

Caesura

... before he left the market in Paris. It was going to be a long year, but a fruitful one. If all went well, he would reclaim all of his homeland. I entertained myself to the clatter of dishes and ate my stomach's fill and watched the clockhacks and ticks like an arthritic

... flying fast and free in this moment
... tossed and tumbling wherever a nurse
... stuck wires to my head with orange
... glue,
... instructed me to sleep, and switched
... on the machine.

The unfamiliar bed kept me awake, and
... dance
... to know the feeling
... The surrounding of arms,
... the happiness of touch,
... and the importance of a smile
... I used to know what I was,
... a passion fold

... ked toward his aide,
... cadier nodded and
... an quickly, "The walls
... be breached by this
... ning, my lord. The gar-
... n is almost depleted.
... ect to losses." He waited
... like a dog for approval,
... Richard ignored him.
... diversion had already
... n too long. It was time
... Chaluis to fall. He still
... Nonron and Montagu
... ice before he began
... in Paris. It was
... g to be a long year, but
... uitable one. If all went
... l, he would reclaim
... a passion fold
... ed upstream in a river
... rowning river with
... empty echo
... ving through me
... eartbeat,
... assionbeat,
... range notion of beidshi

... al but Richard ignored
... m. The diversion had
... eady taken too long
... was time for Chaluis
... le still had
... nter of the smeared
... ights ahead of
... m suddenly disap-
... earing into the mist,
... as if they were falling
... ff the edge of a cliff.
... It seemed ridiculou

... It seems that how a p
... There was a man that
... An old acquaintance o
... who ran a farm near t
... and lived alone most
... out in full colors s
... who have been trying
... on their walks that th
... as the tint of her hair
... someone used to toast
... then a flood of C notes
... filling their parched s
... supply of refreshing t
... At least a chance
... to know the feeling
... The surrounding of ar
... the happiness of touc
... and the importance o
... I used to know what I
... a eld. The cars were s
... headlights, making gl
... He remembered th
... they were falling off th
... thick. Some hysterica
... shit's creek. It was as
... someo

... as the tint of her hair
... someone used to toast
... then a flood of C notes
... filling their parched s
... supply of refreshing t
... At least a chance
... to know the feeling
... The surrounding of ar
... the happiness of touc
... and the importance o
... I used to know what I
... a eld. The cars were s
... headlights, making gl
... He remembered th
... they were falling off th
... thick. Some hysterica
... shit's creek. It was as
... someo

a eld. The cars were still zooming by, throwing up, clistering

He remembered that they were falling off the thick. Some hysterical shit's creek. It was as someo

Caesura

Number 18, Spring 1998

cae•su•ra [LL, fr. L, act of cutting, fr. caedere to cut] (1556) **1** *in modern prosody*: a usual rhetorical break in the flow of sound in the middle of a line of verse. **2** *in Greek and Latin prosody*: a break in the flow of sound in a verse caused by the ending of a word within a foot. **3**: break, interruption **4**: a pause marking a rhythmic point of division in a melody - **cae•su•ral** \-'zyur -el, zhur-\adj. ALSO: a break, or pause, in a line of verse; a break, or moment of rest in a busy schedule; reading material which will not be followed by an exam. See also comma, hiatus, leisure.

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Caesura is the University of Delaware's student literary magazine, sponsored by the Department of English. The creative work is selected and typeset by an all-student staff. All submissions are considered anonymously.

Peter Landesman will present the 1998 *Caesura* awards, which recognize excellence in literary prose and poetry in this year's edition. Peter Landesman is a novelist, journalist and artist. His first novel, *The Raven*, was awarded the American Academy of Arts and Letters 1996 Sue Kaufman prize for Best First Fiction, and was a bestseller in Germany and the UK. His second novel, *Blood Acre*, will be published next January by Viking Penguin. He has non-fiction articles forthcoming in the *New Yorker*, *Harper's* and *Men's Health* magazines. He is also a working artist, a painter. He lives in New York City and Princeton, New Jersey.

The Academy of Poets Prize of \$100

The Elda Wollaeger Gregory Poetry Prize
First Prize of \$100
Second Prize of \$50

The Thomas W. Molyneux Prose Award
First Prize of \$100
Second Prize of \$50

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Momentum – In Memory of Dave Toman

It's as if I'm floating free, like plankton
The tides are rolling me about and try as I might
I cannot counter the will of this ocean
Tossed and tumbling violently in this moment
Laying lightly listlessly lifelessly in the next

Room there is a fog of sadness
His spirit swirling in the smoke
Speaking softly, so softly
Just on this side of silence
A sound that cannot exist
The voice of a soul set adrift
By the thunderous union of
Asphalt metal and flesh
He was flying fast and free in this moment
Tossed and tumbling violently in the next

Game we killed the seven from Salisbury
And the word didn't make me shudder
We played well together that day
His passes were on with the exception
Of those the wind willed to the ground
He laid out in that match
No stranger to the earth
But there the sod was soft
So we rolled north again together
The smoke wearing a smile
Laugh and laughing falling apart
Chill and mellow in this moment
Flying fast and free in the next

Yard he laughed
And even when the laughter fell silent
The smile remained
He was standing beneath a moon that was
Just on this side of full
Happy as he could ever be

He told me so
And we willed the disc between us
He set it aloft
Floating it through the joy
On a road no one had ever traveled before
Each toss was glorious, glistening
Always finding its way to my hands
From his
The reverse too was true
The disc was
Floating fantastically in this moment
Chill and mellow in the next

Seat he pedaled and steered
The captain of a two-man ship
We willed ourselves in tandem
Across campus
On a vesper voyage
He cracked jokes from the helm
And made me smile like always
I let go of my fear of falling
And learned to enjoy the ride
God, I know he did
Flying fast and free in this moment
Floating fantastically in the next

Sleeping and Breathing

In Grandpa's hospital room, my father held a lesson
on sleep apnea. He pointed out when
Grandpa's legs began to twitch, instructed us
to listen for the sound of him not breathing.
And when the breath was not getting in,
his brain would wake him up, because
his brain would rather breathe than sleep.

They wondered later if his brain,
always interrupting sleep for oxygen,
might have failed to make the right repairs
to strengthen what bacteria destroyed.
When I went off to college they all warned me
of boys and beer and also of exhaustion –
“Don't pull too many of those all-nighters.”
Up with coffee and books whose lines blurred
under one fluorescent light, I thought of myself
as pulling these sleepless nights out of my body
the way magicians summon changing-colored scarves
up from their throats, til the piles at their feet
are huge enough to choke on.

For years, Mom's legs disturbed her nights,
awakened her at three for soothing baths and aspirin.
At first she thought Dad's breathing was to blame,
that his insistent snores would jar her from her dreams,
but then a specialist diagnosed her Restless Legs.
It was like those dreams when what is just a dream
of running becomes your lower body thrashing and you wake.
Sometimes her legs ran, and she was not aware,
thought she might be sleeping when actually her brain,
not resting as it should, was plotting her a course
through tracks of soot and hurdles.

My doctor father researched what it meant
to be deprived of sleep. When I was nine
he gave me thirty dollars to remain awake all night
then have my brain waves measured.
He and Mom took turns with me all night,
inventing new amusements when I tried to close my eyes,
and in the morning bore me to a hospital,
where a nurse stuck wires to my head with orange glue,
instructed me to sleep, and switched on the machine.
The unfamiliar bed kept me awake, and so I tried
to keep my breathing deep and slow,
as though by imitating sleep I could achieve it.
When the needles on the paper had mapped out my sleep,
Dad approved it, said he noticed no disorders.
It seems that how a person sleeps can tell her health,
can get the workings of her brain onto a page,
the jagged lines presenting parts' activities –
the brain can still tell stories while it sleeps.

