

NUGGET^s

a literary and art e-magazine

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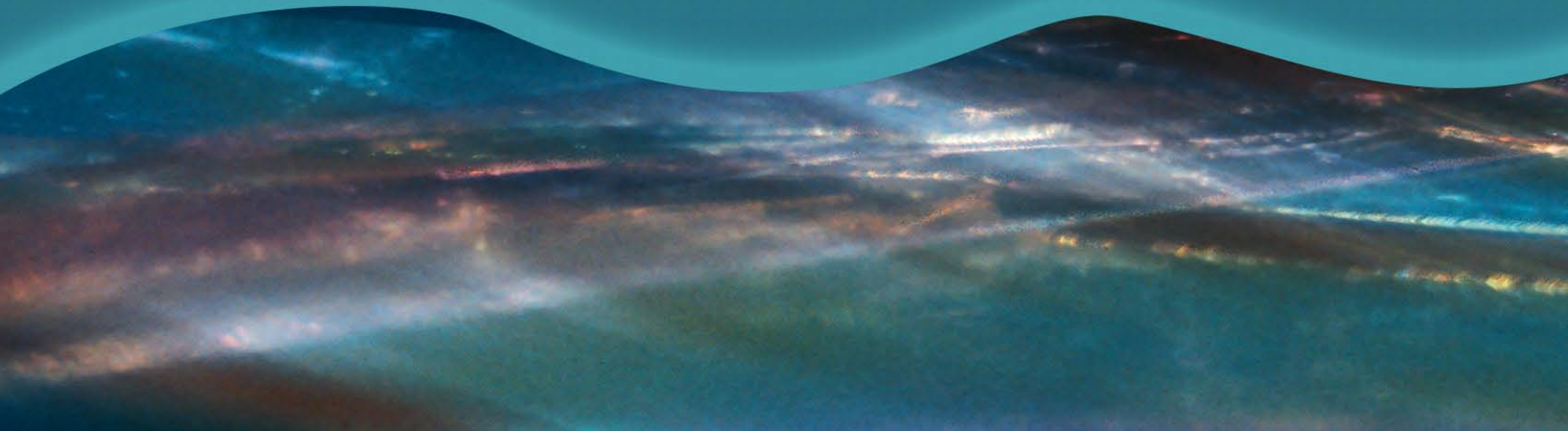


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This collection from writers with other works in this year's NUGGETs will, we hope, whet your appetite for more. The two poems celebrate both human and bird participation in life, while the two stories explore the outer and inner implications of death.

Prairie Fantasies, by Franci Louann

Franci contributes one poem celebrating the mystery of love to our sampler, and three others to the December 2005 issue. Since age twelve she's been holding a pen with deliberate intent. Some of her early poems were included in Dorothy Livesay's last anthology, and are now in the permanent collection of the Vancouver Public Library. Franci edits a poetry column for the *Canadian Unitarian*, and hosts Third Thursday Poetry Plus "downstairs" at the Javanet in Vancouver. At long last, her work as a dental hygienist is inspiring poetry (see Quills). Franci just bought a pink python (polyurethane) cowgirl hat, drives a golden Pony, and says she could live in Calgary.

Common Casualties, by Brendan Main


Brendan Main is so deep in his graduate work in English Literature at Trent University that he only surfaced long enough to send the essay enclosed. His work is featured in the January and later issues of NUGGETs.

Passing through Estragon, by G. P. Keith

G. P. Keith's short story featured in this sampler [as well as two others in the regular 2005 issues of NUGGETs] are part of a backlog of fiction just beginning to see the light of day, and will bask in full sunlight once published this spring in the collection *Journeys into Darkness and Light*. Why now? Mr. Keith hopes that at some point the various bits of education and experience he has acquired both in British Columbia and Ontario will come together and make some kind of sense. Storytelling helps with that process.

Merlin, by Mei Lin

Her Chinese name evokes the mystery of the forest interior where the bird lives its free life unseen. Her Canadian life follows the same migratory pattern of here and there, up and diving down.



