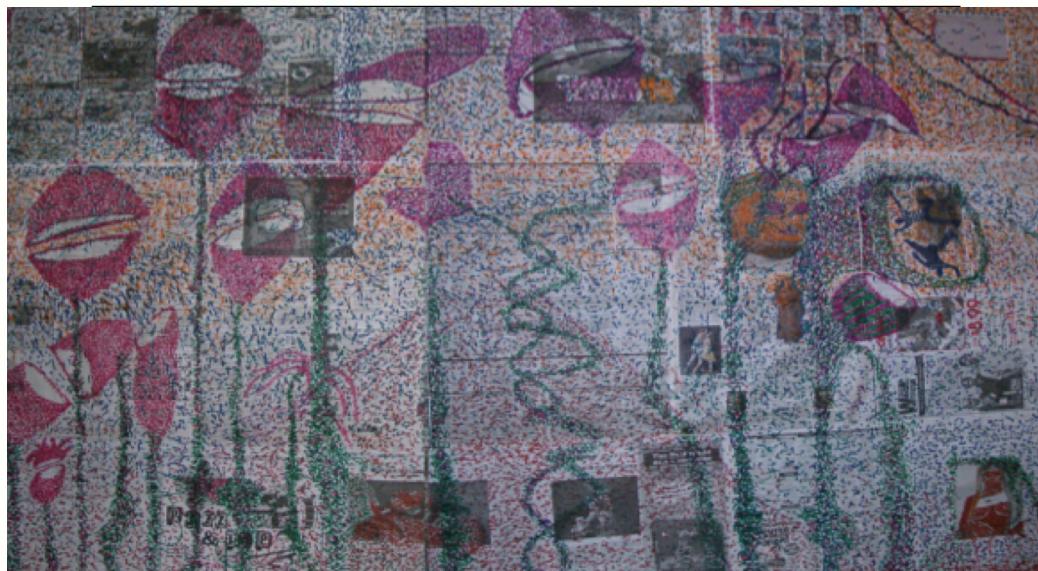

April 2004



Volume One / Issue Ten

strawberry press magazine

New Fiction by Jeff Glovsky, Whit Frazier,
Heitham Black and Adam Elkus

STRAWBERRY PRESS MAGAZINE

APRIL 2004

VOLUME ONE ISSUE TEN

Check out the new look of www.strawberrypress.net online. We publish print and online fiction from all different types of authors and we are currently working on our second book publication – a collection of short fiction. We are also accepting submissions for upcoming issues of strawberry press magazine.

Strawberry Press
Post Office Box 1873
New York New York 10163
www.strawberrypress.net

Strawberry Press is currently held down by:

whit frazier
whit@strawberrypress.net

Matt Andreas
matt@strawberrypress.net

Contact © 2004, Jeff Glovsky
Love's Downfall © 2004, Heitham Black
Faith © 2004, Whit Frazier
Thesis © 2004, Adam Elkus

Volume One Issue Ten

Volume One Issue Ten is another all fiction issue of Strawberry Press Magazine. We'll get back to essays, I promise. But for now, we just happen to be getting a lot of good fiction.

This issue features work by writers all new to Strawberry Press. I'm really happy with what we have here. I hope you will be too. Not much more to say. Two more issues, and we'll be celebrating our one-year anniversary.

Thanks to everyone who's given us their support.

Cheers,

Whit Frazier
Strawberry Press
www.strawberrypress.net
whit@strawberrypress.net

Jeff Glovsky ...lives and dies in New York. He has never considered an MFA. hemmiller@hotmail.com for 'contact'...

Heitham Black belongs to no flag or state, extraordinarily stubborn - he has found himself being shunted across three continents. He would not regard himself as anything in particular; having been a teacher he is wary of job titles and people's expectations. After quitting full time work in a fit of pique Heitham Black decided to write full time using his savings, and then get published (something his jazz singing wife was rather peeved about). He has had several short stories published in various places but there are still 100 poems, 50 more short stories, 27 articles, 12 essays, 2 novels and 1 film script waiting for the right person. So, non charlatan wanted, lover of witty warm words, GSOH, doesn't have to pay very much - \$19000? E-mail: newkrossak@hotmail.com

Whit Frazier is a writer and the founder of strawberry press magazine.

Adam Elkus is a frequent participant in poetry slam events such as Midnight Special/Beyond Baroque (which he has performed readings at for four years), and he has published one poem in an anthology Celebrate! Young Poets Speak Out published by Creative Communications.



CONTACT

Jeff Glovsky



Tap Tap go my teeth as I gawk in the mirror. I tap them: They're hard, sort of white...One is broken. I see skin cascade from my bones like a faucet. A walrus bulldog-looking, blank apparition...

There's nothing behind the grey teeth, walrus laughing. The dull, bulldog skin dripping udder-like, down...There is madness. Unrest. Discontentment. Starvation.

I go out, and sunlight insults me, offends. I squint horribly. Horrid the heat and its light. "Fuckin' cunt," now I'll murmur, as one breezes past...

"Fuckin' cunt." An old woman stopped, stooped at a stop light...

"You cunts." A young couple in love, arm in arm..."Fuckin' bitch!"

I am happy today. Today's Thursday.

On *Thursdays*, I splash from my bed like a whale...*Tap Tap* on my teeth, pick my face, step outside...It's the day of the week, every week, I get off.

I go down to the Kino and get my rocks off! Rocks are solid. They hurt if I don't do it weekly...I come, and then bathe in the full emptiness. Like a cave in a mudslide, soft walls squeezing in...Head is swelling with silence, soul pounding with void.

Leave my stain on the pungent red floor of the Kino.

I'm hoping I won't have to see anyone. No one moves me. There's no one I care to enjoy...I mutter out loud to myself as I walk.

There's the people: the fuckers who crowd my each day...Drive me back to my place after breakfast...The women: the beauties who *know*, and their egos; the men who want these, and their painful, thick stupors...*I'm stupid. You want me though, righ?* Word.

Yeah, boy-y-y... She's drunk at a sidewalk café when I see her. She's crossing her fat, craven thighs in a skirt...Now in real Life, Cristina says she's a comic. "So say something funny," I say, and she farts.

"I hate being ordered to say something funny!"

"Get over it," say I. "So what do you drink?"

"Well, I'm mourning. The loss of my sense of myself. So I'm finding myself--trying to--with a drink."

...Bye.

She follows me, though, to a place called the Kettle. We order a third Flaming Cucaracha. "Welcome to your new addiction."

"So like, are you as fucking trashed...?"

"As you are? I don't think so, baby. I don't think that's possible. Your ass is pretty nice, though. Stand up (isn't that, anyway, what you do...?)."

"You only want to look!" she slurs.

I lift her short thick, craven skirt. She squeals, runs off to the rest room. "How much for the drinks?" I ask. Dude brings the bill. My eyes fall out.

I reach into Cristina's purse and pull out three crisp twenties.

"You need change?"

"Of course," I blink.

Dude brings it, and I leave the bar.

Now smoking in a doorway cross the street, I watch Cristina leave: She stumbles out the door and down the stoop, sways sideways like a crab...Grows sober as she peers around, pretends not even to be looking; calm, she lights a cigarette, and plays she's taking in the night.

...She looks so damn ridiculous, I can't announce myself! And so she finally goes back in and I unwind into a cab uptown. "The cunt!" I laugh, as we blow lights off. "What a fucking nose on her..."

The taxi cab driver, a little Chinese chick, is pissed because I know the way I take home. She's an asshole, all surly, with sermons on driving. "Whatever," I say. "That's great, *left*, 57th..." She turns, and proceeds to run over a biker.

"Wha'...!?" The fuck are you doing, man? Didn't you see her!?" That's good right here," I yell. "Stop the damn cab!"

