

# THE ALCHEMIST REVIEW

*THE ALCHEMIST REVIEW*  
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Editor: Cynthia Young  
Assistant Editor: Mary E. Coffman

Judges: Kathy Bawden  
William Furry  
Rena Brannon  
Dave Antoine  
Mary E. Coffman

Cover photo: Steven R. Dykema

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# The Dealer

*Lynne Weller*

She deals blackjack. Open blackjack. She deals each player two cards face-up. The players never touch the cards; they sit on high stools, the regulars slouch, their arms folded across their chests. The novices — the regulars call them friggers — prop both elbows on the black vinyl pad that edges the table, and they look eagerly at the hand she deals them and they smile, make jokes, as though losing money is lots of fun. She sits straight backed, straight faced, her long hair shines even though the light from the low slung lamp seems stale. She begins on her left, taps the bias above each hand with an urgency, as though she's limiting the time for their decision. When she is done with them, she plays her own cards and flaunts a confidence that horrifies them. She gathers their stakes with her skilled hands, she never fumbles or drops chips, and she gathers their useless cards in one clean movement. They place their next bet quickly; her hand is poised on the next card from the shoe.

She has the look of fine breeding; the arrogance of it. She is alert like a wild animal; she seems to totally involve all of her senses. Her fingernails are not painted, but they are pink, like delicate sea-shells, and her hands are pale, small and slender. They are perfect hands, quite perfect.

Many are impressed by how fast she deals; some complain — tell her to slow down. She doesn't listen to them. But they don't know that it is not her speed with which she controls them — it is the rhythm. She had realized this, that rhythm hypnotizes, mesmerizes, weakens concentration. And so, she lulls her audience night after night, silently mocking their vulnerability.

They call her the witch. They know the odds are with the house, but she goes beyond the odds into the realm of incredibility. They make twenty — she shows a seven, flips over a four, then pulls a two and an eight. They make twenty-one, and they wait for her to turn over an ace to the queen she's showing, and she does, and they moan and nod and murmur and they all agree that there is no doubt that she is a witch.

She feels no sympathy for the losing players. In fact, she often feels contempt for their weakness. Once in a while, she'll give players a ride home when they can't afford a cab, but she prefers to be alone when she leaves the nightclub. She enjoys the silent drive through the silent streets. It gives her pleasure to be going home to bed as other people are getting up. When she worked during the day, kept regular hours, she felt as though she were in a rut, just another one of the herd.

She is twenty-two years old. The daughter of a strong-willed mother and an indifferent father. Until her fingers clutched a pack of cards, she had been invisible, she had manipulated nothing, affected little. For three years, she has dealt the cards — slick, smooth, cool plastic cards, and she has discovered a phenomenon that she does not speak of — she knows no one will believe her.

There have been games during which she felt herself thrust into a different

realm of consciousness. As soon as her fingers touched the next card, she knew what it would be. This awareness lasts through one or two shoes. She uses four packs of cards in one game, and she believes that the patterns of sequence are all in her subconscious, and this idea pleases her enormously.

She has told no one of the man who comes early on Saturdays to play. He comes while the table is still empty, and he loses now, but he didn't always lose. He used to pause in the doorway opposite her table and stare at her. It was as though, in that moment, he was preparing himself to win. He was sure he would win; she could sense it. He was the one player whose will was stronger than hers. She paid him his winnings begrudgingly, and every Saturday night he would pause a little longer in the doorway and she would stare back at him trying to break his confidence. But after playing for half-an-hour, he would leave to cash in his winnings.

She became obsessed with him; spent Saturday mornings and afternoons brooding about him, preparing herself for him, but he was good. And then one Saturday, she took great care with her appearance, wore the black dress, and she smiled at him, flirted with him, flattered him. She let him believe that she had given up — declared him the winner for all time.

In bed, she worked hard to arouse him, then made him wait for satisfaction. She never allowed him the dominant positions; she took them for herself. She knew men, and she guessed his fantasies, taunted him with them, and finally realized them for him one by one. And if she climaxed, he never knew it. Now on Saturdays, as he turns to sign yet another credit slip, her face is filled with scorn as she watches him.

On Wednesdays she does not deal blackjack. She visits her mother, and she gives her enough money to pay all of her bills and have a little left over. Her mother says thank you, but the voice is empty of gratitude and full of contempt and it stings the blackjack dealer. She stays no more than an hour because these visits exhaust her. It is difficult to make conversation. There are too many things she must not speak of. Growing up, she heard her mother say again and again that she prayed her children would have all of the things she'd missed in life. But it was a lie. She knows that her clothes and sports car and continental holidays do not inspire pride.

She knows that mothers can become jealous of their daughters.