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PRAIRIE FANTASIES

teepee? wigwam?
darkness

on furs and skins
stretched over branches

smoke stinging nostrils
hearing voices outside

I welcome you
my lover

later
on a travois

furs and skins again
stretched between poles

behind a horse
a rough road

we meet again
my lover



© Franci Louann

Passing through Estragon

© G. P. Keith



forced to display : michael battenberg

It began with a timeless and pleasant sensation of gentle, sea-like floating that was so minimal and distant as to be something near oblivion. This, however, ended when a terrible, agonizing spasm racked her mind and body, after which there was more of a real sense of existence. This existence, however, she did not welcome, for it was composed of a painfully unpleasant confusion of half-formed thoughts, as well as an aching awareness in virtually every part of her body. The small degree of volition that was available to her, therefore, she used to seek a way of returning to the floating bliss.

Let go, she told herself, it is finished, it is all finished.

She pushed away from mental and physical awareness, and gradually felt herself begin to sink towards the floating sensation. But then came a second spasm, even more unpleasant than the first. The aftereffects of this were an increase in both the confusion and physical pain. She felt her throat convulse in the feeble attempt at a groan. More strenuously did her thoughts seek to assemble coherent ideas, and more terrible and real did

the forces seem that tore away at every such attempt. Again her volition sought to let go, to allow these forces to tear her mind into meaningless fragments that could then be reabsorbed by the nothingness around her. Yet her awareness, gaining strength, was now not so easily directed towards self-destruction. Instead, it fought her volition to find a way up and out, towards mastery rather than oblivion.

And now came a third spasm, which released sufficient energy that it made surrender impossible. Her mind grew aware of these spasms as something meaningful. The idea of rhythm intruded itself, and with it, time. She found herself expecting the next spasm, and when this came, the sense of mastery, minute as it was, flooded her being with a feeling of joyful triumph. She lay back – conscious now of her body as lying – and allowed the following spasms to pass through her. They became a beat, and she knew with the light of sudden illumination, that the beating was her own heart.

But now a new imperative was forming, like a bubble of need growing inside her. As unpleasant as this was, she

attended its development, the arrival of the crisis, and the result, which was action – lifting her chest. A great flood of energy poured into her as the awareness of the action itself communicated that she was taking a breath. Her chest rose, and then she sighed, letting the air out of her lungs with a sense of relief and release that was a new height of being for her.

Or a *return* to being. This thought came without explanation into her mind. She sought to examine the question and found other questions arriving close on its heels, questions that involved “where” and “how” in various forms. The questions posed themselves, and she waited, heart beating, breath coming regularly now. But no answers were forthcoming. The information was as yet unavailable.

Residual unpleasant thoughts clustered around concern regarding her state of ignorance. She felt unsafe as a consequence, and from this fear her mind sought outward, towards her external senses. She was aware of hard surfaces pressing into her from below. The revelation came that her right foot was trapped beneath her left thigh, and she sought to move this. She strained, but her legs felt as though made of stone. She then turned her will towards her arms, and found herself able to shift these minimally. The fingertips of her left hand pressed against the same hard surface on which she lay. With an effort of will, she moved her fingers – hard and smooth and cold. The idea “stone” came to her, and she felt this was right. Moving her fingers along the stone surface, she noted its curvature. She shifted her arm sufficiently to allow the fingers to slide over the stone surface. They came to an indentation, followed by another rising stone surface.

Cobblestones, came the thought. *I am lying on cobblestones.*

And now she set her memory the task of answering the “where” question. *Where am I?* No answer. *Alright*, she thought. *Who am I?* A slight hesitation, then the word – Gail. *I am Gail, Gail...something*, came the thought.

Gail, now self-identified, allowed herself to concentrate on the success of this identification; she was Gail ... something, but for now, Gail would do.

