

# KANSAS CITY *Voices*

---

A P E R I O D I C A L   O F   W R I T I N G   A N D   A R T

---

FEATURING PUSH CART PRIZE NOMINEES BARBARA CROOKER, DYLAN GILBERT AND CHARLES LEGGETT / WITH POEMS BY PHIL MILLER

---

VOLUME 9 / 2011

\$10.00



VERTICAL RISING/ JANET SATZ

# KANSAS CITY VOICES

## VOLUME 9 / 2011

### poetry

**GHOST IN THE MIRROR**  
PHIL MILLER / 6

**STALEMATE**  
ED COLETTI / 6

**A HOUSE IN RIDGELY**  
AMANDA HEMPEL / 11

**YOU**  
ANNE WICKLIFFE / 11

**LOST LOVE BLUES**  
CHARLES LEGGETT / 12

**AWAY IN THE MANGER**  
SUSAN WHITMORE / 20

**FLOWER**  
LACIE CLARK / 23

**INVOICE**  
BARBARA CROOKER / 26

**DRAWN TO PICASSO**  
VIRGINIA LORE / 29

**THE BEGGARS OF  
PUERTO VALLARTA**  
ROBERT T. CHRISMAN / 39

**THE SECRET FRENCHMAN**  
TIMOTHY VOLPERT / 39

**ON MY LAST MORNING**  
MARIA VERES / 53

**THE FLOWERS OF HER  
DECEMBER**  
JEFFERY ALFIER / 53

**WE BUILD A SMALL CITY  
WITH OUR BODIES**  
MELISSA SEWELL / 59

**OUTSIDER**  
JAN DUNCAN-O'NEAL / 59

**IT'S MONDAY MORNING**  
BARBARA CROOKER / 62

**SALOME DISGUISED  
AS A SERVANT**  
DEBORAH KROMAN / 62

**SLOW DANCE**  
STELLA ROBBINS / 63

**DAMN YOU**  
PHIL MILLER / 63

**LIFE AFTER DEATH**  
PHIL MILLER / 73

**prose**

**GARDENS TOUR**  
THOMAS FOX AVERILL / 7

**FOR PICASSO**  
JACK KLINE / 8

**FRESH FALL FUJI APPLES AND  
THE HOMELESS GUYS**  
CORINNA WEST / 13

**THE SCENT OF DEAD SAINTS**  
GLORIA MARTINEZ ADAMS / 14

**I NOW PRONOUN YOU:  
MAN AND LIFE**  
MARK L. GROVES / 16

**MEMORIES OF KANSAS**  
JUDITH COPEK / 21

**TREES AND MEMORIES**  
PRISCILLA WILSON / 24

**A ROUTINE FOR LIAM**  
DYLAN GILBERT / 27

**KALIA**  
DEVYANI BORADE / 30

**THE EARLY WORM  
CATCHES THE BIRD**  
ANNE MUCCINO / 34

**MOTHER AND THE TIN MAN**  
PEG NICHOLS / 36

**SHAVE AND A HAIRCUT**  
JOE BENEVENTO / 40

**UNCLE MARKWEEZE'S  
STORY OF EASTER**  
ROBERT T. CHRISMAN / 42

**TANGO FOR FRANKIE**  
DAWN DOWNEY / 46

**CANDY GIRL**  
ERICA L. WILLIAMS / 49

**THE BABY**  
EVAN GUILFORD-BLAKE / 54

**GENEVIEVE AND RUDY**  
MARILEE AUFDENKAMP / 60

**art**

**MARTINI GLASSES**  
DENNIS LITTLEWORTH / 64

**CRESTED CRANE**  
JEREMY CONOLEY / 65

**COSMIC DANCE**  
MIHN DU PHA / 66

**GRASS**  
MIKE LYON / 67

**DEERSCAPE**  
CELIA SMITH / 67

**PHOENICIAN INN**  
LUCY MASTERMAN / 68

**REARVIEW MIRROR**  
NORM TRIGOBOFF / 69

**VERTICAL RISING**  
JANET SATZ / 70

**AUTUMN FINALE**  
NORMA HERRING / 71

**PEAR**  
JUDY BEYER / 72

**f.y.i**

**FROM THE EDITOR** / 4

**KANSAS CITY VOICES  
DONORS** / 5

**BIOGRAPHIES** / 74

**SUPPORT KANSAS CITY  
VOICES** / 78

**ADVERTISEMENTS** / 79



# *from the editor*

---

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

## *Kansas City Voices* *would like to thank its generous donors*

### PATRON

Alfred & Theresa Hupp Priscilla Wilson

### SPONSOR

Betty L. Barnett Phyllis G. Westover

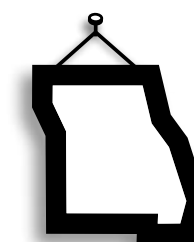
### ADVOCATE

Anne Baber Jim & Gwen Fox  
Judith Bader Jones Ross Lillard  
Donald & Linda Joyce Clements Corrinne Russell  
Cheryl A. Davis Alarie Tennille  
Pamela Boles Eglinski Valorie Wells Fenton  
Deborah Shouse & Ron Zoglin

