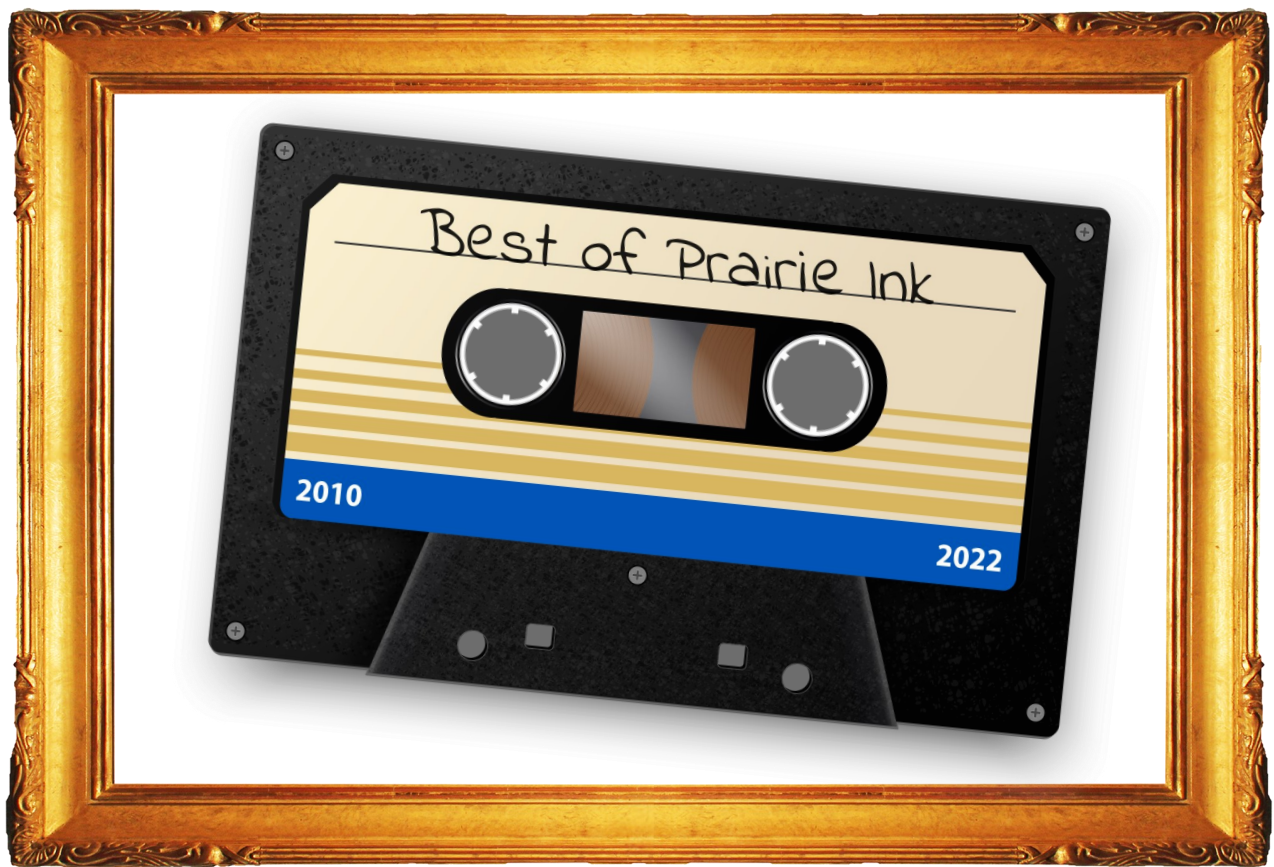


Prairie Ink

A literary Annual



Issue Fourteen



Fall 2023



“There is a way to see inside by looking directly through to seed or marrow.”

-Joan Halifax

From the Editor

Dear Readers,

The *Prairie Ink* literary magazine began during Barton Community College’s 40th anniversary year, 2010. Editors Jamie Abel and Teresa Johnson started the magazine “to provide a venue for experienced writers and a voice for emerging writers” to publish their fiction, creative non-fiction, poetry, drama, literary criticism, and graphic narratives. Over the next thirteen years, *Prairie Ink* circulated the creative works of countless authors including students from multiple campuses and residents from Barton’s seven-county educational region.

Stories have been passed on from generation to generation both orally and in the written form. The art defines humanity. Stories speak to us because they offer a glimpse of another’s inner world that we can relate to on a spiritual level simply because we are also human. Lasting stories stick with us because of the emotional connections we make, forever connecting our minds with the authors’ creations.

With immense pleasure, Barton Community College presents *Prairie Ink*’s fourteenth issue. This issue holds fifteen of the greatest submissions published by the magazine. These submissions left an impression on the editors as we scanned the previous issues searching for our own humanity. These works have touched our souls in ways that cannot be properly described with words, and we hope you find part of yourself in these pieces as well.

-Justin Brown, Editor

The opinions and ideas found in this edition of *Prairie Ink* represent the creative vision of its contributors, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or ideas of its editors or of Barton Community College. Contributors maintain the rights to their submissions; however, *Prairie Ink* reserves the right to publish or re-publish those contributions.

Contents

Beauty of Nothing	
Shannon Orth	Page 4
To Fight a Dragon	
Lisa Holt	Page 6
The Mission	
Phil Jacobson	Page 10
Kill Her with Kindness	
Wittney Hammeke	Page 11
A Letter to a Dear Old Friend	
Walter Helms	Page 14
Untitled Painting	
Gregory Arth	Page 16
Eldon Gregg	
George O. Martin, Jr.	Page 17
Untitled Photograph	
Emily Bucholz	Page 22
Silent Knights	
Patrisha Reed	Page 23
Ash Wednesday	
Joseph Doze	Page 25
Sunrise in Kansas	
Cherish Robinson	Page 36
You're Just Like Me!	
Vanessa Thomas	Page 37
Children's Church	
David Barnes	Page 42
September Pear	
Jaime Abel	Page 62
Sun Burn on a Pale Man	
Robert Joy	Page 63
Why the Pooka Never Says Goodbye	
M. A. Gilmore	Page 64
Insulators	
Diane Engle	Page 73
My Familiar	
James Miller	Page 74
Descending Hell	
Joshua Fredricks	Page 75
Gift or Curse	
Lee Miller	Page 77
Our New Religion	
Esther Saylor	Page 78
Untitled Digital Drawing	
Alyssa Rose Bliven	Page 80
Sunrise in the Bottoms	
Mollie McReynolds	Page 81

Beauty of Nothing

By Shannon Orth

It's cold here in the shadow of the valley, the kind of cold that seeps into your bones, making you feel heavy and clumsy. The sun's warming rays have yet to reach the top of the barren ridge, bringing the warmth of the day into this valley where I stand.

I can see the outlines of massive mounds of dirt, curved and distorted, rising up from the floor of the valley like towers on the alien landscape. There are no signs of plant or animal life visible in the early morning light. I tilt my head back and gaze up at the sky streaked with grey clouds, blending with the earth below. The gauzy blue of the night sky is tinged with pink, a sign of the morning sun peeking out from behind the ridge.

I spot some crevices in the ridge, and head toward them. The dry earth beneath my feet is cracked and broken, as if it had not rained for a long time. Grey dust puffs up like ash with each step I take, quickly blown away by the fierce, whipping wind. There are no colors visible, only the dull shades of grey. I inhale the breeze, and the dry dust clogs my nose, and I can't breathe. I want out of this valley.

I finally reach the crevice, and grabbing hold, put my feet in the crevices begin to climb. The dried chunks of dirt are sharp like cement, cutting into my hands, but I refuse to give up. Hand over hand, scrambling for footholds I keep climbing determined.

I keep climbing, the color of the dirt gradually lightening the higher I go. The wind is stronger now, whipping around me, blasting me with dirt. The sun is rising higher now, and pausing for a moment, I look down into the valley below. The ground is far below me, so far that I can no longer see the cracks and ridges that I know line the bottom. The floor of the valley curves up, like a bowl, melting into the ridges.

My hands finally reach the top, and finding no purchase, I drag myself over the side, the rough dirt scraping my skin. I am blinded by the sunlight reflecting from the tops of the other ridges around me. Looking around, there are ridges as far as I can see, each sheltering their own hidden valley from the sun's rays. Each ridge is different yet the same, the strange exotic shapes all united in the magnificent color scheme.

I stand on the lip of the ridge and take one last look over the edge, down into the valley below. The sun has illuminated the valley, reaching in with glowing fingers to illuminate what had been dim and grey, transforming it into a beautiful swirl of oranges and reds, punctuated by the occasional wisps of tan and gold carried on the spirited breeze.

I linger a moment longer, then turning around, I begin my descent. The climb is over, and I am content. In looking back, I realize that nothing is ever as bad as it seems, and sometimes, it's the struggles that make the end results that much more satisfying.

To Fight a Dragon

By Lady Eilish nee Sale ile de Re - mka Lisa Holt

Original from:

“The Legend of Me & Bigun”. by W. D. McCrary (dec) 1999

Two knaves went forth from
the Forest of Dean,
In the prime of '23.
Bigun astride the black gearran,
Along on the mare was Me.

We braved Snowdonia's mighty heights.
Then at the King's behest,
Joined with Sir Lancelot and his knights
And asked to join his quest.

“T'would I, Kind Sirs,” Milord said he,
“If knowledge I had of ye?”
Bigun replied, “They call me Bigun.”
I quietly said, “Just Me.”

“Just Me and Bigun! Well met, good sirs!
Can you, a dragon slay?
You see we seek the demon beast.
Only the worthy may stay.”
Bigun stroked his mighty ax and said,
“When Beula leaves my side,
Lord, she's always flown so true, so straight
Them Dragons lose their hides.”

“When ax has flown, to the sword turn I
And charge the dragon’s lair.
At times, milord, the dragons expire
When they see me standing there!”

“Brave, Lord” said I, “Something should you know,
About Old Bigun here.
Being dropped on his head as a stripling lad
Has made his thinking queer.”

Lancelot, he did laugh and say,
“Lads, you come along!”
So, while I toiled to set up camp,
Bigun broke into song.

“Wa’ll, they aint’ no har’ on a bill goats’ arse –
An’ that’s why it’s so shiiii=neee...
But Ah’ knows whar’ they is some har’
On th’ girl Ah’ lef’ behind me!...”

From Hadrian’s Wall we rode abreast
The dragons did we seek.
Through Arthur’s Seat to Loch Lomond
We nary saw a peek.

Onto the Isle of Skye, we traversed
Of a dragon’s lair we’d heard.
And when we found that mighty beast
From Bigun came one word,

“Argh!!!!” It was the word we heard,
As Bigun fled the place.
His horse and ax were all he left.
Away on foot he did race.

For Sir Bigun was full of bluster and dream
Nare a dragon had he met,
Until that day upon that craggy cliff,
Dark and drear and wet.

After a time, return did he.
Helm in beefy hand.
“I went back to retrieve my trusty ax,
Come, lad, let’s make a stand!”

We did breach the Dragon’s lair,
Sir Lancelot at the fore.
“Just Me, thou stand upon my right,
Bigun, thee, guard the door.

As knights, we bravely battled our foe.
One by one did fall.
Then the dragon turned its mighty head,
Upon Sir Lancelot’s call.

“Flame me you scaled and horny beast!
T’would face you eye to eye!”
We feared the end of our Lord was near,
When an ax, did fly by.

Between the Dragons lizard eyes
Did sprout an odd shaped horn.
Beulah, she had struck her mark,
And stuck there like a thorn

From the door, where Bigun watch,
He spied the grizzly fight.
To spare his Lord from the dragon's wrath,
Beulah, did he send in flight.

Bigun's courage had won the day!
The beast was well and dead!
But when we praised our hero and friend,
He blushed and bowed his head.

"Give not the praise and glory to me.
But to our Lord, foreswear.
I stood aback at a coward's pace
And just threw Beulah in the air.

To Arthur's Table we did return,
To show our liege Lord King,
A dragon's head with ax still struck,
And Lancelot's praise did sing.

Two knights returned to the Forest of Dean,
Astride their brave, true steeds.
When asked about their quest,
They told of other's deeds.



Painting by Phil Jacobson

Kill Her with Kindness

By Wittney Hammeke

With every stroke of my brush, the anger inside of me spread like a firework lighting up a black sky. My studio was supposed to be a sanctuary. My safe place. Cramped full of boxes and half-finished projects, the organized chaos felt like a blanket sheltering me from everything outside of its clay splattered walls. As I glazed the mug in my hands, I tried to take a few deep breaths. I couldn't let this happen. She has ruined every other aspect of my life; I cannot let her ruin this one too.