She moved her left hand down to touch her trapped foot, but it was still too weak to shift the rock-like heaviness

of her leg. It was at this point that the first sound came to her ears. It was the sound of footsteps. Although relatively distant, they sounded loud in the echoing stillness. Moreover, they were getting louder; they were approaching. With a massive effort of will borne of the sudden stab of fear that gripped her at this realization, Gail managed to turn her head on the stone surface. Her eyelids flickered open, and a terrible explosion of light flooded her brain. Hastily, she closed her eyes again, but retained the visual impression of a bright light at some distance, and a silhouette approaching.

The footsteps came close and then stopped. Gail forced her eyes open again, and saw that the silhouetted figure was completely blocking the source of light. It was a man, standing over her. She closed her eyes again and was immersed in fear, wondering what was happening and what, if anything, she might do. Then came the feel of hands slipping gently beneath her shoulders and thighs. Gail felt herself being lifted up into the man’s arms. The sensation of movement was disorienting. She felt her head lolling against the man’s shoulder as he began to carry her, his footsteps accompanying the jostling movement she felt.

After perhaps a minute, Gail experimented with opening her eyes again. Her surroundings were now dark, only dim surfaces being illuminated. It was, she realized, night. From the odd angle at which her head hung, she thought she saw various shop fronts which they were passing by. Then a streetlamp came into view and she had to close her eyes again. She kept them closed, focusing instead on the sensation of motion, and on the sounds of the man’s footsteps.

At some point the man turned and continued walking. Gail imagined that he had turned at an intersection. He continued to carry her in this new direction for some time, and then turned again. The sound of the man’s footsteps – or, rather, their echos, changed. He was moving in a more confined space now. She opened her eyes and saw a wall quite close. Then came a second change – the footsteps were hollower; the man was walking on wood rather than stone. Moreover, he was climbing, the vertical jostling Gail felt made her sure of this. He was ascending a set of stairs. When she opened her eyes again she saw a banister wobbling past her gaze, and beyond this the slanted surface of a roof gable coming into view. Then the man was turning and there was some awkward, complicated business of jostling and

grunting from him, which concluded with the sound of a door opening and the feel of a wooden doorpost gently brushing past her head as she was carried in.

A pause followed. Then there was the intensity of a bright light right above her. Gail clenched her eyes shut. The man carried her several further steps, then deposited her a little awkwardly onto a hard wooden chair. She would have fallen due to her inability to control her muscles sufficiently to maintain a sitting position, but the man shifted her until she half lay, feet spread before her, head propped up against one corner of the chair back.

Eyes still closed, Gail heard the scraping of another chair and the sounds of someone sitting down. This was followed by absolute silence. The absurd awkwardness of her physical sitting position made Gail feel like a Raggedy Anne doll, and she strove with all her might to shift herself into a more seemly and comfortable pose. This effort of will occupied her for the next several minutes, during which there were no further sounds from the man. Finally, she managed to shift herself by gripping the sides of the chair seat on either side and pushing herself back with both arms and legs. Having achieved a sufficient degree of comfort, she held herself in place carefully, still leaning heavily against the back of the chair.

She had caught glimpses of the room during this struggle, but now she opened her eyes decisively and looked around her with a timid curiosity. The room appeared to be a kitchen. There was something odd about it, but this she did not clearly delineate. She turned and looked towards the man. He sat unmoving, about five feet away from her, regarding her in silence. Slightly alarmed at first by this regard, she scanned his face for any sign of malevolent intent, but quickly dismissed this possibility with a great sense of relief. The man in fact gave off such a palpable air of defeat that she felt that he could never be a threat to her, even in her relatively helpless situation. He was of average build, but the way in which he sat was somehow pathetic, and his mouth curved down in a sad line. Even more striking was the expression in his large, soulful eyes, which registered an extraordinary degree of emotional suffering.

Gail gave him a tentative smile and took a deep breath. The man continued to look at her for several seconds before returning her smile. His smile, however, was so

sad as to make him look still more pathetic. The look shifted Gail's conception of her situation to one in which any initiative leading to a desirable solution would have to come from her.

