No we're not, honey." Gramp says.

"Not you. Me."

"You're still mad at me for saying that last time," Gramp says. "I was just kidding you, dear."

"You're not funny. You make me so angry, Seymour."

The elevator in my throat drops. I do not want to hear this conversation. I've never had much curiosity about my parents' sex life, let alone my grandparents'. I've never heard them so much as disagree before. It's irrational to feel worried – they've been married sixty years, for God sakes. Maybe I think any problem means it's all impossible. And my marriage sounds improbable before it's even started.

"Too old for love?" Gramp asks. "How long are we going to keep living this lie?" They're eighty-six and - seven.

"Don't be melodramatic," Nan says. "It's no longer a lie."

The same rhythm, if not the same topic, as the fights I have with Mattie. I dread the day Mattie and I have this particular argument. Looks like we've got some time, at least.

They're silent now. I can't tell who won. Maybe I should get up and go to the bathroom so they'll know I'm awake and won't say any more. Or maybe I keep quiet so they don't suspect that I've heard this much.

*de Cuir*

"I'm tired. For God's sake. Go back to sleep. You know I love you, Sy."

" 'Isle of view.' Like you write in the greeting cards." He laughs a little. "Good night."

I want to wish them good night too, even if they don't agree on what that is. I wish them thousands more chicken dinners and walks in the twilight, nights of love they aren't too old for. I wish them an eternity of good nights. I wish for the impossible.

*O'Sullivan*

### THRIFTING

By -- Kathleen O'Sullivan

Polyester, yellow and powerful, it evoked tears of shame from a horrifying fit of laughter. In the wake of thrift shops all over Chicago, from vintage dresses to torn slacks, I'd somehow traveled a street carefully ignored in the past. I didn't know one tattered, yellow suit and six children in a shopping cart could affect me this way.

I'd admired a work acquaintance's clothes at the office, and jumped when Susan invited me thrifting, as she called it, the act of hitting every junk shop in town. On a chestnut morning at the tail end of fall, she picked me up at my brownstone in New Town wearing a purple, fringed blouse which jiggled as she shifted her Fiat Spider onto the street.

"Meg," she said, "the deals are incredible. I bought this blouse on Clark for \$2.00, and the pants at the Salvation Army off Broadway.

I scanned her outfit, impressed and even envious. It took a certain know how, a bit of the Renaissance woman to know how to use bizarre fabrics to one's advantage. She screeched around a pothole and whipped down a one way street.

"Take me to these great stores," I said, adjusting my Ray Ban, sunglasses.

I pictured giant warehouses, clothes tailored to Meg McLain, designer blouses and silk pants, last year's styles, but well worth it.

"The fun is," she said, "you spend and spend without denting your husband's precious budget. Jerry prefers this to Brussell's downtown."

"Brussell's carries great clothes though, no denying it."

"Yes, but you feel like you're getting away with something thrifting," she said, turning red, "You know, designer stuff, for five bucks."

*O'Sullivan*

"Obviously you know of what you speak, so where first?"

I noticed the neighborhood we'd landed in since the start of the conversation and sat up, alert. Doors off, shelled two flats sagged behind "for rent" signs nailed in the front lawns. Men huddled on corners. Two exchanged paper sacks.

"We'll hit the 'Vintage Vogue' shop on Clark first, you know, all the dresses your mother used to wear, others as far back as the 1920's. I borrowed my mother's pearl buttoned sweater once for a sorority skit. Wonder what I did with it?" she said, quick look at me, "we'll explore, you know."

She turned to me and cracked bubble gum between toothy grin. Parallel parked across from a pet shop, we wedged between a pub and a therapist's office, grabbed our purses and locked the car. Surprisingly, in only four blocks, we'd crossed into a young, urban, working neighborhood jammed with town houses, briefcases and sidewalk cafes.

Susan skipped across the street, a Saab barely missing her. In my mind, her zest masked an underlying obsession, an insatiable hunger for bargain clothes, like any other addiction. So I followed hesitantly, as if we entered an opium den.