But sometimes now I wonder if my brain has slowed,
if all the long nights that ever were in me
I have pulled out all too carelessly –
in childhood I never sat in class and dreamed of sleep.
My parents, then, believed in eight straight hours,
and would monitor each one.
In winter, when my colds were bad,
my breathing, open-mouthed and harsh,
would pull them from their snores or running dreams,
and they'd stand in the hall outside my door,
would for a moment hold their breath
and listen to me sleep.

Orientations

A glint on a facet of time
a falling rain aching from the toil
of pushing infinite lives forward
second by second, the draw of soul to soil

A winter storm, some distant memory
when the wind was cold enough
to freeze children's footsteps and moments
on some street named after some Czech author

In a seedy dive, where the food was Pad Thai,
peanut sauce and fallen beauty queens flowed
amid the sounds of the Orient over a dolorous short-wave
I don't remember what you said

And in the end it doesn't matter
I was consoled (though the radio was not)
and yawned and wanted to fall inside you
for I remember most your warmth

And curling together like cats
on cold days where everything stood still
except the wind and the snow drifting symmetry from where it fell
accidentally over us and the corner of Newbury and Mass Ave.

The Tease (American remix of Rimbaud)

It was a brown room, fruit
smells and varnish.

I entertained myself
to the clatter of dishes

and ate my stomach's fill
and watched the clock

hack and tick
like an arthritic hand.

Suddenly, the kitchen door
swung back, and in rushed

the servant girl, her dress
half-off, her hair

pulled back, doll-faced.
And touching her cheek with

a finger, and shifting the dishes
to make it easy, she

said in a low voice,
(and I knew she wanted

kisses), "Feel that.
My cheek has got so cold..."

Untitled

so here we are again
white on white
infinite shades of pale
your laughter echoes on the soles of my feet
and the light is filtered through my skin

seasons change
one after the other
your soft breath in my hair
is spring and time is void
ludicrous how the days pass
and do we even notice
how heavy desire can be
when tainted with love

instances and possibilities are finite
we breathe in their urgencies
and are colored with the strange and feral shades of blue
which accompany this knowledge

bruised by feathers
we are wed by ministers of sin
in dark-twisted ceremonies
and while we wait for fragile crystal explosions
sleep comes to us in baby steps
hesitant and timid
we crawl to into each other and grow

The Farmer

There was a man that I once met,
An old acquaintance of my father.
Who ran a farm near Uppton Mill.
And lived alone from what I gather.

In the spring when our peaches ripened,
He would come down to Greensboro.
And eat with us a day or two,
Of fine peach pie, and sweet peach cobbler.

I once heard him tell us,
Of his work and how he spent his time.
He said all day he'd plow his fields,
And at night he'd do them double-time.

"Dear sir," I asked "What kind of foliage do you grow?
Watermelon, tomatoes, or artichokes?"

"No, dear boy, its not that for sure.
I reap the past and plant the future."

"If it pleases you to grow things such,
But I'd prefer melons just as much."

"One day aft, when the melons rot,
You'll know then, and ask me not."

"Well, is your garden big or small?
How many crops you have in all?"

"A stony garden can grow to quite grand,
And every day more stones stand."

"How do you ever protect your seeds,
From hungry beetles, and the weeds?"

“In my garden, the beetles can't bore,
I worry about the worms much more.”

“And when it is time to plant the ground,
When snow is gone, and spring abounds?”

“No, I must plant them all year long,
And every day, from dawn till dawn.
But I wait until each seed is ready,
Then lay it down, slow and steady.
Not until then do I plant the soil,
But I shan't wait too long or all will spoil.”

“Could you bring, when next you come,
Some fruit for us to see?”

“Sorry son, I'm afraid I can't,
For it's best to let dead be.”

John A. Stiner

Untitled

She feeds on gossip, swallows plates
of rumor whole. I guess it sates
her need to fill the empty space.
Her self-doubt spawns a second face.

The Law of Floating Bodies

The human body floats somewhat in water,
and most easily in salty water,
whose greater density buoys up our forms,
thick with their organs and liquids.
It takes a calmness not to sink,
to still the limbs from thrashing
and let physics be responsible –
this I discovered at thirteen,
when I willed the undertow
to bear from my family,
who wore silly hats, asked prying questions,
and warned me always of the current's force.
I tried the float my Y instructor named
“survival” (face to water, limbs outstretched,
lifting head for occasional breaths)
and emerged near alien umbrellas and beach blankets
at the expense of very little energy.

The legend at our pool was of a foolish girl
who, to prove her lungs' strength, dove to
the bottom of the deep end to touch the drain,
but caught her fingers in the stubborn metal grate.
Her long hair waved like seaweed, stirring
from the motions of those who tried
too late to rescue her.

The other foolish girls I knew were those
who married early, or appeared round-bellied
in school hallways before sinking entirely from view.
Years later, encountered in the supermarket checkout,
their hair didn't billow like the drowning girl's
and their fingers, grasping groceries and crying kids,

seemed free. But their expressions spoke of being anchored to something that was heavier than they'd thought, and of suffocating under water or something denser. They didn't know, these girls, the thrill of jettisoning, lightening their bodies for the current that could sweep them down the beach.

And I, the one who always could cut ties and seek the surface, who feared the bottom, thinking that what sank could never rise again – I almost forgot the faithful way that our reflections float in the watery surface of one another's eyes.

Tango Cantos

Anticipare

every sound in the coffee house
from the spoons whirring
to the cappuccino machine growling
and the napkins fluttering under lips,
even the hyper conversations
of freshly opened couples,
is the sound of an orchestra
warming up

the patrons are only partly
enjoying their drinks and guests,
they have one eye on the door
but can't understand why
they're like animals sensing
the weightless footsteps of an earthquake,
so many people are dropping things
spilling things and bumping
into each other that there are
as many pardons asked for
as there are granted back

but each is with little attention
as the bodies inch themselves
to the edge of their seats
and the buzzing of machines
and minds at work comes
to a simultaneous halt
as they see in the opening door,
the conductor raising his wand

Entrata

the first tumultuous breath of her presence
is a breeze that makes the air conditioner
shut itself off out of shame, she has to be looked at

from an angle, the elegance she radiates
would make someone go blind from ecstasy
if she was looked directly at, and even
if you could fashion an apparatus to stare
directly at her, you would miss her completely
as she would turn herself into the breath
falling like waves over the back of your neck

all the women present who have brought makeup
rush into their purses to concoct spells that will
diminish her, they are not going to try to outshine her
because even they know that all the stars together
cannot glow brighter than the sun,
those who are caught unprepared simply
close their eyes, and try to imagine themselves
as one of her eyelashes helping bat back
all the amorous advances sent to her table
in the awkward grins of the men she has
turned to prepubescent boys with her indifference

