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First: Yes, you are reading the newest issue of Kansas City Voices. Having gotten to this page, you already know we’ve changed our appearance.

You could refer to our makeover as urban or sophisticated or metropolitan. Whatever the description, the look acknowledges that times—and the media of the times—do change. Ours is a busier world, so it shouldn’t be surprising that the media we consume is visually busier.

Our eyes adjust to these changes. Before Desert Storm way back in the early 1990s, cable news looked fairly bland—’til CNN changed things permanently with a restive style that included ever-present banners across the bottom of the screen and other doodads. It was television for the fidgety, an effort to keep viewers’ hands off the remotes. For another example, take newspapers – or don’t; many people aren’t these days, and the industry is in trouble. But newspapers have tried hard to keep up; the stories are shorter, there are more photos and graphics, more items on each page—quite a difference from the era in which The New York Times was known as “The Gray Lady” for its paucity of pictures.

Good looks, though, get you only so far, even in the media game. Without content, a magazine of literature and art, especially, is doomed. I and my fellow editors believe this issue of Kansas City Voices stands up to what we’ve done previously.

We’re especially proud this issue features three poems by Phil Miller—but it’s a somber occasion as well. I thought of Phil as the godfather of Kansas City poetry, even after he had retired and moved to Pennsylvania. He had a hand in many things, including reading series, and was a mentor to many of us. Phil died on Valentine’s Day. He was not an overly sentimental man—a good poet can’t be. So we won’t call this issue our Valentine to him, though many of us cherished his warmth and good cheer. Elegy? That’s more like it. Phil often wrote of ghosts in his poems. As all good verse does, his poetry will haunt you long after you turn the page.

John Mark Eberhart
VICE PRESIDENT / WHISPERING PRAIRIE PRESS
MANAGING EDITOR / KANSAS CITY VOICES
GHOST IN THE MIRROR
PHIL MILLER

Is it my ghost I see inside the mirror? When I look into his eyes, he stares until I blink as if he holds time inside his gaze. If I turn, he disappears. As I peer at a mole or a new gray hair, the ghost is watching, too, as when the razor rides my face from ear to ear. If I reach out and touch his cheek: cold glass. And yes, if I do a jumping jack, he'll make like Harpo Marx, but if I dance, who leads? And he can't stop this game; time's not the same for us, though I know he's only light captured and rearranged, but he is the ghost of what I was; I mean, he's aged along with me, and cannot tell a lie except the ones I tell to him face to face in the glass, both of us looking curious as ghosts.

STALEMATE
ED COLETTI

Here when the game is done, the last piece moved, the King with no place to go, not dead, not checked, just frozen forever in a limbo of his own creation. No exit. No entrance. No movement. No target. No victim. No attacker. No time. All the others gaping at him here in his cave safe forever in this vacuum-packed cocoon unclear. No loss. No victory. A draw. A stasis. No nourishment. No need.

GARDENS TOUR
THOMAS FOX AVERILL

When I show you my garden, I am giving you a tour of the past. All of my perennials are scavenged. Lilies are easiest to find, growing in ditches all over northeast Kansas or lining what was once the lane to what was once a farmhouse but is now empty space. Orange, like these that line my driveway, are most common, but I have found pink and yellow. I read that 150 years ago, a starving family survived because of lilies. Deer crave the bulbs, and the farmer shot a deer, also starving, who foraged in the bulbs his wife had brought from her mother's garden in Indiana. Once the venison was entirely eaten from brain to hoof jelly, the wife, her family near starvation once again, gave up the sustenance of tradition and beauty for the sustenance of food, digging up and eating all her bulbs.

My lilac, just outside the kitchen door, is a cutting from a sturdy bush planted next to an abandoned and crumbling stone house out on the River Road. I smell its sweet fragrance with the memory of a family who welcomed the same rich scent as they opened their windows to breezes that would soon turn to the blasting heat of summer and the blizzards of winter. Like them, I cherish the moment of calm, of perfect blossom. The lilac's home, now fallen in on itself, has taught me the transience of promise.

Violets are everywhere in the country: blue, pink, white. I have spread them throughout my garden, just as pioneers spread themselves through this country. Violets have survived with more tenacity, more grace.

I have dug the crowns of asparagus, the long rooty bulbs of winter onions, the rhubarb plugs, all brought and cherished, all reminding those people from the past of how much they missed, and yet tried to recreate, their past in their new homes. And now something of their homes makes my home.

