



Quercus

a journal of literary and visual art

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2010

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

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Weathered Reflections

2010, image transfer on oak, 12 inches x 18 inches

intro page:

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Monstrosity

2009, charcoal, 18 inches x 24 inches

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Michael Mendoza

Forgotten

2009, lithograph, 10 inches x 14 inches

Thanks to Alumni and Parent Relations.

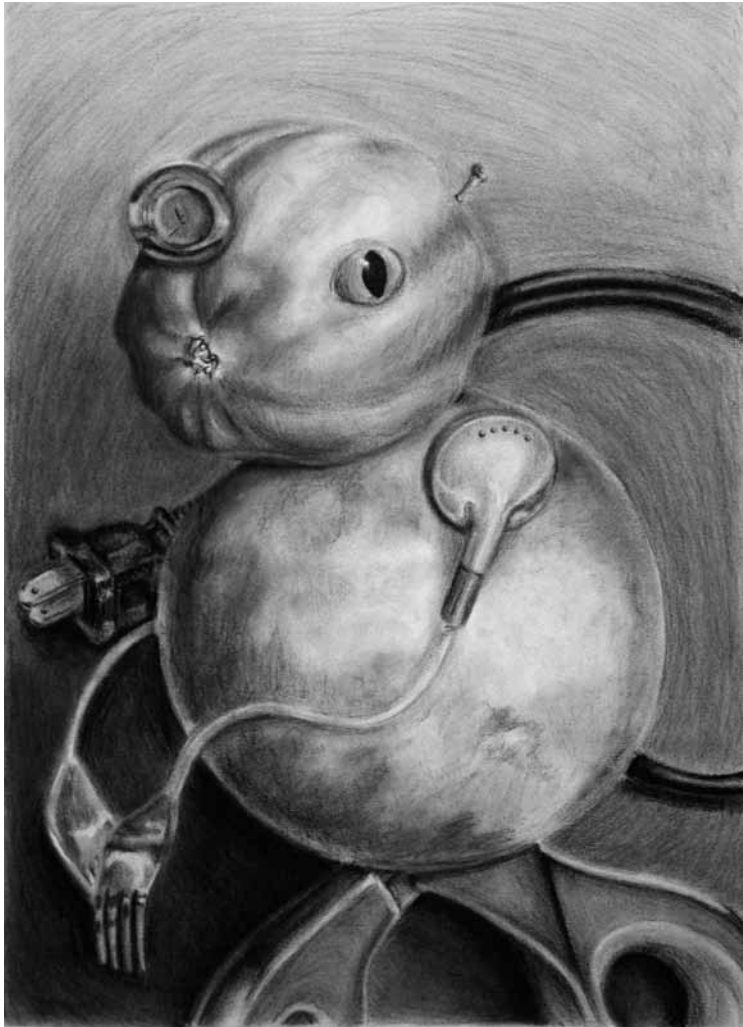
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words

Huaraches	<i>Ralph G. Smith '47</i>	1
La Vida Es Sueño		2
Divan Fire Sermon into Garden	<i>Carl Herzig</i>	4
Sequels	<i>Chuck Blair '74</i>	6
Farm House	<i>Janet Hudson</i>	10
Moonlight Sonata	<i>Bud Grant '80</i>	14
Enchanted Night Cream	<i>Nancy Ritter</i>	35
Squint	<i>Leo Quinn</i>	39
space like a hole	<i>Jenn Flattery</i>	40
a figure study		41
summer in the field		42
Sinking, Singing, Billowing Away	<i>Jeremy Burke '99</i>	43
Bob's View	<i>Janet Hudson</i>	45
A Man to Reckon With	<i>James O'Gorman</i>	48

images

Night, Interrupted	<i>Nicholas Mazzarollo</i>	13
Listen Wind	<i>Sarah Wurst</i>	19
Small Blond Head	<i>Leslie Bell '72</i>	20
The Future is His		21
CTRL No. 3 "Search"	<i>Tien Chang '08</i>	22
A Window of Seasons	<i>Amy Fossum</i>	23
He Wears Shoes Too	<i>Rachel Longstreet '09</i>	24
Barber's Creek	<i>Meghan Hollister</i>	25
The Walls Within	<i>Kim Maher</i>	26
Caterpillar Stitch Journal		27
M-16	<i>Eric Tuftee '08</i>	28
I Walk the Line	<i>Beth VanDerMolen '07</i>	29
Lemon Peeling	<i>Carl Herzig</i>	30
Looking On		31
Wudu	<i>Munir Sayegh</i>	32
Insha'Allah		33
Auschwitz	<i>Jeff Filipski</i>	34



Huaraches

No one could call her “beautiful,”
at least not in the way
the girls who smile in TV ads
and say “I’m worth it”
believe they are beautiful.

But she had a smile to melt the arctic ice cap
and pale blue eyes to match,
to change a man to jelly pudding,
which she consumed with gusto, a little at a time,
then threw the paper cup away,
which was all that there was left.

And she could cut him into morsels with those eyes—
morsels to feed her cat as she saw fit.
And she wore sandals, those huaraches
with a thong between the toes
and over the arch, showing her almost-naked feet.
Huaraches, leather-tooled that fit just right.

She said that as she waited for a bus one day
a gray-haired man, well-dressed, tipped a finger to his hat
and said, “You have the prettiest feet I ever saw”
and then walked on.

A determined woman.
My God, how she pursues me, stalks me,
relentless, after all these years have passed,

even from the silence of the grave.

She had the prettiest feet I ever saw.

—Ralph G. Smith '47

La Vida Es Sueño

When do we stop living?
When does death really occur?
Is it when the nurse gently closes our open eyes,
or when the sheet is pulled up over our face,
or when the body bag is finally zipped?
Or is it when, tearfully, or perhaps with grim resolve,
the plug is pulled?

Calderón de la Barca said that life is just a dream
and that true life begins beyond,
that the last beat of a heart is just the presage
of a beautiful life to come.
But Calderon's dreams were dreams of dreams
and nothing more. "Los sueños, sueños son."

Saint Teresa of Avila
yearned for the life to come—
"Vivo sin vivir en mí,
y de tal manera espero,
que muero porque no muero.
En mí yo no vivo ya
y sin Dios vivir no puedo
pues sin él y sin mí quedo
este vivir ¿qué será?"

Then who lives longest in this dream-life
in which we find ourselves, as we stumble down
that lonesome road?

I think we live in the memories of the others,
the people, friends and foes, and unknown ships
that have passed us in the night.

I remember Tyler, the little boy who died of polio,
then called "infantile paralysis,"

when both of us were ten years old.
He was not my friend—just a classmate, thin and wan,
who wandered through his short life, dream-like, to be sure.