The biker is bleeding and dancing around...as China Girl, beside herself, screams suddenly, "No cursing!" She throws open her driver's door and steps into traffic...A small crowd has formed where she's knocked down the biker. I drop a five dollar bill onto the front seat...

"You pay me! You motherfucking!" China hollers.

"...I paid you!"

"You give me!"

"I gave you! The front seat..."

"You pay, motherfucking! No curse in my cab!"

"There's a five dollar bill on your fucking front seat, bitch!" She's slapped back and forth cross my bleeding-now mouth..."You are evil. You bad man. You bad, evil man!"

"Yeah, wha'fer...!" She's pushing me, up in my face...

Turn my back on her, buck-like, sprint into a bar.

Inside I see Fag...Rather, he checks me out as I bolt in the door...Like an *airplane*, he veers on two-wheels to stop me; like, all of a sudden he's crossing my path! Giant dick swinging loose in his indolent shorts...Fag has done this before. In the past, he has probably even got some; like a dog that's been trained, poor cat just keeps on sniffing...

I knee him in his groin until he howls. Winces, smiles at me..."You're still sweet," mewls the Faggot.

"I love you," say I.

"Yeah, what kind of light have you got?" to the bartender...Raises his eyebrows, looks up toward my sound...

This guy wedged in front of me's holding his ear. Making loud, clucking sucks of disapproval (*Get the fuck out of my way, you oaf!*)...I shout again, "...kind of light beer have you got?"

The guy with the earache ducks down, turns to face me. "You wanna get in here?" he asks, shuffling sideways.

"No, no. That's alright...You have Miller? Yeah, Miller! And no glass...Yeah, MILLER!"

The guy with the earache knees *me* in the groin.

At the end of the bar playing drums in the air sits the Child Actor Richling Huff...He's not sitting.

Oh.

...So this is *his* place now: a cane on a shelf where his vodkas are stocked; on display, with a cap, and a "Huffy's Place" t-shirt...Richling plays murderous drums in the air. 'Til both fists beat down hard on the bar like two rack toms, and everyone's drink skips a beat to the right..."Fucking moron," I think to myself, and pinch wetly, the ass of the cunt deep in smoke near a window.

"You've! Got a stinking cigar in your mouth...Do you care?"

"And perhaps I'm just happy to see you...?"

"I doubt it. You look really ugly, y'know? Like a guy. Like a *dyke*. And you're here by yourself...What a drag!"

"You're an **asshole!**"

"Two lemondrop shots, please." The bartender snaps to; I slap them both back. "You want something...?"

"How do you know I'm alone!?"

"Cause I *smell* you. Perceive what you're going through, always. Two more, please. Here! Have one...You gotta get *out* more!"

I hold up my hand to high-five her. She grasps it.

First contact is made, like a walk on the moon. "Aesthetically, you're really nowhere," I tell her. "You're nice, though. You smell nice. I'll bet you crave fuck."

She excuses herself...To make a *phone call*!?

Whatever!

I leave...

And the China Girl's waiting...Beats on my chest like an ape as I walk! Now it's late out...The streets scream surrender like I do. "Get OFF me!" I whirl, run back into the bar.

I am trapped. Bar scene ciphers and echoing void...I see thirty-some bobbling, babbling skulls; catch the homely Cigar Girl half-snarl at me (She's ignoring the cop trying buying her drinks)...Richling Huff puffs the words to some witless rock classic, still air-drumming back of the bar, looking stupid.

I spin...Pick a payphone up, punch in some numbers: a bright, tight, white skirt there, just wanna get close to. I haven't got change on me, no one to call...But I stand there, and punch in some numbers beside her.

This violent, loud tone comes on, screeching buzz static: "...*you'd like to make a call, please hang up...*" I stare at the cunt in the bright, tight, white skirt. At the *cunt*...at her juncture between thigh and moon. Nest of succulence...scented, damp anticipation...

Her meat-getter seizes her, drags her outside.

Fuckin' cunt ("...*please hang up...*")! She was too vibrant, anyway...New England imbecile down for the night! Watch her ass in the bright, tight, white skirt swing away. Singing happily, laugh, not a care in the world; not a thought in her *head*, save the morning's alarm clock...She looks at her watch.

She has declared fun dead.

...A hand spread palm flat on the window between us: a face from some gig I worked ages ago. Mouths my name, smiles, hurries past, waves recognition...The ass in the bright, tight, white skirt is not there.

Isn't there...there is nothing so grey as illusion. The bathroom: I tap on my teeth in the mirror...They're grey. Craven. Indolent.

Longing to score...

Walrus-hanging, I think, as I *Tap Tap* and stare...As the bathroom door slams opens: Cigar Girl there! In she clomps, on high heels too long, and she stumbles, and, hands on her hips, asks me why I ignore her.

"*Ignore* you...!? Look, bitch," I exclaim. "C'mere, baby!"

...That song by Jack Jones...How's it go? I start humming. No, *that's not*

it...Maybe it's Tom...Anyway. Now *she's* singing...Spanking my ass in the mirror!

"Oww...Wait!" I say, startled. She's burning the hairs off my leg with a match. "Jesus!...Hell are you doing!?"

She's laughing now, up on the edge of the sink. "You are *wicked*...You're evil, bitch! Come down off there..." She is laughing, she dance...*Standing up in the sink!*

"Uh...My name's Jeff, anyway...What was yours? Look, I'm thirsty. I gotta get in there, man...hands are dirty..."

She takes one, and slides it up into her legs.

"I *love you!*" I blurt out. She squats and starts gurgling...The door to the squalid, foul room slams again. Richling Huff, Child Actor, crawls in on all fours.

"Oh! I'm sorry, I..."

Kick him back out where he came! "*Fuckin' cripple...*"

...Cigar Girl is crying my name!

I stand outside, picking my nose in the peace dark. I'm feeble.

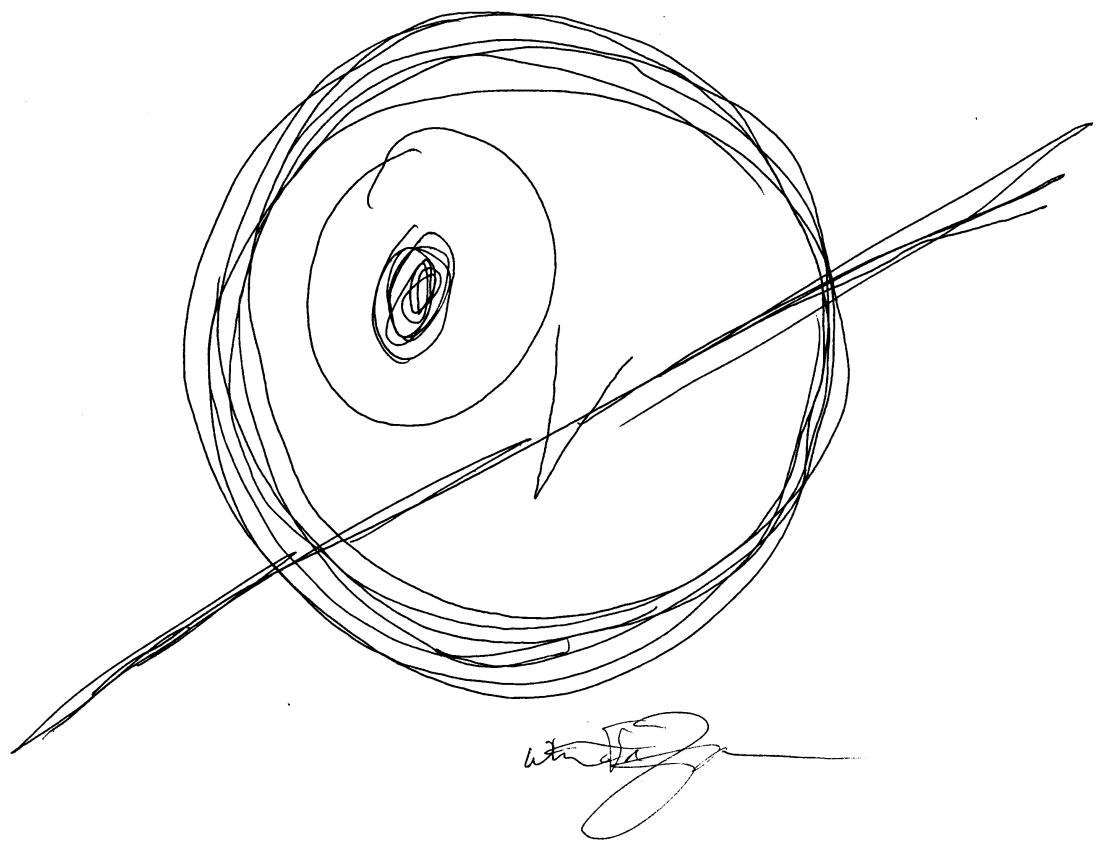
The stars and great night swell about me.