A chilly breeze off the lake lifted flowered dresses on hangers out front of the shop, languid classics set out to lure customers into the warmth of the tiny shop, away from a Chicago winter waiting to pounce. We strolled in the front door and I fingered a dangling \$75.00 price tag pinned to a black, silk kimono. "This is thrifting?" I thought. I'd brought \$20.00.

As aged as their wares, two chain smoking relics ran the place, two slovenly women with faces like prunes. Incense permeated the room and I coughed as we entered. Susan darted to a \$50.00 and under rack, and grabbed two or three beaded sweaters within seconds.

*O'Sullivan*

"Mother had several like this," she said, "and she tossed them! They're priceless. Aren't the pearl buttons adorable? And the beading?"

She turned to me, face flushed. I smiled.

"Tremendous," I said, noting how her eyes outsparkled the sweater.

One of the owners leaned back behind the counter, blouse stretched over generous bust at the third button. Her face contracted with each suck on her cigarette.

I hurried to the back, in search of air, and tripped over a dog, haphazardly sprawled next to a mirror as if a throw rug. Heavy drapes divided the front of the shop from the back. In a dark corner, heavy wool overcoats filled the racks, as well as tailored jackets and padded dresses from the forties. I yanked several black dresses, meager possibilities, and squeezed out front in search of a changing room.

"Behind the screen over there, see?" the busty one said, pointing flabby arm to an oblique corner, where a young man rummaged through army pea coats, next to a cardboard thin, room divider.

"Behind that flimsy divider?" I asked.

For the sake of thrifting, I squirmed out of my shirt and slacks, and knocked the screen with my elbows. The young man's eyes gazed over the top.

All three selections dwarfed my 5'10" frame. The manikins for these classics had been automobiles.

I glanced past the young man to Susan. She twirled in a pink Kimono before a hall mirror, the one next to the dog. As she slapped \$50.00 in the busty one's hand, she exclaimed "what a bargain!" Minutes later, we raced back to the car.

Fiat in gear, she threw the plastic bag in the back seat.

"You have to look," she said, "but you find some gems. I've gone to black tie parties on the Gold Coast and had women fawn over my jackets, 'Susan dear,' they'd say, 'where did you find it?' "

*O'Sullivan*

Forced smiled, I pictured myself in a pink kimono, in public. She sped down several more streets I'd not seen in a lifetime in Chicago, up a one way, down another alley, until she rounded back to the forced integration of North Avenue. Soon we pulled up in front of a huge warehouse, where a sign in a murkey window read "Frank's Deals and Steals." She cranked back the parking brake.

"This is it," she said.

"This is what?"

"Our next conquest," she said, swinging high heels out the car door.

"You're kidding."

By the time I'd slammed the door, she'd crossed the street. A man in tee-shirt and shabby pants, hunched nearby. Purse under my arm, he asked, eyes wild, if I'd spare some change. I charged past him, passed junk heaps in the parking lot and whipped into "Frank's Deals and Steals."

Inside, the clothes reminded me of garage sale rejects from 1970's America, the smell, like someone's basement after a flood.

Nearby, like a chipmunk, a grey haired woman in plastic gloves, burrowed through piles, and caught me staring, while a middle-aged couple behind me argued over a faded paisley blouse.

In one checkout line, a family of two older women and three children hoisted several plastic bags on the counter. The cashier rattled off a language I didn't understand. The clothes on their backs wouldn't qualify for Frank's. I hid my designer purse under my coat.

Ten minutes later, I spotted Susan as she surveyed the men's section. Behind her, two men mumbled and tried on winter coats, one with a hole in the sleeve. She walked toward me, shaking her head.

"You know, speaking of winter, I'm desperate for a new Levy coat. This is last year's style," she said, pile of blouses grasped in the leather gloves she'd

*O'Sullivan*

purchased at Brussell's on Michigan Avenue for \$75.00 on our lunch hour recently. My stomach ached.