### FRIEND

Alice Carroll Carole Katsantoness  
Jessica Conoley Norman & Marsha Ledgin  
Maril & Jim Crabtree Catherine Moran  
Jan Duncan-O'Neal Christine M. O'Brien  
Sally Jadow Susan Peters  
Donna Ziegenhorn

### JOHNSON COUNTY LIBRARY AND FRIENDS OF THE LIBRARY



**Missouri  
Arts Council**

*The State of the Arts*

Financial assistance for this project has been provided by  
the Missouri Arts Council, a state agency

# 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?

# FOR PICASSO

JACK KLINE

My horse Picasso was missing. Lady and Blaze stood mirror, not a hand's width apart, grazing. In unison, their tails swooshed, flicking flies from each other's face, an act of necessity more than one of affection. Aloof, Rusty napped standing in the cottonwoods. Picasso was not in sight. Maybe he lay resting in the draw out of view. Or maybe my kids left a gate open. Or I did, and my tobiano paint quarter horse went walkabout, searching for a greener pasture. It happened once before, and we found Pic and Blaze pilfering a neighbor's brome.

As I saw both gates closed, my stomach hollowed. I hurried down the gravel drive hoping to find Pic resting his lace-white legs in the draw. As I neared the point where I could see the entire length of the draw, I quickened my pace. Then I saw him at the far end, lying on his side up against the fence. Horses do not lie against fences. Pic did not move.

I slipped through the fence strands and ran. Pic's leg might have been caught in the wire or he might have snapped a leg in one of the wash's eroded areas. But I denied what I already knew. Pic had colicked before. Colic binds intestines. The horse cannot eliminate urine or feces. He swells up and dies a painful death. There are treatments, none foolproof. Once before, Pic suffered through a harrowing forty-eight hour bout before recovering. I nearly died with him that time and felt a hangman's reprieve when a stream of waste gushed from my stricken gelding.

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 laid back; his eyes apologized. The scent of sweat and fear

Can love for the animal be as great  
as that for the child or parent or  
spouse? Can it be greater?

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 of the first feature, but I found myself dwelling on that hydrophobic yellow dog from the second. I still remember that dog, just as I recall three years later hiding in my room until I could compose myself after reading Marjorie Kinnan Rawling's *The Yearling*.

Why does the flash of loss flare so brightly for a pet? Why do we allow the fires of our grief to burn so hot for an animal – intense suffering that often blazes a path to catharsis? Can love for the animal be as great as that for the child or parent or spouse? Can it be greater? Is there

something else at play? Horses are not pets like cats or dogs. We breed them to serve us, and they learn their roles as colts and fillies. But time builds bonds. It took no time with Picasso. Picasso chose me.

My wife, son and daughter had all owned horses, and the time came to find a mount for city-bred Dad. We looked at several gentle middle-aged geldings before we pulled up the elm-lined gravel drive near Archie, Missouri. My wife Nancy had called ahead. The prospect of adding another paint excited my daughter whose mare, Painted Lady, might have galloped straight out of a John Ford western.

A border collie met our pickup. She barked aggressively, but her tail telegraphed an invitation. The screen door opened. Alerted by their canine security system, a woman and her teenage daughter walked out to meet us while I scratched the dog's ears.

As we walked to the corral, the woman explained that a new truck transmission precipitated the sale of their beloved Picasso. "My gelding would make a perfect mount for a novice." She

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 tack. Picasso, a mostly white paint with irregular splotches 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 saddle. But it was more than that. He had

been waiting for me. I didn't need to ride him to know Picasso would be my horse. With one blue and one cow-brown eye, he watched me take the reins, and took the bit as if we had been doing this for years. We walked and trotted and cantered briefly around the corral. Pic was patient with my inexperience and tolerated often-conflicting commands from my reins and legs. The asking price was firm, but it didn't matter. I had found my horse.

I left my stricken horse in the pasture and ran for help. Minutes later I had called Paul, our neighbor and vet, and corralled my two teenage kids. As I slid back through the fence I remembered Pic's first bout with colic. It had started the same way.

My kids and I now hurried to Picasso and haltered him, and the three of us coaxed him to stand, painful as it was for him. Paul was on his way. I led Pic out of the pasture and up the drive to where Paul always vetted our horses. Lady, Rusty and Blaze followed along the fence line. Horses are herd animals and they develop intricate relationships with their pasture families. The tilt of their ears displayed their concern. They knew.

Paul confirmed my fears of colic. He gave Pic pain medication and a muscle relaxer, both of which had to be minimal or the systems needed to unravel Pic's bowels would also shut down. Paul gloved his right arm with a plastic version of those ballroom ones that ladies wear. He felt his way up the canal, finding nothing within arm's length, then forced mineral spirits down Pic's throat to grease his entrails.