I'm asked for change not once, not twice, but four times. "Good luck, man," I off-put the last sorry sack.

"Good *luck...!?*"

!...Fuck you, then. Prick. *Get a job, motherfucker!* Door guy from a club near the bar flails happily...The guy he's deranging is claiming to sue. From another door, whores peer out challenging toward me...They're black as the night and my soul...

I go home.



Love's Downfall

Heitham Black



This isn't just a warning for young men. The truth is that we can all be overcome by a sense of service, a feeling that we ought to do the right thing. If you think about it what could be more ridiculous? How can you possibly be always trying to do the right thing when so many individuals have so many different ideas about morals and scruples? Perhaps the reason for caution in life is so that others don't cross our paths and cause us too much damage. No one should have to suffer like poor old Mr. Love. Perhaps the funniest thing about Mr. Love's notions of service was the fact that to us gods he seemed to be displaying such *hubris* and thus deserved to meet his downfall with gratitude. He was a man who had settled into a rut and mightily displeased Destiny; in turn she had unleashed the furies. Ah! The arrogance of complacency. Now read carefully and let's hope that you can avoid making the same mistakes!

Mr. Colin Love was born in a suburb of Leicester; it doesn't matter exactly where, but more how he was affected by this. From his father he learnt the 'value' of hard work and keeping a steady job; and in his mother he saw the compliance that he would expect in women throughout his life. Mr. Love wanted to be respected in his job, and took great satisfaction that the children he had taught were better equipped for success in life. Good old success: for Mr. Love this meant a steady ship, everyone doing the right thing. It was a shame really because he had been a promising soccer player in his youth; at 18 he reached a crucial juncture where he was offered professional terms with Birmingham City, but he chose the option of teacher-training as it offered steady employment.

Maybe a lesser man would have experienced regrets if they had rejected the opportunity to make easy money out of soccer but Mr. Love wasn't too worried about his decision. Neither did he worry about his wife's loyalty, nor family backing in every matter that he brought to them. It's cruel really: the way fate has a habit of making such important things happen behind one's back.

This particular day Mr. Love was wiping the mess left by a bird on his car bonnet. He was thinking about how he would have to have a word with his wayward son about using the garage. This turned his thoughts to the numerous students to whom he would have to speak in the school day. First of all, he thought that he would have to have a go at that girl (he could never remember her name) about

her uniform. He started his car and drove down his gravel drive to work.

He was not to know Kylie Sislewick's family background. He didn't know that she had been up since 4:00am feeding her younger brothers and sisters and getting them ready for school. Why should he? Well, young Kylie was walking to school and smoking a cigarette to help her to stay awake and who should be driving past? 'Come here girl!' His voice was gruff and unkind. 'What do you think you're doing?' Kylie had a thick local dialect, made stronger by her tiredness.

'Fuck off.' She turned to look at the car and her mouth formed a shocked O shape as she realised who it was!

This did not deter Mr. Love from his moaning. 'I'll see you by my office when you get to school Miss ... erm!' He wound up his car window as the lights changed to green. 'Bloody kids! No respect!' He muttered under his breath as he drove into the misty morning. Mr. Love parked his car at the front of the school and then walked into the main reception.

'Ah. Good morning Mary.' Such a sweet smile for Mary!

'Oh. Good morning Mr. Love! Can I get you a cup of coffee?' She seemed surprised to see him even though this was the same routine that they followed every day. Her voice softened from professional secretary to spurned love.

'Have you thought about the things I said in the letter?'

'Er. No, no. Mary, I've got to say I haven't read it yet! I just haven't had the time. I'm sorry.' He looked away from her disappointment; there was a short silence.

'Er. Is that coffee ready yet?'

'Yes I know. You've got so much to do.' She smiled, back in professional secretary mode again, and he did not notice the tear in her eye.

'Milk and one sugar.'

'Thank you Mary. You are a wonderful woman.' He grinned and walked off to his office.

Inside his office he thought that there was a strange feeling growing in the pit of his stomach,

a feeling that something was going to go wrong. I urge you dear reader to pay attention to such feelings; we do not send them for no reason. Love patted his hair, still no bald patch then; that was down to moderate living. He regretted his stomach, which was due to excessive grazing! Hmm! What could be wrong? The lessons for the day were familiar and would be inside his daily planner in the top right hand drawer of his desk. After school there was a Department meeting, and the agenda had been fixed for that. Of course he would have to have a word about being too familiar with the students again. His department was inexperienced and did not bother about uniform and marking, just not thorough enough! As he retrieved his planner a piece of paper fell to the floor; it was a memorandum from the Head. That must be it! He was pleased that he had averted disaster! He rushed down to the photocopying room; that report was very important!

What was it I was saying about things unfolding behind your back? Oh yes, how we can be unaware about the affect of other people's actions!

James Love was driving his car to work. He was glad that he had put his car in the garage as it meant that it wasn't slow to start in the autumn mist. He was regretting his night out though! God! He must have had about eight pints, not mentioning the chemicals and shots of spirits! His head thumped like a nail being bashed into a brick wall. He started his car and set off to work, not knowing that he was going to be the starting point of his father's downfall. That's the point I suppose, whether it started with the accident or whether it had its roots in the deeper past. I mean, if Mr. Love hadn't been the perfectionist father would James have been such an arrogant fool? James knew his dad would help him get out of any trouble; mainly because he was so keen for the family to maintain its good name. His father always used to say: 'We're respected around here.' James was lost in his thoughts as he sped away from the house.

Meanwhile his father was delivering an assembly to the bored Year 11s at William Gibson Community College.

'Now the main theme for my assembly is the rules and doing the right thing. I want you all to listen carefully. Pay attention. We have been back for a few weeks now and as I have walked around it has

occurred to me that many of you aren't wearing the correct uniform. In addition to that I caught one young lady walking to school smoking! Smoking a cigarette! Smoking in the incorrect school uniform! I ask you: is there any greater disrespect? Well yes!'

He stopped to survey the students. A silence reigned for thirty seconds in the assembly hall.

'Yesterday I was walking around the school on call. Something I don't have the time to do as a busy Head of Department and a Senior Teacher. I found several pupils had been chucked out of their classes and I asked them why. "Why have you been chucked out?" I say. "Mucking about." They say. "Why?" I say. "It was boring." They say. Boring! I'll give you lot boring. We're going to have a uniform check when you leave the room and everyone in the incorrect uniform is staying with me. I've got a free period! I've asked all your teachers to provide a list of troublemakers and I'm going to ask for them tomorrow! So you'd better be good today! There'll be no smoking, and no mucking about, and no being bored, and no being out of uniform!'

He stopped abruptly and spoke to the Head of Year before briefly announcing: 'And now over to Mrs. Brumley.'