I remember Dwayne, with whom I wrote notes in Latin class,
and Miss Eskelson smiled when she found
that the notes were in schoolboy Latin, no ablatives included.
He laughed and joked, and probably did so
when his little plane spiraled down into an Indiana cornfield.

And there was Mercedes, the blond Argentine girl I met
on the beach in Acapulco, thinking she was American,
who was, in fact, a movie actress—lucky me!
One of her Mexican movies was *What If You Had Married Me?*
She disappeared into the mist.

I remember my father-in-law, Don Oscar, tall and Spanish,
resplendent in his white linen suit, looking like Cesar Romero in
his prime,
dancing the paso-doble and the tango, indefatigable,
until my wife, his daughter, dragged him home.

And I remember my grandson, Jade,
Smiling that broad smile and putting his arm across my shoulder—
“Hi, Grandpa”—before a bullet fired by his friend at a teenage
party
ended his dream of dreams.

And there was that sweet teenage girl, my seatmate on a bus ride
for a few hours from Matamoros to Victoria,
who smiled as she shared her mangos with me.

—Ralph G. Smith '47

Divan Fire Sermon into Garden

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

Intertwined in habit's posture—
Fingers seeking/ thighs pressed tight—she
Watched the scene as if it were not
She who fought the full-moon night.

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

Past the clock's two-handed beating
On their chamber's time-held wall, she
Ran through bougainvilleas, fleeing,
Borne on wind by His flute's call.

Drawn within by sidelong glances,
Tip-toeing through forest groves, she
Glimpsed the shadowed midnight dancing
Of the Dancer with His loves.

Stolen by His flute's enchanted
Strains, her mind saw only one—she
Called to Him and reached her hand out,
Called to Him that He would come.

Alive at last, her "life" behind her—
All before her a new start—she
Prayed His cooling nectar find the
Burning, aching in her heart.

Suddenly she was surrounded
By His arms, and on His chest she
Lay her head, at last reminded
Of the one place she could rest.

Lotus blossoms greet spring weather
With a joyful, fragrant yawn—she
Danced until the peacocks' feathers
Trailed across the rainbow dawn.

Soft sand by the river cushioned
Her when she awoke, newborn—she
Wore only the garments fashioned
By small birds before the morn.

Then she woke again, however:
Chamber in the forest's place—she
Looked about and pulled the covers
Over her and hid her face.

Separated from her Lover,
From the dance, in one great fall, she
Cried aloud and cursed this other
Dream that covered over all.

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

—*Carl Herzig*

Sequels

*This invisibility, in fact, is only good in two cases:
It's useful in getting away, it's useful in approaching.*
—H.G. Wells, *The Invisible Man*

I

An apple painted red
A drop of dew
perched to fall
The thirsty man drowns
in his simple dream
And the circus comes to town
with two hyenas

II

Spoiled in liquid sun
overrun by blossoms
the day sets at a garden
Wet footprints escape
to twin swimming pools
Wasps ripping
at the water's bleached skin

III

Rain works the telephone wires
in short shifts
The moon spit up
by the sick cat
sitting on the high fence
That star deliberates
To follow or endure

IV

There are four fingers
floating in a woman's milk
The Invisible Man's

black eye swarms
Gasping for air
on its miniature dorsal fin
the thumb breaches

V

One morning he surfaces
in disguise and sees himself
for what is not
Surrounded by counterfeit light
he sings to shed
his toenails before fleeing
with the tiger moths

VI

Elder redwoods exist
beneath the scent of earth
Love in willful climates
shoulders the bite of sages
Read from the bloom's palm
lightning walks a line
with the skin of prayer

VII

He swims in a great river
without water or borders
A future like pure thumbs
circles the raised platforms
of her plunging body
Due to renovation of a cloud
the landing delayed

VIII

Radiant pint-sized creek
knowing only what she knows

The mourners assemble
holding steady to a rock ledge
Ashes fleeing earth
To rest his argument
he delegates to the sea

IX

A day of snow
piled over the curb
Women swept cinders
Men join ice
looking for the wind
Even the sparrow aches
No place to dump

X

The wind again
sitting up straight
The hanged daddy longlegs
in a stunted field
with the bargaining rain
Tasting breath
the bitten child

XI

Enchanted scars
one lost another retriever
Tombs and harvest seers
She finds color buried
in diamonds and God
From the knee's descent
paradise engaged

XII

They come back
waking in museums
Résumés of invisible flesh
All the grammar of the earth
importing the body
The atomized breath
typing on the windows

XIII

Some danced away
dreams in winter wheat
Baskets and combs load
the hair of lost sleep
Bedbugs again flower within
A trumpet muffled between
sheets at the edge

XIV

And the crickets return
Clocks in a distant city
chime a lost hour
Written out of the play
he sits up drawing in charcoal
the blank face of a shadow
A widow blooms for Technicolor

—*Chuck Blair '74*

Farm House

She knew it would come—not when or where, only that it would. Sleep had vanished from her senses, or had it? She stopped, listening intently, and heard the hiss of the fan as it rotated through its crazy, off-centered orbit in the ceiling of the yellow bedroom. The smell of horse manure and songs of crickets wafted in with the night breeze through the open window. She was sure she was awake.

The summons seemed to come from within, felt rather than heard; she had opened her eyes and rose without hesitation to respond. Her name hadn't been called, but she knew it was time to answer. Slipping silently from the bed, she wrapped a cotton robe over her light nightgown. Glancing down at the man still lying asleep, she hesitated only slightly before leaving the yellow bedroom.

What had happened to them? Two strangers now inhabited the bodies they had so freely shared; their path had come to a crossroads, and each had chosen a separate way. Cordial and committed, together they existed but did not live. Buying the farmhouse was the same desperate measure that resulted in some having a child—a long-ago dream revived in futile effort to bring back what once was. After, he continued his old life while she fell under the spell of the house.

The house seemed to speak to her, not in an audible voice but with innate memories of previous occupants. Approval drifted in warm swirls about her as she worked to make the house cozy. Kneeling in the cool dirt of the reclaimed garden or cooking in the sunny kitchen, she felt the presence of another woman bending, weeding, working, gently sharing her space, giving her approval, and the camaraderie was a comfort. She never worked alone, the man was not there to help, but the house always provided a presence—a glimpse at its past glory, a recipe for her to follow. She leaned more and more to the old-fashioned ways of doing things, just as the house required of her.

Now the house was summoning her. Walking cautiously down the steep stairs in the dark, she heard the faint murmur of voices.