My role dictated that I keep Picasso walking, painful as it might be for him. The act of walking, muscles alternately flexed and relaxed, helps unbind the knots. Paul pledged to check again on his way to and from his clinic. Within seventy-two hours Picasso would survive, or not.

My mother died in 1999 after a long decline, about nine months after we bought Picasso. We were in the room at her last breath, my brother, sister and me. After her death, an eerie coldness shepherded 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



## FOR PICASSO CONT'D

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.

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. Pic and I walked to the north pasture gate past the daylily patch, its dead straw-brown stalks a reminder of blossoms three months gone. I led him to a point where a friend would backhoe his grave the following day. We waited.

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. It's funny how the mind will wander at the most implausible times. The waxing moon and fog and the splayed light pushed me back to childhood and my terror of the headless horseman. As I leaned against my sweat-soaked horse, stroking his neck and withers, the inexplicable uninvited memory brought a smile. I pictured that denizen of childish nightmares, sword held high, riding down Ichabod

Crane when suddenly his mount decided that it was time to turn back.

Oncoming truck lights blew through the mist, lights bright now and razor sharp. My smile soured, and I wept.

Paul, a cattleman and horseman himself, a man who must have played out this scene with customers and friends many times, told me the injection would only take a minute or so. It would be painless.

"It's time, Jack," he said. But I could not shake the thought that I had waited too long.

Paul suggested that Nancy hold Pic. And he understood when I patted my horse's flank, turned and walked to the gate. Nancy held Picasso in his last moments.

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.

AMANDA HEMPEL

*A HOUSE IN RIDGELY*

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.

ANNE WICKLIFFE

*YOU*

have me framed up with square-cut assumptions  
so you can't hear a thing I say.

You're perched on a ladder in your workman's clothes,  
absorbed in your pounding, satisfied your eye is keen—  
certain the spirit level you balanced on my head  
is consistent in its result,  
certain that all *your* walls are plumb.

All is surface and plane to you.  
Subtleties of design, charming inconsistencies, elude your eye.  
The only thing you keep on your toolbelt is a 3 lb. claw hammer,  
so—of course—everything *must* need pounding.

CHARLES LEGGETT

*LOST LOVE BLUES*

*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. There.  
 You name five things you can do with a knife, you got five verses.  
 You got yourself a blues.*

--Big Bill Broonzy

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.

# *FRESH FALL FUJI APPLES AND THE HOMELESS GUYS*

CORINNA WEST

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.



# THE SCENT OF DEAD SAINTS

GLORIA MARTINEZ ADAMS

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.

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

The mystery of his feet was of the utmost interest to me. He walked with a stiff stride from an injury; a mishap of birth, I imagined, or perhaps he had been snapped and mangled by some ferocious animal. He moved slowly with an

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.



MARK L. GROVES

# 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 I 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.

“Not so 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 him. I fell asleep holding that hand and had none of the usual guilty dreams.

Days fell after. I couldn’t get he me us from my mind. She could tell. My girlfriend. She walked unawares into the heavy traffic of my thoughts, and didn’t hear the horns blaring. We met for dinner, had drinks, fumbled through conversation. I was nervous. Guilt stalls all subjects but its own.

“Stephen, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I say too quickly. Exposed, I drink to cover the gaff, the gash, the sad mess I’d made of our future. She didn’t deserve this. I couldn’t stop it.

“Is there something on your mind?”

Yes. Something.

“No,” it was she heard from me.

“You haven’t really talked to me all night. Did I do something wrong?”

You have the wrong body, my beautiful girl. You have the wrong mouth.

“No, it’s not you,” I say.

I am not who I was supposed to be.  
The map to my future has been folded  
wrong, and now none of the roads  
connect to where they were supposed  
to end.

She knows I’m lying. Her eyes drill into me. She doesn’t move. She waits. A woman’s heart is a gazelle smelling lion on the hot wind of the Serengeti. And don’t kid yourself. It’s also the lion.

“Then what? Are you seeing another woman?”

“Absolutely not.” Not a 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 queers 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. We snuck like thieves, behind closed everything, stealing each other’s respect in the thirst and fury of our passion.

At the restaurant we had a business lunch, but the business I wanted to conduct required less professional attire. None, actually. He punched my clock.

“You’re not being very discreet.” He eyed me, he eyed them, the other eyes. He spoke in whispers.

I sipped my Chardonnay and tasted vintage rage.

“Fuck’em. I’m tired of hiding.”

“You’ll get tired of running, too. Easier to hide in the open than be exposed in the dark.”

His words were the dark.

“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

I used to be handsome. The problem was, I discovered I’m special too, in a way that Mom would not find attractive.

shows and want to scream at 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.

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 unlock the cellar. Dark thoughts lounge there, smoking unfiltered cigarettes, exhaling grim expectations. They arrive uninvited and ruin the party.

I am not who I was supposed to be. The map to

## I NOW PRONOUN YOU: MAN AND LIFE CONT'D

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.

He

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.

Me

A month or two later I moved in. It's a great condo. We don't party much, unless you count caiparina'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.

I

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