It was never going to be that simple. There are never simple sweeping explanations or solutions in any circumstance. Poor old Mr. Love! As he stepped briskly to the back of the assembly hall, as Mrs. Brumley droned on about something or other, Mary walked in. She whispered to him.

'Oh Mr. Love. There's an urgent telephone call for you in the office. It's something to do with James!'

He stalked through the corridor to the office and spoke to the other secretaries, Mary scuttled along behind him.

'Apparently I have an urgent phone call?'
'Oh yes! Here you are Mr. Love!' One of the younger secretaries handed him the telephone receiver from her desk.

'Hello. Colin Love speaking. How can I help you?'

'Ah. Hello Love. Jenkins here. I'm wondering if you can get a bit of time off work?' Why was his lawyer on the line, poor Colin Love wondered?

'Why?'

'It's a bit awkward. James might be in serious trouble and we can't get hold of Sue, it seems she hasn't turned up for work today.' Colin's head began to thump. He wondered if he should have paid more attention to the ominous feeling that he had had at the start of the day.

*

Jenkins had informed him that James had caused a fatal accident that morning; he had been kept in hospital but would be charged with several motoring offences. James had called from the hospital requesting that Colin went to visit him. The greatly respected Mr. Love had been allowed to leave the school and was anxious to speak to his wife about their errant knave of a son. He was trying to use his mobile phone but still hadn't learnt to dial numbers properly. As he tried to concentrate in his driving he threw it on the floor in disgust. 'Where is she?' He drove quickly to the hospital, nearly causing several minor collisions on his journey.

James was lying in bed sobbing and Jenkins was trying to reassure him. Colin did not really want to interrupt but he had a few things to say to his son.

'Mr. Jenkins.' Colin nodded at his Sunday-golf partner. 'James.' He breathed tersely and loudly. 'What have you been up to then son? Eh?' James turned his head on the plump white hospital pillow; he looked at his father with a vacant gaze and began to cry.

'He's been breathalysed and he was 20mg. over the legal limit, and that's the morning after! In addition to that the girl he ran over was pronounced dead on her arrival at the hospital! She was from your school by the way. Oh, and it seems from the skid marks on the road that he was definitely speeding.'

For a moment Mr. Colin Love recoiled into his thoughts; he brushed his hair with his hands in an effort to seem in control. His mind was a whirling vortex of thoughts and questions: Where was

Mary? How could James be such an idiot? He wondered if Sarah had done anything stupid or gone missing. She was usually a good girl; how had she turned out so well, when James was such a rebel?

'So Colin, what shall we do?' Jenkins seemed to be enjoying this; an unpleasant gloat spread from cheek to cheek.

Mr. Love ignored the lawyer and spoke to his son. 'Why did you have to get him involved? You could have rung me at work or mum! Or your sister! Why were you drunk anyway? And why did you have to run a kid over from my school? We'll never live this down. Why were you driving like an idiot? Uh?'

His son still fixed him with that constant gaze, tears running down his cheeks.

'You're never there. I couldn't have rung you or mum; work is far too important to you. You have an image to keep up.'

Suddenly enraged further, Colin interrupted: 'That's a lie son. All your mother and I have done is worked hard and tried to bring you up the right way. To be decent parents and to get you to make the right decisions and do the right thing!' Like I have already said, these are difficult claims to substantiate. James felt aggrieved and shouted at his father.

'ALL YOU CARE ABOUT IS THE RIGHT BLOODY THING, OR THE CORRECT WAY, WHICH ALWAYS HAPPENS TO BE YOUR WAY!, DON'T YOU DARE INTERRUPT ME! YOU'RE SO PIGHEADED THAT YOU CAN'T SEE ANYTHING ELSE, ANYTHING OUTSIDE YOUR BORING LITTLE PERFECT LIFE!'

His shouting had aroused the attentions of the hospital staff, who requested that Jenkins and Mr. Love leave for a while as the Police were coming back later to ask some more questions. The two men left the hospital and Jenkins offered Love a cheap mass-produced cigar.

'You know I've never smoked Alex. I've got to go and see what's up with Sue. I'll phone you later.' And with that he strode towards his car. Jenkins muttered: 'Good Luck!'

But it was too late. Luck had nothing to do with

events anymore. Through countless years of mediocrity and inanely made decisions Love had come to deserve his fate. For those of you who don't understand yet: you were not made to live like dullards and to be prissy pedants - you were made to strive for poetic zeniths. It was going to be a pretty spectacular downfall; we're talking Narcissus here, rather than some wishy-washy celestial telling off!

By the time he arrived at his home Colin Love had started to panic about the school. He wondered if they were coping without him but never once did he wonder whether he was coping: the furies were waiting; they had only toyed with Love so far. Mutter, mutter: Colin opened the door and was surprised to see signs of life in his home. He cautiously called up the stairs: 'Is anybody there?' There was no reply, but the strong smell of coffee and the lingering smoke from a cigarette increased his suspicion that he was not alone.

He briefly remembered his mother in law, but she couldn't be back; they had packed her off to a nursing home in the summer. Mad old witch. As he climbed the stairs towards his bedroom his musings were dispelled rapidly. The door was open and the bed was unmade; lying on the mattress was a huge black rubber dildo.

We Gods have never been bothered by sex but dear old Mr. Love was mortified; he picked up the offending phallus and stared at it. It was priceless: his face had turned an ashen grey colour and his heavy breathing led him to splutter.

'Sue! SUE!'

There was a sound of movement coming from the bathroom. He thundered through the door. Sue was towelling herself down whilst a young man sitting on the edge of the bath lit a cigarette. He stood in the doorway; a pain had begun to spread down his left arm and he could not speak. Instead he just gawped. The man was staring at his wife's body too as she slowly wrapped her dressing gown around her damp body. Love hadn't seen his wife naked for a year or two and had forgotten how arousing her body was; the young man clearly had not forgotten a thing. He arose and dropped his towel on the bathroom floor. As he reached for Colin's dressing gown he spoke dismissively: 'Is this your husband then?'

Sue looked ashamed. 'Yes.'

'Didn't you used to teach me woodwork?' The man spoke directly to Colin who was still struggling to speak.

At last the words came: 'Billy Mitchell! My wife!' He pointed towards the bedroom. 'That thing on the bed! What were you doing with that thing?'

The man spoke again: 'Get over it granddad. She's bored. We like to have a bit of spice don't we babe?'

Sue smiled at her lover, and then spoke to her husband. 'Sorry Colin. I needed a release and I wasn't likely to get one from you. You were always playing golf, or working.'

'But why?'

Exasperated she spoke as Colin slumped into a sitting position on the floor. The young man left the room.

'Because I get fed up trying to be the perfect wife, and keeping up appearances! Because I get fed up being married to a self-important, arrogant, insensitive, boring, prat. That's why! A moaning, groaning, delusional fool who thinks that he can do no wrong. A man who thinks that he needs to interfere in everything and yet never asks what's going on. You think communication means telling people why you're right. I doubt you listen to anyone. If you do, you just ignore their feelings and opinions.'

'But we're...'

'Yes, yes. A respectable family. We're valued in the community! In case you hadn't noticed there is no community. How long are you going to delude yourself? Sarah's pregnant, James is completely wild, and I'm being fucked by one of your former pupils! And do you know what? It's good! I like it! I feel happy and wanted, and sexy!'

Colin Love had nothing to say. His mouth was dry and his thoughts turned to the Gods at last. He was pleading 'Why me?' We didn't ignore him; we had now devoted our full attention to him. Of course he was lacking in perception and ignored our attempts to contact him. Dream after dream! Feelings of *déjà vu*! For heaven's sake, he had

dreamt this only a month ago in explicit technicolour! We had revealed all of the signs; strangers had spoken ominous words. There had been warnings from the birds, from the weather and from his soul. You must understand that in the face of such ignorance we had to make Love's tumble dramatic.