Had she left a radio on? Rounding the bottom of the stairs, she noticed a strange light glowing from the kitchen. Walking closer, she saw the doorway shimmer as though covered by a thin, hazy veil. Within the room she saw the kitchen, though it was not her kitchen any longer. In the reality of her world it was night and yet the soft light of early morning shown in the kitchen windows. Outside the kitchen window she could see the farm as she understood it once had been, with many outbuildings and animals. She could hear the sound of the windmill fans gently turning in the morning wind, pumping water into a cistern. A wooden radio played old-time music softly as a family sat at breakfast.

She knew instinctively not to cross the threshold, though the scene pulled her fiercely. Come, said the smiling woman, whose presence she had felt beside her this long year. Join us. This is where you belong, this is where you are welcomed—you belong to us. Across the table, a strong, rugged young man sat with an outstretched arm. This would be her man; together they would work to make a life, not each living their own life in the same house. She knew this in an instant, without words being spoken. Come, said the smiling woman; cross over to us. One step and she could be in a world of comfort and sense; one step and she would never return to the man gently sleeping in the yellow bedroom.

A tear slipped unnoticed from her eye as she smiled to the woman and looked regretfully to the man. She turned away from the scene that she desperately longed to be part of to return to try to fulfill the promises she had made in the yellow bedroom. Stopping at the bottom of the stairs, she turned again toward the kitchen, but the room was dark, the chance gone.

Weary but determined, she climbed up the steep stairs. Not so quietly, she entered the bedroom, took off her cotton robe and nightgown, and wrapped around the sleeping man. The drifting would be over. She would settle for no less than for their paths to converge. The man stirred; she smiled; they would begin right now.

Kneeling, digging in the cool garden earth, she shivered slightly. These days, she worked alone; the house stayed silent now. She turned to see the man striding toward her, trowel in hand. Her heart brimmed as he too knelt.
“Here,” he said. “Let me give you a hand with that.”

—*Janet Hudson*



Moonlight Sonata

set to Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata," 1st Movement.

0:00

Unstartled, she lifts her eyes from the story resting in her lap, sensing rather than actually hearing his perfectly quiet entrance. No, she thought, I am not surprised. It is time.

His half-shadowed body slips gracefully into the room, solid but deft, dark but not somber. There is something comfortably woolen about his somewhat dowdy aura. His suit is thick, old fashioned, yet he moves as one capable of swordsman swiftness.

0:26

"Yes, it's me again." He smiles at her unselfconsciously, and the room seems warmer than the wood-fired hearth would account for.

"What is it this time? It's cold. Could you close the door?" Her tone is simply tired, and one ought not, he knows, read anything else into her inflection—neither suppressed irritation nor passive tolerance, but then, no particular warmth or welcome either. How one would react to the cat that had crept into the room, opening the door to a draft—that's how she sounds. She is just tired. She is always tired these days. She had been, she reflects, since . . . hmmm . . . since his last visit. She smiles back at his innocence.

1:07

Not waiting for him to obey but nonetheless unhurriedly, she rises and moves across the room, trailing her slipped shawl, the thick old-fashioned leather book still in her left hand, a finger marking the spot as if not yet surrendering the idea of returning to that other tale soon. She steps past him, smelling the dampness of melting snow on his tweed, and assertively grasps the brass knob and pushes closed the heavy door ahead of her.

1:34

He steps out of her way and turns to view her. He doesn't answer her question immediately but just looks at her like a kindly physician—noting her color, her movements, seemingly even her feelings, with an air of one who is assessing vigor. He is, in a sense, a kind of medic, his specialty being that condition we might call joy, or maybe contentment, or, sure, maybe just health.

1:55

“Yes?” She knows she is being examined and wants his diagnosis.

“You look well, Cara Mia.” He means it. He wants to mean it, at least. He agrees: she is tired. He considers it due to the inquietude of separation. “I should only stay a few minutes,” he adds, sadly. He is conscious of his own desire to see her profile from that one perfect angle he so loves, the one that shows the line of her exquisite jaw, starting high, just below her pearlish earlobe, dropping to that dramatic curve sweeping into the horizontal stretch that extended to . . . to paradise, he thinks.

2:36

“You never stay long, do you?” Yes, this time there is a hint of judgment, of the ambiguous sort.

“Do you know what night this is, Cara?” He must be accustomed to her veiled criticism.

“No. Tell me.” Her interest is as genuine as her ignorance. “You know that I have been exonerated from all things temporal, but . . .” she manages her curiosity . . . “I would like to know. What night is this?”

3:00

Relishing her delight and delighting in his own role as dénouementiste, he announces it as if he is the harbinger of good news. “It is the night they say that the Christ is born. Merry Christmas, Cara Mia.” He smiles.

3:13

“Look, Michael.” She stops herself, not liking the irritation evident in her voice. Giving the door one last nudge with her shoulder to ensure it stays latched, she crosses to a corner spiral staircase that leads from the first floor to a sort of balcony that surrounds the room at the level of a mezzanine. She is already halfway up before she pursues her thought, now with greater focus.

Her soliloquy, though long rehearsed, is brief.

3:42

“Michael,” she begins again, peering down at him from the candle-dimness of the loft, “I am not willing to tolerate our arrangement as it is.” If she expects a response, she doesn’t get one. He stands, hat in hand, so to speak, like a caught truant. Her hand unconsciously finds the bookshelf slot whence the volume in her hand had come. She continues.

4:06

Her voice lifts, and he imagines her words as musical embers, as gilded notes rising into the gloom of the rafters, glinting with refracted candlelight. His heart, he feels, with a certain embarrassingly Victorian sentiment, could burst and he would be pure joy.

“You come to me with your uncanny and unerring sense of my need for you, but then you leave again as soon as whatever little threat is doused or entanglement unkinked. I go about my life

in my secure little world here, confident in your guardianship, but . . . but that is not enough. I don't want a crisis extinguisher, Michael; I don't want a vagabond savior. I am tired of this." No reply, save the flame-illuminated glint of moisture in the corner of his left eye. "It should end." She has to push this. She inserts the book in its book-shaped void and shoves it home, the sound like a sheathing blade, and finishes: "I want either more or less."

5:02

He moves across the room beneath her as she descends slowly, unhesitatingly—always deliberate, forever decisive. She is just a few steps above him, one full circle of the stairs from the ground floor.

His mouth opens, then closes. He clears his throat. His mind heavy, like a rain-soaked towel, his tongue has the dexterity of a writing hand in a plaster cast. Looking at his toes creaking the floor planks, relishing the lightness of her looking down at him. Firewood snaps and sparks behind him. It is, he thinks, my judgment day.

5:34

"May it be more, Love."

And it is.