"Excuse me," she said, her voice a little raspy and uncertain, "but where am I?"

This question only seemed to deepen the look of despair in the man's face. His eyes drifted from hers towards the window beyond her. Gail managed to turn her head so she could look over to the window as well. Outside it was night, and the lights of various buildings could be seen stretching into the distance. When she worked her head back around to look at the man, she saw that he was regarding her again. When he caught her gaze, he looked away into the middle distance.

"Estragon," he said, and shrugged his shoulders. Then he sighed and seemed to sink an inch or two further down in his sitting position. Finally he seemed to pull himself together and his eyes focusing on hers for a second. But then he looked away again.

Gail felt the beginnings of irritation. She turned to survey the room, and noticed now in detail the odd features that had registered before only as vague impressions. The floor on which her bare feet were resting, for example, was comprised of large stone slabs that appeared to be very worn, like the steps of some ancient cathedral that had seen centuries of use. The counter opposite the table, however, appeared to be covered with a kind of formica that was chipped in places. Moreover, the cupboards above and below this counter, also heavily chipped, showed pressboard beneath a cheap wood veneer. Wallpaper covering the wall behind the man was torn here and there and did not suit a kitchen at all, having a rich red and gold paisley design, and looking very expensive. The ceiling was painted beige, but the paint – if it was paint – had run before drying, forming odd hanging droplets here and there. As well there were a number of black, round smudges in it. In the very center of the ceiling a light hung, a sphere of translucent glass containing an incandescent bulb.

Lowering her eyes, Gail saw the table next to which she was sitting also had a formica top. The pattern was that of a 1950's diner, with gold speckles. The edges of the table were of rolled chrome. Running the fingers of one hand along this cool metal surface, she turned to look

again at her host, and raised her eyebrows, intending to ask for further information. But before she could utter a word, he rose from his chair.

“Tea first,” he said, and went over to the counter, picked up a kettle, filled this with water at the sink, and then plugged it into a wall socket. He performed each movement with a sort of methodical lethargy. Gail watched him, perplexed and fascinated, as he opened the cupboard and extracted two cups, a glass sugar bowl and a silver cream jug. Then he went over to the white fridge that stood next to the counter and got out milk, which he poured into the jug. Finally he lifted down a teapot from atop of the fridge and put two teabags from a small tin container into it. By the time he had done all this, the kettle was whistling. He poured boiling water over the teabags, then put everything on a silver tray which he took down from atop of the fridge as well. He carried the laden tray to the table.

“Shall I be mother?” he said, an odd, twisted half-smile playing about his mouth. Gail didn’t know how to reply, but he poured the tea anyway, adding milk and sugar to each cup. He placed one cup near her and then retreated with the other to his chair.

The smell of the tea was delicious. Gail reached out towards the cup hesitantly. Sensitive to the heat of the porcelain, she lifted her cup carefully by the rim with thumb and two fingers. When she raised the cup to her lips, the aroma filled her nose and she sipped the tea, savouring the exquisite sensation of heat and flavour. Closing her eyes, she swallowed, and then carefully took another sip.

When she had sipped about half of the contents of the cup, she replaced the cup on the table and looked across at the man. She found herself smiling at him in thanks for the tea. The man, however seemed to regard her as though she were miles away from him, and the forlorn expression on his face only deepened.

Gail cocked her head a little to one side. “How did I get here?” she asked.

The man’s gaze drifted down from her face towards the floor. “I found you in the street,” he muttered.

She nodded, but a trifle impatiently. “Before that.”

The man’s eyes shifted back into the middle distance, and he sighed heavily, putting down the cup he was holding onto the floor beside the chair.

“You oozed up,” he said at last.

She stared at the man for a few seconds. Then she asked, “I’m sorry?”

“You oozed up,” he repeated, his mouth twisting slightly in a bitter smile, “through the cobbles.” He made an upward motion with his hands, fingers spread, then added, “Like everybody else.”