Love ran out of his house, got into his car and drove to Mary's house. By now it was 13:25: time for lunch. She only worked part time and he knew that her husband was away driving a lorry in France. She always had kind words for him! He thought that Mary would lend her support to him.

*

He drove his car right into Mary's drive; her car was not there and he had a few moments to reflect on the events of the morning. But, alas, he chose instead to read her letter. What an inopportune moment! He reached into his breast pocket and pulled out the white envelope. He opened and read carefully.

Dear Colin,

I know that you will think that I am foolish and impetuous for writing to you but my heart has been heavy for years with this burden. You know that I am an admirer of yours and that I have been for many years. I've always respected you; even after that incident at the Christmas do all those years back. I thought that I meant something to you but perhaps you weren't aware of the extent of my feelings. I'm going to leave Nigel and I want you to know that I am waiting for you, as I have been for the last 7 years. I love you Colin.

'Oh God.' He groaned, as a car pulled up behind him.

It was Mary. She had a bemused look across her face and she tapped on his car window. As he unwound it, she spoke: 'Well, well. Here's a moment I never expected. You've read my letter then?'

'Yes.'

'Well, why don't you come in?' Colin Love could not resist; it was to be a meeting with his nemesis. They walked into the hallway and Mary offered him a cup of instant-coffee.

'Yes.'

'Well do sit down. I shan't be a second.' He slumped heavily into an armchair, dislodging a doily from its arm. Usually he was obsessive about tidiness but he was immersed in self pity and left it crumpled on the floor. When Mary entered the room with the coffee, she stopped at his knees and picked up the doily.

'Now, now Mr. Love. That's not like you!' She purred seductively. He noticed that she had undone several buttons on her blouse.

'You seem like a man with a lot on your mind! Let me help you to relax!' She sat on the chair opposite jiggling her legs; her skirt had risen above her knees.

'Oh God this is terrible!' He cried like a wailing baby.

'There there!' said Mary as she got up and came to sit at his feet. 'Many people think I'm a bit of a shy woman but I'm not really Colin. I'm very open minded.' He could see her brassiere and looked lustfully. Her hand lingered on the trouser leg of his polyester suit. Age had had its affect on her and she tried to cover her perceived blemishes with a thick coating of foundation. Unfortunately she was over made-up and her real beauty was hidden; many of her colleagues perceived her as a naïve, straight-laced bore but she had decided to take control of her life for the first time. Oh well, better late than never.

Colin had suspected that Mary admired him and had enjoyed the perks of her devotion for many years. It had started with a hand-job in the cupboard at work; then it continued sporadically over a seven year span. The odd grope here, a cup of coffee every morning, typing reports and schemes of work, staying behind to prepare for parent's evenings: he had taken a lot but never given back. A selfish man's prerogative? He did not like his wife acting the same way. Still, he was swelled with greed and hungry to escape from the mess of the day. It's never that easy though is it? I approve of allowing one to react according to one's emotions, but not everyone is an immortal.

Mr. Love's lust was something that he was careful to hide. Like most men he realised that his emotions were easily stirred and was, as a

consequence, brutal in his repression. It was to his despair that he succumbed to his lust; unthinkingly he began to unzip his trousers. Mary had begun to remove her clothes too; mechanically they rubbed bodies. Let me be quite clear here; it was amusing only in its grotesque irony. It has always amazed me that the mortals never took care of their *psyche*, let alone the *soma*. Dear old Mr. Love; he couldn't quite live up to his name, and he ejaculated messily on Mary's thighs. Men should not scorn the needs of women for ineptitude can breed dissatisfaction. Mary couldn't help being disappointed, and with her new found courage she tore into poor Colin.

'Is that it? After all those years of letting you use me and that's it!' The final tempest was brewing. 'I've sucked your penis, and stroked it, you've groped me and made all of those lewd remarks and yet you're done in two seconds! Is that efficiency? You've not crossed my Ts yet, nor dotted my Is! I thought you were a real man. A strong caring type! IS THAT IT? ARE YOU ALWAYS SUCH A LET DOWN?'

She had taken the words right out of my mouth. Colin meekly tried to explain but the pain had started to course from his weak heart.

'I did my best.'

'YOU DID YOUR BEST! MY NIGEL CAN LAST LONGER THAN THAT AND HE'S AN IGNORANT OAF! YOU'RE NOT THE ONLY ONE WITH NEEDS YOU KNOW!'

'But I ...'

She was standing over the pathetic figure of Colin Love.

'No wonder everyone hates you. You have such foolish standards that you can't even hope to keep yourself. I pity you and your poor family. I pity myself for faffing around you and being deceived by your words. Sitting in your ivory tower, you're nothing!'

Colin gasped and began to convulse on the floor. Mary turned with poetic distaste and strode to the kitchen. She found her husband's bottle of Single Malt Whiskey and took a long slug of the warming drink.

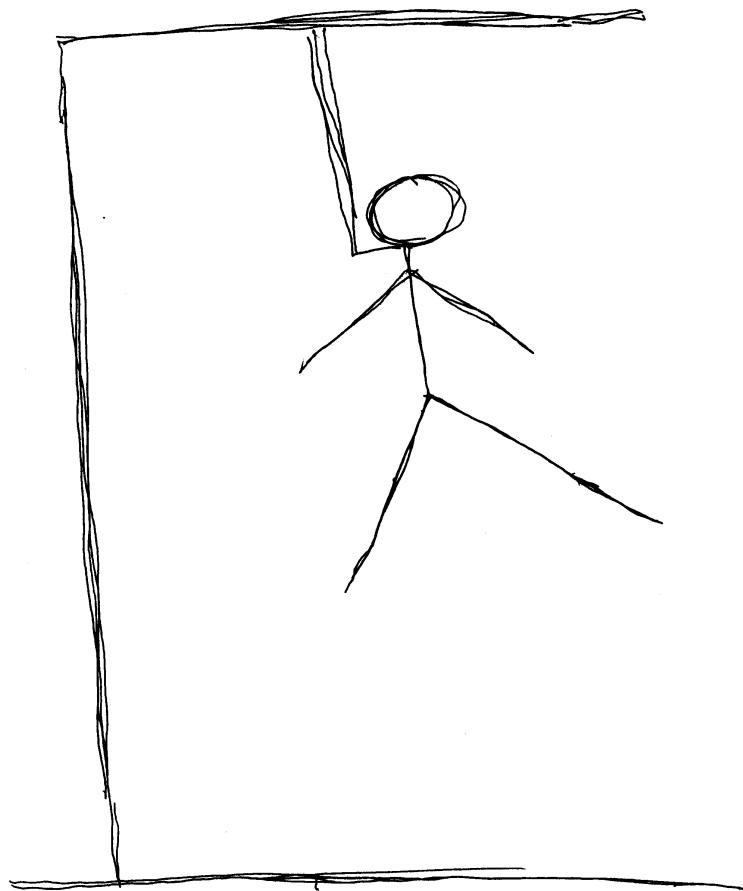
'Aah.' She smacked her lips. 'That's justice.' She called for an ambulance and began to rearrange her clothing.

Poor old Mr. Love! The ambulance men took him away with his trousers around his ankles and a rather chastened look on his face. Of course it didn't stop there: the repercussions lasted for some time; they always do when fury is unleashed. Mary sweetly carried on at William Gibson Community College where Mr. Love's reputation was soon forgotten. He was only remembered for having a heart attack during an act of adultery; of course he had another heart attack which led to a prolonged stay in hospital. Whilst he was languishing the rest of the Loves lived life. Susan was less heavily punished for her adultery; I have always enjoyed the thrill of the hunt myself and I enjoy the sight of passionate love: she and Billy became parents. Sarah enjoyed swapping childbirth tales with her mother whilst James served his time in prison. He would get one more chance of course.