Faccia

a camera that always photographs you
in your best light, airbrushing
the ideal memory of childhood
that keeps you waking every day
getting out of bed and propels you
into the world with the hope
that you will come across that person again
and they will remember you and be so glad
to see you their smile saying - I have been
waiting for you all my life - and they
open their chest so you can climb back
inside and splash around in your youth
just like you used to when you didn't know
it would not be around your entire life

not a mask, but a mirror, whose reflection
is a bowl of strawberries and a glass
of lemonade, on your grandmother's porch

where she and all the dead relatives
who you never thought of as children
themselves, stand in their favorite dresses
and suits, with fresh haircuts, brimming
with health, every wrinkle ironed out

with their glasses raised to you
smiles waving you to come over
to embrace their vibrant flesh, kiss
their smooth cheeks, take in their scents
when they were taught themselves
and let them know you, as a man
who misses them in every way
very much

Capelli

the sea of the Costa Del Sol
on the summer nights when lovers
paste their humid passions all over
each other like oil paint and on the skin
it feels like someone is rubbing ice cubes
on it, as the laughter from the homes in Ibiza
reaches the shore on the crest of the lumbering
waves, then collects in the sand in heart-shaped
puddles, which before the morning attach themselves
to the ankles of young girls rushing home
to get into bed before their fathers check on them
and find out that their beds are empty
and head to the beach just after calling the priest
to search for the boy who the daughters are either going
to marry or the fathers are going to bury,
but the girls always get home before the father
turns the knob, and when he looks in
he still sees the soft halo sleeping on her lap
whose shadow hides the moist toes
hidden under a blanket, and he goes
back to bed, grabs his wife by

the small of the back, feeling proud
that they made together from all their
dirty living something completely white

the auburn highlights, constellations blushing
from the pleasure they get from being tenants
in her house and not paying any rent,
they perform operas and ballets in each follicle
and when it falls over her shoulder they break
out into full chorus, shattering the precarious bodies
who have been trying to find a spot
on their walls that they can play a tune on,
as the tint of her hair swims in the wine glass
someone used to toast to their uniqueness,
then a flood of C notes flows into their mouths,
filling their parched souls with a lifetime
supply of refreshing thoughts

Ochios

twin black holes, from which all light
is simultaneously exiting and coming to
as caravans of comets who have been
traveling the cosmos under the control
of its fateful gravity, raise their arms
as they come to the end of their journey
and find that their home is going to be
the tranquil center of her soul,
they shut off all their fires and sigh
as they vanish into her onyx glaze

the endless stare of a clock
without arms, where time lends you
its gills and lets you swim in its fishbowl
for as long as you like, and has a warm
towel and a cup of hot chocolate waiting
for you at the edge of the pool so that
when you get out you won't feel the chill
of something having passed you by,
instead you ease back into the comfortable feeling

you get from thinking that the ticking
you hear is the sound of your mother
rocking you to sleep endlessly in her arms

Labbros i Voce

at the same time a bed and a
newborn alphabet, from which Down
letters rush to every head present
like dogs who have not seen their masters
in a long time, as the necks fall limp
from the drowsiness they are suddenly
come over with, when she first opens
her mouth and the first syllable, a feather
dissolved in a violin string, flies
through the crevices in their toes,
then severs the anchors which have kept
them stuck to the ground, and they find
themselves all of a sudden weightless
in the angelic pitch of her chords

they flap on her line like freshly washed linen
with their faces dipped into bowls of sunlight
as her words like wind currents dry away their miseries
and when she is done, she folds them into fruit
arranges them in a bowl then paints
a picture of them, so they will have something
to look at to remind themselves
whenever they feel like they
are rotting inside, that they are capable
of turning themselves ripe

Carne

the mist rising from a road
just after it has stopped raining
adhering itself to the tops of trees
and the bodies of mountains,
giving them their foamy glow
which seen by distant cars

heading home after another night shift,
who think those are the lights of sacrifice,
showing them that possibilities are still ablaze
just over the next ridge; the next day

a benevolent ghost, who turns off the stove
when you're in a rush to get to work
and has a sandwich waiting for you
on the kitchen table,
the comb you think has been brushing
your hair as you wake from dreaming that
the love you lost had really jumped
into you and was with you all along,
the ten dollar bill in your back pocket
just when you think you have run out of money,
and you can buy your friend who's crying
into his beer because he says
he has forgotten what the face
of his dead child looks like; another round

the stranger who holds you back
when you are about to walk into traffic
then disappears into the crowd
before you can thank them or ask them why,
the unexpected card you get from a relative
who tells you they are thinking of you
and hopes you are doing well, and the
way your gut all of a sudden feels heavy
with the tears that are about to kiss your face;
someone calling to apologize even though
you know it's your fault, and them stopping you
before you can make a fool of yourself, the pause
right after that, when you understand what
it means to be blessed, and not saying it out loud
but the other person on the other line says they feel the same way;

sensing that your breath is always hugging you back

Il Danza

she's doing it for the first time
and doing so well without trying
that she leads me through the dimly
lit bad memories of my life,
never once stepping on my toes,
cheek on cheek her breath heaving
up and down perfuming the entire room
with a serene pose, her legs two swans
swimming in the grace of each one of her steps,
her raps on the hardwood floor
wake Buenos Aires from its nap
and it barges into the room
along with its streets and bars,
then buys a drink for everyone
as we continue to dance in the form
of a smile, the joyous hands of laughter
are clapping in our ears, the chairs
are thrown out the window
and on the tables are old men
with their wife's ghosts in their hands

the room dips everyone at once
knocking a balance back into our lives
as the guitarist spreads his rift
on the floor and all the legs jump
to step on its melody, I lose
myself in the music and in my partner,
our bodies become a current of energy
from all the spinning around,
our entire beings are one light,
gliding across the dance floor, swaying on
the ceiling, vibrating in the glasses
and bouncing their hips on the walls
until the party comes to a stop
in the deafening roar of her looking
down at her watch

Uscita

I walk her out to her car
and instead of screaming into
the tight fist of air how I will
sleep in the softness of our meeting,
I have to let a kiss on both cheeks
mean for me an embrace that says
I can never think of the world
as beautiful if she is not included by name

behind us the musicians take their final bow
for the appreciative audience who'll forget
how an entire city fit into their little coffee house
the moment they step on the street again,
she drives off in a cloud of moonlight
and a trill of her perfume shoots
out from her car exhaust pipe,
the city changes out of its tuxedo
and into its pajamas as I get into my car
on the drive home, I see petals of her
in every raindrop, they fall like snow
over my thoughts until they make
at the foot of the darkness of my door
a sculpture of her frozen in mid-step
yet still twirling as I turn the lights on
and her and the entire night vanish
in the clarity of her absence

Il Desiderio

a liquid, not water
but a placenta of honey
she wakes into every morning
floating in a bed of warmth

regardless of weather,
the thought of me
the umbilical she feeds from
never having to feel the
hunger of not being loved

a constant music in her head
as she travels in her days
that keeps her feet dancing
within the hole in my heart
and the joy in her steps
filling my caverns with laughter,
her aloe hands around
my burning waist, looking at me
as the cool glass of sangria
sitting at the end of a long table
that she can't wait to take a drink from

mining words out of my gut
that I can shape into
priceless jewels she can wear,
so if someone asks her to describe
me, all she has to do is
let them see the glimmer in her eyes,
that shines like Polaris, navigating
her fragile ship to my port
where I'm sitting at the deck
my arms open like a mouth
waiting for her sails to appear
like a flock of doves above
the horizon, and fly into me,
kissing vision back into my eyes

The Good News

And so the other day I went to church
To watch the man with his degree in God
Discuss the ways that we as humans hurt
The Lord above, the ever-present God.
His Adam's apple bobbed to the rhythms of Good News
As rows of red-faced moms and dads would plead
With drooling children banging on the pews,
Their stained glass faces lit with colored dread.
As nodding altar boys fell into sleep,
The priest advised: forgive with all your hearts,
And once he said for us to go in Peace,
We rushed to be the first ones to our cars.
 A Cadillac rammed right into a Ford
 The two men cursed; their wives looked to the Lord.