Do you see that willow, weeping in the side yard? I cut it from a tree in a darkened woods, next to a foundation filled in with stones and weeds. As I cut away the thick dead branches, searching for a tender green twig that might sprout, I found a small marble stone. Etched into it, the words “Infant” and “Forgiveness.” I nearly loosened it, to plant it here under my willow, but it belonged in the past, that old tree a sentinel to whatever loss the stone represented.

Such loss. So much is lost. But out of loss I have found what grows. You see it here, in my garden.

Oh, and don’t you love that blood red poppy?
Approaching, I saw no hoofs tangled in wire. Pic raised his head a bit at the sound of boots, and then settled again. A cluster of flies retreated, circled, and repositioned around his nose and eyes. I dropped to my knees and swiped the flies away. Pic’s popsicle-blue eye sought me, panic and pain reflected there. I spoke softly, stroked his mane and waved away persistent flies. A quick look showed no splintered legs or visible injury. But he could not stand. I encouraged him, and my horse strained to rise. He lay back; his eyes apologized. The scent of sweat and fear hovered around us in the windless swale.

As a boy I attended a matinee double feature, The Comancheros followed by Old Yeller. After the first feature, in which hundreds of men, women and children were killed, I chomped at the bit to grab my BB gun and blast away. The conclusion of the second film found me vainly trying to hide my tears from my friends who filed out into the sunlight blinking in similar distress. On the way home we chatted up the bloodiest parts to hide my tears from my friends who filed out. On my way I led Pic out of the pasture and up the drive to where Paul always petted our horses. I told him my wife had schooled me on how to make acquaintance with a strange horse, as if I carried handfuls of grain.

I felt more pain from the guilt of not grieving than I felt for the loss. Perhaps my mother’s long illness prepared me. Or like Rhett’s Scarlett, I compartmentalized and would address my loss another day. smiled at me.

We entered the gate, and mother and daughter walked to the barn for tackle. Picasso, a mostly white paint with irregular splatches of deep oak, approached. My wife had schooled me on how to make acquaintance with a strange horse, but before I could begin the ritual, he nuzzled me as if I carried handfuls of grain.

“Pic likes men,” the owner smiled, bringing the owner and me up to her funeral and then regained its frigid hold afterward. It was as if a friend of a friend had passed on. I felt more pain

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FOR PICASSO CONT’D

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Pic and I never rode for ribbons like the rest of my family who competed in shows and trail ride competitions. We rode for pleasure, often on the wooded trails at Middle Creek or LaCygne. Whenever Pic saw me with a saddle, he cantered to the gate, eager to be off. But once on the trail, riding as a family, Pic became our halfway bellwether. He decided the place to turn back, often long before our plans determined. Each ride produced a brief struggle, he trying to reverse course and I commanding otherwise. Our contest became a family ritual, one complete with competitive predictions and laughter. Pic never won a turn-around struggle. He never failed to try.

After midnight of the third day, both of us sleep deprived, exhausted from miles of fruitless walking, the pain became too much for Picasso. Yet he still tried to walk for me. His pain became my agony. Moonlight framed his mismatched eyes as we walked up and down the long drive. And in those eyes I saw that it was time. Nancy phoned Paul, for on his last visit he said to call anytime night or day.

Paul’s Dodge approached the creek bridge that bordered our property, and its headlights, diffused in the low-hanging mist, broadcast a rainbow born of moisture and light. I thought it was abandoned but one day there was an old dog sleeping on a couch on the front porch his back turned to the road as if he’d seen cars his whole life and was no longer impressed.

For days grief, raw and palpable, disassembled me. I could not think straight or sleep or eat. I could not work. At the same time, a vague guilt gnawed at the corners. How could I feel this way about a horse now and not my mother three years dead? What allowed grief to flow so readily for one and not the other? It might have been the element of time and the ability to prepare for my mother’s death.

Or maybe it was me, a twentieth century Gary Cooper walking down Main Street at high noon, unable or unwilling to feel, even at the loss of my mother. My stoic father bred a stoic son, passing on the best and worst of his generation. The father’s generation and his father’s before considered a man weak who displayed emotion. Perhaps the loss of an animal can break down the lifelong barrier some men construct, brick by emotionless brick, and allow the searing pain of grief to cauterize the wound.