"I can't find anything," I said, "may we leave?"

"These places are a bummer when you can't find anything," she said, dragging a huge bag I'd not seen until now, "but it's the search that's fun."

I tried to rush her out, the air heavy. I couldn't breathe. Yet before we left, she'd emptied her wallet of \$100.00 for a thin, leather jacket, eight pairs of pants, two blouses and six oversized dresses. She waltzed through the parking lot. I plodded behind.

Cars raced by as we waited at the curb. Several young men leaned out windows of a low riding car and yelled "hey baby," amidst horse whistles. The car, easily the size of a small boat, splashed through a mud puddle and sprayed Susan's one year old, wool gabardine coat and she leapt back.

"You jerks! Want to pay my dry cleaning bill?"

She blotted the spots with leather glove as a slow caravan of eight children, a mother and grandmother, trudged past without a glance.

"I doubt they'd know of a handy cleaner," I said, "Susan, what are you going to do with all these clothes?"

"I'm not even sure what all I bought," she said, laughing, "isn't it fun?"

I walked behind, speechless.

"And I just had this coat cleaned. Oh well, I'll buy a new one."

Strapped in the car, I studied my hands, then glanced at the cluttered alley where two children peddled bicycles between garbage bins, and without thinking, turned my diamond ring around.

A heated argument ensued on the corner, where we'd slowed for a stop light. Susan hit the all door lock on her side with a quick switch, rolled up the windows and snapped on the radio.

"Are we through?" I asked, straining over the music.



*O'Sullivan*

"Hardly, now we hit this place off Belmont, gargantuan place. You'll love it, stuff appears junky, until you look. I found a Halston blouse there a couple weeks ago. Hand me my Vuarnet's would you? They're in the glove compartment."

"Your what?"

"My Vuarnet's. Come on Meg, my sunglasses, you crack me up."

She skidded out front of a gloomy, decayed factory. Signs in the window read "Five Dollar Days," and "Fifty Cent Jewelry, Today Only." The knot in my stomach tightened. I shivered as we walked in.

Inside, an airless, stifled heat from an overblown furnace swallowed me. Giant fans blew from every corner and piles of merchandise drooped from formica tables. Short, unkempt families huddled around tables, and picked through items. I pushed blouses around a bent, metal rack like a monkey in imitation, to not attract attention, not give myself away. I didn't belong here.

At the end of a rack of jumpsuits, a tired woman in her thirties wore a dated, purple cape and wheeled a shopping cart. Six, dark-haired children squirmed inside, unusually sedate for children so young, their faces creased in the worry lines of adults. One of them, a tiny girl with long lashes and wispy brown hair, eyed my leather purse and suede shoes, her pout that of a sage. A younger girl smiled so broadly, she looked out of place with her siblings.

In my haste, I knocked a sweater vest to the floor and Susan stepped over it. I bent down to pick it up.

"Don't bother, it's seen better days," she said, "although, it might line my cat's bed nicely."

At the same time, the woman in purple, children behind her, stooped to retrieve it. Susan, oblivious, continued.

"No, forget it, let's give women's suits a try," she said, stalking off.

*O'Sullivan*

I stared at the spot where it had dropped, when Susan broke my thoughts and shoved a yellow garment in my face.

"It's you, don't you think?" she said, laughing.

I looked at her, at the miniature suit, comically small, with loud, yellow fabric, then past her. I pictured someone my height, in that suit, and involuntarily, I coughed a tiny laugh. It started quietly, then I turned away, away from the tiny family in the shopping cart, away from Susan, and her designer sunglasses, and laughed uncontrollably.

I sensed the woman in purple on me, reading my thoughts, pained by my laughter, and yet I couldn't stop, both in spite of her and because of her. And those children, six children sat crammed in the shopping cart.

"It's not my size," I blurted, as tears rolled down my face, the laughs coming in gasps, "stop it, let's get out of here."