—*Bud Grant* '80



Sarah Wurst
Listen Wind

2009, mixed media on paper, 22 inches x 30 inches



Leslie Bell '72
Small Blond Head

2009, oil on canvas, 12 inches x 12 inches



Leslie Bell '72
The Future Is His

2009, oil on canvas, 12 inches x 12 inches



Tien Chang '08
CTRL No. 3 "Search"

2009, oil on canvas, 24 inches x 24 inches



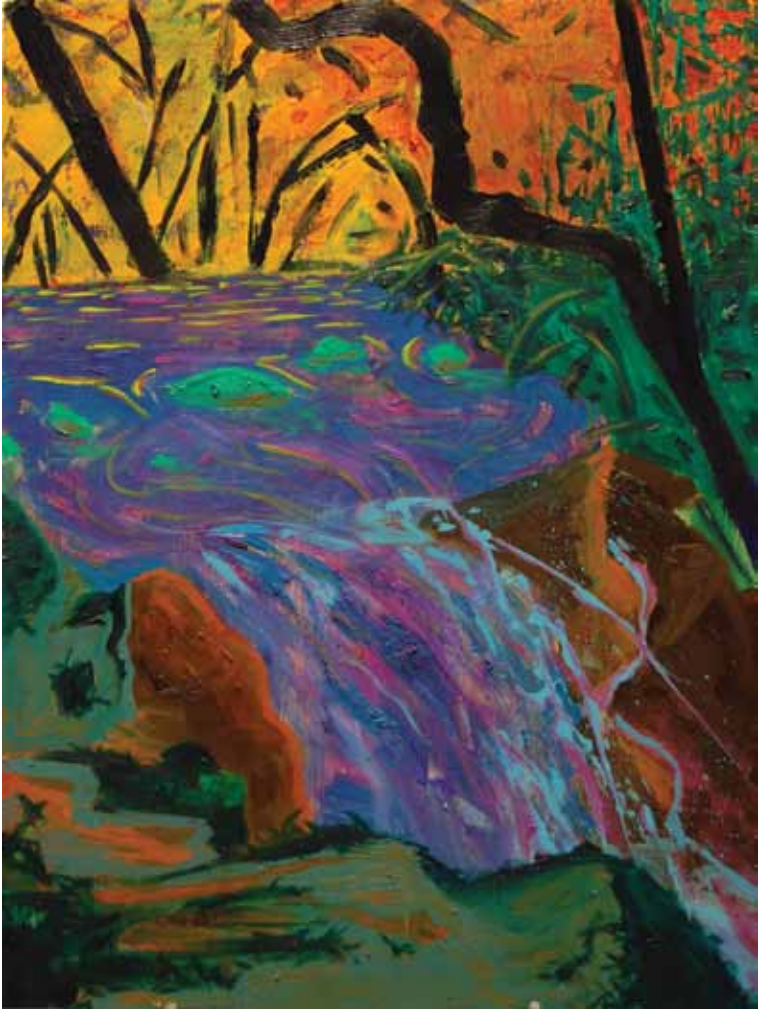
Amy Fossum
A Window of Seasons

2009, screenprint with linocut, acrylic, and oil ink on rives BFK,
27 inches x 36 inches



Rachel Longstreet '09
He Wears Shoes Too

2010, mixed media, 48 inches x 65 inches



Meghan Hollister
Barber's Creek

2009, oil and acrylic on canvas, 18 inches x 24 inches



Kim Maher
The Walls Within

2009, silkscreen print on paper, oneside format,
8 inches x 22 inches



Kim Maher

Caterpillar Stitch Journal

2010, monotype print on paper, book board, binding thread
9 inches x 6 inches



Eric Tuftee '08
M-16

2008, oil on board, 36 inches x 30 inches



Beth VanDerMolen '07
I Walk the Line

2009, mixed media on mylar, 58 inches x 40 inches



Carl Herzig
Lemon Peeling

2010, digital photograph



Carl Herzig
Looking On

2010, digital photograph



Munir Sayegh
Wudu

2009, digital photograph



Munir Sayegh
Insha'Allah

2009, digital photograph



Jeffrey Filipski
Auschwitz

2009, digital photograph

Enchanted Night Cream

The old country woman whipped up another batch of her Enchanted Night Cream. The ladies from town could not get enough of it. At first she couldn't sell a jar to save her life, so they sat in a row on the shelf in the back room collecting dust. But then, just by chance, one of the ladies from town came out to her shack to get Something-Special for her daughter, who had gone too far with her boyfriend the night before.

Long before the morning-after pill had been created, the old woman had Something-Special to take care of those little indiscretions that could cause major problems down the road for young girls still in school. Those certain girls that got carried away by a tender smile, sincere blue eyes, and a warm summer evening in the back seat of a car could rest assured that the old woman had Something-Special to fix them right up.

The old woman also had ointments, tonics, and salves that could take care of a wide range of conditions and circumstances, from head lice and athlete's foot to bad breath and migraine headaches. But her night cream was unique. She had stumbled on the recipe by accident. She had been looking through her grandmother's recipe book; she'd forgotten how much slippery elm to use in her Soothing Diaper Rash Balm. The balm was a big seller for her, but she was running low and would have to mix up a batch. While flipping through the cracked and yellowed pages she came across the instructions for the powerful night cream.

She was hesitant to waste time and ingredients on it at first. After all, the ladies from town preferred to buy their face creams and lotions from the department store. They made the trip out to her place only for those things they were too embarrassed to get from the doctor or drugstore. Hence the popularity of the powder that cured jock itch and yeast infections, Mr. Toad's Wart Remover, the Amazing Tingle Spray, used to spice up a boring sex life, and of course, the Something-Special Elixir. Despite her doubts she followed the recipe, carefully procuring the ingredients, some of which she had to special order from a Chinese herbalist. She even bought the small pink jars with silver lids, thinking they

would appeal to the ladies from town. She priced her new product at \$19.99 a jar and called it Enchanted Night Cream. She gave it the hard sell to everyone who came out to the shack, but she just couldn't move it. She cut the price several times, and eventually moved the stock to the back to make room for her new product, a gentle tea designed to treat constipation overnight.

But her latest customer to visit the shack to save her daughter's reputation and future actually asked if she had a face cream. She had been very impressed with the dandruff rinse she had used at her mother-in-law's insistence and was willing to try another product. The old woman rushed to the back room, blew the dust off a pink jar, and gave it a wipe on her old cotton house dress. At last, she was about to make the first sale of her Enchanted Night Cream. She hurried back to the front room and told the woman, "This cream is very powerful and must be used sparingly. A small amount each night will produce remarkable changes in your skin." The woman eagerly reached for the small jar. "Remember, don't use too much, just a small amount," she said as she handed the jar to the lady from town.