Dance of the Damned

We find out quite by accident
that you have cancer. He kneaded your skin, you tell me
that night, and told you to come back. You were still standing
in your paper gown while he made the appointment personally
from the phone in his office. The size of my thumb, he said
to his golf partner, smiling at you with his hand over the receiver.
The best in the business.

This under the glare of a kitchen lamp that hangs over us like a sen-
tence, like the once-nightly reprimand: no elbows on the table.
Blankly you look down at ours, at wood scarred with endless *Paul +
Amy 4ever's*, carved with a pocketknife years ago when it still
belonged to the public library. We've been eating over these decla-
rations of love for almost a year; there is something tender about
macaroni and cheese that is infused with so much desire. Your
hands fall lightly over the wood as they trace the letters we know by
heart after all this time.

We lie in bed at night and stare at the ceiling. *What will you do?* you
ask. Your voice is quiet but unmistakable. I reach for you, but this
isn't what you want. You know that there is no answer. When you
think I'm asleep you kiss the air near my face and leave the
room, and I just lie there
watching as you go.

You take me to the room where they do the treatments. *This is it*,
you say, gesturing toward the table. A potted plant with thick,
glossy leaves is in one corner of the room, and the walls are paint-
ed a soothing peach. When you throw up after chemo I feel the
burning rising in my own throat and find that I am always swallow-
ing. Or being swallowed, I'm never quite sure. I ponder this ques-
tion while I sit up in bed, the lace of my nightgown pale around my
shoulders in the dark, and call, *Are you okay?* There is a thin band of
light under the door of the bathroom.

Three steps forward, two steps back.

One night I have this dream: I am almost all the way back when I spot your car behind me. I'm completely drenched and can hardly see because there's so much rain on my face. You're laughing when you see me, as you park the car and roll down the window. I stand for a second, then walk over to you, ease my arms through the window and wind them around your neck, and kiss you, water from my skin and hair wetting you and your clothes. *Where have you been?* you ask, your voice incredulous. I lift my shoulders in a helpless shrug, motion toward the sky.

Isn't this beautiful?

Yes, you say, looking at me.

The first time I see you cry is when you find your hair in the sink, tangible proof that you have lost control over everything. Your scream could tear us into pieces. I taste despair in your mouth now when we kiss, and I have to push you away, keep it from invading me. *Just let me hold you*, you say, then I say. We make another lifetime of closing in, then pulling away again.

I struggle as you try to ease me to you, pushing away your hands, resisting with everything I have left. We're too clumsy for this. I'm not strong enough. You press your face to mine, breathing life back into my mouth, holding me as long as you can.

You, Me, Us

There was a crying moon
And a careful heart.
Two hands tightly held
A million stars so far apart.

Just A Notion

A certain girl,
a glance
At least a chance
to know the feeling
The surrounding of arms,
the happiness of touch,
and the importance of a smile
I used to know what I was,
a passion fold
curled upstream in a river
A drowning river with
an empty echo
flowing through me
A heartbeat,
a passionbeat,
a strange notion of being loved.

The Guest

looking at you

to forget all faces

tired
of myself

and of too many

entangled stories

I come to be your guest
amid the voice of the seas
and midday suns

perplexed

I come to be your guest
a little nearer to sleep

a little more absent

a little farther from other things

In A Puddle

These two women
squeeze out
the one boy
who had filled
the space between them.
Two women that touched
and were touched by
the same boy, are hugging
breast to breast –
sphere-like, milk-like –
four beige-silked cup-fulls
for a boy's two hands –
one pair for September
and one pair for March.
He oozes down
their combined cleavage,
into their splitting middle lines,
the essential crevices,
and down the insides
of their thighs,
and these are the thighs
and the splitting lines
and the spheres
that he touched.
Two women –
and only one returns to him
though he is, in part,
in a puddle on the floor
where they had embraced.

The Waitress

He'd been staring at her with that same look all the time they'd known each other. She knew he disliked her, resented her, maybe even hated her. She had decided long ago not to care. Still, it bothered her when he stared like that. Not that he ever said anything, no, he just looked. He was clever all right. How could she possibly complain about a look and not sound like a lunatic?

She wiped up the diner's cheap Formica counter with quick, sharp strokes, feeding her anger through her fingertips into the cloth. It felt good to push something instead of being pushed. She smacked it with a snap when she finished, leaving a faint wet streak behind. Soon some grizzled middle-aged trucker would come in, bleary-eyed from driving the rig, and order a huge meal of chicken-fried steak and grits and greens and coffee, and end up dribbling half of it because of exhaustion or a hangover. Oh well. The older ones tipped decently, those who like to smile toothlessly through stained beards at her, saying she reminded them of a mother, sister, wife, daughter. The younger ones were arrogant and flexed their muscles, grinning as though she ought to pay them for the privilege of their presence. How she would have loved to give them some nasty retort to the come-ons, to show her disgust! But he, her boss, insisted on "Service with a Smile," so she remained silent and obliging, smiling tightly, as she had every day she'd worked there. She often wondered fretfully whether those smiles could kill her in the end, they were so painful, so forced and unreal.

She glanced up. He was sitting in one of the ugly little booths, sipping black coffee from a cracking ceramic mug and doing the books. Actually, he was staring out the windows more often than writing, trying to see the highway through the sun glare. After a while, she knew he'd give up and sit there doing nothing, waiting for customers to show up to force him to move. He never did the books. The task always ended up falling to the cook, making it that much simpler for him to extract a buck here and there to support his liquor habit.

There was a clatter in the kitchen. His head swiveled around fast to look at her, to see if it could somehow be her fault. She shrugged and swiped at the counter again. She felt his eyes on her a moment more before they dropped. Getting rid of her would be a

triumph for him. She was the only employee that he couldn't completely crush, one way or another. She wasn't quitting though, and they both knew it. She needed the job and he needed the waitress. No one else would work such lousy hours for such lousy pay in such a third-rate dive. Everyone else nowadays had been to college, had real lives.

Late in the afternoon, cars began pulling off the highway into the gravel lot. People eager for an early dinner filed in the narrow doorway. Acting the part of host, he led them to their tables and assured them someone would be around in a minute. Tonight was going to be one of *those* nights, she could feel it. There was always at least one during the week that made her feel like sneaking out the back door and slitting her wrists with one of their huge, dull kitchen knives. In her more bitter fantasies, she saw herself doing it in full view of the customers, sawing away at her arms, blood dripping down in thick slow motion, while he stood by helplessly attempting to explain why his waitress was cutting herself up instead of delivering orders.

Her first table of the night was the one that would cause her the most trouble. She watched them scrape their chairs across the stained checkered tile floor and squeeze themselves onto the small, square vinyl seats. Her eyes narrowed as he walked up to them, pleasant and poisonous as he passed out dinner menus. From the kitchen doorway, she examined the one child in the group of five, a skinny girl of no more than ten or eleven who was trying to look at the diner and the people in it without seeming to. She felt a rush of companionship, of pity, for the girl, thin and pale in her faded shorts set, with her messy ponytail, sitting among all those fat whales of adults who weren't paying one bit of attention to her. She was likely the sensitive type, that one. She could tell by the set of the girl's tiny mouth as she noticed others staring at them. The stares probably hurt the girl more than those adults at whom they were directed. She was old enough to see the vulgarity of their loud laughter and the mens' towering cigar smoke, of the cheap flashy jewelry and over-done makeup of the women, and with her child's vulnerability, she probably couldn't understand why everyone else didn't love them anyway, as she did. Well honey, welcome to the world, your faults and shortcomings on display for everyone to see.