I will never forget Picasso. I ride him in my dreams. And he still wants to turn back before we are ready. Today I can open this chest of memories and gaze into his crazy-colored eyes without pain, without catching my breath. The hurt is gone.

I still grieve the loss of my mother in unguarded moments, and touch the guilt of not having mourned more. I suppose I always will.
CHARLES LEGGETT

**LOST LOVE BLUES**

The knife was something that we never used.
Stubble barely showing on my chin
We had five verses. We had ourselves a blues—
No crossroads, but a lamplit avenue
That forked and let its cow-eyed travelers spin,
Conniving with the stubbornness they'd used
To make it matter if not hard to lose.
Hear him say, Can you keep time, boy? If
I got five verses. I got myself some blues
Records, got hindsight I can hear them through,
Got ears for someone's bottleneck slide riff
Sounds just as though the knife we didn't use
Is what he cuts his toenails with. I choose
My records carefully. I like them if
They got five verses. I got myself a blues
Collection. If there's nothing left to lose,
Boy (hear him say), then let the record spin.
The knife is something that you never used,
You got five verses, you got yourself a blues.

---Big Bill Broonzy

Now take a knife: how many things can you do with a knife?
You can cut fish, you can cut your toenails, I seen guys shave
with it, you can eat beans with it, you can kill a man.
You name five things you can do with a knife, you got five verses.
You got yourself a blues.

Saturday I rode my bike to City Market. They have a really exciting program, the SNAP program, where people with food stamps get their cards swiped and then get double the amount of tokens to go buy food. Some things are cheap at City Market and some things are more expensive, but it's worth getting as much as I can carry.

So I bought two pecks of Fuji apples and loaded them on the bike. I can load a lot of stuff on the bike. That day I filled the panniers with baked goods and vegetables, then just put the two big bags of apples on top of the rack and tied it down with inner tubes (bungees for bicyclists).

I rode to where my friends were meeting at YJ’s across from the Arts Incubator for the 3:00 “Explore the Urban Core” bike ride. Pretty often my friends give me flack for carrying lots of stuff on my bike. They especially razzed me about the time I slid two three-pound iron railroad spikes into my panniers to take home for my 9-year old neighbor, who loves railroads. Then I forgot about the spikes and rode around with them in my bags for two weeks till I finally investigated that odd clunking noise.

So I gave all my friends fresh fall Fuji apples before the ride. If you've never had orchard fresh apples, they are incredible. Much better than stored apples. They were so good that my friends kept asking for seconds and thirds as we got further into our ride.

The apples were pretty heavy. Two pecks is a lot of apples. We rode to Kaw Point on the Riverfront Heritage Trail, where we ran into some homeless guys who are my friends. Last week I’d been trading them hot pepper ice cream from Tropicana for beer while they told me about a crocodile that lives in the Kansas River. They’d seen some homeless dogs run over to the river and the dog’s leader ran into the river and started swimming circles and barking around the crocodile, but neither dog nor crocodile got eaten that day. I’m not sure crocodiles can live in our climate but it made a great story, along with the ice cream and beer. The hot pepper ice cream was so hot that even the Cuban and the Mexican had to eat it slowly.

So those were the homeless guys I ran into on the bike ride. They asked me where I was going, because they knew I lived fairly close to the bike bridge where they were hanging out. The Cuban said, “You ought to leave those apples here and just pick them up when you come home. No one will take them. We’ll just see them and say, ‘Oh, some apples,’ and eat a few of them. But I’ll just take them into my house and they’ll mostly be right here when you come back.”

So that’s what I did. I just kept six of the apples with me in my panniers because they were so delicious that my bike friends and I might need them on the rest of our ride. We rode around the rest of the afternoon: to the Mexican restaurant, to my one friend’s house on Paseo to help him carry stuff, to my other friend’s house in North Kansas City for a party, to the overlook on Main, and came back after midnight for the apples.

There they were, minus the 1/2 peck that we and the homeless guys had eaten that day. That’s how we improve our economy—by building local, sustainable livable communities, then just living out enjoyable lives and talking to one another, and making friends with everyone around.

**FRESH FALL FUJI APPLES**

**AND THE HOMELESS GUYS**

**CORINNA WEST**
He had the aura of an angel. *Sí, de un ángel.* The perfect uncle whose kindness never failed him. When he spoke, he spoke with utter humility and kindness. I saw him in a surreal light, a person of utmost dignity and ugliness.