The woman rushed home and gave her daughter the Something-Special and then locked herself in her lavishly appointed bathroom and applied the cream. The next morning as she looked in the mirror she gasped in amazement. The fine lines around her eyes and mouth had vanished. She looked refreshed, rested, even youthful. What a transformation after just one application. She applied it again that night, remembering what the old woman said about using just a small amount. The next day she looked even better. When her friends all commented on her new and improved appearance, she told them about the night cream. There was a mad rush to the shack by the ladies, and the Enchanted Night Cream became the old woman's biggest seller. Soon pink jars were flying off the shelves.

Eventually, as in most cases of this sort, more is better. The youthful looking ladies from town reasoned that if a small amount

of the enchanted cream could create such amazing results, just a tad more might send them all the way back to their high school days and the fresh and clear skin of a teenager.

As the ladies used more cream, however, the magical effects began to diminish, and then started to reverse. Their skin became dry and flakey, with fine lines around the mouth and eyes. Their complexion had a dull and sagging appearance, with a grayish hue that made it look as if they were always in shadow. The more they used the worse it got. For those smart enough to stop applying the cream the effects were halted, but they never got their youthful complexion back.

Some of the ladies went back to the old woman demanding to know what happened. She reminded them of the warning she had given when they bought the cream, to only use a small amount. There was nothing she could do for them now. But most of the ladies were too embarrassed to go back to the old woman to complain. After all, she had warned them.

Luckily, there was a new spa in town that specialized in an all natural-skin peel, similar to dermabrasion but without the risks and potential damage from the powerful chemicals. The young herbalist that invented the invigorating new procedure was handsome and charming, and the ladies flocked to him for rescue and repair. After just one procedure they were amazed at the results. It was not quite as dramatic as the night cream, but it did reverse the horrible effects they suffered from applying too much of the powerful cream.

Business at the spa was booming and the young herbalist and his skin peel were the main draw. Of course the effects of the skin peel didn't last forever, but with monthly maintenance (at \$250 a pop) one could maintain that youthful glow.

After a few weeks, the new herbalist visited the old woman in the shack. She invited him in and made coffee. They sat and discussed herbs and his new business and looked through the old recipe book. She told him she was glad he was off to such a good

start and thought he would be very successful. He thanked her for her help and gave her a plain white envelope filled with a large amount of cash.

As he handed over the envelope he gave her hug and said, “Thanks Mom, I never could have done it without you.”

—*Nancy Ritter*

Squint

Tip-toeing through the blinds,
the sun makes me squint.

Any other day I'd roll
back and seek further hours
with my pillow and comforter,

but this morning
the hint I see through half-closed eyes
is a Post-it note with autumn
scribbled on it.

Reminder:
the scents and the sights
and the warm, early light
are yours for the taking.

—*Leo Quinn*

space like a hole

i am invisible
in a way i have only wished for
at parties and fancy dinners

i am not even considered
as you walk past
so complete
that you've not
a thought to spare
leaving behind
where i'm not
giving up
what we ought
(but never had a chance)
to be

you leave space like a hole
rather than
room to grow
and i know it's the end
when i pretend
not to see
and become a lesser version
of me

i am in danger of really disappearing
turn around and know
you used to know
too late

—*Jenn Flattery*

a figure study

i am intensified
by her awareness—
a foggy windowpane outline
traced in ink.

she makes me finite,
fills me in.
i am whole,
but only half
of her perfection.

i am torn.

i want to follow
footsteps
but i stray
and wander upon my own way.

it is something new.

again she comes
to me, finds me
always.
i am never alone
for long.

my curves and lines
make no picture
until she comes
to me,
fills me in.

—*Jenn Flattery*

summer in the field

the sky breaks
faint and wide,
a dim flashlight
under a well-spun quilt—
after-hours,
 unexpected.

we asked for stars
and waited all night
unanswered,
we burn up like ants—
accelerated,
 magnified.

the grass itches
red underneath us
restlessly we turn,
unmatched socks in a drier—
unintentional,
 alone.

we shed our skin
in the late sun
agitated,
anticipating like a knife—
precise,
 ready.

we wait.

—*Jenn Flattery*

Sinking, Singing, Billowing Away

*The first word
is always the hardest*

she whispers.

Still nothing. A tousle of my hair.

I want to write it all

I say to her,
looking out the window
at the icicles
reaching toward Earth
like a saint's claw.

Then a few words fall

in short lines

making little sense.

The neighbor,
his dog,
the next apostle—
all walk past.

I say I noticed. I think I did.

The sun keeps sinking.

Rachel keeps singing.

The smoky truth of winter keeps billowing away.

(A haiku interlude)

interjects from the right)

One leaf still hangs fast
ignorant of the winter
burying its kin.

I stretch toward
twilight, the stars,
praying for the burn
of an alien sun.

—*Jeremy Burke '99*

Bob's View

As he dozed, twitching in his sleep, just like the dog lying next to him, Bob's dream played on. In the dream he was young, vigorous—and horny. He ravaged the woman under him and lay smiling, awaiting the next beauty to appear for his pleasure. As she walked naked and full breasted toward him, her mouth suddenly curled and she shrieked, "Bob, Bob, where are you?"

Startled awake, Bob jumped to his feet and wiped the spittle from his chin. Damn, he thought, that was worth drooling over! From the house below, Kate, his wife, was calling to him. "Are you all right?" she called again. "Yeah, Kate," he yelled back. "I'll be right down." Still aroused, walking down to see Kate seemed a better and better idea as he stood gathering the tools he had brought with him.

Though nearly forty-five, he was still fit and muscular from all the physical labor their life required. Easily swinging the heavy sledge and axe up to his shoulder, he snapped to the dog and they started home. Making his way down the hill, he thought about his wife. Kate was a knockout when he met her—long brown hair, legs for miles joined to a perfect ass, and a smile that made his stomach flip. She was hot, and he was hooked.

Each had a passion for the earth and natural living. They were, he told his mother, "beyond compatible." His mother agreed. They were a good match all right, and she didn't even know about the sex. They bought the secluded acreage and started the organic farm, where they were married in the spring.

Time had softened the tight ass and hard work had wrinkled the attractive face. The same wrinkles that enhanced his rugged good looks had aged the beauty from hers. Always generous with her body, she was still warm, and welcoming to him if he approached her. But he approached less and less often. The hurt he felt was for her—he was acutely aware of her awareness; the rejection she felt from his disinterest burned him like a brand. The best sex he had these days was in his head. Bevises of young, firm beauties danced before him when he closed his eyes. He sought sleep now like a drug.

Warmed and primed by his dream, Bob stepped faster to satisfy the need he knew they both had. Kate would feel wanted sensing the urgency of his desire. She would not know that she was only the receptacle of his lust today, not the one who inspired it.

Always a high achiever, Bob felt a twisted pride in the fact that he had fared so well in the repopulation tests. He thought of himself as strong, agile, and not bad looking for a guy his age, and he had great swimmers too. He and his vanity kept as close company these days as he did with his farm work.