The professional gamblers never play against her. Gordon is a professional. He seldom plays house games. His game is upstairs at the poker table. Sometimes he stands in the shadow behind the players, and he watches her deal. When she cares to, she will go out with Gordon, will go to an hotel and spend the night with him. He wins every game for days after that. He believes that she is a witch because she brings him so much luck. He asks her to see him all the time, he can't go wrong with her around he says, but she refuses. He asks if it's because he's married, but she tells him that makes no difference to her. It doesn't. Sometimes Gordon is waiting for her after work, his tie loosened, his hands in his pockets. She knows then he's lost money; he's on a bad run. She looks at him a moment, and then she nods. She is touched by his expression of relief and gratitude.

She expects nothing from the affairs except some amount of distraction. She expects little pleasure from the luxuries she can afford as a blackjack dealer.

She has no close friends, few interests, few goals. She is a dealer, a winner, she must make sacrifices for this.

She has come to the conclusion that every person receives an equal measure of good luck. To win as she does, she must use her entire ration at the table. There is none left over for her life. But when a crowd gathers to watch her deal, and when she hears them gasp at her incredible luck, when they scratch their heads and say she is extraordinary — yes, they do say that — well, then it hardly seems like a sacrifice.



# An Ignorance of a Sounder Quality

*Mary Elizabeth Coffman*

Rome was a disaster, a fiasco that began with Jim's introduction to the vagaries of the Italian rail system which forced us to make a long and dusty stopover in Bologna and ended with a marital fight — ours — of almost epic quality on a major Roman thoroughfare, the Via XX Settembre, to be exact.

It was, of course, Jim's fault. After we (finally) had arrived at Rome's Stazione Termini, we had staggered six city blocks to a pensione of the most rudimentary nature. The bed in our 8 by 8 room had the sunken mattress typical of cheap European accommodations. But it had a tiny balcony, almost claustrophobically crowded with plants, which overlooked a central courtyard, and the shower was next door. I was content.

Two hours later found us, after a three-mile walk, morosely studying other diners in a little basement ristorante on a side street off Trevi Fountain — so much cheaper than directly by the fountain, as Frommer says. It had not been a success.

"That was what you wanted me to see?" Jim asked. I knew perfectly well what he meant.

"What do you mean?" I said.

"That," he said. He gestured with his chin in the direction where the fountain would have been had we been sitting in a more expensive restaurant.

"It's much more attractive when there aren't so many tourists," I said. It's amazing how much tourists can dislike the sight of other tourists.

"Everything looks dirty," Jim said.

"Dann thought Rome was a dirty city," I said. "He couldn't understand why I liked it so much." Dann is a good but non-mutual homosexual friend. To have opinions in common with Dann is not one of Jim's delights, which makes it a perfect seemingly innocent ploy to irritate him in an argument; such are the pleasures of arguing with someone one knows well.

"The food will be good," I said. I tend to follow a sting with a pat and I don't know if it's because I'm basically kind-hearted, cowardly, or being disarming to disguise my next attack.

"Um." Jim said. He tore a hunk of bread from the larger hunk sitting in a basket on our table. This hunk had, in turn, been taken from an enormous hunk sitting on a sideboard. Our waiter attacked this mammoth loaf with a small handsaw in order to cut off basket-sized portions. It had a crust of almost unbelievable hardness and density.

"Do you want to order price fixe or a la carte?" I asked. This innocuous-seeming question was, in reality, another sting: a major difficulty in restaurants had been the battle over whether fixed price meals were better value for money or whether the usually cheaper quality of the food negated the savings. I held out for fixed price since I love to eat, can — and will — eat almost anything, and am the sort of miserly spendthrift who opts for appallingly low



expenditures 95% of the time so the other 5% I can be appallingly extravagant. The price fixe war recently had come to a Mexican stand-off since it had proved the best way of ordering in Amsterdam, while a la carte clearly had been superior in Florence.

"Um," Jim said. This is his best weapon. I find it devastating to have a meal with someone who will not talk — and not, mind you, because he wasn't speaking to me but simply because he had nothing to say. Even when this is true I go ahead and say it anyway; this is, as my mother taught me, the art of gracious conversation.

We ordered fixed price: minestrone for him, cannelloni for me, Florentine beefsteak for me, spaghetti for him, green salad for me, nothing for him, gorgonzola cheese for me, nothing for him, wine for him, wine for him.

"The minestrone looks good," I said. Jim looked at it and took a sip of wine. I picked up my spoon and leaned across the table to taste a mouthful. This, too, is not always something he enjoys and I often insist we order different foods so I can taste his choice of foods as well as mine.

"Excellent," I said. "Really homemade. Jim, why don't you try it?"

He took another drink of wine and refilled his glass, filling mine at the same time till the wine was near the brim. This is something I don't like, though to do Jim justice he does it because he forgets rather than to annoy. It annoys me anyway.

"They put Parmesan on it," he said. "I hate that cheese. I hate the way it smells, let alone the taste."

I looked at the soup again. Sure enough, it had come sprinkled with Parmesan.

"Scrape it off," I said coldly. I began to eat cannelloni. "My cannelloni tastes wonderful," I said. I forked a bite and held it out to him. "Taste?"