I have never been great with anger management, but the rage that had ignited was a different kind of fire. It was untamable, so hot and wild that all of my attempts to extinguish it only resulted in failure. My mom had always told me the best way to move past a problem I have with someone is to kill them with kindness. Her sunny disposition made her the kind of mother that broken children would dream about while drowning out the inconsistencies in their own homes. Kill them with kindness, she would repeat. Kill them with kindness.

Day after day I returned to the studio, and I couldn't focus because of my anger. I pushed my skills to the limit creating projects that grew more challenging with every passing hour. I stared at my most recent creation, a two-foot vase the color of a robin's egg. It had taken hours of concentration and had turned out exactly how I had envisioned. I should have been proud of

myself, but all I could feel was that rage telling me it wasn't good enough. I took one last glance at the vase before gently nudging it off the edge of the table. I didn't hear it shatter, the sound of my heartbeat drowning it out. I thought about my mother's words. I tried out every other method to calm myself down; I was running out of options. Setting my trimming tool over to the side, I grabbed my pencil and a piece of scratch paper to begin planning a mug. This piece had to be perfect.

After countless nights of planning, I had created a flawless design. I had decided on a yellow and red glaze separating the top and bottom with a waltz swirling brilliant orange in the middle, a fire equivalent to the one roaring inside of me. The mug itself would be slightly larger than the average coffee mug with a curvature that was wide at the bottom, and grew gradually narrower towards the lip. It was not hard to get this design perfected while throwing on the wheel, the form itself so simple a beginner could do it easily. After letting it dry, I began the trimming process. Taking multiple deep breaths to still my shaking hands, I took off as much excess clay as possible. One of the best ways to tell if a mug is crafted well is to see how heavy it is. My mug was like a feather. After firing my creation, I added the glaze mixture and fired it again. Nothing can be done once the mug is in the glaze firing except crossing fingers and praying that it's what I had envisioned. Reaching into the kiln to retrieve the finished piece, the fire inside of me flared. It was perfect.



The mug burned my hands. Maybe this was a bad idea. For the first time in a long time, I made myself sit down and think about these past few weeks. One moment my life was moving steadily along before she grabbed it and wrung it out like a towel after a long day at the beach. It was time that I let my world start spinning again. I had to do this. I knew that I had to deliver it now, or I never would. She wouldn't mind if I stopped by at this hour. She couldn't. Grabbing my keys, I rushed to the door. I've only visited her once, yet I knew the way like the back of my hand. Driving through the empty streets, the realization hit that I have been in my studio all day and into the quiet hours of night. If this didn't work, if even this couldn't stomp out the emotions eating me from the inside out, I didn't know what to do. My vision blurred as angry, hot tears began racing down my face.

Parking haphazardly, I hopped out of my car. The gravel bit at my bare toes. Autopilot took over as I began rushing down the path. "Turn around," my bones screamed. "Turn around." "Turn around!" And just like that, I was standing in front of her. I couldn't help as the tears grew into a river, the red that spread across my vision. She left me. My rock, my mentor, my person. My mother.

My anger continued, strong as ever. This wasn't going to work. The mug slipped out of my hands, shattering as it made contact with the spotless gravestone at my feet. A sob pried my mouth open as I sank to the ground. The trees shook with laughter, the surrounding ghosts watched unblinkingly. You cannot kill someone with kindness if they are already dead.

A Letter to My Dear Old Friend

By Walter Helms

I write this to you, my Dear Old
Friend,

As I am gazing up at the moon.

With colors and leaves dancing all
around me,

orange and yellow,

Beautifully mixed with slight green
in the meadow.

A hint of spice and pumpkin invades
my senses from the distance,

And parallel to a lifetime, departs in
an instant.

Others have asked me why I seem so
blue,

When they already know,

I am wondering and pondering 'til
the day I see you.

It seems like only yesterday

The three months before,

The day that you slipped away,

The pain, slowly swallowing me,

Something I was forced to ignore.

The waters of time, are floating me
astray,

And the waves of frailty, crash into
me

swallow my moments, drown them,

And wash them away.

I remember seeing you for the first
time,

So long ago,

You in a blue dress,

While me in my Sunday best.

Seemed like out of a movie,

With you, my lead role,

Me being your prince charming,

Uniting our souls.

I gave you one look,
Then you stole my heart perfectly,
Replacing it with yours,
Filling my hole.
We danced together,
I showed you a thing or two,
I think that's how it goes,
wait....
Unfortunately, the reminisce must be
cut short,
For my own body betrays me,
Like a Thief in the night,
Taking my tales.
And leaving me in his trail of greed,
I no longer can put up a fight.
I am speechless and confused,
Anxiety boxes me in,
"Who are you?"
Seems to be the expression,

Replacing an affection,
I once knew.
Maybe this is how you felt,
Before you were stolen.
The blank stares that you gave me,
Like all our stars had just fallen,
I remember taking care of you,
Writing notes on our bed,
Begging the remedy would prove
sufficient
to guide you ahead.
A remedy all too well known,
To a soul so alone.
Or maybe you also remember too,
Hopefully heaven has done that for
you.
I only pray that you look down,
And protect me as I enter a new
dawn,

And hopefully ask God to guide me,

As the Thief forces me to move on.

So, I am writing this letter to you,

My Dear Old Friend,

Before darkness envelopes my new
world,

And new moments impatiently come
to an end,

I want to say I'll never forget you,

I love you and forever I do.

And now as I stand above your
resting place,

Watching the birth my new world,

My own predestined fate,

I say thank you, thank you for the
world I once knew.



Painting by Gregory Arth

Eldon Gregg

By George O. Martin, Jr.

Eldon had given up elegance slowly with the reluctance of a survivor who was not going to survive. His affliction left no room for style; his treatments took away decent vanity; and his prognosis left no room for grace. Eldon knew full well the empty length of remaining time, and he sought no reprieve.

His room had none of the familiar trappings of his profession. There were no comforting wool gabardines, no smooth serge, or silk neckties, scarves and hankies; nothing that resembled the worsteds or tweeds he used to sell the other gentlemen who came into the store. There were only the cotton bed linens and the backless gown of hospital couture and functional design.

He smiled very little and ate even less, waiting in awkward dullness for the doctor to come on rounds. Eldon waited each day, not for news of a cure, or some remission, but to see the suit Doctor Gage would wear. Eldon's only remaining connection to his thirty plus years of selling men's wear was to see one of his best well dressed customers walk into his room.

"Ah, good, Doctor, you chose the Gray I sold you last spring. That was a good weave. I told you, you would look splendid in it when I sold it to you. I was right, wasn't I?" he would say. And, then, "Did you take the jacket you wore yesterday back to the store? The new man should have known better

than to leave the sleeves so long. I never would have allowed you to look that way.”

“I will this afternoon,” the old doctor would say, “I didn’t have time yesterday. Nurse tells me you haven’t been eating. Don’t you like the food? You know you will only get weaker if you don’t eat.”

“You really ought to get a wider spread to your collar points, Doctor. You would look so much better.”

“Eldon, we should be discussing your eating, not my collars. Now, I’m going to have nurse get you some extra desserts and things, and I want you to get busy and start eating again. What say, Eldon?”

“Didn’t I sell you that tie last year, Doctor? I think it is time to give it to Good Will, don’t you?”

“Never mind the tie, Eldon. You have to eat! I’ll see you tomorrow. Eat, Eldon.” Dr. Gage would move into the hall and Eldon would begin waiting, again, for his return.

Eldon and Mae lived next door to me. They were a couple in their mid sixties, who had worked all their lives, and achieved a certain dignity of appearance. Mae always wore dresses, and Eldon always wore a jacket. Her only indulgence to a more common comfort was the housedress and the inch-and- one- half heeled mules she wore on Sunday morning. His, was a white shirt without a tie and Bermuda shorts, but only on the backyard patio, and only on Saturday evening. There they would enjoy more than one drink, and

sometimes several, whereon all inhibitions would vacate and comfort would absent costumes as well. The patio was well screened and viewing was impossible, so propriety was always maintained; however, giggles, laughs, a gentle slap, and kissing sounds easily penetrated the thicket, painting in imagination a most wonderful picture of a good, loving couple.

Mae asked me to visit her husband. She wanted me to find out what he would eat if it were brought to him. It seems nothing the hospital would prepare interested him, and his strength was leaving. He was gaunt and wasted, and waiting as usual for the doctor. I greeted him, and he smiled as any pretense left his face. He was just Eldon, my friend and neighbor now.

I asked how he was, and he told me “Okay,” as we progressed through the usual amenities, but, then, in a direct approach to the duty I had been assigned, I asked, “Mae is worried about you not eating. How come you are not?”

“You haven’t spent much time in a hospital, have you?” he said. “There isn’t much here that is fit to eat. I don’t think it would make me any better if it was fit.”

“Well, what would you like if you could get some food somewhere else?” I asked.

“You never believe it,” he said.

“Try me.”

“The last couple of days I’ve been remembering the ham and beans I had at your house last fall. If I could have some more of those, I would be a happy man.”

“Would the doctor approve?” I asked

“Who’s going to ask him?” he answered.

“I’m not sure this is a good idea, but I’ll see what I can do.”

After another few minutes, I said goodbye in the way men do, by making an excuse that I had something else I had to do. I had nothing to do; it just became too hard to look at him. His face had already taken on the look of inevitability. I managed to get to the parking area before I cried.

It took a day to make the beans and one more before I got back to the hospital. All of the medical staff had made their intrusive rounds by the time I arrived, and Eldon looked weak from all of the necessary care he had received. His head was looking left, away from me, and he made no effort to move it in greeting. I went to that side of the bed.

“Eldon. . .Eldon! I’ve got something for you. I brought the beans you wanted.”

His eyes opened, and he motioned me closer.

“Close the door,” he said.

I did as he asked, and when I turned back to him, I could see that he was trying to sit up. He reached his arm for assistance, and I helped him

move to a sitting position on the edge of the bed.

“Get my jacket,” he said, pointing to the small closet.

It was beautiful red and black paisley silk, a gentleman’s smoking jacket, and I helped him put it on, covering the open back of his hospital gown.

“Now, where are the beans?” he asked.

I gave them to him and watched as he took every bit from the bowl to his mouth, never stopping to speak or wipe his chin. I helped him do that when he finished, and eased him back onto his bed.

“Do you want me to put your coat away?” I asked.

“No, I think I need to wear it a bit longer. It feels good to be dressed again.”

I waited a few more minutes, but there was no conversation, except on small belch and a

“Pardon me!”

I made the usual excuses and said I had to leave. There was no reply, only a small smile. The walk to the care seemed even longer that day. I had left him full of food and properly attired. His smile was evidence of that.

It was only a day or so; afterward, Mae went to live with her daughter, the house was sold, and there was no

more laughter from their patio. I think of Eldon whenever we have beans. I sit up straight, making believe I have on an elegant silk smoking jacket, and I eat every bit in my bowl, remembering how happy he was when he ate mine on that last visit, and I smile.



Picture by Emily Bucholz

Silent Knights

By Patrisha Reed

T'was December 17th and no one was here.

Except one Barton Elf, who was delivering good cheer.

The phone wasn't ringing, the corridors still.

In the halls no one lurking, not one—not even Bill!

No Fedex or UPS deliveries to sign.

Or packages to carry to your desks, from mine.

Every task was completed, all textbooks turned in.

One semester now finished, another waiting to begin.

Dexter was dying from all the endless requests.

And the trees were all mourning the loss of their best.

Paper clips were untangled, and the staplers were full.

The pens were all 'working,' and the pencils not dull!

The keys all accountable and clear out of sight.

while the monitor hung in the shadows, like a Dark Barton Knight.

The cars and the trucks and the trailers all parked.

Every classroom now vacant, not a sound or remark.

PC's were shut down and "MOST" files put to bed.

The desks all a clutter with post-its, instead.

The shredder still full from the feast that it ate.

is now waiting for New Years to regurgitate!

But the real life at Barton isn't "all the above."

It's about folks working together with teamwork and such.

It's not the funding, or the cutbacks, or KBOR and such.

Any Degree of Wisdom clearly, doesn't rest upon

A budget, or the cost of oil, or the proof of our
success.