Kate brought the letter to him later that night. He read the official document of his reassignment and worked hard to keep his face level. He could not add to the pain on Kate's face as she watched him reading. She threw herself against him with hard gasping sobs. Instantly he felt the old love and protectiveness he once felt for her sweep across him, and he held her tightly. Kate pressed her face hard into his chest. Her head lay against his shirt pocket, pressing the photo he had there against him.

Bob was told of his reassignment the second day of the testing. Given a book of photos, he picked as though choosing a chocolate. Then he and Kate went home to find out to what repopulation center he would be assigned. He never shared this news with her, mainly because he couldn't figure out a decent way to bring it up and secondly because he didn't want to deal with her emotions. He felt heat as the photo pressed against him, but he felt it in his loins.

The auburn-haired woman in the picture, "woman49b," had skin the color of café au lait; obviously of mixed race, her beauty was intense. He thought of hot Latin lovers when he looked at her, and he looked at her at every opportunity. The days could not pass by fast enough until he could actually have her in all the ways he had imagined.

Kate talked on and on as they traveled; he wanted to yell at her to shut up. Her incessant talking distracted him from his thoughts of what was to come. But he knew that while he was

ready to do this, Kate was not, and for everything they once were, he owed her this time to talk.

Catching sight of the repopulation center, Bob was surprised to feel the throb of an erection. He looked intently ahead, anxious to start his new duty. He strode forward to the gate, oblivious to Kate and her tears, like he was going into a brothel. He never looked back; the gate closed behind him.

Searched and instructed, Bob was sent to the quarters he would share with his new mate. He studied the photo as he walked toward the room and anticipating the nubile young woman awaiting him. His heart raced.

“49b” was pressed into the corner made by the bed and the wall. Her auburn hair was disheveled; swollen eyes in a tear-streaked face stared back at him. The room smelled faintly of her unwashed body. She cringed back even further into the corner as he entered the room. What the hell was this? He expected her naked and waiting, and here she sat looking at him with fear and revulsion. She cried hysterically as he pulled her from the corner, harder still when he threw her onto the bed. A crumpled photo fell from her hand during the struggle. Picking up the picture, Bob felt bile rise as he gazed at, not as he expected, a picture of himself, but of a wedding couple, one of whose smiling face was hers. “Please don’t do this,” she begged, “I can’t believe they took me from my husband. Please, I don’t want to be here; I just want to go home.”

The door slammed sharply as Bob left the room. He looked for someone official to speak to about obtaining a new partner. He had waited so long for this; he wasn’t going to be cheated now.

The guards came again. They held her body down on the bed as they did with someone every day and forced Bob to attempt to impregnate his new life-mate as her screams rang shrilly in his ears.

—Janet Hudson

A Man to Reckon With

Charles Kilroy was Benjamin Cardwell's opposite. Big Ben came by his name honestly, for he was tall, a good two standard deviations above the mean, and rock solid, both metaphorically and physically. He would run, not jog, fifty miles a week, anything less than all out not being worth the effort. He lifted weights, did a hundred push-ups and twenty pull-ups every day, and was a gold-star member of the town's prestigious by-invitation-only health club. Ben, they said, was always pleasant—remembered anniversaries and birthdays, read the paper daily so knew what co-worker's child had received a scholarship, placed first in a music competition, scored a winning touchdown, made the Dean's list at a far away university.

Then there was Charles Kilroy, a person who failed to even reach the average height for a man in his age group (25-34). Short in stature, yes, but not slight of build, for he had battled his weight since birth. Charles joined groups, took pills, starved, and in college had even tried purging until one night he watched what was left of his self-respect spiral down the waters in an hallucination that could only have been caused by a higher power. At least he had stopped doing that. When Charles spoke up in groups, no one heard him. If he were asked a question, which seldom happened, no one seemed interested in his answer. Nonetheless, he believed in the job, and by most measures he did it well. He met deadlines, showed up when he should, worked late, followed the company's sick-leave policy to the letter, and never added extra time to his lunch break like so many he worked with did. In fact, he often returned early and would be at his desk before his hour had even expired. Despite all this, he never got promoted; never got a bonus or a raise that everyone else did not get; never won an award, a personal handshake from the boss, or received his hand-carved replica of the company logo that everyone received upon their five-year anniversary. For some reason, personnel had overlooked that fact, and when Charles Kilroy brought the oversight to personnel's attention they apologized after first taking an entire pay period to check

the veracity of his claim. They notified him of their error by way of an unsigned office memo and promised to make it up to him the next year. When the following year came and went and his figurine never appeared, Charles gave up the quest. After all, what did he really want with a hand-carved 3-dimensional replica of the company's logo? Anyway, in a few years he would be eligible for a twelve-inch hand-carved statue of company founder, Sidney J. Conklin.

Charles had just about reached the stage in life where he accepted himself, was comfortable with it, and no longer cared what others thought about him.

But then that incident happened, the incident that made Charles Kilroy a man to reckon with, the go-to guy in the company, the first one called to Benjamin Cardwell's office when a delicate question of equally compelling alternatives presented itself, for, you see, Benjamin Cardwell was good at what he did, but he was not without a flaw, a flaw that only Charles Kilroy knew about.

Charles liked a routine and a fixed schedule. He would get lost on weekends when he didn't have one or when a plan he had counted on got changed. When that happened he would go into a funk and waste hours roaming his house like a confused shopper around Sam's Club. He knew there were those who described that behavior as neurotic, but he preferred to call it Active Repositioning, a term he had coined and defined as the process of letting the trauma go, accepting life's unpredictability, and formulating a new plan of action, a process that could take weeks depending upon the magnitude of the change.

So it was not out of character for his mood to go straight to anguish when he was told he had to take his lunch break later than he had planned, due to a meeting that included everyone on the floor but him and a company policy requiring that one employee remain available in case something awful happened that needed to be documented.

He checked his watch, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath.

He said to Sally Remington, a woman hired two years after he was but who now outranked him by at least two pay grades, in a tone intended to convey his displeasure, "This puts me in a bind." She gave him the cold look of boredom to let him know that what he wanted wasn't the issue. Charles saw this, of course, so shrugged, and said, "But you know me. I'm here to serve."

"Great, Steve," she said, for despite nametags and introductions she never had learned Charles's name, and with that, Sally Remington from Procurement exited her underling's workspace.

Charles opened his desk and took out his Tic Tacs, hoping several popped over the next sixty minutes might help stave off his hunger. He got up from his desk and began his Active Repositioning routine. After several dozen turns around his cubicle, he decided, Okay, I've got the Watkins report to finish, and although I'll be missing the shepherd's pie special at Lou's that I had planned on all week, I can still catch the soup-and-sandwich combo at that new bistro. This will work out.