Her chuckling increased as she presented the suit like a seamstress might, "Oh, but note the careful stitching, and the unique design," she said.

"Stop it Susan, I can't stop laughing," I said, and stepped back, bumping into a rack of children's winter coats.

"And it's your favorite color! Canary!" she said, following me, suit crumpled in her hand.

I held my stomach, my laughter ruthless, and closed my eyes against the sight of the tiny sleeves, the cheap yellow fabric and crudely patched elbows. After several seconds, the laughter carried me away somewhere else, a funny movie at the Biograph Theatre or a well told joke. I opened my eyes finally, Susan barely visible through my suddenly tear-filled eyes, her head back, her face nothing but rows of perfect, white teeth.

We overwhelmed the cement severity of the room, a somber air confused by the fans and our contrasting levity. Yet I couldn't stop. My emotions

*O'Sullivan*

rolled onward, like a runaway train. Susan's expression changed when tears streamed down my cheeks. The woman in purple tapped her on the shoulder.

I'd stopped laughing.

"You going to buy, miss?" she said, heavy accent.

"What? Oh no," Susan said, and handed it off, eyes on me, "what's your problem, Meg?"

Hand to my face, I turned away toward the exit. She caught my sleeve.

"What is it, Meg? You don't have to buy it, I was kidding. That woman took it anyway."

"It's not that. Forget it. Where's women's slacks?"

I stood with my back to her, embarrassed for myself, moreso ashamed of us.

Minutes later, a successful find of khaki pants in my hand, we waited in the checkout line. Susan tried to barter the cashier down on a \$2.00 blouse, with a wink at me, and a scornful look from the woman. As she pranced to the door, paper sack filled to the rim, the family in the shopping cart rolled up behind me. I dropped my \$20.00 bill on the counter and marched to the door.

"Wait for your change, your pants are \$3.00 madam," she said.

I didn't stop. On the street again, Susan revved the engine of her Fiat when she spotted me and unlocked the doors as I reached for the handle.

"Such deals, huh Meg? Didn't I tell you? Where to now?"

"I think I'm thrifted out for today." I said, paper sack heavy in my lap.

"Too bad," she said, fluffing her bangs in the rear view mirror, "I told you thrifting was a thrill, right?"

"Yes, an experience," I said, watching two young boys fight on a corner, and reached for my Ray Ban's.

"Oh drat, I've lost my red sunglasses somewhere," I said, patting my coat pockets.

*O'Sullivan*

"We can go back."

"No! I mean, no, we're almost to my place. I'll live without them."

"Join me at the Yacht Club for dinner?" she asked, smoothing gloss on her rosy lips.

"No thanks. Another time, maybe."

"You just wish you'd grabbed the yellow suit, right?" she said, grinning.

"Right."

I sat on the front stoop for half an hour after her car motored off, and watched the winter red sky distill into a splash of pink. The temperature dropped to around forty. As I stood to go in, the woman in purple wheeled her children by in the shopping cart, directly in front of my building, yellow suit heaped on top of the load. This time I didn't look away, but rather smiled when one of the children, wearing Red Ray Ban sunglasses, waved. I thought then, that regardless of age, she was the only child.

*Chadwick*

### **THE MAGIC NUMBER**

**By -- Ina B. Chadwick**

They were moving, quickly. The taxi turning each corner close enough and fast enough to throw the little girl down. She had to hold on to her mother's arm to keep from falling over again.

"Son-of-a-bitch", the cabbie said, and the little girl waited for her mother to stiffen: to be offended, to show it clearly. But the mother just stared out the window, sobbing.

The little girl knew where they were going but not how they were getting there. She was too small to see above the window and during the whole ride she had to be content to stare at the framed white sign behind the driver's seat - "5¢," it said. She could not read the other words except for "THE", "A," and "AND". She pushed her hand harder into her mother's. The handkerchief was wet and the mother was still sobbing.

"Poppy, Poppy." She would cry, her breath pulling inward before out. The little girl could not make her better and she did not try.