It isn't based on mere projections, it is "what drives u?" on
the quest (for knowledge)

So, remember

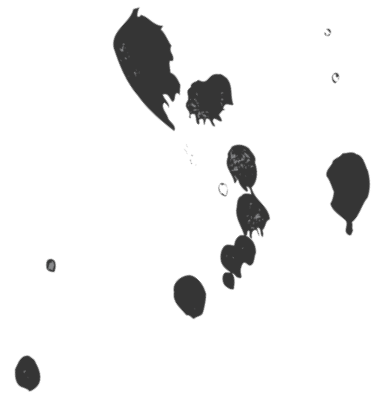
"Higher education" is not defined as an executive sport.

And careers are never founded upon those legislative reports.

But if we maintain our focus toward the Highest Degree.

Wisdom will become the profit margin that will motivate students to succeed!

Merry Christmas to all!!!



Ash Wednesday

By Joseph Doze

Gio was a tall man of sturdy build. His graying hair matched his gray suit, his face was creased by his fifty two years of life, most of which was hard living. His gentle face and soft eyes belied the cold-blooded savagery that he could commit, when necessary. His counterpart, Marco, was a stark contrast. His chestnut hair was glossy and slick, his face was stubbled and sharp, and his plum colored shirt was wrinkled and untucked. He was the quintessential “guido” and damn proud of it.

It was 3:30 in the morning, and the Lincoln Town Car sat idling in the chilly February air. Englewood was quiet at this time, and Gio really enjoyed the serenity. Unfortunately, it was soon broken by his passenger.

“What the hell, Gio? You want me to freeze to death here? Let’s go!” Marco was rubbing his hands together for warmth. Gio handed him a cup of coffee. “I’m allowing myself to wake up,” he answered as Marco grabbed the cup from his hand, “it’s a long drive to Wilmette. I don’t like to drive tired.” Marco sipped from his coffee cup. “Why the hell do we need to be up this early to be in Wilmette?” “We want to get there before the owner does, get the jump on him. It’s a tactic, keeps them off balance and unsure, gets them rattled. Plus, when the Boss says jump... you know how it works, Marco.”

Marco nodded, he did know how it worked. He took another sip of coffee, it needed creamer and sugar. “Thanks for the coffee, Gio,” Marco

uttered, "I needed it. I gotta say that I'm damn excited to work with you, ya know? I mean, you're a big name for the family. Giovanni 'The Gentleman' Oliverio, the man you go to when there's a problem that needs fixed, you're a legend. A guy like you, been in the game for decades, taking a guy like me under his wing; it's like Michael Jordan coaching LeBron James!"

Gio's mouth twitched slightly, hiding a smirk. "Jordan never needed to move to South Beach to win a ring." With that, Gio eased the car out of the driveway, maneuvering through the neighborhood and on to the I-90 Expressway. Marco continued sipping his coffee and pouting about the time and the weather. They were quiet for the first several minutes of the drive before Gio switched the stereo on.

The mechanical whirring of the CD player broke the monotonous silence before a beautiful strain of music came lilting through the speakers. Marco looked inquisitively at Gio.

"The hell is this?"

"It's Puccini. *Nessun dorma* from *Turandot*. Quite possibly the most beautiful aria ever written." Marco snorted a laugh. "You listen to opera? Come on, guy, you gotta be kidding me. Who listens to opera?" Gio's face remained set, but in his mind he labeled Marco a philistine. "I do," he said, an air of pomposity in his voice, "and so do millions of other people with sophisticated taste."

Marco laughed again. "Alright, calm down. Christ."

They continued on, again in silence while the track continued to play. Gio quietly mouthed the lyrics while Marco stared out the window watching the street lights go by.

“You really like this stuff, huh?” Marco asked. Gio nodded. “Yeah, I do. I was going to study music after high school, but my pops had other ideas. Wanted me in the business.”

“You sing?”

“A little, yeah. I take lessons from a lady in my neighborhood. She taught at DePaul for awhile.”

“No kidding? So, what, didja wanna sing opera professionally?”

“I wanted to teach choir.”

Marco laughed. “I can’t see you as a teacher.” He gave Gio a once over. “Well, maybe with a tweed jacket and some penny loafers, a checkered bowtie, you’d look like a teacher.” Gio had to laugh. For once, he had enjoyed something that Marco said.

“Nah,” continued Marco, sipping his coffee, “not me. I never had the patience for school. I’m just a head buster. I knew I wanted in the game since I was little. My pops never questioned it. It suits me, ya know? I get to bust heads and get away with murder, literally! It’s free rein to do whatever I want, and no one is gonna step up to stop me.”

Marco sipped the last of his coffee. “So what’s the job anyway? I was

told it was in Wilmette, but nothing else.” Gio never looked away from the road. “There’s a funeral home in Wilmette that would be a good place to have to get rid of certain problems. We are supposed to go over there and try to persuade Mr. Giavotella to pay the dues.”

Marco nodded. “Makes sense.” He stared out the window again. The expressway was nearly deserted, save for a small smattering of cars now and again. The drive was just over an hour and they had only been on the road for maybe 20 minutes. The opera continued to play and his partner was no conversationalist.

He jerked his head, unaware that he had dozed off. “How long was I asleep?” Gio shrugged. “Dunno. Few minutes. Not long.” Marco stretched and rubbed his eyes. “Christ, Gio, I took this job because of the hours, this ain’t in my contract.” He tries too hard to be funny, Gio thought. “It is what it is,” was all he said.

“How you like it,” Marco asked excitedly, “how do you like *la cosa nostra*? Our thing?” Gio sighed. “It is what it is,” he muttered once more. “Plus *la cosa nostra* is a Sicilian term, and I’m not full Sicilian. My dad’s family is from Calabria.”

“You ain’t full *paizan*? No wonder you ain’t a made man.”

“Neither are you, Marco.”

“Yet.” Marco gave Gio a glare of contempt which had no effect on the older Caporegime. “Anyway, you didn’t answer my question. How’s this life

suite you?”

Gio paused for a moment, collecting the right words to use. “It doesn’t,” he finally spoke in earnest. “This life isn’t what I had intended to carve out for myself. It’s my dad’s life, his dad’s too, back in Calabria. Not mine, though.”

There was a pregnant silence, neither man wanted to break it, but both had something to add. Gio was the first to speak. “I’m getting out, going legitimate.” Marco whistled in astonishment. “I never seen that happen before. Heard of it, but never seen it. That’s... wow... congratulations, I guess.” Gio nodded. “Got one more job to do, then boss says I’m clean.”

Marco, couldn’t understand why anyone would want to leave the life behind. He began to see Gio in a different light. He turned his head slightly and looked Gio up and down, seeing more of the man and less of the myth.

“You got any idea what that last job is gonna be,” Marco inquired. Gio shook his head. “Nah, I’m sure it will be something easy as a parting gift. Maybe a shakedown or a collection run.”

“So after this, what’s next for Giovanni Oliverio? Gonna go get that music degree?” Gio shrugged. “Actually, I’m gonna open a cigar joint. Gonna call it The Smoke Stack. Catchy, yeah?” Marco laughed, “I like that!” He sighed. “Gonna have a lounge with those overstuffed chairs and sofas?” “You know it,” Gio said proudly. “Gonna have a place to play cards and dominos, and I’m gonna set up some TVs to show the Cubs. It’s gonna be a classy place.”

Marco shook his head, “Nah, it’ll only be classy if you got the South Side Boys on the tube. The White Sox are the team this year, Gio, I’m tellin’ ya. The Cubs won their ring, now they’re gonna wait *another* hundred years for a repeat.”

“The Sox aren’t winning anything without a bullpen.”

“They got Soria from KC in the offseason, which solidifies their late game pitching. Their defense is undeniable! The Sox are the team in the AL this year.” Gio shrugged. “You tell yourself that, Marco. I’m just saying, they are suspect.”

Marco became silent. He crossed his arms and turned in his seat to face as much to the door as he could. “Jesus,” Gio laughed, “are you seriously pouting? For Christ’s sake, Marco, you’re 33 years old. That’s too old to be pouting.”

“I’m not pouting,” Marco said sternly, “I’m just trying to understand how you can know shit all about baseball. The frickin’ Cubs. Christ’s sake.” Gio laughed even harder now. “Shut up, Gio! I swear to God!” “Well,” Gio said through fits of laughter, “if you come to my shop, I’ll make sure we get WGN on the TV for you to watch the Sox.”

The rest of the drive was about the same. Marco pressed Gio for more information on what he planned to do after he retired. Gio, who felt more and more hospitable as the drive went on, told him about making and bottling his own wine and possibly trying to market his own Bolognese sauce.

Marco talked about the life. He was excited because he felt that he was going to get made soon. He told Gio about the run-in he had with a Capo from the Villico family. How they were at the same club and the Capo had disrespected the Chiaramonte family, so Marco followed him to the alley and beat him into a coma. "They had to pull his plug. Good riddance, the bastard. Talk shit on *my* family? That's what happens."

Gio stayed silent, listening and absorbing what little information Marco's stories consisted of. He wasn't surprised at the callousness of his recitation of the beating he gave the Villico Capo. Marco was a man of little regret, and even less forethought.

"You know he was a made man for the Villicos? That doesn't worry you?" Marco cocked his eyebrow. "Worry me? What should I worry about that weak-ass family for? The Villicos are too weak to come at us, plus they got that beef with the Black P. Stones, so all their assets are tied up in fighting them. I told you, Gio, I'm untouchable. No Villico punk is gonna get Marco Costanzo Bruno." Gio shrugged.

Another silence overcame them. They were getting close to Wilmette. Marco fidgeted uncomfortably in his seat. He hated silence.

"Today's Valentine's Day," he finally said, "you got anyone special? A wife? A *cumare*?" He nudged Gio with his elbow, trying to entice the stoic driver. "I did, for awhile," Gio answered, "she was good. Real good, but she was too high maintenance. She always wanted a new this or new that, even if

she had one already.” Marco shook his head in disbelief. “That’s the whole point of making money,” he whined, “you buy the dames whatever they want and you get favors in return. You can’t put a price on a good piece!”

“I don’t know, Marco. I just... she wasn’t my type. She had no sense in her head. She was so finicky. She never wanted to take the Red Line. Who doesn’t ride the trains?” Marco looked at Gio with disgust. “A true goddamn gangster, that’s who doesn’t! Are you frickin’ kidding me, here, Gio? An old school *goombah* like you, in your three-piece suits and wingtips, is riding the goddamn Chicago Transit? *Marone*, this guy.”

Gio shrugged again. It was his default gesture. He turned off the 94 Expressway into Wilmette and crept through the streets of the suburb. It was just nearing 4:45. He came around a curved street to see a brick building on his right. A red sign with black letters read Lux Aeterna Funeral Home. “This is the place. Boss says this guy gets here every morning at 5 to get working on things. He wants us to meet him in the alley when he gets here and have a little talk.” Marco nodded.

He reached around his back and pulled the gun he had tucked in his waistband. Gio’s eyes widened.

“No! No guns, only words. This isn’t going to be another Villico fiasco.” Marco stared Gio in the eyes in an attempt to be menacing, but Gio stared him right back down. “Put it in the glovebox.” Marco hesitated, but complied grudgingly.

Gio shut the engine off and the pair exited the Town Car and snuck around to the alleyway. The back door was in the middle of the building and opened to a small parking area with a large dumpster. Black fabric bags poked out from the dumpster lid. "Body bags," Gio said, indicating to the dumpster with a nod of his head. They heard the sound of an approaching engine and hid behind the dumpster.

After a moment, the parking area was illuminated by headlights. The engine died and the lights turned off. Gio strode out from behind the dumpster, Marco following. An older gentleman, dressed in a white button-down shirt and black slacks exited the vehicle. Marco pushed ahead of Gio.

"Hey! Old timer! You the owner, Mr. Giavotella?" The old man stopped and turned to face the pair.

"Yes, I am Sergio Giavotella. Who are you?"

Marco cracked his knuckles, more for show than anything else. "We got something to talk about, you and us. We got a message from Joseph Chiaramonte." Gio pulled a gun from under his jacket. "It's actually for you." Marco turned around to look down the barrel of the suppressed 9mm pistol. "Sorry, Marco."

One shot rang out in the cold, still morning. *K-thup*. Marco crumpled to the ground. Three more shots. *K-thup k-thup k-thup*. Gio shook his head. "You were right, Marco," he said to himself, "it wasn't the Villico family that got you."