She had trouble carrying their order. It was huge, practically a

display of their dinner menu. He noticed her slightly clumsy juggling of trays and came over. She pushed the hair out of her eyes roughly with her wrists, vowing silently to kill him on the spot if he criticized. He didn't. He simply picked up one of the trays and followed her to the table. They looked up as she announced in a monotone and delivered their orders. She tried to smile at the little girl, who refused to look up. He set down the remaining few with a flourish, smiled, and disappeared into the background, leaving her to cope with their thousand little requests for more sugar, more ketchup, more salt, and didn't they have any mustard?

What a sweetheart! she thought angrily, pawing through the refrigerator in search of lemon for the womens' teas. Helping me out like that! The lousy bastard, he ruins everything. He can't see anything that matters. Yeah, he pretends he likes me. His actions are all right on the surface. He's got to be careful. But underneath it's all poison.

Spinning on her heel, she returned to the counter to serve the truckers, who, as she'd predicted, had arrived for their chicken-fried steaks and grits and greens and coffee. Life was just a trap anyhow, quicksand that sucked you in until you couldn't get out. What'd matter if she spent the rest of hers in this dump? She'd go under soon anyway, and the tiny sand grains would cover her head, and she'd be lost. She fixed a smile on her face and asked the first trucker in a sugary voice what he'd like for dinner.

If Everyone Jumped Off a Bridge

It was raining on the Commodore Barry bridge, and the cars were a solid of sea of moving lights. Wedged somewhere in the middle, being borne along by the current, was a plain white car, darkest gray in the night, driven by a man wearing a Phillies cap. He had taken the long way to the bridge, because the radio had said that the direct route was completely jammed. Now the radio was grinding out Nirvana again for the fourth time since he'd gotten into the car forty minutes ago. All around him the other cars on the bridge pressed in, trapping him in a moving phalanx of lights; red in front, white behind. The rain blurred the lights and made his windows look like stained glass.

He swept along with the legion of cars under the huge steel frame of the bridge, guided by the taillights and the blinking signs above. The man was in the far right lane, and looked out over the Delaware. Not that he could see anything; a heavy fog had settled over the river. In a way, he was glad of that; he'd never liked heights and even going over the bridge every night, safely enclosed in traffic and guardrails, made him a little edgy. Up ahead of him, the lines of taillights rose into the air and vanished over the crest of the bridge, as if they were falling over a cliff. The car rocked like a cradle, and he imagined himself curling up in bed with a comforter up to his chin.

He hit the brakes long before he consciously registered that anything was wrong. A giant sheet of water flew up in front of him and he was vaguely aware of slamming into the guardrail. A screeching grinding noise drowned out the rain as the car slid forward along the rail in a shower of sparks and spray. A support column emerged from the rain in front of him and buried itself in his hood. Cracks shot through his windshield like lightning bolts and the car stopped with a shock. Then the screeching was gone, he was still and the air was filled with car horns.

He sat back against the seat, gasping like a drowning man.

It took a while for the various parts of his brain to catch up with each other. For some time, he stared at the ceiling of the car, watching the patterns of light. Gradually, the meaning of the colors began to dawn on him, and then he was aware of himself again. The car horns had died away.

The first thing he did was take stock of his situation. Nothing felt broken, although he still hadn't gotten his breath back. His legs felt like marshallow. He guessed that the car was mashed up against the support beam in front and the guard rail on his right, although he couldn't tell for certain. In fact, he couldn't see anything through the windshield. The cars were still zooming by, throwing up glistening water and bathing the windows in their golden headlights, making gleaming caterpillars crawl along the cracks.

He remembered the vision of the smeared red lights ahead of him suddenly disappearing into the mist, as if they were falling off the edge of a cliff. It seemed ridiculous now. Of course they disappeared. The mist was thick. Some hysterical impulse must have taken him over, made him stop the car and now he was really up shit's creek. It was as if someone else had put his foot on the brake. He would have to get out now and get someone to notice him.

The traffic was going so fast that it was impossible to open his left door, and the right door was jammed against the guardrail. The passenger side window, however, obligingly fell into pieces at a single stroke, letting in a blast of freezing wind and rain. He stuck his head out the window into the torrent, found that there was in fact a little walkway on the other side of the rail and clambered out onto it. On the outer side of the walkway was another rail, and beyond that, a vacuum of rain, mist, and river. He was on an island over nothingness, suspended by the steel skeleton of the bridge. He felt his stomach muscles tighten. The rain tore at him; it was coming down in sheets.

The traffic was whizzing past him at an insane speed, going by his car and the column it was up against, and then vanishing once beyond it. He edged forward along the walkway toward the place where they were disappearing, rounded the column and found himself staring down into an abyss. The walkway ended precisely where the bridge did, leaving nothing but a long black drop. Beside him the cars were speeding off the bridge, arcing downward and disappearing into the mist, their taillights winking out. If there was a splash, it was masked by the wind and the rain.

He suddenly became very aware that the walkway was as slippery as an iced-over pond and that the wind was terrifyingly strong. It pulled at his coat and whipped his soaking hair into his eyes. He started shivering uncontrollably and reached out to the column beside him. It was horribly slick and cold, like a pillar of ice. He

stared for a long time at the disappearing headlights, and the blackness that swallowed them. The tide of cars hurtled by him. Just as he had groped for the column, his brain groped for an answer.

"Radio," he muttered through freezing lips. "They'll have a warning on the radio. They'll be telling people the bridge is out, and sending helicopters and everything." His mind cleared. Visions of floodlights and gruff saviors filled his head. Would they fly him out by helicopter? He didn't like the idea of that; he would almost rather stay here with his feet on something solid. But he was getting so cold that his whole body was shaking, and it would be crazy to just stay where he was. He scanned the sky for lights, but the rain was too heavy to see anything, except for the bridge lights, tiny red stars above him. He fumbled his way back to the car and climbed in through the window. A piece of glass sliced his right palm as he did so, but he hardly felt it. He flipped through the stations until he found a traffic update: "...eastbound on the Schuylkill expressway. There's an accident northbound on I-95, but two lanes are still open. Traffic is fairly heavy on the Commodore Barry Bridge, but it all seems to be going smoothly..."

They didn't know. No one knew. People were plunging to their deaths twenty feet from his car and no one had any idea. He suddenly noticed that his palm was bleeding, and when he tried to picture the helicopters, all he saw was blinking lights. The dark about the bridge was between him and everyone else in the world.

"Well fine," he said, making a determined face at the night. "I'll just get myself off the bridge then."

He climbed out the window and started off along the walkway, back toward the bank he'd come from. The bones of the bridge groaned above him. The onrushing headlights almost blinded him and turned the world to a crystalline shower of stinging diamonds. He was moving primarily by feel, one hand glued to the rail on either side. The cut on his hand was entirely numb. The wind pushed and battered him and froze the rain in his jacket. The rain was also freezing as it hit the walkway, making little marbles of ice.