A tightness clutched at Gail’s chest. His explanation sounded, on the surface, to be absurd, almost nonsense. Yet at the same time she was aware of the uncomfortable realization inside that somehow suggested “oozing up” was indeed something she had, in fact, done. She remembered the terrible confusion that had so assailed her when she first came to, lying in the street. She felt again the sense of helplessness. The room started to spin around. Hastily she closed her eyes and gripped the edge of the table, gritting her teeth and willing the fainting sensation to go away.

After several seconds it died down and she found herself, eyes still closed, sliding her fingers along the table’s metal edge and across its surface. Her fingertips touched the curve of her teacup and, feeling its warmth, she cradled the cup in her hands and felt a return of stability. Lifting the cup, she took another delicious sip. Then she was able to re-open her eyes and look at the man.

“What do you mean by ‘everybody’?” she asked, her voice a near-whisper.

The man regarded her strangely for several seconds, then looked away and stared at the floor. When he began to speak it was in a low voice, as though he were speaking to himself.

“I go for walks,” he said, his voice sad, resigned, and slightly-choked. “People ... come. They ...” he shrugged without looking up. “They ooze up. They begin – I’ve seen it – they start like a small pool of blackness, like oil or something oozing up between the cobbles. The pool spreads out and fills in, becomes fully shaped, and forms ... a person. And then they’re there.”

The man glanced up at her and cleared his throat, then looked down at the floor again. "They're weak at first. Helpless. I pick them up. I bring them back here and give them tea."

A new and sinister thought began to form in Gail's mind. She pondered it for several seconds before speaking. "And what do you do with them," she asked. "I mean, with the people that you find?"

The man looked at her. There was something horrifying in the complete and utter look of despair with which he gazed at her then. The bleak smile that formed on his lips only made it worse. He shrugged. "I give them tea," he said, gesturing towards his cup. "I listen to their stories."

"You listen," Gail repeated mechanically.

"Yes," he said. "To their stories. They tell me their stories. I listen."

"But," she began, "what happens to them?"

He pursed his lips, and then gave a short, sharp, humourless laugh, like a bark. "They rise up," he said.

Gail tightened her grip on the table's edge at these words. "I beg your pardon?" she said. "I don't understand."

The man's smile became even more twisted. "Oh, you will," he said, his voice choking. "I've seen it. It comes in a rush."

The man raised his eyes, which now held something else, something perhaps like wonder. His voice became animated. "You'll breathe, like – oh, I don't know – like something's been released, like something you've been waiting for all your life. Your eyes will get bright, like you're seeing something wonderful. And then..." He stopped, and his voice choked back into a sob, his head falling forward onto his chest. He remained like this, just breathing for a minute. Then he finished in a low voice: "Then you'll rise up."

Without looking at her, and with slow, resigned movements he brought his hands together, palms touching, then parted them, one going up the other down. When he had done this he seemed to deflate, his arms falling to his knees, his head sinking onto his

chest.

Gail stared at the bizarre figure which sat before her, slightly numbed. What in heaven's name was he talking about? She wanted to shake him, to get answers she suddenly felt were imperative. For a second something like frustrated rage took hold of her and she saw herself striking the man, but then gradually the feeling passed. She continued to look at his motionless figure. A thought occurred to her.

"But what about you?" she asked.

A curious whimper came from the lowered head. Slowly, the man raised his head but still he did not look at her. Instead he stared at the floor. "Me?" he asked wonderingly, as though the concept of self was a new idea for him. "Me?"

"Yes," she said smiling gently and feeling something close to compassion for this curious, pathetic person.

"I..." he hesitated. "I ... remain," he said at last. Then he sighed slowly and at last raised his eyes to hers.

"It's always night here," he said in a quiet, frightened voice. "It's always just been raining. I go for walks. I walk through the empty streets – they go on forever as far as I know. I see the others, too, when I walk. But we never speak; I don't know why. We just don't. Maybe it's because we know that the others ... that they have nothing ..."