All I really wish to say is don't neglect the signs. It is never wise to be complacent, nor is it sensible to become proud. If one is cautious like a hunter then the virtue of patience becomes clear. It is never wise to rush any move, but after thought comes action. Hesitation can mean only so many missed chances.

Mr. Love remained immersed in his thoughts in the hospital; the purgatory punctuated only by the heart monitor's electronic pips. He had plenty of time for regret now; catharsis is a lonely place.

FAITH



Whit Frazier



Brenda's calligraphy stopped strangers at the wall. The intersection sat broken buildings, cracked sidewalks and glass, and one or two stray cats came to and fro, from into and out of the earth.

In the morning she asked him to leave. He sat down and looked out at the wall and the calligraphy and he didn't see any new patterns. Brenda said: I mean now. He stood up and walked over to the window. It isn't cold outside anymore, he explained to her. She didn't say anything. When he turned around there was no Brenda; only a wall.

&

Brenda's calligraphy stopped strangers at the wall. He'd heard about it since he was a child, when his mother and father would tuck him into bed and tell him about the strange wall on Concourse and Mezzanine where strangers came and strangers went and all of them went away changed. One day, his father used to tell him, there will be a man who will stop her, but until then she writes day and night and it always stays winter. He would argue with his father: but that doesn't make any sense. How can that be true? His father smiled, and his mother, she would always cry and leave the room. One night he asked his father, why does it make mother cry?

Father told him how mother's father was an ambitious man, and how he had always heard about the wall. That one day someone would stop Brenda, and that mother's father had thought he was that man. And father said: maybe he was, but if he was then the wall stopped him. Mother's father was an alcoholic, a failed poet, a wreck of a man who worked day in day out and never had an extra penny to spend on himself. The police found him one morning, hanging. His father paced the story slow, so he knew his son could get every nuance. Hanging. They said it was a suicide. Hanging from the wall.

"Mother's mother never recovered. She had a nervous breakdown one afternoon in a taxicab home. Mother had to stay with her grandmother who was a mean old lady named Brenda. It haunted her. And she never likes to talk about it; but she told me when we got married, that when we had children, we would have to tell our children every night about Brenda and her terrible calligraphy."

And father smiled. And it dawned on him that evening that father never believed mother. It also dawned on him that evening that he hated father. Hated him. And that if mother had given him this strange birthright, then he must be the man who was to stop Brenda. And what's more that it would have to be over his father's dead body.

&

Brenda's calligraphy stopped strangers at the wall. The night mother was committed he sat with father in the living room, each across from the other. The curtains tugged from into and out of the window, and father couldn't look at him and he stared at father. In the background father had put on something demonic and classical. Probably Stravinsky. Father said, without looking up: I know you're old enough now to understand. Yes, father, he said. And he felt like Damian.

The sterile cell that kept mother locked up, locked him up inside her head, but he was a young man now, and yes, mother, of course she was crazy. He saw her everyday. He hated to go see her, and she just sat there looking at him, desperate, sad and insane. Mother, he would say, there is no Brenda. Brenda is the name of your grandmother, and your grandmother was fond of calligraphy. Please recognize this, so you can come back to us. And his mother would tell him: You have been talking with your father. He loved me enough to play along, you know. But he never respected me. And he never believed me. He has never even been to the corner of Concourse and Mezzanine.

Of course there was no corner of Concourse and Mezzanine. He had known this a long time, so of course father had never been there, but that's all mother would say. Mother, please. And she would be silent. At school the word got out. Why is your mother crazy? children asked him. She had a rough childhood, he would say, and she lost both her parents. And when that happens sometimes you go crazy. And he would stare right at the other students and say, I can see it in your soul that it would drive you crazy, but it would make no difference to me.

&

Brenda's calligraphy stopped strangers at the wall. His father dies when he's twenty years old. His father was found hanging. And slowly too, so he could capture every nuance. Hanging at the corner of Concourse and Mezzanine. The police

judged it a suicide. What else could it be? He stopped visiting mother. She was crazy, and to go mad was a weakness, and he had no place for weakness. He had only one weakness. Her name was Brenda. Brenda passed him daily on the stairs at the University. He smiled and she smiled, but they never said a word. Sometimes he would catch the scent of her hair in class. He loved her, but he was onto her and he knew what he had to do. He was never worried, because he knew how things worked out. He'd known the story since he was a child, and probably, so had she.

The day after he found out about his father's death he invited Brenda to the funeral. She smiled and blushed and said she'd love to go. Great, he told her. He would pick her up at nine. She should wear her best dress. He would wear his best suit. When they lowered father into the ground he smiled. He took Brenda home, and kissed her. He told her he'd had a wonderful time, and they should see each other again. She said, yes, that was very true. He pointed across the street where the sun stopped shining and fell just short of where a kitten lurched limping across the broken glass. That's where father hanged himself. Yes, she said. I know. I was the one who found him. The corner of Concourse and Mezzanine. Where you can find all my calligraphy.

The summer after graduation Brenda agreed to marry him. We will live in my house, she said, and you will be able to look at the wall all the time. He couldn't get enough of the wall. The wall, where even in the summer, it was still winter. He took pictures and put them up in his house. He sat in front of it for hours and stared. Patterns developed and changed. People came and people went. Stray cats came from into and out of the earth. The patterns changed and the people changed, though he never changed and Brenda never changed, and everything stayed the same. The calligraphy was what awed him. And what awed everyone. And all the lovers Brenda took, and all the children that stopped by to play, and all the people that went away changed or hanging, and Brenda stayed and he stayed, and he knew he was going to stop her one day.

&

The day Brenda got married he went out with friends, and they all got drunk. They laughed at him and they laughed with him and they said: we told you that girl would never marry you. Look how many men came and went, and what made

you think you were special? So that he smiled and laughed and said: Brenda's calligraphy stops strangers at the wall. His friends said: you've had too much, and now you're not making sense. It's time for you to go to bed. He pushed them all off him, and he looked at them like he was in the living room alone with his father, with Stravinsky, Damian, with the curtains pulling from into and out of the window, and he said: you are all the same. Every one of you, and not one of you believes, and that's why I'll see you all hang at the wall.

In the morning he tore up all his phone numbers, and he walked over to Brenda's house where he found her new husband hanging on the wall. The patterns changed, and he sat there all day and he sat there all night, and the next morning Brenda came outside and asked him did he want to come inside? He said, yes, he'd like very much to come inside, and they went in and he asked her, what happened to your husband? She told him, that's how things happen around here, and I have nothing to do with the wall. He walked over to the window and looked out at the wall. The patterns on the wall had changed, and her husband wasn't there anymore, there were more images, and he said: you have everything to do with that wall Brenda. Why didn't you marry me? And Brenda said: you know why.

He didn't say anything. He walked over to where she was standing, and he touched her lip. He put his other hand on the nape of her neck. He could feel the patterns changing on the wall behind him outside, where years ago his father had died. She slipped, catlike from underneath him, but he pushed her up against the wall, and slid up against her. He kissed her. She led him to her bed. She rolled him around and climbed on top of him. She slid her hands up his chest, and whispered hot in his ear: "Is this what you wanted? You wanted to fuck me?" He lay still and silent and sleeping, like his father.

&

Brenda's calligraphy stopped strangers at the wall. When he was a child he used to visit his grandmother, and she would tell him stories. They would sit in her dusty old den where she'd hunch over her desk and write the names of their ancestry in snakes of calligraphy that changed into patterns of pictures while she told him stories about each name. The patterns of the calligraphy and the stories of the names weaved together into

a strange picture, and Brenda kept a long roll of paper where she kept writing names over and over and coming up with new names and she said she traced her lineage all the way back to the story of Job.

Sometimes mother would come into the den while she was talking and writing and he was listening and watching, and mother would scream and say, Brenda you stay away from my child, stay away from my child, he's already not well, you hear me? I won't have you doing to him what you did. And she never finished the sentence, while snaking patterns of calligraphy and stories cobwebbed inside his head, so that each new visit to his grandmother became necessary to spin new webs.