Poppy was "dying", her mother had told her and they were going to the hospital, "trying to get there before it was too late." The little girl did not feel like crying and she tried to understand why her mother would cry so hard. She remembered that Poppy was Mother's daddy. It was a very difficult thought. And she pulled her arms closer to her body, pushing her tiny chin high into the air, remembering how Poppy, once, in a gesture so unexpected, lifted his immense arm, coming from nowhere, and slammed her across the head; which also happened to be her neck and shoulders, causing her to fall from the chair, eliciting only silence from everyone else at the holiday table. She had been wiggling beneath the tablecloth, now and then kicking cousin Ellen. Cousin Ellen had managed to stay put. Then, he caught the back of her velvet dress

*Chadwick*

and as if she were a cat and placed her in a bathroom where he sealed the door.

When they got to the hospital, the Mother's sisters were bundled together like the rabbits she once saw in the pet shop window, twitching at different intervals yet seemingly together. One by one they would disappear with the nurse down a long corridor and one by one they would return, head low, standing erect only long enough to reach the others, then falling into the huddle again.

A nurse had picked the little girl up and gently given her a seat on a deep sill, high above the city. The cars hardly seemed to move from way up there and people were even smaller than she was. She could not hear horns, or busses, or even sirens. It was a quiet city. Only the Mother's sisters made a terrible noise.

The little girl tried to be scared but she could not get that way. They were now going home. The girl was picking at some black tape covering a tear in the taxi's leather seat. "Five cents", she read aloud trying to amuse her mother whose head had fallen to one side and whose mascara ringed eyes were staring, not fluttering at all. "Five cents," she read again, and risked prattling. "Five is a magic number."

The mother opened her hand in which she held a ticket. One sister had given it to her. It was the ticket Poppy had pulled in the bakery and still had clutched in his hand when the baker called that number and Poppy's brain exploded. He fell down in line.

The little girl repeated "five cents," over and over. "Five cents, five cents, five cents." The mother did not look up. The girl chanted in different voices, in different tones, in different volumes, going faster when the cab went slowly, going slowly when the cab quickened, only stopping when the cab stopped, only waiting for the mother to either laugh or scream.

**DANCE RECITAL AT THE NURSING HOME**  
**By -- Charles Bigelow**

while you changed into your pink tutu,  
they were rolled across the shiney linoleum;  
one by one, like diseased fruit.  
a captive audience, staring endlessly,  
locked in their pasts, minds filtering  
into streams of yesterdays.

your tiny body  
reacted on cue to the music.  
wrapped delicately in black leotard,  
all parts were ripening on schedule;  
nothing but tomorrows in front of you.

while you glided about the room  
one woman jerked her head,  
for a moment watching you  
as though you had  
struck a chord still  
clinging to a vein of life.

## JESUS AND THE CHILDREN

By -- Clarita Felhoelter

I don't believe it. Pictures lie, you know.  
They didn't stand there – not all – sweet and prim,  
Seraphic visages aglow and Him  
Benignly posed within the sculptured row,  
Unmoved, unmoving, lovely figurines.  
One at least pushed roughly from the rim  
A baby squalled and several yelled to Him.  
Two tots (or were they in their early teens?)  
Scuffled. I really think He laughed aloud  
To see a tiny scalawag first glare  
And then stick out his tongue at Peter, who tried  
To keep away the jolly little crowd.  
I think they saw each other (meeting there),  
Saw each other clear, the Christ and youth  
And celebrated trust and truth – the kingdom where  
They lived, undignified, unglorified,  
Where He embraced and sanctified  
Those urchins gathered there.



**ANOTHER JUKE BOX AFFAIR**

**By -- John Grey**

The juke box  
plays me more often  
than I play it.  
Some tired country ballad  
whining from my lips  
when I'm trying to sound sincere.  
Raucous rock guitar solos  
roaring out of my loins  
as we make love,  
screaming melodies underlining  
the cheapness I'd hoped to bury.  
She tells me not to worry,  
she loves those songs,  
keeps feeding me more quarters.