And work out it did. When the meeting ended, Sally Remington dropped in to apprise him that all was clear. He filed the now-finished Watkins report, threw away the empty vial of Tic Tacs, and removed his jacket from the rack.

Due to his Active Repositioning, he thought he had integrated the schedule change into his schema. However, a part of him remained partial to his original plan, and that miffed him because it meant his best effort had been less than a hundred percent effective. He knew he was about to pay a lot more for his tuna on wheat and cup of chicken noodle than he would have for Lou's luncheon special, and besides, that new bistro was two blocks further in the other direction.

He turned the corner, passed the Walgreens at the intersection of Boyle and Bronson, and remembered he needed more Tic Tacs; while there he could get another hundred yards of that store-brand dental floss. After finding what he needed in the clean, well-lit aisles, he started for the register. That's when he

spotted his company's Head-of-Everything, Benjamin Cardwell, clinging to a blue plastic shopping basket. This surprised Charles, for he had trouble picturing Cardwell buying anything from a store as plebeian as Walgreens. Surely, he thought, there must be boutiques stocked with life's most basic needs for men like him: designer Q-tips, gilded tooth brushes, Napa-Valley-pressed mouthwash, French scented shampoos, conditioners, antiperspirants, and so on.

Cardwell's basket hung off his arm as he rolled a tube of chapstick between his fingers. And that's when Charles saw him do it. Cardwell made a furtive glance around before sliding the lip balm into his pants pocket. Charles was stunned, so stunned that he at first refused to believe what his eyes had just seen. Why would a man like Cardwell, whose basket held other items (Charles could see two magazines, hand cream, and AA batteries), want to pocket something so mundane as chapstick? Unable to come up with a good answer, Charles reasoned that he must not have seen it. Yet he had. So he considered that the man only looked like Cardwell. What stood before him proved the theory that we all had a twin somewhere in the universe. No, wait; this was Cardwell's twin, the bad seed to Benjamin's angel. Everyone knew that plot.

But then something so far from the expected happened that it forced Charles to accept the truth of what he had seen. Benjamin Cardwell, moments after sliding the chapstick deep into his tailored trousers, turned to Charles as if he had known he had been standing there and nodded, going so far as to lift his hand with his manicured nails to wave. With that, Kilroy was more flattered than appalled and so lifted his hand in response. Cardwell then turned and headed for the checkout line.

Well, Kilroy was so flummoxed that he forgot all about the bistro's soup and sandwich and went next door instead to a nondescript noodle place and ordered a big plate of Beef Yakisoba, the most expensive item on their lunch menu. And now he wasn't even hungry.

He picked at his meal and mulled over what had just happened. He decided he hadn't seen Cardwell pinch the chapstick after all. What he had seen was an illusion caused by having ingested too much sugar (in the form of Tic Tacs) coupled with extreme hunger (due to having waited an hour longer to eat). He reasoned that this lethal combination had been made more acute by finishing that damned Watkins report when he wasn't at his best. However, he had to admit that letting his noodles grow cold right in front of him did little to support his apparition-by-starvation theory.

Besides he had a history of seeing things that weren't there.

As a kid, he had told his parents that their neighbors, the Applewhites, had just left for the coast when all he had really seen that afternoon was a car resembling theirs pass by hauling a large rubber raft. And what had his father done upon hearing the news? He walked right into the Applewhite's garage and walked out with their twelve-foot extension ladder. When Connie Applewhite, standing at her kitchen window, saw what Ernie Kilroy had just done, she called the police. When they arrived, Ernie Kilroy was on the ladder cleaning the leaves out of his gutters, unable to claim something other than what he had just done. Being one to deflect any responsibility from himself, he held his son's bogus account as the reason for this "misunderstanding" after first spending several hours in jail and paying a small restitution.

What a burden for poor little Chuck Kilroy to carry. The memory had always made him think twice before putting much faith into believing what he thought he had just seen. Still . . . he was older now, and darn it, deep down he knew what he'd seen. Well, didn't he?

Charles Kilroy returned to his office a good ten minutes before his break was officially over and opened the next report. The details were so well chronicled that he knew he could get through it in less than a half-hour. He would have too, had the telephone not rung.

"Charles Kilroy?" a woman's voice asked. After Charles

replied that it was, the woman said, “This is Ms. Barkman, Mr. Cardwell’s personal secretary.”

Charles covered the receiver so that she would not hear him starting to hyperventilate. In a voice shaky and unsure, he said, “Yes?”

“I do hope I’m not catching you at a bad time.”

“No, not at all. Just hard at work.”

“Of course. Mr. Kilroy, I’m calling to ask if this might be a good time for you to break away to come upstairs. Mr. Cardwell wishes to see you.”

“Mr. Cardwell?”

“That’s right. Shall we say in ten minutes?”

Charles’s palms took on a moist quality. He did not like this. He went to the men’s room to freshen up and to ponder on how he could now actively reposition himself to face his own termination.

Alice Barkman sat behind a beautiful oak desk so polished and uncluttered he could see the ceiling’s reflection on its surface. The room smelled like flowers, but not from any fake aerosol spray. He saw two, no, three large vases of cut flowers filled with all sorts of blooms he couldn’t identify. She looked up and over her glasses resting on the tip of her nose when Charles approached. “May I help you?” she asked.

“Charles Kilroy to see Mr. Cardwell,” he announced, then decided he needed to explain himself. “You just called.”

Barkman, the legendary Guardian of the Gate, at last gave what Charles thought could be a smile and said, “Of course, Mr. Kilroy. Make yourself comfortable while I inform him of your arrival.”

Charles looked for someplace to make himself comfortable, and was about to head across the room to a chair when Benjamin Cardwell emerged from his office, all smiles and walking towards Charles with right hand out and his left poised to slap him on the back. Benjamin Cardwell’s handshake conveyed, Man, am I glad to see you, my dear, dear friend.

“Please, Charlie, come in. Is it okay to call you Charlie?”

Charlie? He’d never been Charlie. Chuck, yes, but then he went directly to Charles around the time he started looking for work right out of community college. Stood out on an application, he thought. Charles C. Kilroy. Now, that was class. So did he correct him? Charles said, “Certainly, Mr. Cardwell.”

“Call me Ben,” and Big Ben guided him toward his office by holding onto his shoulder.

So far this doesn’t feel like a firing, Charles thought, but he remained wary. Just in case, he started drafting an appeal letter to Human Resources in his head. Cardwell said to Barkman, “Hold my calls,” then closed his office door.

Ben Cardwell walked to his desk and opened an ornate case. “Cigar? They’re Cubans. I have them secretly brought in by a private plane owned by an Argentinean firm with headquarters in Toronto. We do business with them.”