Brenda was found dead one morning sitting at her desk rotting. She'd died alone in her study, the calligraphy pen still in her hand, and her head resting against the long roll of paper that ran snaking calligraphies of names and stories. No one had known she was dead for weeks. One day someone walked by and smelled something horrible. The police had to break into the house.

For years after she died, he used to sneak away from home in the middle of the night and creep into the old house where Brenda died. He would sit in the den and dream up the desk and the roll of paper and the strange names of ancient relatives and all the old stories. He liked to make up stories of his own in that dark little den, where all he had were murky memories of ancestors. He could try to trace them all the way back to Job.

&

Brenda's calligraphy stopped strangers at the wall. The intersection sat broken buildings, cracked sidewalks and glass, and one or two stray cats came to and fro, from into and out of the earth.

In the morning she asked him to leave. He sat down and looked out at the wall and the calligraphy and he didn't see any new patterns. Brenda said: I mean now. He stood up and walked over to the window. It isn't cold outside anymore, he explained to her. She didn't say anything. When he turned around there was no Brenda; only a wall.

&

The last time he was there he had been sitting mumbling thinking scribbling for hours, and when his mother found him in the morning, pale and shaking she started to cry. Have you been here all night? she screamed. You had us worried sick! His father stormed up and down the room furious. He didn't know what to tell them: Don't cry, mother; father, please don't be angry. You were right all along Mother. I always believed you. Except I was your father, and I am your son, and I was always destined to stop her. And though it cost me my life once, you can see now that she is gone.

www.strawberrypress.net

THESIS

Adam Elkus



Howard Edgar couldn't see through Morgan Degas's glasses, behind which lay bloodshot eyes.

"Hello Morgan," Professor Edgar said. "We don't really have much time before classes start, so we should get down to business quickly."

Morgan was trembling. It was unusual for him to be this nervous, but these days were much different. He hoped that the results of too many sleepless nights would not be evident. Much was riding on this.

"Associate Professor Degas, I like the ring of that. Many other people in the department do too, Morgan. And as department chair, I think it's about time that you realized your true potential."

"I would like that."

"You've worked here for nearly six years, and done an excellent job of it. You deserve this very much."

"Thank you. I've done my best."

Professor Edgar laughed and said, "How is your wife doing?"

Morgan's eyes narrowed, but he tried to take attention off of it by adjusting his glasses. "Fine. She enjoyed the reading."

"Yes, I really do like Redman. He's one of the better poets I've seen these days."

Professor Edgar blabbered on about it, not noticing a suppressed glare in Morgan Degas's eyes.

"So yes, we expect to consider your tenure at the next board meeting. But of course, there's nothing to consider, as everyone agrees that you'll get tenure. It would take a major scandal for you to be turned down."

Degas's teeth rattled. He knew very well what the professor was hinting at.

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in," Edgar said.

A slim and elegant young woman walked in, a tote bag in hand.

"Cindy," the professor said, smiling. "Always a pleasure to have you here. Your husband and I were just discussing the upcoming tenure decision."

"Is that so, Morgan?" Cindy said, beaming not at her husband but at the professor.

"Yeah," Morgan said, trying hard to keep his hands out of sight. They were trembling with rage.

"That's wonderful."

Cindy walked over and kissed Morgan on the cheek. It was a hollow kiss, though, a gesture more fitting for a pet than a lover.

"I have to be going to class now," Morgan said.

"I'll see you at 5:00," Cindy said.

"What're you going to be doing?"

"Working on tonight's benefit," she said. "There were some last minute changes in the schedule that we have to go over."

Morgan faked a smile, and then slowly opened the double doors. He took one glance back, then walked down the hallway, his Oxfords clicking against the floor.

* * *

"You don't seem too excited about it," Cindy said. "They are going to give you tenure!"

"I am excited," Morgan replied, but his hands clutched the steering wheel like those of a dead man.

"You'll be working late, I guess."

"Yeah. Grading papers. They just completed a big essay on Kant."

"The benefit's going ahead as planned. Ravi Shankar is setting up right as we speak. It was a real coup getting him for tonight."

"A real coup," he laughed grimly. There was an awkward moment of silence, and then Morgan spoke again. "You want me to go? I'll defer the papers until later."

"No, I don't want to inconvenience you," Cindy insisted. "I'll go by myself. Those papers are important. I remember how late you were working when I was in your class."

"Is there anyone you know there?"

"Well, there's Sarah, Mimi, and Lisa."

And of course, Morgan thought, there was Professor Howard Edgar, who was known for his "hospitality" towards young women.

* * *

True to his word, Morgan raided the coffee machine and spent the night reading through sloppy essays on what he assumed was an out of whack idea of Kant. However, the burning anger never faded. It stayed submerged within him. He was sorely tempted to fail everyone, but duty to the inflated grade policy kept his instincts in check. He could imagine in his mind what was going on at the benefit. Most likely, Sarah, Mimi, and Lisa were at Fred Segal doing late-night shopping rather than hearing some sitar great play. Edgar and Cindy probably left early to head for drinks, and then fucking the living daylights out of each other. And Morgan knew it well because he had snagged the leggy woman when she was barely 21, a student in his philosophy class. She already had a boyfriend, but a clueless one. Morgan knew almost everything about the fine art of cuckoldry, except now he was no longer

dashing and young. He was forty, and grounded firmly in his work. No more time for frivolous games, drunken sex, or near-Roman decadence. Somehow he felt a lot like Leonard Cohen....

He had known what was going on for a long time; it was just that he had failed to acknowledge it in his mind. Edgar had him by the balls, and he thought it better just to leave it is. Still the anger wouldn't go away. So he lost himself in work. As the hours went by, he grew so focused that he didn't hear the crash of the door opening, didn't hear the drunken giggling, and didn't see the hand snake down a short minidress. He continued grading his papers and didn't pay any mind to the moans, the garments furiously tossed aside, the crash of two bodies slamming against the wall. He couldn't smell the seductive French perfume or the stink of an excessive serving of liquor. But he could feel it. He could feel the anger rising. And he could see in his mind's eye a trusted friend inside his wife, a vandal smashing into pieces what remained of a marriage.

He gritted his teeth, but no more papers were graded that night. Morgan Degas headed down to the bar. He would surely kill someone tonight unless he could drink himself into a stupor. The tenure was all he had left. He had better not throw it away based on such a silly thing as pride.

* * *

In the days that came, Morgan Degas remained normal on the outside. He still walked to classes and regaled the students with abstract theory, cajoling them into enlightenment in his own unique way. He still carried on his workaholic tendencies. He still listened to Leonard Cohen and the Beatles. However, he walked with a slump. Dirty jokes he once indulged in seemed to hurt him. And he often took his papers down to the bar instead of the faculty lounge. He was more sedate, the frustration and passion that seemed to drive him forward a thing of the past. His wife didn't seem to mind the time he spent drinking down at the bar. She had other things to pursue. It seemed that there was a new sale at Bergdorf every week. Her clothes were extravagant, but Degas didn't seem to care about the cost. It was obvious that she was paying out of someone else's pocket. He had fantasies of stabbing Professor Edgar with a pen, black ink replacing red blood in a torrent that filled up that damned lecher's office. But he always reached for the Jack Daniels after that horrible vision came about. Remember the tenure, he thought. It's all I have left. And indeed, it was. And he focused on

killing a part of himself. The nights and days blended together now. He saw things through a haze of bright colors and dying stars. And he made frequent trips to the bathroom to vomit during class time, enough to make Edgar worry and give him sick leave. All through it, Degas repeated to himself, "It's all I have left."

* * *

It's 1:00 AM. Do you know where your wife is?