Sergio unlocked the back door to the funeral home. “Quick, help me.” Together, Sergio and Gio lifted Marco’s body and trudged through the door. Sergio directed Gio to a long metal slab protruding from a large furnace. They placed the body on the slab and Sergio slid Marco into the crematory furnace.

Moving to the side, Sergio turned the furnace on. Gio watched through the window as the flames sprang to life, licking at the body of his former associate. Soon, Marco was engulfed, and was no more. Gio turned slowly away. Sergio came to his side, holding out a handkerchief. “You got some blood on you, Gio.”

Gio took the handkerchief and gingerly dabbed at the crimson specks of arterial spray that now decorated his black dress shirt. The blood was stubborn, not keen to be cleaned off so easily. Gio shrugged and handed the handkerchief back to Giavotella. The undertaker took the handkerchief and placed it in a metal bin marked “incinerate” and then produced a manila envelope bulging with bank notes. “Happy retirement,” Giavotella said, matter of factly.

Gio took the cash filled envelope and stuffed it in his jacket pocket. He noticed more fine specks of blood on his gray suit, which he brushed at absentmindedly. Sergio patted his shoulder. “I’ll tell Papa Joe you did good, and I’ll pay my dues, swear to God.” Gio nodded. “Leave the gun,” Sergio continued, “my nephew will disassemble it and get rid of the parts.” Gio shrugged. It was his default gesture.

He made his way to the door, ambling slowly, listlessly. Sergio could sense Gio's discomfort and melancholy. "Ashes to ashes, Gio," Sergio called, trying to comfort the massive Chiaramonte button man. "We all gotta die sometime." Sergio watched as Gio's shoulders rose and fell in a great sigh as he continued out the door, to his car, back onto the I-94 Expressway and back home to Englewood.

It was after 7:00 when Gio finally shook the cold feeling of murder from his soul. He had taken his clothes off and delicately folded them up, nice and neat, placed them in his fireplace, and burnt them. He changed into a more comfortable outfit of khakis and a pullover sweater. He decided to take a walk; he wasn't going to be able to sleep anytime soon. He took off aimlessly, wandering around the early morning streets.

Finding himself at the 63rd Street South Shore Line, Gio descended the stairs to the train stop and jumped on the first Red Line. He chuckled to himself, thinking of earlier that morning. "Right again, Marco," he said to himself, "no real gangster rides the Red Line. I'm no real gangster." He rode to the South Shore stop and walked to Navy Pier.

The Pier was abuzz with joggers and early morning breakfast seekers. Lake Michigan was quiet, and the breeze off the lake was bitter and cold, matching Gio's mood. He ducked into Billy Goat's Gruff restaurant to grab breakfast. He ordered and found himself a quiet corner in which to nestle, away from the other diners.

He picked at his eggs and hashbrowns thinking back on the events of the day before picking up a piece of bacon. He looked at it. It, too, was once a living thing. It, too, was put to the flame.

He went to take a bite when he remembered what Sergio had said. Ashes to ashes. He placed the strip of bacon back on his plate, then took a napkin and wrapped his bacon strips in it and put them aside to take home. He couldn't eat the bacon. Not today. It was Ash Wednesday.



Picture by Cherish Robinson

You're Just Like Me!

By Vanessa Thomas

As a small child, my mom always gave me words of affirmation. She constantly instilled in me that I had a beautiful skin tone. She was also fascinated with my hair, always telling me it was gorgeous and curly. My mom loved to show my hair off and forced me to wear it down or in ponytails. Her favorite hairstyle was two ponytails on the top of my head, but they transformed into two afro puffs hours after I made it to school.

As the school day progressed, my hair would become a relentless monster. I was a tomboy, so my hair would be filled with grass, sticks, and dirt from me rolling around outside after recess. Every night my dad would overhear us going to war in the bathroom. Washing and conditioning my hair was the easy part. My mom would comb through small sections of my curls one by one with the patience only a Buddha could have. I'd sit in the bathtub for what felt like hours and screamed bloody murder while she would detangle my unruly curls. My mom's superpower was how she could get my hair back to normal no matter how knotted it was. Every morning, my classmates would surround me in awe, asking if they could touch my hair. Some loved it, and others compared me to a poodle; it was devastating.

No matter how much I prayed, my hair wouldn't change as time went on. I didn't understand why my mom's hair was so straight, smooth, and manageable; I envied her. My hair would dry and turn into frizz, and I didn't

want it to be fluffy anymore. I couldn't stand the texture and volume of my hair; I grew to despise it. I constantly cried in defeat despite my mom's words of comfort when she styled it. The attention I received--positive or negative--was mortifying. I felt like a freak show, and everyone was always staring at my hair.

I usually only received compliments from teachers and staff, but one boy named John always complimented my hair. When my parents would take me to school events, he would come up to me and compliment my hair with his toothless smile and runoff. After my parents met John, my mom always pointed out that he had a crush on me. My dad would roll his eyes and smirk, and I would brush it off because I didn't care about boys. John and I became good friends; we had a lot in common. We both were overweight, had freckles, and loved video games. We were in different classes, but we talked every time we saw each other. He was the only person who always had something positive to say about my hair even though I thought it looked like a tumbleweed ready to take off in the wind.

One day after school, I stood on the playground finding any little reason to delay walking home. Kids ran past me, screaming and laughing, scattering off like cockroaches. I dragged my backpack across the blacktop with the sun was beating down overhead. While standing on a kickball base, I started kicking at the rocks beneath my shoes. Suddenly, John approached me with the usual friendly pat on my hair.

"You're just like me!" he randomly pointed out.

"What?" I asked, puzzled.

Swiftly he brought his arm up to mine, "We're the same shade of brown!" Then he pointed towards his hair. "My hair is curly too."

Fascinated, I poked through his dreadlocks; they were long and tightly wound, but in-between each dread was curly hair growing from his scalp. I was fascinated by his dreadlocks because I had never seen anything like them up close before. He then mentioned his parents were the same color as my parents. I thought it was so cool, but I didn't realize where he was going with his statement. Suddenly came the question that changed my life forever.

"When were you adopted?" he asked with a straight face.

I stood there looking blankly at him. "Adopted?"

"My mom and dad are both white, and your mom and dad are both white, and we're black," he pointed out.

"BLACK? I'm brown."

He laughed so hard he fell to the ground, "We're African American. Our race, that's called black."

I stared at him in confusion. "What?"

"Haven't you noticed you are a different color than your mom and dad?"

"Well, yeah, but I didn't know I was...."

"My parents adopted me when I was five," he explained. "I wonder when your parents adopted you."

As we continued to talk, I noticed all the children were long gone. We stood at that empty playground for what felt like hours but was probably no more than twenty minutes. He told me all about his birth parents. I was astonished, overwhelmed, and excited. As we walked out of the empty schoolyard, he mentioned that my hair was different from my mom's because I was African American; I had no idea. My hair was always my worst enemy, and I thought something was wrong with it. Finally, we said our goodbyes and parted ways on the sidewalk.

My mind was racing as I crossed the street on my way home. I contemplated who my birth parents were and wondered how they looked. I anticipated telling my mom all the amazing things I learned. My excitement grew as the cars passed me. Halfway home, it felt like the longest walk of my life. I couldn't wait to tell her I was black and began sprinting home as fast as my legs could take me.

Backpack flailing about, I burst through the door. "MOM! MMOM," I shrieked, tossing my backpack on the living room floor.

My mom flew around the corner and out of the kitchen, Diet Dr. Pepper in hand. "What, Honey?"

"I'M ADOPTED, and I'm BLACK!" I squealed in excitement. "John told me I was adopted, and he has white parents too."

My mom stared back in absolute horror. She stood there in silence with a perplexed gaze holding back a story she thought she had years before explaining. "Vanessa, you aren't adopted," she said, bursting into tears.

I looked at her confused and disappointed, "But you're white, and dad is white, and I'm brown."

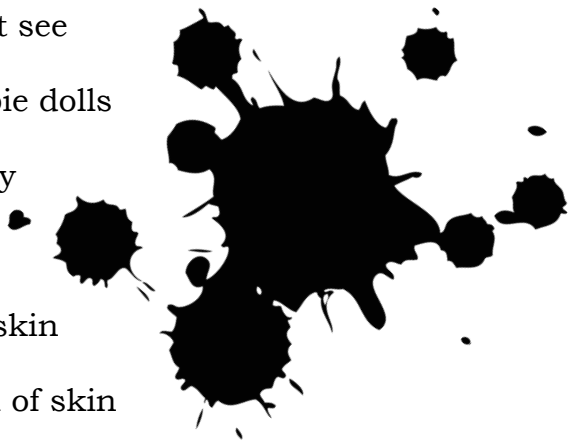
My dad came up from his television in the basement, but he went right back downstairs when he overheard the conversation. Taking my hand, my mom sat me down on the couch. She began telling me a story I was too young to comprehend. Years later, we would have this conversation again, and then I would understand the details. She explained that my father was black, but she was my mother. She told me my dad was my stepdad, but my stepdad loved me very much.

"Wow," I thought to myself, "this day keeps getting better and better. I'm black, AND I have two dads!"

Looking back on that moment of my life, I remember the veil of disappointment that cast over me when my mom told me I wasn't adopted. It wasn't that I didn't love my parents; it was just that the thought of being adopted excited me. Children are innocent, and I had no idea what was going on. I was just excited about new information, but I didn't realize what it meant. It wasn't until I was a preteen that we would have this conversation again; she told me that my birth father had been in a car accident. The moment my friend and I had the adoption conversation, it was a huge turning

point in my life. It significantly impacted me and is imprinted in my memory like the day I found out Santa Claus wasn't real. Realizing I was both black and white filled the blanks in about things I was curious about but hesitant to ask my parents.

Now that I'm older, I think back on this story, and it makes me laugh. I know firsthand from my experience children don't see color. My mom always bought me the brown barbie dolls and admired how pretty they were. I loved that my dolls had similar characteristics, but as a small child, color meant nothing. I knew they were my skin color, but I didn't know anything about the origin of skin color. Learning I was half African American helped me understand why my hair was so fluffy and texturized. As I aged, I was immediately accepted by the black community, and they taught me things my mother couldn't. Eventually, in middle school, I discovered the ethnic section of hair products in the stores. Though this experience was life-changing for me, I am grateful that my first experience with skin color was positive and not a negative experience, like being discriminated against by a classmate. After I found myself and understood my ethnicity, I learned to love my differences.



Children's Church

By David Barnes

I remember the sound of chert and limestone crunching beneath the tires of our car as we drove up onto the patch of graded mud and conglomerate that passed for the church's parking lot. I remember watching my father's stolid face as we sat and watched the billowing of dark clouds and the play of static discharge as the electrical storm approached. I remember that his body language told me he did not want to be there.

I remember many things about that evening, but I do not know if my memories are true. I know about false memories. I know that memory is a reconstructed phenomenon that can often be influenced by emotions, fantasies and the beliefs of others. I know that on some level we are all fabulists.

I also know having false memories doesn't make you a crazy person even if you believe that what you remember cannot possibly have happened. I have a friend, a serious and sober physicist, who remembers, at the age of eight, kicking a soccer ball into the air and that the ball did not return to earth. He knows as a scientist that this event could not have happened but he remembers it nevertheless.

I remember that, during my ninth summer, my father bought a parcel of land on a little spring-fed stream somewhere near Blue Springs. We spent several weekends camped upon this beautiful piece of the Ozarks. I remember

damning up the little stream just below where it fell between large limestone rocks forming a natural shut in. I used fallen logs and dis-lodged rocks to create a temporary pool. Almost as soon as my labors were finished, the surface was covered with a legion of long legged water skimmers creating phantasmagoric patterns of rippled and reflected light.

I remember on one particularly hot and humid day making a sweaty climb with my father to collect the fruit of two twisted persimmon trees that stood like sentinels at the top of a nearby bald knob. And I remember meeting the preacher. He was standing there, at our camp, when we returned from our climb. He was long in aspect, dressed in black from head to toe, with thin shocks of brown hair that flipped greasily along the sides of his balding pate.

“Mighty glad to make your acquaintance Brother Barnes. Folks round here been saying a preacher from Sprangfield finagled a piece of this here drainage.

Nicely siche-ated. Yep, a might perty spot, might perty.”

"And looky here what a fine husky boy. Must make you mighty proud. Keeps the drippin' jar empty, I'll wager." The man in black chuckled, or more precisely, cackled. I could imagine him slapping his knee in cartoon delight.