I could not understand why this more than angelic man had been encumbered with a physical appearance that most would turn from. His body was bony throughout; his spindly legs came up to meet the rest of his crooked torso. The skin on his face had turned leathery underneath a black stubble, the face long, complexion dark as strong black coffee.

His unsteady gait and wore the same high-strapped black shoes he had always worn, laces tightly laced around the bulges that served as feet. In his dignity, however, he never took his shoes off or allowed a soul to see his feet bared.

But the eyes: the eyes did not lie. They glowed sure and direct, nestled between the arches of the sharp features that outlined his face. Yes, inasmuch as he lacked the physical attractiveness in the expectations of the day, when his eyes met yours on the occasion they were bloodshot, you immediately forgave whatever indiscretion might have been his only fault. The kindness that emanated made up for his lack of beauty and commanded your rapt attention. His angelic presence made the devil himself fear the goodness inside. The warmth of his character shone from the irises; when they looked into yours, they transformed his face into an essence of purity.

When he slipped a small nip of sweet-scented tobacco under his lip, he moved it around lightly with his tongue, slowly savored it. Now, that habit wasn’t distasteful because he slipped the nip between his lip and tongue with delicate ease and chewed it so inconspicuously that even a discerning eye often missed the action.

So when Casimero Lucero told his stories, occasionally spitting out the bits of tobacco under his lip, the listener heeded only the words coming out of his mouth as his husky voice flowered the air with the scent of his mamá’s geraniums.

It had been his lot. The son who never married, the son with bowed and bent legs, born into a large brood and of them all, the one to inherit the care of his mamá, the son with true countenance. When his mamá died, the 60-year-old Casimero wanted to marry, but the only eligible girl left in town was a mere girl of 24, a homely and fearful girl somewhat slow of mind who had never ventured far from her parents. On the occasion Casimero saw her timidly venturing from the house to tend to her chores, he thought she, too, was in need of taking care of.

Since the custom of an arranged marriage was perfectly normal, her parents saw it as good and fortunate for her, but when the marriage day drew closer, the girl had a sudden awakening. She shed her long skirt and black shawl, snipped the long tresses that had always lain on her shoulders, donned a pair of Levi jeans she borrowed from her father’s closet, and ran away, ending Casimero’s chances of any happiness he might have longed for.

The very next year, on the first day of July, my dark angel was found dead in his little house, lying on his bed fully dressed, his eyes closed and hands clasped in prayer. They say that when they buried him, his body permeated such a lovely scent, some said of roses—the scent of dead saints—yet others said it was definitely a scent of sweet tobacco.

He took his place beside the grave of his mamá. *La señora* would no longer have someone to care for and water the geraniums around her grave. It was his lot, they said, the lot that made him a saint.
I NOW PRONOUN YOU: MAN AND LIFE

He we I

The hand touched me there and I said “No!”

My living room rang with the outrage and he knew it meant it which is why he didn’t stop and why I didn’t want him to and I fought and fought and fought with myself. I lost. Which meant I won.

“No secret now, huh?” he chuckled, my apple offerer. I ate of his fruit. I knew the forbidden. I did not die.

Later, in the bedroom, he spooned me, ill fitting because of the obvious. Two yins, no yang. The curve that isn’t meant to be, but is. Are we the sound of one hand clapping?

“No, not secret. I hate you.” I pulled his hand to my lips, kissed it, bit it. He laughed at me. Damn something wrong.

“Nothing,” I say too quickly. Exposed, I drink to my clock.

“Stephen, what’s wrong?”

“Is there something on your mind?”

“Nothing.”

“Then what? Are you seeing another woman?”

“I’m just tired, let’s go back to the apartment.” I run over her with comforting lies, speeding on the fuel of cliché, foot pinned to the pedal by my wish to avoid hurting her. We fake love that night. It’s work to get aroused, to begin, to finish. Our sex smelled like goodbye.

A month later, the end. She cries. She doesn’t understand. I didn’t. Not really. Or at least I chose not to. Until

He we I

Our first trip to the City, as they like to call it. The dipping streets and rollercoaster hills and tilt-a-whirl thrill of holding hands, in public, and no one rolls an eye. I haven’t heard the word “fag” or “queer” all week, except for the fags and queens calling each other that. It’s almost like saying “I love you” all the time. No wonder blacks call each other niggah so much. They made it their word. You’re in the club, niggah. Welcome to the gang, fag.