Degas didn't. He didn't pay attention to her explanation, because he simply didn't care. He was at the bar again, grading crappy papers. He didn't care about the content, he would slap grades on them based on their fonts: A for Arial Black, B for Century Gothic, and C for Times New Roman. He slumped lower and lower, and under the drinks he finally started to cry. He stopped himself quickly, but his self-control was fast vanishing. His mind was wandering like crazy. A smile. He saw it. It was his wife smiling. She was the only one in her class who could actually write an intelligent paper. Since she had graduated, no one else could. Nostalgia is a bitter thing. What had gone wrong? he could hear a nagging voice in his head saying. "You were married to your work." But he knew that already. It was all he had left.

Suddenly he felt himself lurching backwards off the stool. He tried to hold on but his limbs felt like jelly now. It was all falling away from him. Cindy, his job, the beer, everything. There was a loud crash now but he didn't feel anything. People stared at him sprawled on the floor, his corduroy blazer stained dark. After his head stopped spinning, he picked himself up and slowly inserted himself into the barstool. But something had changed. His glare burned like a furnace. He felt like he had looked God straight in the eye and the almighty had blinked.

"Scotch," he gurgled.

Suddenly he felt now like he could handle the papers. And for hours he did, furiously scribbling until his pen was drained of all the ink. He felt like Superman, without the gaudy costume, and certainly without Lois Lane. Scratch that, who needs Superman when you can be Lex Luthor? To be bald, malicious, and constantly aspiring to take over the world...how Morgan wished he could be that.

* * *

"You walk strange," Cindy said. "Kind of like one of those chimps at the zoo."

Her words echoed dimly in his head, because for all purposes Morgan Degas was on autopilot. She had to drag him out of bed in the morning. Cindy was honestly afraid for her husband's well being. He hadn't taken the sick leave, despite Professor Edgar's urgings.

"I've been down at the bar," Degas said, his eyes glazed.

"Too much. All that time alone in the bar, why don't you go with Sarah and me down to the jazz lounge? You can grade your papers there."

"No. I got a job."

Cindy rolled her eyes and then said, "Whatever works for you, honey."

Degas watched her walk out the door. In his blurry vision, she was sashaying like a stripper, no, there were two Cindys, both echoes bouncing into his vision, fragmenting. It was time for class. He barely focused on the road as he drove in. Even when the police officer gave him a ticket for stopping in the intersection, Degas did not lose his bliss. Students were wary of him, and kept their distance from the assistant professor as he shambled in. This was clearly a man on the edge. Degas had a stack of papers in his hand, the results of the much vaunted philosophy essays. A wave of dismay rose up as the students found out that the grading pen had not been kind to them. This wasn't natural. The grade inflation policy had been thrown aside, and for the first time since high school, they were getting the markings they deserved for their shoddy craft.

That week, Degas was a quite different man. Students wondered what had happened to him. He developed a habit of making crude sexual jokes in class, often to winsome young freshmen girls. His behavior was erratic, the only consistent thing being his tough grading. He slaughtered tens of thousands of words, entire research reports, wielding his little red pen like a machine gun in the trenches of the Marne. Mowing down the students just like Germans had wrecked the cream of British and French youth so long ago, Degas became a man to be feared.

"You must be easier on them," Edgar said. "They are not Nobel laureates yet; it's your job to make them less stupid."

To which, Degas replied, clipboard in hand, "This is the class criteria and grading rubric for the papers."

That became his mantra. And Edgar began to sweat.

* * *

Degas went down to the bar more often. The grimy, low-lit landscape became blurred to him, the sights and sounds molded into one complete sensory package. It was like he had reached a state of serenity, found his Buddha sitting on the barstool, legs splayed instead of cross-legged. That was his home, not his house. He was married to the lady on the scotch bottle now, not Cindy. The lady on the scotch bottle was a most faithful wife indeed, and Degas an unusually attentive husband. He was a regular at the bar, an institution, whose entry and departure came to be used by the other drunkards as a kind of Big Ben to calculate their own labors. And what a strange man indeed—clad in a tweed suit, a bottle in one hand, and a stack of reports in the other. An uninformed observer might have said that Degas was half the man he used to be. But they were dead wrong. Degas was everything he wanted to be.

One night, the lightning lashed at the trees and the rain pummeled the roofs. Degas's face was now as red as his eyes. He cast a holy aura that spake unto the entire world "badass" in all its forms. He was Shaft, the Archangel Michael, the Terminator, and Screamin' Jay Hawkins all rolled into one. None of the other barroom regulars approached him. He laughed and ranted incoherently. Tenure and class was as far from his mind as could be. The music in his head grew steadily louder. Random memories circled through his mind: he thought of his college friends from the days of yore, crashing on the couch, leaving cigarette burns in the plush couch, and tossing back shots of supermarket tequila. All of it annoyed him after a while. It was time for him to go home. So against the angels of his better nature, he climbed into his car and drove through that familiar, quiet neighborhood again.

There was already another car parked in his driveway, annoying Degas. How dare they steal his parking space! Demons! He'd show them. He grabbed a garden rake and swung it like a terrible, swift sword. There was a tremendous crash and the car windows shattered in a thousand shards. Degas ran his key along the side of the car from the trunk to the headlights and then inspected his handiwork. Satisfied, he limped toward the door. It wasn't locked, thankfully, as he had long since forgotten in his haze which one was the house key.

The door creaked upon. There was a foreign presence in his house. Rage coursed through Degas's bones. This was his castle, his primal territory. Someone had pissed on the walls

and marked it as their domain. So Degas wandered into the kitchen to find that the old French wine was open and drained. They had drank his blood, the vampires. The wine he had bought for the anniversary. He heard the rhythmic pounding from upstairs and his muscles tensed. He got on all fours and barked. He scrambled over to the side of the staircase and spotted some undergarments. A bit large in the waist to be his. Invaders!

He howled and then charged up the stairs, passing more discarded clothes as he went. The top door to the bedroom was halfway open. He could see some blurry images romping around on the bed. Their quick movements were fevered and angry. Fools! They were defiling his bed. The center of his power. They were insulting his very manhood. A wild look developed in his eye, and he knew what he had to do. He threw himself at the door and lunged inside. The woman in the bed screamed, but she was of little concern to Degas. It was the invader, the defiler, he was after. He jumped at the naked man. The man dodged this clumsy blow, but Degas quickly grabbed a poker from the fireplace and swung it around. Like the knights of old, he would protect his castle with the sword. The man's eyes were melting, melting into a pastiche of fear, surprise, and humiliation. He was saying something, pleading for his life, but Degas did not hear anything he said. The woman was violently shrieking about something, but Degas did not catch that either. His swings were clumsy and easily dodged, but they put the fear of God into the defiler. He ran. Seemingly in slow motion, but he got off running.

He didn't stop to pick up his clothes; he ran stark naked. His balls were jumping up and down as he pushed his feet to the limit in order to escape this madman of an assistant professor. Degas stumbled along after him, gangly in appearance now. He bounced off the walls and rolled down the stairs, getting up in time to chase the intruder from the stairs and out the door. Degas followed him out the doorway, and then comically tripped on one of the garden hoses. The naked man shivered in the cold before hopping into his car and speeding off. Degas picked himself up and then stared up at the moon. He howled. He had defended his home and hearth from an intruder and protected his honor.

No matter that the next day Degas would recoil in horror, realize exactly what he had done, once the buzz from the liquor wore off. No matter that Degas would lose his job, and all semblance of acceptance from academia. No matter that he would become a laughing stock, neighborhood

legend as the wolfman from the ivy leagues. And no matter that Degas would soon lose every single thing of which he was proud, including Cindy, who served him with divorce papers, successfully painting him to a judge as a raving, drunk, unreliable madman. This was to happen later, once the euphoria had faded. This was his victory in the now, a moment to savor while it lasted. Because for one night, Degas was a true man.