**BUILDERS**

By -- John Grey

In this family,  
when we lose our heads,  
fingers take over.  
Pain is another bookshelf,  
death an extension to the house.  
Tears are too vacuous  
and words won't hold up  
under pressure.  
Wood and glass,  
thin slats of steel,  
are our offerings to memory.  
I am not sure if it's the action,  
bodies busy as a child's laughter,  
or the finished totem,  
taunting the enemy with its  
solid lines, perfect squares,  
inviolable corners,  
but somehow, out of that construction,  
we furnish relief,  
convince ourself that we  
have it in us to rebuild,  
even after the darkest earthquake.

**A CHRISTMAS GARDEN**

*For Fritz*

**By -- Phoebe Grigg**

Out of the roots of our  
twisted childhoods,  
we sprout double blossoms  
of love and fear;  
we prickle with thorns,  
or dance like a garden,  
leaping with joy  
and leafy song.  
Lucky are we,  
or chosen, or blessed,  
to have found this  
place of happy soil  
to sink our tired  
and hopeful  
selves.

**ALONE**

**By -- Jennifer Jordan**

The dark presses its face to the window and peeks in,  
Somehow longing for an elusive warmth and comfort  
That isn't in moonlit shadows of spring leaves  
And the uneven ground of the farmer's field  
That will be plowed and stirred up tomorrow.  
The night sidles up to the aloof streetlamps,  
Only so close, no nearer does it dare,  
It doesn't understand and worries and wonders,  
Searching for a response, a simple touching,  
More than the smiling morning pushing it away.

**SIRENS AFTER AVIANCA**  
**By -- Joan Payne Kincaid**

All night  
and the next day  
first the living  
                  then the dead  
down Glen Cove Road  
spinning through the sky  
                  over the roof  
                  roadblocks  
                  and beds  
his voice in the black box  
is calm

**THE DESCENT OF PRUFROCK'S DOUBLE**

By -- Thomas Kretz

The mind elopes  
to honeymoon  
in the spiritual bed  
of double tomes,  
finds sheets of gray  
creased with passionate  
complaints of former lovers  
and hungover mornings.  
A jigger of memories  
thrown back in the throat  
neutralizes toothpaste;  
off with the stubble,  
down with coffee mugs,  
pick up your pallet  
and pace the cloister.  
The fantasy years  
stuffing the ears  
with exuberant beans,  
ringing up exotic shades,  
wild eyes whisking off  
the clothes of civilization,  
taking and making doubles  
of the one untouchable.  
Along the growing fault  
tremors tumbling  
from a razor-slashed barstool,  
gripping the brass rail  
at the feet of things  
and rolled-up dungarees.

**HITCHHIKERS**

By -- Thomas Kretz

Moonlight might have  
painted a shadowed Caravaggio  
of the bruised woman  
breasting her vagrant child,

a recently discovered  
Madonna of the Desert  
trekking towards Sonora  
and security for son;

instead the headlights  
of a finned Cadillac  
flashed upon an imitation  
Gironella mocking a queen,

woman tourists quickly pass  
in any undusted museum,  
secondhand suffering scribbled  
over second-rate sin;

Even so red taillights  
put blood in the pair,  
demand some sort of braking,  
some human appreciation.

**THESIS: ON A DACHAU DOOR**

By -- B. Z. Niditch

Feeling brotherless as solitude  
among the monks and orders  
wanting to cleanse the past  
without any cavernous shape  
to muffled death here at Dachau  
preferring non-existence  
and this arduous long trek  
to my berth's cold place  
my eyes watch a cup-bearer  
remembering the wagons  
fill up with our animal skins  
on confessional walls.

Such crows  
appear on bare-iced fields  
amid a grey monument in Hebrew  
passing by what is human  
a child was here once  
he still nakedly cries  
I suddenly became afraid of words.