“Reckon you got more at home, don'tcha.” Even at that age, I could tell when someone was laying it on thick.

“Don't often get dignitaries round these parts. I heard you represent the National Church Office. I don't 'magine you executives pay much mind to the goings on of us po'folks out here in the hills, and, 'tween you and me, Rev-Er-

Rend, we don't pay you much never mind either." He gave a short guffaw.

"Well I declare, where be my manners? I be Jackson Bois-darc. Most folks just call me Preacher Jack." He extended an unusually elongated hand and gave a slight sarcastic bow of his head. My father did not respond with his signature friendliness, but silently took the apparitions hand and shook it without emotion. " Well now, we be having ourselves a revival out at the church and my little flock would be most pleased to have an important church leader liken yourself out to our service this evening. Truth be told, we're having a special service just for the young folk. I reckon your boy would find it most interesting."

I do not remember how my father replied but I do remember that the sound of the man in black's voice encouraged me to move closer to my father's side. This man scared me. What I remember clearest is how my father sort of hunkered down into his own body and subtly swayed from side to side. He focused on the preacher's eyes and never for a moment broke contact. It was not unlike the way an old experienced tom cat will size up a snake before striking out with a lightening quick swipe.

"Now I know you don't come all the way out to these hills to be pestered by the likes of me, but you're not too important and fancy to come out and worship with my humble congregation, are you?"

The faint of friendliness had left Preacher Jack's voice and hardened into sarcastic accusation.

"Fact is, I know you Johnnie Barnes, yep, Johnnie the Bare Foot

Dreamer,” he cackled again. "betch you don't member me though. Fact is, you was the reason I figured on being a preacher myself. It was a time ago in Rhome, Texas. You was endin' a two week re-vival. I never knowed the spirit to move like that. That last night when you was preachin' bout the second coming of our Lord. Well sir, i'twere the most powerful thing I ever seen. Lord a'mighty when you got to that part about the blood a bubblin' up to the horses' mane, children were cryin', the ladies were fainting and grown men were pissin' their pants."

"Careful now ..." admonished my father.

"Pardon my language; I mean no offense, but you was fiery, and I knew that I wanted what you got. That power, Lordy, the power to reach out with words and squeeze a man's heart dry. To leave a congregation floppin' and gaspin' for breath like a mess of fish. You could do that. Why, I done heard you called Elijah. Heard you could call fire down from heaven. A regular righteous hero of the faith."

"Yes sir, that night I nearly danced up to the platform for your anointin'. You and your posse a 'deacons lined up like crows on a saggin' line. When you put your hand upon my brow, I done swooned right on down to the floor."

"I had nere been slain in the spirit before, and indeed I felt as though I would surely die. But I did not. When I come to, them deacons were on me like a bunch of chickens round a june bug, a spittin' and cacklin' trying to prayer me through to the baptism. I knew then that that power must flow

through my hands, the fire must be kindled by my will as well.”

The preacher sighed audibly, “Too bad it come to this.”

He shook his head in resignation, "Well, I suppose things change and to their season. Never took to child evangelism myself. No sir, no coddling snotty nosed kids fer me. I reckon you got soft, John. For Judah's sake, you, a mighty man o'God, dressing up like a heathen savage and singing round your council fires with your khaki rangers and all."

My father sported the slightest smile when he replied, "Might be, I grew up a bit. Might be, the Holy Spirit grew me up. I've come to learn that the fiercest fires are laid with the most delicate tinder, green even, if you know what I mean. But they must be nurtured and cradled a bit."

"Possible, but be that as it is, I reckon our children are good enough fer you. As good as your own. 'Sides," the preacher almost sneered, "might be you could use some humbling. There be more than one powerful preacher on this here ground."

I remember that the rest of the conversation was short and direct, and that before he back-stepped his way out of our camp, the preacher had elicited my father's promise to attend the children's service that very evening. As the old, black crow jumped the little stream and disappeared into a thicket of dogwood and fledgling redbud trees, he called out, "The Holy Ghost abjures you to be there."

My father responded to himself in a barely audible voice, "That may well be so."

§

The little church was bathed in the gray green light of the approaching storm. It was suspended on old stone pilings; the black gaps and deep breeches here and there made the church look as though it was floating above rotten jagged teeth. It was a simple box structure with a roof of weathered tar shingles and walls tacked together with cracked and broken asbestos tiles. The front of the church was distinguished only by a crumbling concrete porch and a great screen door over which hung a flickering bare bulb. Beneath the lamp and above the screen door were hand scrawled letters that demanded, WATCHMAN WHAT OF THE NIGHT?

We stopped about 20 yards in front of the decrepit structure. My father put his arm across my shoulder and pulled me close.

“Stay near me tonight, don't stray away from my grasp.”

“Why, Daddy,” I asked anxiously.

“You're a smart boy, Son, sometimes too smart for your own good.” He smiled warmly, “So I know you realize that not all who speak in God's name know God's heart. Some preachers become mis-guided, some are just vain and full of themselves. Sometimes they don't realize the damage they can do to gentle young spirits. Sometimes they just don't care. I guess I was as guilty as the next fella on that score, but some have filled themselves with darkness in their love of spiritual power. Those preachers don't preach love at all but have become like vicious wolves. Do you understand Son?”

“I guess so,” I replied and squared my shoulders fearing what the

evening held. "Sometimes, well, some of your preacher friends scare me."

A momentary smile graced his face, "Well, sometimes they can scare me."

Then a wave of gentle sadness spread across my father's face, "And I know that I've scared you too, scared you awfully, haven't I?"

He spoke of the nightmares that plagued me as a child. Dreams that woke me screaming in the middle of the night and drove me weeping to the comfort of my parent's bed. Dreams of graves opening and the dead rising. Dreams of my little dog Bullet, on fire, howling in pain and panic racing down a devastated street. Dreams of great winged beasts that ripped apart the very fabric of the sky revealing a terrifying abyss beyond. Dreams that made me fear more than love God. Dreams that made me dread being left behind and of being abandoned. Dreams of the Rapture.

I simply lowered my head and whispered, "Yes, Sir."

He wrapped his arms around me and quietly sighed, "Believe me son, that is something I will always regret."

My father gave another heavy sigh and spoke more to himself than to me, "Please trust me tonight, for we battle not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers..."

§

We were greeted heartily at the door by a lanky creature who humbly proclaimed himself the deacon. He guided us down the single aisle of the church past plain wooden pews where sat a dozen or so serious country folk

in clean over-alls and neatly pressed and tatted dresses.

At the end of the aisle a flurry of Pentecostal bunned vivaciousness introduced herself as Mrs. Morney. Behind her in lock step came the Gloor sisters. The Gloor sisters were twins as best I could tell. They were beside themselves with enthusiasm. Our presence was, as Mrs. Morney chanted in spontaneous canticle, "a sure sign the power of the Holy Ghost will visit us tonight and or'take us each one, so that even as the serpent sheds its old skin, naught will remain of what we once were." I wasn't at all sure that sounded like a good thing.

They herded my father and me into a pew occupied by several small children. In the pew in front of us were more children ranging in age from four to twelve. Some were quite dirty wearing ragged clothes while others were well scrubbed in their Sunday best. They barely noticed our arrival. They seemed mesmerized by the figure before us on a small platform. It was the preacher.

He did not acknowledge us but only grinned as he made eye contact with my father. We were in his domain, and he would certainly make the most of it.

The service began in good Pentecostal fashion moving through song, testimony, more song and then into a disorienting aural wall of glossolalia. Then as voice by voice the well-practiced gift of tongue speaking ceased, the preacher stepped down off the platform and stood in front of the gaggle of children sitting in the front row.

“We have celebrities in our midst tonight. This fine gentleman,” he gestured towards my father, “is a famous child evangelist, right here in our humble house of sacrifice. As I am sure our Brother Barnes would agree, our Lord said suffer the little children to come unto me. Well, I will surely suffer them gladly, though tonight they may also suffer a bit for their eternal good.” The preacher smirked, well pleased with his inversion of scripture.

“Tonight I want to tell you youngins a story. You young folks like stories don’t you? Well this ain’t no ordinary story. This here story may rock the soundness of the ground beneath your feet, it may show you the monsters what lurk behind the veil of light and day. Monsters, slaverin’ to taste your sweet meat and devour your living soul.” And with that jovial introduction he began his sermon.

§

“My daddy, he was not a particular mean fella.” Here was the first of the preacher’s many pregnant pauses. He smiled with an almost condescending leer as we all shivered in response to the vibrating bass of thunder that rolled across the little church.

“I reckon,” the preacher continued, “he had his nights of hard drinkin’ when you wanted to be clear his boot. But in the main he weren’t unkind. Most folks round here thought him the salt of the earth, but, you see, his hard thinkin’ about life and such had sloped over into his notions about God.”

“My mamma and I tried, oh Merciful Lord how we tried, but there were no beseechin’ or debatin’ could git him to see one whit of sense in redemption

or in God's own sweet plan of salvation. Nor could any amount of readin' from the good book or crying out for his eternal soul convince him of the horrors awaiting the unrepentant ones in the bloated belly of Hell. Fact is, the longer he hung onto his bitter life the harder become his heart and the more hateful he were to the rest of us."

"My momma called me back to the home place a few year ago to minister to my daddy in his last hours upon this earth. Unrepentant Sin had et up his innards; colon chancre some nurse said. Well, some folk take well to dying, and my daddy seemed made fer it. His anger had turned to grit, and despite terrible suffering, his stubborn vow to utter no cry of despair had become his religion and reason for bein'."

"By the time I had arrived, things were 'most done. I knew the moment I strode into his room that he were barely there. I seen he wore that pearly pallor of the departing, and I touched his sheets what had become sopping rags of sweat and moist decay, and of course," another lingering pause ... "there was the smell."

"I would have wanted a final moment with my daddy, not to share some sweet farewell, but to give him a last warning; I feared a terrible fate waited to snatch away his soul to places infernal. He was far too gone for that. There weren't nothing for it but to put my momma to bed and prepare for an evenin's vigil."

"I myself repaired to the front porch. Slipped into one of the old worn chairs, hooked the heels of my boots over the bottom rung and eased on back

gainst the wall. Betcha I'd sat on that very porch with my daddy and his kin a thousand times. Fer hours they would sit saying nothing like they was a watchin' fer something. I could never right figure out what. Well I sat there that night awaitin' too."

The preacher surveyed the congregation making eye contact with all who dared meet his gaze. The impact was most pronounced on the children. They seemed to wilt like delicate flowers at his approach. I was not excluded and nuzzled in closer to the protection of my father's shoulder.

"It were not a bit like tonight my darlin' congregation. It were so quiet that I believed I could hear the crawdads cussing down in ole' boggy crik." A flash of lightening and a roll of thunder punctuated his remark.

"After a mite, my eyes become heavy and my breathin' deep. Now I don't rightly know if I fell asleep or not. Fact tis I don't rightly know if what I am about to tell you'n is a dream, a vision or some deep woods phan-tasm. I believe it twer a vision."

The preacher now looked up towards the exposed rafters of the church and dogmatically exclaimed, "But what ere' it be; it be truth and no denying it! Be prepared! I was not prepared for the deep well of horror what Man should not behold in this here life. I was not prepared, and it was opened up unto me!"

I began to feel a crawling dis-ease as the preacher continued his narrative. I could tell that my father was feeling it too. He fidgeted in his seat with the same anxious energy as the children surrounding us.

“Over behind my daddy's house there be a hill, a knoll you might say, and on

the tother side of that rise is a patch of swampy ground not fit for growing living things. Instead of planting there, my daddy had put up some pens and sheds for to keep his hogs. Then he dug up some of that putrid ground to make hissif a slop for them hogs. Some year it was a right regular pond but mostly it were a filthy puddle surrounded by a dried up plain of mud and a forty year heap of hog slop and, pardon me ladies, ex-CREE-ment. It was all covered with a crust of dried up pond scum and drew flies liken it was the kingdom of flies. You could hear the infernal buzzing of them maggot mothers long before you could see 'em. I reckon even Beelzebub, himself, never seen nor heard the like.”

“In my mind's eye there were a troublin' on the scum covered surface of that pond. At first the meanest of bubbles gurgled as they erupted through the mud. Then come up bigger ones, faster and more. Then even bigger ones faster and more. The commotion continued till the surface of that pit seemed to agitate into a rolling boil. It was then that all that bubbling stopped dead.”