I might just love here. San Francisco is the quilt sewn by grandma’s hand thrown onto her grandson’s bed with no questions asked. Just squares and squares of color and pattern and no two exactly alike and most not alike at all and as the fog rolls in from the bay and curls down the hills like your mother’s hair when you were young it all comes together and you’re breathless with your own life.

It’s only a vacation, and we treat it like a honeymoon, he and I.

It ended. We came back to a home that wasn’t. We retreated into our personae non gratifying.

It’s only a vacation, and we treat it like a honeymoon, he and I.

I would have given anything to see him again.

“Wouldn’t you rather….” I ran a foot up his calf, seeking his thigh, seeking his secret. He kicked me hard.

“Goddammit, not here.” He ate his salad. I tore the muscle off my salmon and hated him by the mouthful. We left, shook hands like business associates outside the restaurant, and I refused to see him again.

I threw away my life, two if you count hers, for him. How could he hide me now, stow me away with his underwear and socks in a drawer of anonymity? I wanted to kill him. I wanted to love him. I could do neither.

Me I myself

Time is a pitcher with a hole. It is never filled. There is little to do at work but the work, and into it creeps my revolt. At home I watch my favorite shows and want to scream at my favorite characters. Music tells me lies about love, and characters. Music tells me lies about love, and lies about hate, because they don’t know what it is to love what you hate and hate what you love. My distractions disturb me, always leading me back.

The mirror has thinned me, given me sallow cheeks. I have pouches of Merlot beneath my eyes; ah, that’s where it goes when the bottle tilts empty. Drinking opens my doors, makes me feel worthy, light, beautiful, until that one glass chances to end. Time is a pitcher with a hole. It is never filled. There is little to do at work but the work, and into it creeps my revolt. At home I watch my favorite characters. Music tells me lies about love, and lies about hate, because they don’t know what it is to love what you hate and hate what you love. My distractions disturb me, always leading me back.

I used to be handsome. The problem was, I discovered I’m special too, in a way that Mom would not find attractive.
my future has been folded wrong, and now none of the roads connect to where they were supposed to end.

My mother calls. She is a patient woman, remorseless in her ability to wait. She will not leave a message; she will only redial. Defeated by the ring, I answer.

“How is Cecile?” she asks. Her innocence, her ignorance, saws a hole through my chest.

“I told you, Mom, we broke up.”

“Oh, that’s right. So who are you seeing now?”

“No one.” I wasn’t. Anonymous sex isn’t seeing anyone, not even yourself, so why mention it? Honesty is the thermometer, not the temperature, so I spoke tepid truths to her. She accepted them without comment.

“You’re a handsome boy, you’ll find someone special.”

I used to be handsome. The problem was, I discovered I’m special too, in a way that Mom would not find attractive. I don’t know if it was the special, or the worry, or the hiding, that sucked the attractive right out of me and I felt ugly when we spoke. I don’t tell her this. I prefer the way she still sees me. We hang up, and the plump grunt of a cork fills my glass, empties my thoughts.

Sleep on the couch again and in the morning rise stinking of stale Shiraz and fresh regret.

Older. Gentler. Not whom I would have chosen at all.

He picked me up in a gay bar in San Francisco, how redundant, and said I had drunk too much.

Most gay men my age didn’t believe in too much of anything. They flitted and pranced and looked like tortured Lucille Balls with too loud laughs and too loud hair and too hard pricks and too little love. I was drowning in this desert.

So he said, “You look like shit.”

I said, “You look like my grandfather, so fuck off, pops.”

He replied, “No, I mean on the inside. How can you hurt so much and still stand?”

No breath. No noise. Just his eyes. Did he really see me?

“I hate you,” I said.

“Wrong pronoun at the end there.” He flipped some money on the bar, absolving the tab of its many sins. “Come, let’s talk.”

He walked out without looking back.

Thank God, a moment or two later, so did I.

A month or two later I moved in. It’s a great condo. We don’t party much, unless you count caiparinà’s on the deck with kebabs and horseradish-wasabi mustard. He says my cooking will kill him. I laugh.

But in my heart: he must never die.

He had called her when I was out of the room, then found me and handed me the phone first and the bastard said “It’s your mother.”

I hadn’t talked to her in a year, since I’d moved to The City, to him. I didn’t want to hear her voice. Too much there, of old me; too big a crack to fill.