**A HOUSE ON FIRE, CHRISTMAS NIGHT**

**By -- James Proffitt**

It is a marvelous thing  
the house on the hill in the country burning.  
Few things so rare and strange and beautiful  
as bright rage of destruction  
working itself into a charred remnant  
of what once was.

It is a brief gift in the blindness of night.

Shingles float up and off  
to an airy place beyond the light of resurrection.  
Miscellaneous sirens wail in the distance  
like hounds over hills and hollows.  
Ever-so-gradually helpless volunteers arrive.  
Watch with merciless guilt, glancing down the narrow  
black road for their red dinosaur.

Sorry ears of the homeless  
hear the thousand snaps sizzles pops  
crackles and other utterances of a fiery language.  
Events between the shrinking walls of a shrinking house  
are beyond their control.  
They do not know it now, but in the crisp, icy air  
of dawn they will stand before this personal wasteland  
smiling and thinking of days coming,  
delighted they are not themselves clouds.  
Imagining all things in the world that end in smoke.

**NATURAL BRIDGE. RED RIVER GORGE, KENTUCKY.**

**By -- James Proffitt**

Trees are still  
on distant crags  
somewhere a raptor cries  
triumphant and a muddy river  
below given voice by torrents  
silenced by space,  
fashions a watery rage.

I think I know now  
barechested against  
coolness of stone  
about my permanence.  
A thousand years  
for my every hour.  
Patience is the motto of rock  
and the crisp, cool song  
of wind in fir needles.

**ALWAYS UNDERFOOT**

By -- Tom Riley

Utopia lies always underfoot,  
but no one notices when he is tripped  
up by its skulking presence. Tempting fate,  
Utopia hides always underfoot  
but never quite gets hurt: it seems to fit  
into the floor until it has you trapped.  
Utopia hides always underfoot,  
but no one notices when he is tripped.

## EDGAR ALLAN POE RETURNS TO PROVIDENCE

By -- April Selley

Edgar returns, like all ghosts, to a city  
where he left something unfinished. But  
he cannot find Sarah Helen now;  
there are only the gliding goddesses of business  
in undandruffed dark suits and symmetrical heels;  
the grey wives, eroded by smoking and abuse,  
sticky from the hands of their grabbing offspring;  
the Portuguese widows hovering like ravens  
over bargains at sidewalk sales and  
smelling of black wool and the spices of chourico.  
He is drawn to the latter's warmth and grieving  
for a moment, and then wonders:  
what ever happened to the venerable vulnerability  
of beautiful ladies, whose memory  
draws back even the dead to mourn them?

Edgar, do not leave only with the  
cold concrete visions of new buildings.  
The heart of the city herself still beats  
beneath wide floorboards; in the must of  
untouched East Side rooms, chairs are  
still overstuffed with gentility and the  
miasma of visions. Love and death  
still honeymoon, and the city  
quivers with the touch of artists' dreams.

**BEANSPROUTS AND MY FATHER**

By -- April Selley

Mortified and defiant like all prisoners,  
I in my highchair would not negotiate  
a release with my father on the unspeakable terms  
of eating a casserole made with beansprouts.

I felt my first yearning to grow up,  
to spurn beansprouts forever;  
their confusing taste of new and mold,  
their sickly shape  
like strings  
like things left in sinks after dishwater.  
I craved the smooth chocolate roundness  
of Ringdings and Yodels and Scooter Pies.

It is Sunday night, when my father usually  
makes pizza, but I,  
two hundred miles away,  
eat a chow mein *deja vu* of that hated casserole.  
True to an old longing, I'd like to  
stuff down six Oreos:  
some sweet stuff to take away  
the taste of beansprouts  
when I'm far from home.

**THE CHILD WATCHES NIGHT**

**By -- Irv Rosenthal**

With quiet brown eyes  
the child watches night  
drown the black branches  
beyond the warm bay window.

Under the blue china  
lamp, the anxious mother  
busily knits a charmed  
sweater to baffle winter  
which waits in the black branches,  
watching the child  
with quiet brown eyes  
who watches night  
beyond the warm bay window.