“At first I could not see it. It was as though globs of mud and scum were being thrown up into the air without no sense at tall. Then I slowly began to make it out. It had no flesh, as we reckon flesh. Even in vision I could hardly receive what mine eyes commanded. For as it thrashed in the muck, the mud, scum and shite stuck to his carcass makin' like a filthy mask visible to my sight. I will not describe what it appeared for I cannot. Words been made for

this world—not for the place whence this beast done arose."

The preacher turned to the children again and spoke now in a low conspiratorial voice as if only we could hear. "It was not an easy birthin'. The horrid thing had to fight and push for to free itself from that sticky bog. Then after much contention, it pulled itself out and onto a solid perch. I have never dreamed nor 'maged nuthin so heinous."

The preacher jumped back up on the platform and began to pace back and forth. He seemed energized and yet aloof as though speaking from a faraway place.

"I won't say it walked, for what it done was more like lumber up that little rise towards my daddy's house. It labored and groaned with each step as though the air itself pushed with some desperate will agin its progress. Yesir, laboring up that hill, the vile thing seemed assaulted as it spewed mud and slime from holes and gashes what appeared here and there upon its loathsome carcass."

The preacher paused and slowly cocked his head to the side. He rolled his eyes up into his head rapt as though listening to some lost melody and whispered, " It moved through space as though it wern't made for the texture of this world."

"I reckon I slept, but I know what I seen; I seen in my daddy's room a fine white vapor arisin' up through his nostrils. It twisted and worried itself into something unspeakable then faded away like the mist in the holler when the sunlight touches its depths."

“My daddy’s lips, they begin to twitch liken he wanted to whimper, cry out maybe, but there were no life there; instead, from outta his mouth and between those old cracked lips come slithering a small white poorly thing. It were naked and as pale and clear as them albino worms. Sally minders they call 'em, what swim with huge blinded eyes in the dark pools of bottomless caves.”

The preacher paused gathering his thoughts, “And as I watched the little pale thing crawl across its own dead face, I knew, oh yes, I knew in the very deep of my heart, that it were my daddy’s own soul.”

He whispered again making us strain to hear, “Poor pitiful thing, poor pitiful, pathetic, damned thing.”

Beyond the cracked windows and tattered screen door of the old church, the storm responded to the preacher with a counterpoint of crashes and pyrrhic beats. Speaking with the forked tongues of tremendous electrical discharge.

In the pew behind me Mrs. Morney and the Gloor sisters began to rock back and forth. Their silk handkerchiefs spun around in short agitated circles. They chanted softly with words syncopated to the rhythm of their rocking, “Save us Jesus, save us Jesus, save us Jesus, save us Jesus ...”

As the words gained momentum they inevitably slurred together becoming one long aspirated hiss.

“Listen close now children, hunker on down next one t’other, for what I say is God’s own mercy. You see, that heinous thing, that obscene, unnatural

thing, come over the hill right on down to my daddy's house. It moved up besides me on the porch. Be I dreaming or not, it was so close I could not catch breath for the foul stench what come offa his putrid being."

"That abortion proceeded cross the threshold and plowed dreckly round the corner into my daddy's room. The little white thing what crawled outta my daddy's mouth sensed it coming. It were a pitiful sight to see. When it reckoned the beast, it were more afraid than anything I hope never to see again. It ran terrified up and down and up and down the length of my daddy's bed. In downright desperation, it flung itself offa that bed and grabbed the edge of the coverlet, swung on down to the floor and ran. Ran from the very pits of Hell. Ran with all its puny might. Ran from its gruesome end."

The preacher spoke with a frightening intensity.

"But i'twere all to no good children, all to no good," the preacher continued, "for that loathsome beast swung its arm down and scooped up that little soul like a hawk may snatch a chick from under a momma hen's wing. That poor pitiful thing commenced to writhing and wailing in the beast's vile embrace."

"There were no escape though, no escape from the wages of sin, no escape from the doom, from the damnation. My daddy's rebellious disregard of God's own laws had brought hissif to terror and to anguish that defies all knowing."

The storm outside intensified with loud booming retorts and crackling ejaculations. The children seated around me were becoming visibly

frightened. They began to huddle close against each other, the littler ones holding onto the hands of their elder peers. One little blonde girl hypnotically pulled her hair back and forth across her saucer sized eyes.

I glanced up at my father who had become grim and stone faced with an expression of what I can only describe as disgust. His eyes were focused on the preacher with a cold steeliness. As steadfast as a gargoyle, he made no effort to wipe the sweat that now flowed freely down his brow. He seemed called to bear witness. To what exactly, I could not be sure.

The preacher continued, "Back over the threshold of the cabin and over the gentle hill, like an infernal locomotive, that thing from the pits made hast. Pushing against invisible bars, hell bent towards the sty and swill of its birthin'. Quickly now, with not a moment fer mercy, it stood on the edge of the shite and scum covered pool. It hesitated fer but a second as if listenin' to the whimpering of the little white bein' in his grasp, then plowed full bore into the slough."

The preacher crouched down in front of us directing his full attention to the cowering children. For just a moment he glanced up at my father with a look of defiant arrogance.

"I shall nere forget, as the thing began to sink, the pool parted into an awful swirl of filth. My daddy's soul straining against the tow seemed to swell and lengthen, its eyes bulged outta its sickly white head, and its mouth widened and strained to utter a most obscene and pathetic sound. A sound like that of infant kitten cats, sacked and carelessly tossed inna

dark lake, all a' squealing and gurgling their last gasp."

All became quiet. Even the storm outside lay still. Then in a sad small voice the little blonde girl in front of me began to sigh, then whine, then cry, then weep.

Ignoring the little girl, the preacher started up again, "Oh and look at you children, such sweet and tender children, you think you be safe in your momma's love, hah, without dread in your daddy's arms. But I kin see, oh yes, I kin see just behind you now, little boy there with that snotty nose, the beast be lingering near. And you pretty baby with them golden locks, behind you be a shadow of strange proportions like unto that beast what dragged my daddy to his eternal doom."

The preacher slowly raised an elongated boney hand, "I kin see it even now. It extends what might pass fer fingers to paw and streak with vile issue the yellor of your vain hair. It waits for that moment that we know not, when the veil of life be lifted, when the soul be freed from its bodily shield. It waits to pluck without pity what pretends to see but cannot. Seek what shelter, seek what salvation you may find now before your sweetness is sucked away like sop from a bittered sponge."

The preacher began to wave his arms in a mysterious musical way.

It was as though he were directing some sort of invisible choir. And sure enough in my mind's eye I began to believe I could see it. It was a spectral ensemble composed of dark liquid shadows that rose up behind the children in front of us. These smoky apparitions seemed to quaver in

and out of existence as they poked their tendril like appendages about and through the children's bodies.

In that very moment, my father seemed called to action. He rose to his feet with arms outstretched. He stared at the preacher with a focused attention allowing some strange energy to rise up within his spirit and explode with wrathful authority, "Shame on you, shame! Whoso shall offend one of these little ones let that millstone drown him in the depth of the sea."

The preacher chuckled in response. "I may be the ointment what burns away the pison of yo' momma's baby suck love. No Jesus meek and mild. Nossir! I be the blade that slays the lamb. I be that ancient spirit of jealous retribution what demands jus-ti-fi-ca-tion! I am as hard and as fast as what lies beneath the rock and within the twisted trees of these here hills."

My father lifted both his hands towards the ceiling of the church and commanded, "In the name of Christ's love I rebuke you! By the power of his Holy Spirit, I bind you, son of the pit, child of perdition!"

§

If it is in fact memory at all, I remember that the little church was transfigured by a blinding cloud of light. At first it was non-specific; the light fully present here and there in equal brilliance. It seemed to emanate from every corner of the structure. Then meandering like a stream between the pews the light coalesced behind the pulpit into a swirling ball of

pulsating plasma.

I remember that the orb of scintillating light seemed to hover just behind the preacher, creating for a moment a grotesque skeletal silhouette. I remember that it then shot with a blast of terrifying energy down the aisle and out through the devastated front door.

Then quiet and calm. Like the depth of a mother's sigh when her child's fever breaks in the heart of the night. A momentary repose that swaddled the little church.

But the peace did not last. In the pandemonium that ensued, my father gathered the children around him as best he could, marching us through the roiling congregation to the screen door, now damaged and dangling by one hinge. We pushed and bullied our way past the flailing, disoriented deacon guarding the threshold and into the electrified night beyond.

Here, my memory ends. I have no recollection of how we crossed the lawn or of our drive home in the dread of the night. In truth, my mother denies that my father ever bought land near Blue Springs or that any of these events could have possibly happened.



September Pear

By Jaime Abel

A Rubin's shape, you drop 'mong woodland bush.
Firm skin belies the yielding flesh yet hid.
Pale hue of spring beneath warm summer's blush.
No stricture can unnerve my lover's bid.

Your flesh melts in my mouth like Zephyrus' wine.
All soft, all subtle pleased heart's delight.
Your juice outflows my mouth drips down my chin.
Your scent, your taste, your touch all sense excite.

And yet, when o'er, no slice of you remains.
No form, no pleasing aspect keeps me near.
Just stem and seeds bear witness to my pains.
Greedy! My unwanted testifiers jeer.

But still my mouth desires the tender flesh.
And I conjure sweet remembrance afresh.



Sunburn on a pale man.

*Robert Joy
8/2014*

Painting by Robert Joy

Why the Pooka Never Says Goodbye

By M. A. Gilmore

The Emerald Isle is full to brimmin' with a variety of folk, that is to say, of the non-human kind; it bein' an island, 'n all, surrounded as it is by water, and with the merrows and the shipfish, they've naught to come face-to-face with a human every while and 'nother while, usually after Belanus has bedded down of an evening.

This is a tale to me by me grandfar, who was told by his grandfar and so on, afar back, about the pookas in Ireland and why they never say "good-bye."

THE WORLD has heard of the *faid-rhe*, the *said-rhe*, the *banan-che* and the *claurichaun*, and has adopted its own sundry names for such, but as for general chicanery and mayhem, there's no candle can be held to a pooka.

The first pooka, 'tis said, fell from the forge of Lugh, as he was engaged in smithin' a set of shoes for King Donough's horse to do battle against King Murragh in the south. A bit of the doss flew up and smacked Lugh in the eye, off the hammer, like, causin' a curse to escape from the forger's lips. The doss landed in a dung-pile to smolder and smoke up the shop. Another curse fell off Lugh as he doused the pile, and a third as the steam came with the smell, and with the three curses, up rose a little man, no taller than a *caman-bush*, and thrice as crooked.

With a thumb and forefinger at his creator, the pooka bent for the woods of Limerick and set to luring out the wood nymphs with false promises,

and such like, and a little while later, the townsfolk began to miss their shoes and their crakes from the doorsteps, and just about everything they'd left outdoors overnight.

Stories began to crop up, about a great black horse with a streaming mane and coal-red eyes, in which form, with a bit of devil's magic, the pooka presented himself to man. The horse was usually spied a-twixt the site of a particular bedevilment that sometimes included brave (or besotted) souls attempting to catch and ride and earn a knock on their arse or their noggin for their trouble.

This went on for a time, and another time, into and after the time of St. Patrick, who went 'round the island chidin' the country folk about their wicker-fires, and their chieftains, and replacin' them, as it were, with the Word of Christ.

But pray as they might, the people went on missin' their shoes and their crakes, and noggin-knocked besides, as the pooka and his children and grandchildren spread into the copses and the fields of the West Country.

That is, until the time of the Norsemen, who'd nothing better to do, but slap on their horned hats and sail off to see what they could see. Most of what they saw in Ireland was the fire-haired, smoke-eyed lasses of Leinster, and took them by guile or force, along with a share of the villages, so that the blood of Lugh was fair-tainted with the Vikings' mischief.

So 'twas in the village of Dal Cais, where a particular chief was victim of a Viking raid. So much so, that the entire family was lost, 'cepting the oldest,

Mahon, who was chief next-in-line, and the youngest, Brian, who was old enough to sit by the hearth and listen to the travelin' *shenanche*, and learn to despise the Vikings.

Now, the DalCassians were more than fair horsemen; they'd rid and roped for more generations back than 'twas possible to count. Brian, 'twas said, was near dropped from his mother's womb as she was barebacking it home from Derry.

And so Mahon, made chief by default, took it in his mind to set his father's horse and broadsword up against the Vikings, because he was tired of them burning his houses and taking his lands and all his best girlfriends for themselves. When Brian said he wanted to go, too, and clout them for killin' the region's best storyteller, Mahon said "no."