He shook himself. "Anyway," he continued. "We avoid each other. No one lives around here for five or six blocks."

"Why?" Gail asked.

"Why?" the man repeated. He shook his head slowly. "We're all waiting. We know. I go for walks. I pick people up. I listen to their stories."

A semblance of dignity beneath the man's suffering now came through with his words. Gail choked back her frustration and willed herself to wait for him to continue.

"I listen," the man repeated, his fists clenched. "I listen."

She looked at him.

“Would you like me to tell you my story?” she asked at last.

The man looked at her and a slight, for the first time genuine, smile curved his lips. He nodded.

“Okay,” Gail said briskly, reaching out mechanically to take a sip of tea, only to discover that the cup was empty. “My parents met at a fair..”

But the man now stood up.

“More tea first,” he said. “You’ll need it,” he added. “It will help.”

As she curiously watched him, he repeated his earlier ritual of preparation, his movements again the same methodical, resigned actions as the first time. Then a light flashed outside the window and she stood up to watch. Outside the dim lights of a vast city extended to dimmed horizons. A second flash appeared somewhere in the middle distance – a bright flare of white light that rose swiftly into the black sky and disappeared.

“What were those flashes?” she asked.

The man merely turned his head and looked out the window. Then he looked at her mournfully but said nothing.

She sat down again and he poured her second cup of tea. Then he reseated himself and looked at her, sad yet expectant.

“Okay,” she said briskly. “Where was I?”

“Your parents met at a fair,” he said.

“Oh, that’s right. Let me see...” And with that Gail began to recount everything of what she remembered or had been told about her early life. Curiously, as she continued, the thread of her talk seemed to bring about a change inside her; something came alive, something expectant and imminent. The man listened intently, his large, sad eyes resting on her face. As she continued, now into her school years, Gail grew less and less aware of him and more caught up in the story of her own life. She heard herself going into increasing amounts of

detail. Yet she felt no fatigue, and the man’s attentive silence did not falter.

She came to the years of her youthful adolescence and finally her early adulthood, a time filled with hope and brightness. She passed these at last and into the years of her marriage and divorce, into the darker, fearful time of her late thirties and the arrival of her fortieth birthday. How many times had she looked into her own past and viewed the pointless wreck of her life, she asked herself? But this time was different. Every memory seemed very real as she told it, more alive than before. And curiously, detail built on detail until it seemed that she was recounting virtually every day, linking together events, people and sequences. At some points she was aware of the man making more tea. He did this several times, but never did the flow of her recollection falter, and the reality of the remembrance increased minute by minute.

Something was emerging from beneath the details, like some vast leviathan rising from the depths of her soul. Only instead of being dark and menacing, it brought an increasing sense of hope and joy as it rose. The threads of her life, the painful incidents, seemed less pointless, less chaotic, less comprising an overall defeat. Instead she could discern patterns of learning – of trying and suffering, yes, but of growing as a result, casting away the false chimeras of tiny, seductive wants, an emergence of something as yet unclear, but wonderful in quality. This rising sense of organicity, of meaning and development came like a warmth to fill her with increasing reassurance.

Now the act of restarting her life in her forties, which she had seen as hollow and bitter, Gail saw for the first time as a breaking out of some earlier stage – a true second beginning, a deepening. The path from which hitherto she had strayed to gather bright flowers of vain and false happiness was again beneath her feet.

At last she came to that final weekend.

She had gone riding as usual. It had been wet and the horse restive and unfamiliar to her. Now time slowed as she recollected. The very air of that final brisk spring morning seemed limned with joy and promise in her mind, every molecule pulsing with reality and life. Each of the horse’s footfalls came to her clear and distinct, the mud splattering her hands and face, each

breath. Had she been distracted? It seemed so, as she now retold the story of that fateful ride. Something beyond the mundane had called to her. It lifted her up as the horse had made that final jump. It was though she could feel the muscles of the horse as it pushed off from the earth. The hedge came forward with sudden and unexpected menace. The horse's hoof caught and it swerved. Down they had come and the horse, landing awkwardly, stumbled. It scabbled to find its footing but she continued to fall, past the neck of the horse, through that bright air, crashing to the ground. There had been the shock of hitting her head and the sudden pain in her neck.