**DEATH OF THE OLD VACABULARY**  
**By -- Humberto Gomez Sequeira**

sick of waiting in the life-  
line for my feet  
to transform into brains

old age and death peacefully  
reconciled appeared before me  
in the form of an eternal sale

my tongue began to rot  
with the old vocabulary  
in the lying-dirty mouth

while the common-sensed-  
majority keeps buying  
forks and knives

to kill the prosperous  
turkeys for whom they give  
happy thanks to god

**THE INS DOGS**

**By -- Humberto Gomez Sequeira**

Limit  
of the Great Ruler's  
imagination.

Nightmare  
of South America's  
orgasm.

To sniff the banana bone.  
To bite the coffee flesh.

Dogs and gendarmes:  
protagonists of freedom

in the land of honey and milk.



**10:30 P.M. REPORT, JUNE**

**By -- T. Sheehan**

A breeze you measure  
in gallons, mark as potable.  
Maple limbs dance the way  
schools of kelp dance  
just below the surface  
or the idle shuffle  
of smoke screening  
the valley.

Leaves sigh as deep  
as armless lovers.

Overhead a jet slows down  
for Boston, its wingtip  
lights coding like fireflies  
against the solemnity  
of one dark cloud.

The stars seem paired.

Across saltmarsh miles,  
over Baker Hill  
and the thick shadowed  
water tower, past old  
trysting dens  
more amorous in dreams,  
another jet fires up  
for Shannon or London,  
a long cannon boom  
of goodbyes.

It is different in January  
when a Northeaster  
sounds like broken arms  
or demolition derbies.

10:30 is bridging toward sleep,  
but the breeze with hands  
of an old sweetheart  
keeps touching  
secret places.

**LOG CUTTING, QUEEN ANT BURIAL**

**By -- T. Sheehan**

I have brought these trees  
almost to a final  
dimension, the two brick  
span of my flue.

And from the shatter  
of one oak wedge  
I spilled a home  
of carpenter ants  
thick as blueberry pie.

Black guard legionnaires,  
in a frenzy  
of revolutions,  
merry-go-rounded  
about the queen.

She was the eye  
of a small universe,  
a little storm;  
thick as my thumb,  
she trailed out  
two gossamer capes  
like gauze hackles  
of a trout fly.

I shoveled her,  
her lovers, her sons,  
her terrorist henchmen,  
into a green bag.

Underground at the town dump  
they start out again,  
tunnelling up through  
a plastic vault,  
looking for the root

of a home, a simple  
cavernous boudoir  
for a dark progenitor.

**THE WEEDER**

By -- T. Sheehan

The azalea's been drab  
since the year I scissored it  
and carried off those loose laces  
in the wheelbarrow.

The single maple tree,  
double trunked, porched, split-  
levelled by a house without basement,  
keeps a squirrel out of sight.

Bluejays, in the high rushes  
of its limbs, careen all daylight  
while my grandfather knobs at weeds  
with thumbed fingers, knuckled joints.

When he kneels, patella prised  
with a near orange pain, unsure of rising  
again, the jays jangling his ears,  
he pretends he does not

see me seeing him. His gray felt  
hat's worn like some half-mast standard,  
his ankle-highs elaborate of cow  
and a matter of tanning bark.

He is unsure of weed or flower,  
and clears space because it is space,  
a neatness that after all will grow again  
no matter how he treats it.

I have seen other old men,  
cleaning bricks, sweeping walks, carving  
wood into nothing, just to keep  
old hands moving in daylight.

He posts the sun high over house,

**ALDEBARAN 47**

narrows it into noon, marks for boiled  
potato and a single shot of rye as brown  
as his belt. He's as faithful as time.

When he looks at me, it's never  
sidelong or indirect, he speaks not of weather,  
never asks what hour it is. He hears the loon,  
the frog bloating, the sun hiss.



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