When the rail disappeared from under his left hand he thought he was as good as dead. He could feel the wind from the cars pushing him off, trying to force him through the gap where a twenty-foot section of the guardrail had broken away. His feet slipped on the ice and he banged his chin on the walkway. His right hand was so numb that he couldn't feel himself letting go of

the inner rail. He slid slowly off the walkway, as if something were pulling him off the bridge and down. The same thing that had made him stop the car made his arms throw themselves around the last solid piece of guardrail before the break and he hung there like a rag on the side of an ocean liner. The roar of the cars, the moan of the wind, the hiss of the rain and the groans of the bridge were all drowned out by the enormous hungry silence below him. He could feel the mist creeping up his legs already. He looked straight up into the flying shards of golden light and thought he saw something reaching for him.

His muscles strained. His fingers turned to steel and clung to the rail. It took him three tries to get a leg back onto the walkway, but after that it was fairly easy to hoist the rest of him up. He lay in the freezing rain, staring at the illumination of the passing cars and crying. The tears froze on his face.

He hardly felt cold at all. The only thing running through his mind was the image of those raindrops coalescing into something reaching for him. An idea invaded his fatigued brain with the force of a pillar of flame. Suddenly it all made sense. How could no one but himself notice that the bridge was out? Was everyone else blind? It was impossible of course, unless it wasn't really out. He hadn't heard a splash when the cars disappeared. Maybe they didn't even hit the river.

He looked back at the section of walkway with the broken guardrail. The little ice balls were rolling off it like snow off a roof. It would be crazy to go that way.

He turned around and started back toward his car. The headlights illuminated his way for him. The wind was at his back, shoving him forward and the rain had lessened.

At the car he stood and paused, staring into the gloom ahead. The traffic was still rushing into nothingness. He climbed into his car, shivered and turned the key. The motor coughed, then grumbled into life. The radio was still going. Macy's was having a sale on kitchenware.

"It's there," he kept telling himself. "The bridge goes on. So what if I can't see it? Simply because you can't see a bridge doesn't mean it isn't there."

He backed along the tiny shoulder far enough for what he thought was a running start, occasionally bumping the rail. Then he pulled out into the flow of traffic. The other cars accommodated

him, ushering him in. He was submerged in light.

Simply because you can't see a bridge...

Through the cracked windshield he could see the edge of the bridge zooming toward him. The interior of the car was freezing cold. Ice had formed on the dashboard and the passenger seat. The car ahead of him vanished.

...doesn't mean...

As his car left the bridge he closed his eyes and held tight to the wheel. Wind whistled through the open window. He was flying.

...it isn't there.

The Lionslayer

Chalus, France 1199

It was the smell of the bodies that woke Peter from his dream. The stale, sickly sweet odor of blood and decay that wafted up to his post was overpowering, disturbing his thoughts even in slumber. His eyes popped open and he immediately grimaced against the stench. It was amazing that he had fallen asleep anyway, given the conditions. There was not enough room to lie down along the fortress wall, and the nervous pacing of the sentries made comfort impossible, even if one could ignore the chill air. He stood carefully from his little nook in the stone, stretching out his cramped limbs, and risked a quick glimpse over the wall.

The great siege engines of the Lionheart stood ready for another assault. The English campfires burned patiently, waiting for the morning light to penetrate the heavy rain clouds overhead. Every now and then, Peter could feel the echo of a raindrop splashing against his small iron cap. Looking up, he found that the small patches of white sky offered no solace. It was a miserable, gray day.

From atop the battlements he had been afforded a view of the entire English army yesterday, an ocean of armor and spears that had smashed against the keep and retreated only to return again, just like the tides at Normandy. The hill on which the keep sat was now burdened with mounds of fresh dirt unearthed by Richard's miners, slowly turning to mud in the morning drizzle. The tunnels had been stopped just short of the walls. Arrows riddled the ground, mocking the men on the battlements and in the tower, reminding them of how often they had missed their mark. Yet, they had been able to fight off the English yesterday. Barely. The army of the Lionheart was as ferocious and confident as its leader. They were the heroes of Antioch and Acre. The tiny garrison of commonfolk here at Chalus held no great threat for them. Peter had heard Sergeant Brun mention that once Richard had dealt with the Viscount, he would take the fight to King Phillip himself. What a battle that would be, he thought. The Lion against the Fox.

Peter had caught a glimpse of him yesterday. Out of bowshot, clinging to the legs of a dormant siege tower to get a better look at the battle. He was a big man, and handsome in his glittering armor.

He looked like a king. He was aptly named too, with a gold-red mane that spilled dramatically on his shoulders. It seemed unfair that he should be the enemy, this champion of Christ, this thorn in Saladin's side. He was a countryman of Peter's, returning from the colonies he ruled to reclaim that which had been swindled away from his grip. Richard looked as Peter had always imagined he would, proud and bold, a warrior with noble blood. Arthur in the flesh.

He looked down at himself disgustingly. His padded tunic was old and torn, passed down from his father. His surcoat was crude compared to those of the English knights. His breeches were worn at the knee. No one would mistake him for nobility, that was certain. Though his father was a knight, their family had long since been forgotten by the Viscount. Lord Aimar was a petty, jealous man who treated his knights like lowly servants. With more sons than acres, his father had struggled to keep anything in the family coffers. The crossbow Peter carried was his. It was old too, hand-made, with only twelve felled rabbits and one stag to its credit, even after three days of battle.

"I think you miss on purpose, Basili," Pierre Brun had chided him yesterday. Peter had flushed guiltily, but the sergeant-at-arms had only been teasing. He did not have the look of one who revelled in death. There had been far too much already, and the pile of bodies inside the keep continued to grow as the unseen enemies of hunger and sickness lent their strength to the English hordes.

It seemed months since the siege began. Had it been only a week since they invaded the quiet valley of the Tardoire, descending on Chalus like an angry god's wrath? Richard's miners had struck first, and for three days they dug the same tunnels that had brought down the infidel at Acre. Their bowmen had come next, circling the tiny keep on horseback, sending volley after volley over the walls, so many that Peter had flinched when the rain finally fell, so fearful was he of death from above. There was little cover inside the keep and the arrows had killed many. The screams of the dying and the moans of the wounded below haunted the men on the walls, for the keep was so undermanned that they had become accustomed to every face, and every death was that of a friend.

Sergeant Brun and Peter's father, the only two knights at Chalus, had rounded up every able man and woman and even some of the older children to fire back at the riders, but the knights were the

only ones really skilled with the crossbow. They managed to bring down a few, but it mattered little. The English were too many, and their heavy armor made even direct hits do little damage.

The knights had spoken last knight of surrender. It was clear that they could not fight their way out. Peter would never forget the look on his father's face as he broke the news. All his life he had dreamed of either fighting for or facing the likes of King Richard. But his chance had come not on the battlefield, but bottled up in a tiny keep with no army or provisions. No real chance at all. The disappointment was etched forever on his bitter features.

Peter was very proud of his father. He was a real soldier who wore his armor well. He was a kind man, who, despite the meager rewards of being in Aimar's service, had provided well for his children. Peter wished he would have married again, but his father did not seem willing even if the church would have smiled on it. He deserved a better fate, Peter thought, suddenly angry.

It was almost time for the surrender. He looked for his father and found him, standing below in front of the main gate with Peter's two older brothers. Each had a sword on his hip, and one held up a small white pennon to signal their surrender. They were preparing to meet the king to discuss terms. Peter, he had been informed quite emphatically, was not to accompany them. It was a daunting task that they faced, for the English monarch was not known for his mild temper. The slaughter of Acre was fresh in everyone's minds. But then, those were Saracens, treacherous Muslim infidels. Richard's orders, while brutal, had been according to God's will. Chalus was different. Here were good Christian men and women, honest and hard working. It was Aimar who refused to give Richard his due. It was Aimar who deserved punishment.