And then nothing.

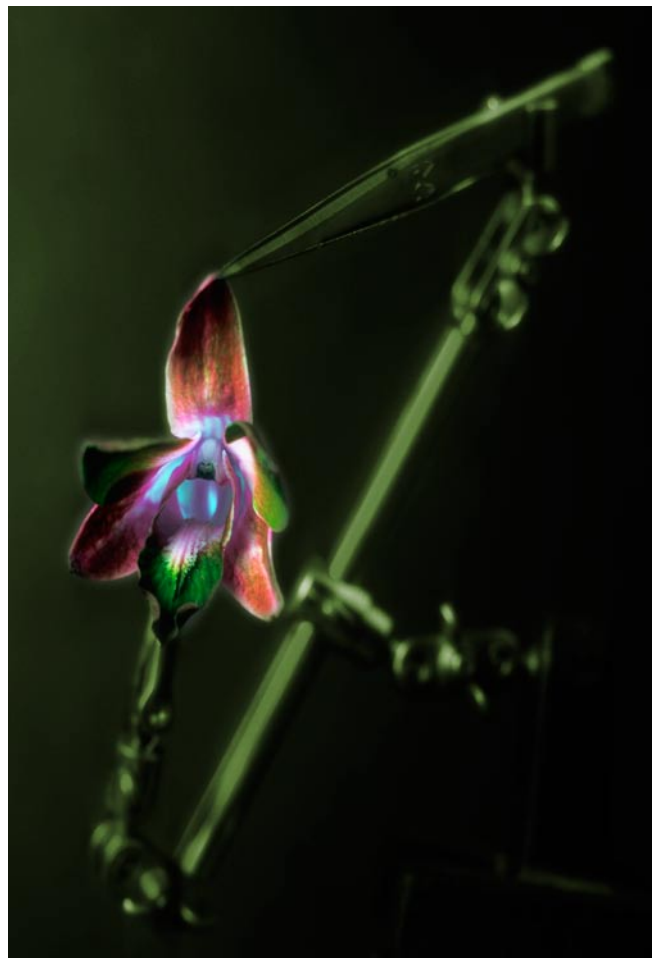
Nothing for a long time... and then the floating movement that presaged her arrival in this strange city.

All this registered at one level as she spoke. At a second level she sensed that truth in its most elemental and profound form was opening up before her. What had been chaos and confusion was now organic growth. And with this realization came joy – a great, vast sea of joy that filled her and buoyed her up. She could see through the walls of this small room. She saw the city spreading out endlessly on all sides. It was, she realized, so very small. And small too, terribly small, was that tiny room. She saw herself standing before the man, still sitting, regarding her with the most extraordinary expression on his face.

Joy continued to build inside and beyond her. She almost laughed at the realization of the falseness of the man's miniscule trap. She had only to say one thing to him and he would burst from it and start to see as she now did. She opened her mouth to speak but in that instant the evolutionary development that her revelation was working in her completed its preparatory stage. She was flooded with light that shone down with intolerable intensity on her from an infinite distance above. To pause now, to turn away from the wonder and beauty of this light was impossible. Lifting herself up, she responded. The room seemed to collapse about her, and with a sigh of bliss she shed the last tie of its limitation, coalesced into a single vertical ray and rose up into the endless brightness that claimed her.

In the small kitchen the man continued to sit, staring at the place where the woman had been moments before. Above him on the ceiling a new burn mark dripped paint. His head sank slowly as the sense of wonder he always experienced at such an ascent left him and he felt the familiar sense of desolation and despair close about him again. After a long time, he raised his head, eyes shiny with unshed tears, mind filled with confusion and pain. Shakily he got to his feet, went to the kettle, and plugged it in. Several minutes later he sat at the chair next to the formica table, teacup held loosely in his motionless fingers.