"I ken yer wrath, and it's a fair share of it I'm feelin' as well, but ye'd make not a whit again' a Norse broadaxe," Mahon told his brother. "And there ye'd be, a-lyin' there in two parts, and none's the use we'd have of each of 'em. I'd have lost me only remaining brother and a captain, besides."

Mahon took Brian out to the byre, and handed him their father's steel, so that he might feel the heft of it. "When ye can lift this up, and bring it down so's it can split this stump, it's then I'll let you have yer head against the Norsemen," Mahon said.

So Mahon sent Brian to Clonmacnois, to the monastery there, where he'd be safe from battle and have his head crammed full of Christ and ways to

clout the heathen Norse. Mahon gathered his best boys, who'd 'scaped the village sack, and they headed to the copse to set the uprisin'.

Brian went, but he was of two minds about it. By day, he'd learn to read and write and listen to the priests' ramblin'. After matins, though, he'd skirch off to the copse, where he could listen to the trees and animals and hope to catch a sight of the wood-nymphs in their dance. There, he found a great rock, which he took for the head of a horn-hatted Norseman, and took up a branch as big as himself to bash out th' brains.

In about a dozen summers, Brian's shoulders and arms had swelled with the bashin' practice. His head was full to burstin' from the priests, and he could take nae more. For all along, he'd heard Mahon, staunch as he was, couldn't dislodge the invaders from their Irish lustfulness, no matter how many men or horses he could set agin' 'em.

One dark night, as he was gazin' at the moon at Beltaine, Brian thought he'd heard a slight rustlin' and went to scout. Sure, and there was a gatherin' of the fairy-folk, who'd suffered bound to the wood through the winter and were achin' to stretch their wings.

Brian gathered up his stealth to spy and listen to the singin.' The wood-nymphs didn't scatter, for they'd grown fond and fast of the young man and his purpose. They invited him to share their songs and stories, and he told them of the Norsemen, and how he'd lost all but his brother, who was being beaten back time and agin' to no avail.

“Aye, an’ it’s a sad tale,” said the fairy queen, whose dark eyes swam from the tellin’ and her gossamer wings droopin’ slack from her shoulders. “We’ve seen and heard, and it’s to help ye we’ve decided. What ye need, my young man, is a staunch horse to end it all.”

So she told Brian of the pooka, of the three curses, and the chicanery and the mayhem, and how they’d fretted over his advances through the ages. Seein’ at once how he’d be able to crack two birds with a single stone, Brian asked the queen for advice on how to conscript the pooka to his service, and no harm to himself or his noggin.

The fairy queen went to an old, cracked stump, and took into her tiny hands a bit and bridle near a dozen times larger than herself, and set in in the lap of Brian.

“Here, an’ this is the stuff to do it,” she told him. She explained that the bit was of iron, casted and beat at the forge of Lugh, and into the bridles leather was worked three hairs of the pooka’s mane. One for each of the curses, to subdue him.

“When you swing and mount, slip this over the great horse’s head,” she said. “He’ll buck and run – like the very wind – and it’s a heavy bump ye’ll get if yer dismounted.

“But when he’s lathered, and spent, and can run nae more, ye’ll have dominion, as such the man of Christ ye are and an Irishman besides, for the pooka’s naught but a whisper of the De’il himself. Ye may ask what ye will,

and the pooka'll have nae choice but to serve. Then, maybe, our fair folk might earn some recompense," she said, and winked.

They parted, then, with a last word where the pooka might be found close by, 'twixt times of devilment and at rest.

That next day, Brian bid goodbye to the monastery and the priests, and set out to meet his brother at the site of their first conflagration. "I'm ready," he said, taking in his hardened hands their father's sword, and clove the stump at their feet in two halves on the ground.

"Aye, that ye are, and more," Mahon agreed. "We're set for a run at the first sight of Belenus tomorra, at their camp yonder, and we'll see what we'll see."

"Before we go, I've a small task yet this night," Brian said, "and it's sure to bring us aid, by your leave. I'll be back at dawn." He left Mahon to wonder, and set off to find the pooka.

After a time, he found the great horse, with its coal-eyes a-smolder, pawning its iron hooves on the ground and sparkin'. He was set to add to his store of villager's shoes for his kin and collection of crakes and hardware, and whatever else, and preparin' to throw anyone with a mind to stop him in his purpose.

Brian's eyes narrowed, thinkin' if there'd be a discourse to start, an' there was. "So, ye think ye can best the likes of a pagan's curse, take that, and welcome," the pooka said.

“Aye, that I will, and by Christ on the Cross, I’ll have ye for my bidding,” Brian countered. As he did, he swung a hardened leg over the great horse’s back, and threw on the bridle and set the bit, all in a motion—just as he’d done since a whelp at his daddy’s stable.

The surprised animal reared and set off, unsuspecting of the tether, and sped into the night. For any that could catch a glimpse, would’ve been a wonder, with the horse’s eyes burning fire to light the way; hooves sparking the turf for a path behind and the great black mane flying in a mix with Brian’s own red top, as he clung for his own dear life.

On, and on they went—past Ballyoutogue Castle, where Grainne surrendered to her lover Diarmond—past the corrag ports to the West, over the sand and across the water.

For ‘twas the pooka’s intent to deposit his rider at the gates of Tir-nan-Og, Christian as he was, where the ancient Tuatha slept, near-forgotten in island lore. That, and to teach him that no Christian, before nor since, could lift a pagan’s curse—especially one sprung from the Great Blacksmith himself.

But as the gates of the Tuatha’s realm hove in sight, the horse began to flag. The harder he ran, the higher he jumped, the tighter the bit drove into his mouth as Brian’s grip tightened on the fairies’ bridle that cloved him to obey.

Making a great, wide turn, the pair sped back, across the green grass, past the trees and farmsteads, while all the while Carridwen’s bright, lovelorn eye looked down full from above.

All a-lather, the pooka stopped short in one last futile attempt to dislodge his fire-haired rider, but failed. He sank, exhausted, to his knees, with his great flanks heavin' from the effort.

Off Brian clambered, victorious. Bridle still in hand, he thundered: "Now, ye wretch, ye spawn of horse's dung, yer mine! By the Hand of God, ye'll do what I ask." And he removed the tether.

"Aye, though it's me vurra nature ye've suborned," the pooka snorted. "Ask, and I'll obey."

Givin' careful thought to the phrasin', Brian told the pooka he would carry him to Leinster to fight the Norse and do their best to drive them back across the water.

"Aye, it's done," the horse said to the first.

Next, Brian said, that it was his wish to have the pooka come when called, whenever Irish blood was threatened, should the invaders chance to return.

"Aye, it's done," the pooka assented to the second.

Last, the pooka would forsake his habit of assailment of his kinfolk and their like, and the fairy folk as well, and leave off cracking every Irish noggin he'd come across, until the end of days.

At that, the horse shrank into his form as a defeated, wrinkled and crooked man-elf, and keened. "Nae, nae, I canna' do tha'," he wailed. "That's agin' me vurra bein;' I'd fold up, go down to dust, an' die," he blubbered.

The pair argued; the pooka swore, and Brian vowed the wrath of God, and the pooka wailed th' more, until they reached accord on the final point. He'd never again assail a single Irishman from that day forward, unless his pate was addled with drink, and useless. He'd leave off the fairy folk, as well. "Then, ye may do as ye may do, and God help the Irish for that," Brian said.

The two creatures—man and monster—spat on their palms and shook hands, to seal the bargain.

The pooka took his equine form and Brian hove aboard. The pair trotted toward Mahon's camp in time to see Belanus' first rays spreading across the sky.

What happened next is a matter of record, and legend. How Brian, aboard a great, black stallion with smoking red eyes, rode into a mass of Norse and clove their heads from their bodies with nary a scratch from an axe; how Mahon, in the heat of the battle, was run through and expired, elevating Brian to the post as chief; and how the great horse disappeared into the evening mist; and how the townfolks' shoes and noggins were mysteriously spared any further mischief.

All through Brian's storied reign, he fought the Norse and won, driving them back; and when the upstart northern clans began to rise, he fought them too. Until, his path took him to the Stone of Fal at Tara, where he was made High King of All Ireland.

Yet, as with many kings, the hardship of the office finally killed him, at Clontarf, and as the nation set to keenin' no louder noise was heard from the

copses and the fairy-circles in their mourning, for Brian was truly King over all.

At the wake, there walked a great, black horse, in full daylight, to pay his respects. But, being of pagan birth, he couldna' hold the Mass, nor invoke the name of God.

“Sleep well, O Prince of Boruma,” was what those who stood too near the wakin' ale said they heard, as the horse strode off and disappeared. For the pooka, bein' as he was of earthly birth and not a child of Heaven, that was as close as he could come, without surrendering his own corporation.

And that is how the pooka was born, and lives; how he was bred into the Irish story; and how he was suborned by a king with the help of fairy magic.



Picture by Diane Engle

My Familiar

By James Miller

For Jim and Gretchen

Run with me barefoot laughing in waves that caress our toes

Swim with me in the wild blue oceans of tomorrow

Walk with me in Autumn Leaves

Tenderly through moss-covered forests and giant redwoods

Rest with me in meadows full of new life and spring blossoms

Dance with me in the blue-white snow and keep me warm through icy nights

Sit with me in color-washed sunsets

Hold my hand and unfold yourself to me and me alone

You are my familiar

I know your face better than I know my own

Your habits and your hidden smiles

Your moments, your desires, your fears,

Your Music only I can hear

You are my champion, my lover, my friend

You are my mystery and my everyday

You are my familiar. Today, Tomorrow,

Forever.

Descending Hell

By Joshua Fredricks

Spotlight. Upper left table

I was in Kuwait in '92. Shot three times. Twice in the leg, once in the chest. When I got back I decided to help others like me adjust to life. Help them re enter normalcy. I can't tell them that it doesn't get better. Ever.

Go to dark.

Spotlight. down right table

The great depression wrecked any chance of a job I could have gotten. So I started hanging out in the bars. Around that time I started to notice signs asking for young people to enlist. So I did. If I had known what it would do to me, I would have taken my chances back in the States. Drinks from Mason jar. That and invested in corn.

Go to dark.

Spotlight. down left table

20,000,000 gallons. 6542 sprayings. 400,000 deaths. I only did nine missions. That amounts to over 500 people that I alone have killed. Men, women, children. Only a tenth of which I was ordered to. I don't know how to sleep some nights. I see 500 screaming bodies. Faceless, but they're there you know? Then a friend showed me this *hold up weed* It helps me endure. *Go to dark*

Spotlight. upper right table

When the war finally came around here, I gladly enlisted. I wanted my

chance to kill those bastards. The thing is, I only got six of them. Wasn't enough, and I still had a need for blood. I was discharged, but I still wanted more. I was promised the chance to kill some people, and I hadn't had my fill yet. So I went home, found a girl, and started on her. *Go to dark*

Spotlight. center table

So much blood. Even a year later, it's just a blur. I was on watch duty at our camp. I saw a woman in black walking slowly up the hill. I got out my binoculars to get a better look. I saw a long barrel, poking out from beneath her arms. I woke up a friend just to double check what I saw. He told me to take it. I aimed for her chest, and I didn't miss.

A year later, I wish that I had. The bullet went straight through her six month olds head, and into her chest. As soon as I got home they told me that it would go away. I've put the barrel of a gun in my mouth what seems like a thousand times. I never can pull the trigger though. I'm not sure if that makes me a coward, or a hero. That feeling. After you kill someone so young. It never goes away. Ever. *Stands up. Taps plays.* Well I have to go see some friends now. *Go to dark. Walk off stage. Gunshot*

Gift or Curse

By Lee Miller

The bell sounds and echoes.

Pictures casted onto the back of the eyes,

Glowing, burning, penetrating deep through and into the creative lobe of the brain.

The vision swells and expands,

ballooning out, sucking up the center of imagination and concentration

forcing pressure on the vulnerable structure until it finally engulfs the sense of consciousness.

Fighting for focus is futile.

The image has a plan of its own.

It wants to be born, to live, to breathe the air through the pen that has been stuck up its nose

pumping ink into its body, inflating its lungs.

The design throws itself out and onto the paper.

The artist, with what seems to be little control, guides the pen around the page

extracting the daydream.

Letting it run out of the ears, eyes, and fingertips of the puppet.