A low, despairing horn sounded as the gates opened quickly and closed immediately after Peter's father and his attendants. Peter scrambled back to his post so he could watch the proceedings, tension mounting in his heart. The sentries had all risen from their posts to view the negotiations. Richard rode proudly out to meet the envoy. He certainly was an imposing figure, especially on horseback. His eyes were like flame and there was an aura of power that flowed from him, affecting all who would look upon him. The negotiations, however, were decidedly brief.

Peter watched helplessly as the barrel-chested king ordered his father seized. He watched as Richard's men pinned his brothers'

arms behind them and forced them to their knees. He saw with peculiar detachment the king's sword rise and fall three times, and the heads of those he held most dear fall like rocks from their shoulders. The act was so sudden it seemed unreal, as if in a dream. Peter felt no pain or even horror. Numbed by shock, he watched the executions with wide, impotent eyes.

The fearsome king wiped his hands free of the very same blood that ran through Peter's veins. He stepped forward and shouted at the horrified townsmen on the tower wall.

"Here is your answer! Here is the fate of all who oppose me! Tell you precious Viscount that! Tell him that he will die at my feet like a dog!" The powerful baritone carried on the wind and echoed throughout the keep. The faces of the townsmen were portraits of utter despair now that their last hope had been crushed. Pierre Brun's face had fallen also, a mixture of fury and anguish. He would die, if it came to that, but he did not want to die here, not this way. He spat at the blood-soaked warlord and shouted in disgust at the spectacle before him.

"Do your worst, Sodomite!" he screamed. Richard's men pretended not to hear as they retreated to plot their next onslaught.

Hearing those words, the bitter, futile defiance from someone as admirable as Brun, something snapped within Peter. The protective wall his mind had erected to shield him from the sight of his dead family shattered like glass, and the gory images of the scene burned into his mind. His heart cramped and threatened to burst, and tears sprang into his eyes. For a long moment he choked on his grief, striving to hold back the pain. He fought against it until the numbness returned. It took hold of him suddenly, closing around his heart and turning his eyes cold.

He ripped his eyes away from their lifeless bodies and jumped from the ledge where he was standing to the narrow walkway beneath. With fluid precision, he slid down the length of the ladder to the ground, whereupon he crossed the courtyard full of his anguished countrymen.

He soon found what he wanted, a small campfire where a middle-aged woman sat frying what would probably be her last meal. Without any preamble he wrenched the skillet from her covered hands and dumped its contents on the ground. The handle was hot and burned him, but he ignored the pain in his hand and the woman's outraged screams. He stalked away from her, methodical-

ly retrieving quarrels from the ground and the dead bodies alike until he had an armload of ammunition for his bow. He then scurried back up the ladder with some difficulty and tossed the bundle against the wall.

The other archers were beaten, leaning lifelessly against the stone. Some even wept openly. Peter ignored them all. He reached over the wall and pulled himself up onto the very lip of the battlement itself, balancing precariously on the edge. The ground seemed impossibly far below and he concentrated on getting his bearings before he even spared a glance at the enemy, in whose sight he was now open and vulnerable.

The view from atop the wall was staggering. The ring of English horsemen began to gallop proudly around him, firing their cross-bows at their new target. Peter did not flinch as the deadly bolts cut the air around him. He could hear their shrill whistle, followed every so often by a scream from inside the keep. He moved not a muscle, defiantly allowing the enemy a free volley at him. The seige was grand. The assembled knights with their crimson banners and golden lion standards, waving above silver armor that sparkled even under the shadow of the brooding smoky clouds, all seemed to be paying homage to Peter. He felt like the center of the world.

As if with new eyes he spied an oncoming arrow whose arc would plant it in his chest. How strange that it would seem so much slower than the others! He laughed at his would-be assassin. With more force than was necessary he brought the heavy skillet up and swatted the quarrel away. A second bolt careened toward him and he deflected that one as well, his laughter slowly building. The flight of the arrows was grand comedy to him. Soon he would be laughing like a madman. He wondered how he appeared to the enemy below. He could imagine the faces of his people behind him too: aghast, fearful and stunned, despairing that they should lose another to the siege. It was a great and joyous surprise to his heart then, that when he struck down a third bolt from the sky there arose a cheer from behind him. He did not turn to look, but he knew that all eyes were focused on him. He realized that he was their champion now. He fought the battle alone.

* * *

The sun had almost finished its descent when it finally broke free of the choking clouds, and the keep began to take on the same gray-gold hue as the uncertain skies. King Richard emerged from his tent to view the setting sun. He straightened his powerful shoulders, releasing the cramped muscles from where he had frozen them while studying the many maps of the countryside. Dusk was his favorite time of the day. The air seemed sharper, his senses keener. He felt alert and ready, and that made him comfortable.

Mercadier, his aide, came rushing from the battlefield to brief him, but Richard raised a hand to stop him. He wanted to enjoy the moment. The sun was turning itself red and was trying to paint the clouds to match. It was quite beautiful. He stared after it while Mercadier waited, careful not to let impatience grow on his face. Mercadier was becoming tiresome. He was too eager, too bloodthirsty for even a seasoned warrior to stomach easily. Still, his loyalty was without question and he was an able soldier, so Richard suffered his presence without comment.

He sighed and looked toward his aide. Mercadier nodded and began quickly, "The walls will be breached by this evening, my lord. The garrison is almost depleted. I expect no losses." He waited like a dog for approval, but Richard ignored him. The diversion had already taken too long. It was time for Chalus to fall. He still had Nontron and Montagut to siege before he began the march to Paris. It was going to be a long year, but a fruitful one. If all went well, he would reclaim all of his homeland before the new century.

He regretted killing those men this morning, but it could not be helped now. Richard had reconciled his fits of rage with his conscience long ago. If he let the faces of all who had suffered his wrath torture him, he would have time for little else. Smiling grimly to himself, he wondered exactly when his conscience had deserted him. He had held a sword almost from birth, it seemed, and learned quickly from his father that warriors could afford no moral ambiguity. He had been called a butcher by more than one enemy, and could not argue the point. But Innocent had solved that problem, hadn't he? He had given them all the grandest of excuses with his little quests to the Holy Land. They were sanctioned by God now. The holy idiot. How clear things must seem from his lavish Roman balcony, without the grime, mud and death of a rainy French battlefield. Richard was no fool. Nor was he a puppet in the hands of the

Church. Innocent feared him, he knew. The young pontiff now sued for peace every chance he got. It would be interesting to see his reaction to the imminent confrontation with Phillip.

Mercadier coughed slightly and Richard frowned at him, though his thoughts returned to the task at hand. Aimar needed this lesson. The Viscount would hear of the massacre at Chalus and tremble. No one steals what the Lionheart claims as his own. He walked toward where the men were gathered, taking at Mercadier's insistence a hard iron cap and a small round buckler for protection. The aide wanted him to wear more, but knew better than to badger the king.

When Richard approached, he found the men standing around listlessly, gazing up at the castle wall. They stiffened abruptly as he neared their ranks. He addressed them in a harsh tone. Idleness was not to be tolerated.

"You men," he called. "Has the keep been taken while I slept? Is it victory that has you rooted there?" They saw the anger in his face and quivered. He saw their fear and seized it. "Speak!" he yelled furiously, face flushing. The knights flinched as if slapped. One turned his head toward the wall, searching for an excuse. Richard followed his gaze.