Charles, who had tried a cigarette only once, in junior high, looked at the offerings wide-eyed and said, “Thanks.” He selected one and held it like a baton, not sure what he was supposed to do with it, before placing it in his jacket pocket. “I’m aware of the smoking policy, Mr. Card . . . I mean Ben.”

In the time that it took Charles to select and pocket his Cuban, Ben Cardwell had his cut, licked, and lighted. He expelled a smoke stream that went straight toward the ceiling and out of the room. “Don’t worry, Charlie. The exhaust fan. It sucks air like an Oreck. Go on, sit.” So Charles obeyed, sitting like a patient awaiting a proctology exam while his boss sat on the desktop looking down upon him. “Comfortable?” Ben asked, licking his lips.

Assuming he had meant the chair, Charles said, “Yes, very,” especially compared to his office chair, the one that skated around the hard-plastic mat and whose seat could drop a good eight inches without warning. He crossed his legs. “The chair is just right. Mamma-bear perfect,” he added, and then laughed at his own humor.

Cardwell smiled down upon Charles before going to sit in his own chair. "I meant the room, Charlie. People tell me they like coming in, visiting, you know, shooting the bull."

"Yes, comfortable."

"You know, Charlie, we've had our eye on you for sometime. Did you know that?"

He stirred and repositioned his legs. "No, I didn't know that."

"Your supervisor, Walt," he paused, held out his cigar and studied it. "Um, Walt. Help me out here. Your super's name?"

"His name's Henry. Henry Loomis."

"Of course, Loomis. Well, he's been sending us reports on your work for the past six months. Outstanding. Simply outstanding."

Charles sat back, thinking, That's odd. His last evaluation from Loomis had consisted of one positive comment and nine areas where he could improve (1. "Check your spelling before submitting paperwork. Reports are no longer retyped by the secretarial pool as we no longer have a secretarial pool; 2. Area reports go to Operations, client summaries go to Development. Oversight sent three emails noting that change last month; 3. We instituted casual Friday's two months ago. Bola ties are still ties," and so on. Nothing major, but still . . .). Charles rubbed his chin. "Outstanding?"

"Gold plated, Charlie." Benjamin sat back and exhaled a smoke stream "You look confused."

"I'm just surprised."

"Surprised?" Ben asked. Charles watched his boss lick his lips, then rub his mouth with the back of his hand. "Why surprised?"

"That a man in your position should see departmental evaluations. Seems like you'd have more . . . well, more important things to do."

He leaned forward and again moistened his lips. "Nothing's more important than knowing about the people who work for me. Nothing. Nada. Nil." He held up his hand making a circle with the index finger and thumb. "Zilch. Zip. Zero." He sighed.

“Charlie, employees like you keep us running. In the end, it’s you and others like you who are the important members of this team. Me? I’m just a face. A hand to shake. A back to slap. A man holding a plate of hor d’oeuvres in one hand and a glass of wine in the other.” Then Ben did something that surprised Charles. He reached into his pants pocket and removed that tube of chapstick. He held it up for inspection as if it were an innovative cutting-edge design. Then he uncapped it and applied the balm first across one lip and then the other, followed by that lip-rubbing thing to spread the waxy sheen evenly to all areas. Once finished, he recapped the tube and tossed it into his desk drawer.

“A seasonal thing, Charlie.”

“Sir?”

“You know, cool weather, low humidity, programmed temperatures. It adds up. Come,” he said, waving him to his side of the desk. “I want to show you something.”

Charles obeyed and went around the desk while Ben opened two of its drawers. “Yes?” he asked.

“Look at this,” Ben said peering down at the opened drawers. When Charles did, he gasped. Both drawers were filled with hundreds of tubes of different brands and flavors of lip balm.

“Amazing, isn’t it?”

Charles whistled. “What a collection, Ben. You’ll never run out.”

Benjamin said, “Excuse me?”

“The drawers. They’re filled. A lifetime supply. Amazing, just like you said.”

Ben laughed and patted Charles on his shoulder. “That’s not what I’m talking about. No, no, Charlie. What’s amazing is having a man of your ability working at this firm for as long as you have and us not seeing your true value. One assumes that cream rises to the top, like they say, but you’ve proven that not to be the case. We’ve been remiss, Charlie. I see it now. You’re a man of substance, and we need you up here, on this floor, close to me. Charlie, I need your counsel.”

“My counsel?” Charles said, falling back into his chair.

“In fact, I called you up here on a most delicate matter. I need your advice.” Charles moved his mouth, but no words came out. “We have this problem,” Ben continued. “It’s come to our attention that one of our trusted employees has this, well, this problem.”

The word problem got Charles to sit up. “You say there’s this problem you want to see me about?” Okay, he thought, maybe corporate and I will be parting ways after all.

“It seems this employee, who shall remain nameless, you understand, our confidentiality policy being what it is.” Charles nodded. “Well, he has this problem. In all other respects he’s quite gifted. Contributes to the company’s bottom line, adds value to the firm’s output, on first-name basis with the global players. In other words, a real keeper.”

“I see. A keeper. But there’s this problem. Just how big is this problem?”

“Insightful question, Charlie. This is what I wanted from you. The answer, of course, is it depends. It’s a big problem if you look at it in isolation. But small if placed in context. So the question is what should be done? In other words, if no one knows about it, little changes. But if it is ever reported, you know, to the press, say, or to a store manager, or to the board directors, well, then it could become a problem. A problem that might be able to be resolved quietly, but then, maybe not.” Benjamin began rubbing his lips together.

And then it started to make sense. Charles leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs. “Why would this ever be reported? I mean, if no one knows about it.”

“Oh, someone knows about it,” he said and pulled out one of his many tubes of gloss. Before coating his lips, he admired the cylindrical container. “That I’m sure of.”

“So, if that someone doesn’t tell anyone, then what’s the problem?”

“You’re a perceptive man, Charlie. We need men like you

here. Men whom I can turn to, trust, rely upon. But, and this is where I could use your help right now, what would this person who has this so-called problem have to do to make sure this person who knows will not tell anyone?”

With that, Charles stood as if a fire alarm had just gone off and started walking in circles muttering under his breath.

“Charlie, good lord, are you all right?” Ben asked, sounding rattled.

A moment later Charles sat back down and pulled out the cigar from his pocket, the Cuban smuggled in by a private plane owned by an Argentinean firm with headquarters in Toronto. He reached across the table to Benjamin’s stainless-steel cigar scissors and trimmed the tip as he had watched Benjamin do earlier. He took a deep breath, confident his Repositioning was complete. “If you hand over your lighter, Ben, I believe I might be able to help you.”

—James O’Gorman