Now, finally off ventilation, it speaks for itself and allows the servant to return to the duties of servanthood

until the bell is rung again...ring.

OUR NEW RELIGION?

By Esther Saylor

It was waiting on the doorstep when I arrived home- -a big box labeled Septic Savior. I was taken aback. Somehow it seemed a bit too sacrilegious, too incongruous. To me, “savior,” is a powerful word steeped heavily in historical Christianity. A born-again, goin’ to heaven, personal word. And, anyhow, does a septic system need saving?

Apparently so. My husband, Arthur, was taken in by a very perky telephone evangelist touting the values of Septic Savior. Without it, our lives would certainly be destined for hell- - an everlasting (and smelly) damnation. Other products, she claimed, might seem to have the answer for our septic woes, but only Septic Savior is the real entrance through the pearly gates to an eternity of sewage peace and harmony.

So, Arthur bought a lifetime supply. It came with a sacred script of how to administer the rites of the Church of the Septic Savior, and how often and with what anthems of praise when partaking of its saving benefits. The ritual is to be performed monthly, with incantations, and with the pouring of water. While Arthur is but one steward of the product, he has taken on full status as lay leader and Deacon of Decontamination. How tithing, offerings, sacrifice and ceremony will come into play, I have not yet witnessed- -and I’m just a little afraid to think about it. In fact, I may return to a life of prayer and meditation (or medication) myself if the testimonials get any more glowing.

And not only is he a true believer but also he has now begun to

proselytize. He took a sample to our daughter along with the holy writ of instructions and begged her to accept it as her new way of life. I suspect Art would send it to our son, Max, overseas in Germany if he thought it would pass through the German postal and customs workers. I know for a fact that the full Wrath of Max would descend upon us like the galloping horsemen of the Apocalypse if our son had to go before the humorless European customs agents to claim the package. These stern, unforgiving officials could well deem the chemicals contained in the box to be weapons of mass destruction, --or is that weapons of Mass desecration? And, of course, with a Ph.D. in Physics, Max probably could turn the "Savior" into something lethal.

In my husband's defense, I will admit that the wages of septic sin are dire. I remember a past experience with the satanic sewer gods. I was giving a bridal shower for my niece. In my living room were 20 women, dressed to the hilt, drinking some fruity punch and getting ready to observe the opening of beautifully pastel wrapped presents, when the future Mother-in-Law came thundering into the room announcing loudly that the potty had overflowed and water (?) was running down the hall. In my defense, I have always suspected there had been some vast ecumenical movement there, but it was not the time or place to raise up her sins before the multitude. It was my duty to just clean up and add stronger ingredients to the fruit punch. (Lighting the altar candles helped as well.)

I suppose I can hope that our personal Septic Savior will help us pass through the valley of the shadow of waste products and lead us unto the still

waters. I am pretty tolerant about other people's religious practices. But if you see Arthur knocking at your door, pamphlets in hand, you might think twice about answering.

Amen.

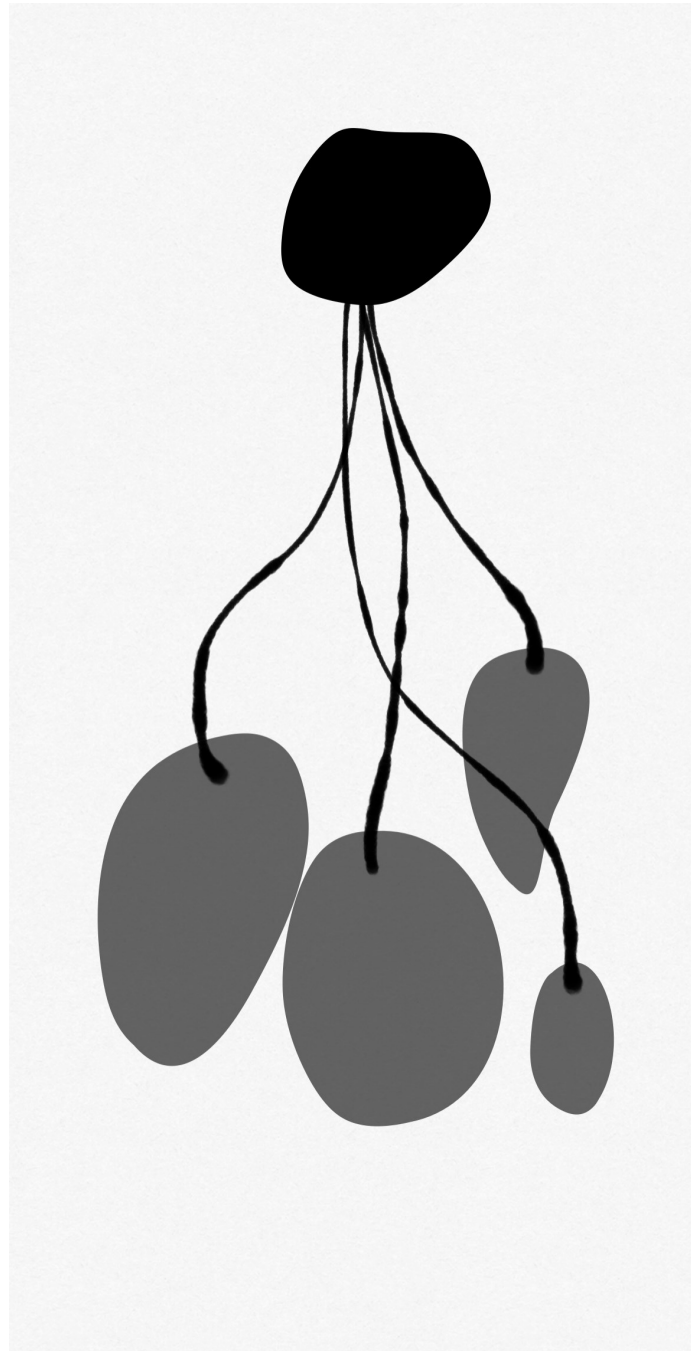


Image by Alyssa Rose Bliven



Picture by Mollie McReynolds

Submission to Prairie Ink

We are a literary annual that welcomes art, creative non-fiction, drama, fiction, graphic narratives, literary criticism, and poetry.

We serve as a vehicle for emerging writers who attend Barton Community College or reside in one of the seven counties within Barton's service region.

The editors of Prairie Ink encourage submissions from Barton students, alumni, and community members from Barton's seven-county service area: Barton, Pawnee, Rice, Rush, Ellsworth, Russel, Stafford; and from students enrolled at the Barton Fort Riley Campus and Grandview Plaza Outreach location.

To check out submission guidelines or to submit your work, please email the editors at prairieink@bartonccc.edu.

Acknowledgements

Prairie Ink 2022

Barton Community College

245 NE 30 RD

Great Bend, KS 67530

620-792-2701

prairieink@bartonccc.edu

Barton Community College Board of Trustees

Gary Burke

Carl Helm

Mike Johnson

Don Learned

John Moshier

Cole Schwarz

Barton Community College Administration

Dr. Carl Heilman, President

Elaine Simmons, Vice President of Instruction

Brian Howe, Dean of Academics

Stephanie Joiner, Executive Director of Foundational Education

Editorial and Production Staff

Scott McDonald, Editor

Justin Brown, Editor

Sheyene Foster Heller, Editor

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, mechanical, electronic, recording, photocopying, or otherwise, without prior written permission by Barton Community College.

To provide equal employment, advancement and learning opportunities to all individuals, employment and student admission decisions at Barton will be based on merit, qualification, and abilities. Barton County Community College does not discriminate on the basis of any characteristic protected by law in all aspects of employment and admission in its education programs or activities. Any person having inquiries concerning Barton County Community College's no-discrimination compliance policy, including the application of Equal Opportunity Employment, Titles IV, VI, VII, IX, Section 504 and the implementing regulations, is directed to contact the College's Compliance Officer, Barton County Community College, Room A-123, Great Bend, Kansas 67530, (620) 792-2701. Any person may also contact the Director, Office of Civil Rights, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC 20201.



Barton's Mission and Vision

Vision

Barton Community College will be a leading educational institution, recognized for being innovative and having outstanding people, programs, and services.

Mission

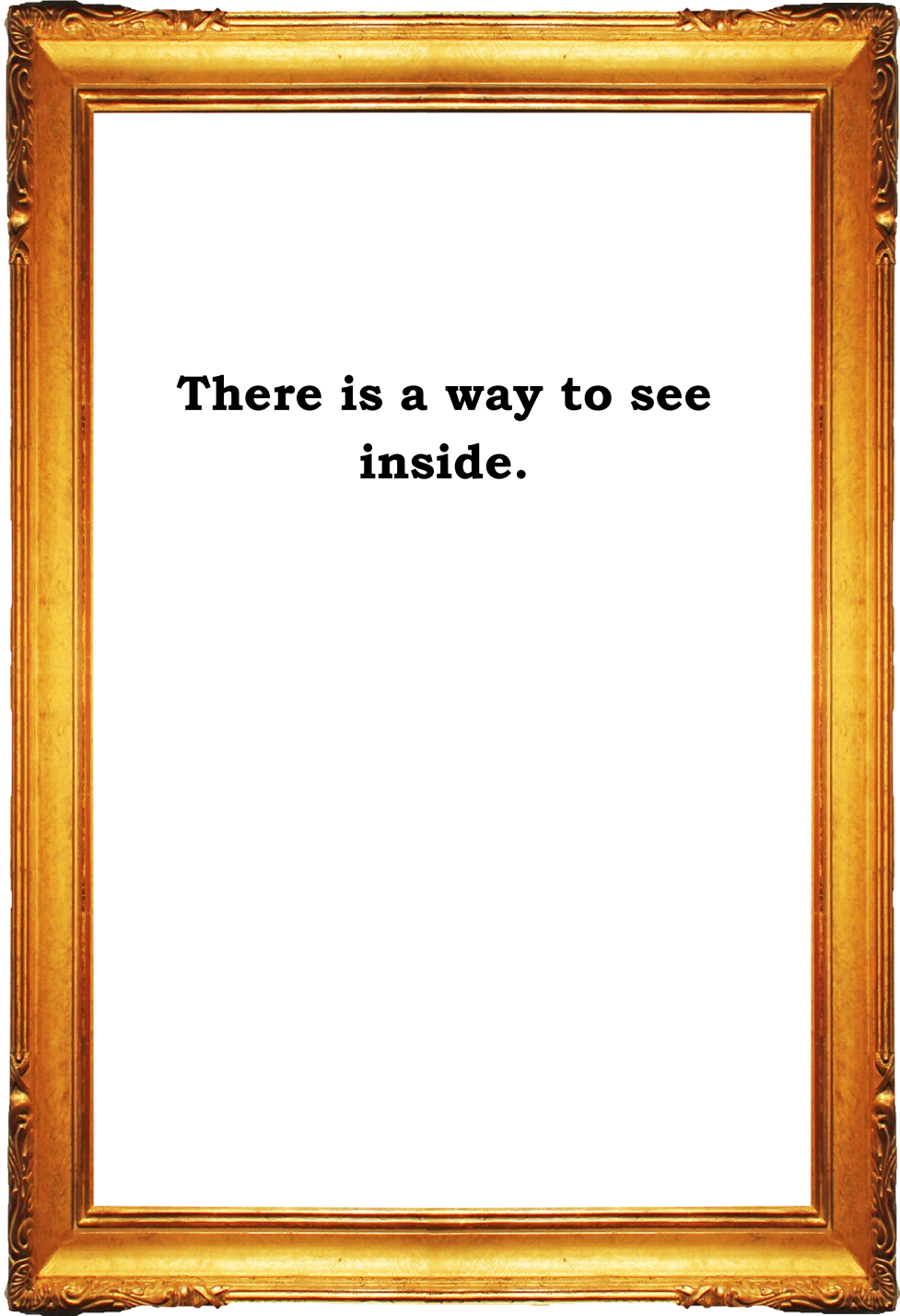
Barton offers exceptional and affordable learning opportunities supporting student, community, and employee needs.

ENDS

1. Fundamental Skills
2. Work Preparedness
3. Academic Advancement
4. Barton Experience
5. Regional Workforce Needs
6. Barton Services and Regional Locations
7. Strategic Planning
8. Contingency Planning

Core Priorities (Values)

Drive Student Success
Cultivate Community Engagement
Optimize the Barton Experience
Emphasize Institutional Effectiveness



**There is a way to see
inside.**