The silhouette of an archer stood brazenly atop the wall, unmoving, his shadow made brilliant by the red sun setting behind him. The fierce light around him was enough to sting the eyes, but his figure remained in darkness, a black center in a wheel of fire. Richard drew in a breath involuntarily at the sight. It seemed to him a holy vision. A dark warrior from the realm of legends. An angel, perhaps? The king did not know.

"Who is that?" he asked in a voice trained so as not to tremble. He did not really expect an answer. Mercadier's face twisted into a half-smile.

"It is a madman, milord. He has been up there since morning."

"Since morning?" the king asked incredulously. "All day? What of my archers?" he demanded, half-angry, half in awe. Mercadier grew sheepish and gave a little shrug.

"None can bring him down. He is no threat, though. He spent his last arrow hours ago."

The figure atop the wall was watching him now. Richard could see that. The aura was beginning to fade, and he thought he could make out some of the features of the crazed defender. No, not

crazed. Brave. Richard could sense it. There was no fear in the man above him. There was a deadly purposefulness about him that the king had seen often enough before. He knew one of his own kind.

He held out an arm to the soldier he had scolded and the knight nearly tripped over himself handing Richard his bow. Laughter began to filter down from the wall above as the king loaded the weapon. He felt a rush of the old anger flooding through him as he heard the mocking sound, threatening to overwhelm him. It was as if the entire countryside had become silent except for that haunting, sinister laugh. Richard raised the bow and the laughter halted abruptly. A deathly quiet settled on the battlefield as both sides held their breath. Richard smiled over teeth clenched in fury. It was fitting that he would be the one to kill this man. A warrior of his type deserved such a fate. He hoped, when his own time came, it would have as much meaning.

With a loud snap the arrow was loosed, but Richard knew right away that he had misjudged his aim. His hands, trembling with outrage, had sent the quarrel awry. The figure on the wall did not move as the king's shot drove deep into the cracked stone battlement inches below his feet. Richard cursed, but smiled up at his adversary. It was the smile of challenge, the same one he planned to give Phillip before he stormed Paris. It was a call to battle between warriors. This man he faced, who all alone had stared down the greatest force in all Christendom for an entire day, was worthy of such a grin. There was a place for him at Roland's table, Richard knew. Perhaps they would dine together someday.

The lone guardian of Chalus bent carefully down and pulled Richard's bolt from its stone casing. Slowly, he examined the shaft for damage before fitting it into his own weapon. He gave no answering smile. Richard could see that his mouth was tight and his eyes were hard. He was no more than a boy, really. His gaze met the king's evenly and then the eyes caught fire. With an anger to rival the Lionheart's, the boy jerked the crossbow skyward and fired.

Richard saw the arrow fly. It was moving slowly, sailing through the air like a Byzantine heron. He watched the sleek black spear with fascination. It was a wonderful, beautiful shot. Instinctively, he raised his hands to applaud, as if he was a spectator at a tournament. He heard Mercadier shout in alarm but the voice seemed distant, drowned out by the whistle of the oncoming arrow. Too late he realized his predicament. Too late he brought the buckler up to pro-

tect himself. With a sickly thud the bolt plunged into the top of his shoulder, piercing both muscle and bone. Pain exploded throughout his body, and he sagged but did not fall. The knights around him drew a collective gasp and Mercadier nearly bowled him over trying to support him. Angrily, Richard shoved him away. He forced his legs to hold him upright and straightened, staring defiantly at the archer on the wall. He bit back the pain and with his uninjured arm he gripped the long shaft protruding from his blood-soaked shoulder. He thought to wrench the arrow free, but the bolt had already been weakened by its previous flight. The shaft snapped in his fist, leaving the razor tip within. Richard felt the blood drain away from his face, but he maintained his proud stance.

A triumphant shout from the other side of the keep rang out to them. The miners had broken through. Chalus had been breached. There was nothing to stop them now. Richard winced in pain, blood ebbing between the fingers that covered his wound. He spoke harshly to his aide,

“Take the keep. Leave no one alive except that archer. I want him brought to me.” Without waiting for a response, and without a glance back at the walls, he walked slowly to his tent.

* * *

Peter did not resist as he was pulled from the walls. He did not even hear the screams of the slaughter going on around him. He was too numb to feel the heavy sword hilts crashing down on his back and shoulders, too numb to feel the slaps from iron-covered fists or the kicks from viciously sharp boots. His eyes had lost their focus, and he did not see clearly again until he was brought to the king's tent. They pinned his arms behind him and threw him roughly through the thick curtains.

“On your knees, dog!” the one with the cruel face sneered, forcing him to the ground while lifting his head by the hair. Only then did he notice the king. He lay back on what would have been a quite extraordinary bed, if the coverlets were not ruined by blood. He wore no shirt, only bandages around his waist, arm, and shoulder. A surgeon sat weeping in the corner. Peter tried to smile cruelly, but it came out as a blood-filled cough. Sinister amusement flared in his eyes. “I've killed you,” he said in a low voice.

The bearded king did not speak for a long moment. How weak

he seemed then! How different from the swaggering warlord of yesterday. His skin was so pale, his eyes sunken into his skull. Sweat rolled freely from his fevered temples. They were no different now. Peter understood that finally. In the end, through all their differences, they would be forever joined by anger and death. It ruled them, made them who they were.

“Why...?” the king began, but pain closed his throat.

“Because you killed by father,” Peter interjected coldly. He hated this thing before him. This thing he had become. “You killed my brothers. You would have killed me. Take what vengeance you can. I have freed the world from your evil.” He would have spat then, if his jaw had not been so swollen.

Peter watched the king intently, waiting for a response. He saw his words sting. He wondered if the man before him had ever thought himself evil. The eyes held no anger. There was a deep sadness there, and not all for himself. The lack of blame in the monarch's eyes stung Peter. He wanted, needed, for the king to share his hatred. Richard frowned, and let the silence hang in the air. Doubt crept into Peter's mind and he fought against it. He fought it with every fiber of his being. He could not let his anger cool for one second. He could not allow himself to feel any remorse for his act. If he did that, all would be lost. Richard would find no sympathy here, no forgiveness. How unjust it would be, if the king could atone for his deeds on his deathbed, while he, Peter, was forced to take his place as a cold-blooded monster, a killer with no remorse.

“I forgive thee my death,” the king said quietly, a tear welling up in his eye. Peter squeezed his eyes shut and nodded violently. “No!” he begged. The hand in his hair was pulling him to his feet. “No!” he almost screamed.

“Mercadier,” Richard commanded over Peter's cries. “Give him some money. He is not to be harmed.” Peter flailed against the men dragging him from the tent. The sight of the chaplain entering the tent drove him nearly into a frenzy.

“No! Damn you!”

* * *

Outside the tent, Mercadier's face was flushed with anger as he stuffed the bag of shillings into the boy's tunic as ordered. The crazed boy was still thrashing from side to side muttering "no" repeatedly. The knights had all gathered in front of the tent by now. Mercadier held the boy tightly by the collar and waited. Minutes passed slowly, the darkness had asserted itself over the accursed valley. When the chaplain came out finally, head down, Mercadier shoved the boy into the arms of the disconsolate soldiers and pulled out the short, barbed whip. He brandished it proudly in front of the little assassin, watched as his eyes widened. It could strip a man bare of his skin in mere minutes. Then the real torture would begin. He wondered, but only briefly, why the boy was smiling.