“Let me see,” he said quietly to the empty room. “My mother and father met at a fair, I think...”



A Graveyard of Faces

© Brendan Main

Some nights I can't sleep. I keep myself up, worrying about this thing or that, my problems becoming convoluted and irreconcilable to my tired mind. I'm hardly unique in this way. There must be a hundred solutions to this problem, most of which go well with tonic. My solution is newer than most of these, but no less effective. I search the Internet aimlessly.

Taking care to avoid my bookmarked sites, I while away the time by following search engines and links, seeing where they take me. This is not some profound search for truth, but a concerted effort to distract myself. The results are often obscure, sometimes bizarre, never uninteresting. After a few hours of such meandering, I conk out like a light.

One marvellous thing about the Internet as a medium is that it will seldom catch you off-guard. Whereas television and radio have the occasional curveball to offer, the Internet is often a much more controlled experience: you know where you're going, you go there, you move on. With an appetite for the regular schlock that crops up so readily online, I found myself unprepared for what I would encounter.

I came across a Washington Post feature entitled "Faces of the Fallen." The site follows the casualty count of American soldiers in Iraq, which stands at 2,061 as of recent reckoning. Though for the most part a standard coverage of the war's statistics, one feature of this site is remarkable: a chronologically anthologized portrait gallery of these fallen soldiers, providing a place of birth, a means of death and a final age. Fuelled by a macabre curiosity I began flipping through these photographs.

Three hours later I was still at it. I had given up any hope of sleep, driven by a commingled sense of shame and duty. These faces provided me with a wholly separate perspective than the one I was used to, and events that would otherwise seem commonplace were thrown into sharp relief. I realized how disassociated I was from the actuality of war. Reading a headline like "seven killed by a car bomb in Fallujah," I would make a mental note, perhaps make mention of it during conversation, and ultimately leave it behind. Here it reads like a mantra: Lance Cpl. Holly Charette, killed by a car bomb in Fallujah. Cpl. Chad Powell, killed by a car bomb in Fallujah. Pfc. Veashna Muy, killed by a car bomb in Fallujah. Seven times, seven names, seven faces. The spectre of seven dead.

I recognize that the news media have a tough time following war. Without caution and compassion, it's easy for media reports of war dead to seem like a number game, the callous math of a zero-sum equation. It's equally easy to focus solely on the icons, boiling down the presence of war into a few digestible portraits. From Jessica Lynch's now-infamous rescue from a hospital in Iraq to the dour pug-face of Lynddie England following the Abu Graib photo revelation to the recent figure of Casey Sheehan, Cindy's valiant, wasted son. It is easier to find these icons (or in the case of Ms. Lynch, construct them) and portray them as symbolic of the experience as a whole. The faces shown on the Post site will never earn this distinction. The soldiers displayed seem eerily common, ranging from acne-ridden youth with wispy moustaches to balding, dough-faced adults. These are not the soldiers of icons - they are people, plain and simple, the sort you'd expect to find working cash at a convenience store or sitting beside you in class.

As I scanned the site, a part of me wanted to disengage myself entirely from this roster. After all, I thought, this is not my war, this is not my nation's war. These are not my brethren. While such an attitude might be maintained elsewhere, here it simply couldn't stand. I felt my politics wash away from me, leaving behind discussions of WMDs, of oil, of shocking and awing, of terror and the terrified. All that mattered here was the litany of names, a story told over and over like a bad joke without a punch line.

Spc. Mathhew Gibbs, 21. Sgt. Jery Ganey Jr., 29. Lance Cpl. Christopher Dyer, 19....

Just war or otherwise, I found myself thinking – 19 is a lousy time to die.

merlin

falcon flee
to the forest

perhaps
you will not live as long

for sure
each day
on the edge of adrenalin
on the edge of existence

but you shall live

fly free of these traces
fly high

dive
die
in the glory of your surging wings

[Mei Lin]