He shook his head. I sprinkled Parmesan on the cannelloni — lots of it. "Umm," I said. The food really wasn't as good as we'd had in Florence, but by now I was furious that he wasn't willing to make the best of it.

I finished my meal and he finished his wine in silence. His spaghetti came sprinkled with Parmesan. Neither of us said anything.

We mounted the stairs to the street and passed Trevi one more time. I took out a fifty-lire piece and tossed it into the fountain.

"So I'll return to Rome," I said, putting a slight but (I hoped) definite emphasis on "I'll." "You're supposed to throw a coin in Trevi Fountain so you'll return someday."

It had been a three-mile walk from our pensione to Trevi Fountain. I am no mathematical genius, but I calculated that meant it was three miles back — and uphill.

We walked in the arrangement common to disagreeing couples: not side-by-side, not single file, but with one of us always slightly ahead and in front of the other. Our conversation's, strained quality was worsened by not being able to hear one another as well as if we had been closer.

It was very hot. The last three blocks before the Plaza de los Cuatro Fontanas inclined at a forty-five degree angle. I began to use my hands to push my knees down as I strode. The heavy pasta, crusty bread, and sour wine had made me thirsty.

I mentioned this to Jim.

"We'll be at those fountains in a minute," he said.

I looked at him with the exaggerated patience of a nursery-school teacher five minutes before summer vacation begins.

"The water in those fountains is not drinkable," I said. "See? See where it says 'non potable'?"

"That figures," Jim said. "Fountains you can't drink from. You have to buy water."

"I love the mineral water," I said. "You do too."

"I'm getting tired of having to pay for everything," he said. "Water. To use the goddam toilet." He looked around morosely. "I bet there's not a single drinking fountain in Rome."

I looked longingly at the fountains as we passed. What would happen to me if I drank from one? Would I die? Or merely become ill — and if so, how ill? I felt alarmingly thirsty, almost ready to risk a mild case of amoebic dysentery for a drink of water.

"Should we stop and have some dessert?" I said. "Some of that luscious Roman ice? It's the best in the world."

"You go ahead," said Jim. "Whatever you want. I'm tired. I didn't know we were gonna walk all over Rome in this heat after not having slept for two days."

"Thirty-six hours," I said. "And you slept. On the train."

"I can't sleep on trains like you do." We passed a galateria selling different-flavored ices and soda. Jim's pace never slackened.

We turned onto the Via Settembre XX. "Only a mile and a half," Jim said.

"I bet you can't wait to go to bed," I said.

"That's right," he said. "And I mean to sleep."

"No problems," I said. "I think you stink. I love Rome. It's one of my favorite cities. Every time I've been here I've thought how wonderful it would be to come back someday with someone I love and go the Trevi Fountain, and eat ice cream and drink wine, and walk along the Via Veneto..."

My voice broke. I ran my tongue over my lips, which seemed extraordinarily parched.

"What'd I do?" Jim asked. "You wanted to go out, we went out; you wanted to walk all over this filthy city in 90 degree weather, we walked all over." He shrugged.

I found my voice, but all it was good for at once was a cross between a shriek and a growl. I made some violent, vaguely menacing gesture. "Walk — walk somewhere else," I spluttered. I could think of no words scathing enough to express what I felt.

"What?" Jim said.

"Walk somewhere I'm not!" I shrieked. A small knot of dark men standing nearby applauded ironically. I darted out into the avenue and swiftly walked down the opposite side in the direction of our pensione.

The physical drama seemed at first to make up for my lack of eloquence, but it is hard to keep a serious face on such a gesture for more than a block or so. I found myself constantly wanting to look over my shoulder to see if Jim were walking faster than I, if he would dare to cross to my side of the street. I resisted the impulse to check and walked faster to ensure he wouldn't catch up

— not unless he really ran.

This brought on a new set of troubles that further eroded any dignity in my gesture. I grew rapidly more heated and sweated through my white t-shirt. Cars began to honk. Why hadn't I worn a bra? The answer, I thought miserably, was that Jim was supposed to be with me so I wouldn't have to put up with leering Italians. I began to resist another set of impulses that were whispering I should wrap my arms tightly around my chest to stop the jiggling. Dammit, no! I pulled my t-shirt down on my hips, stuck out my chest, and glared across and down the street at Jim, who was a block behind.

I speeded up still more. My tongue felt as though it could at any moment crumble to dust. I fancied myself about to die of thirst — no — about to have a heart-attack. And I wouldn't be able to ask an ambulance attendant for a drink of water because my mouth was so dry...For an insane moment I considered putting a small stone in my mouth to stimulate a flow of saliva. I remembered having read in grade-school that that's what desert explorers did.

Steady...I turned a corner and recognized a cinema that stood next to our pensione. I ran to the massive door and was about to buzz for entrance when I noticed the namecards on the door were unfamiliar. It was not our pensione.

Fighting down sobs, I gazed wildly up the street. Was I mad? I saw another sign for a movie house a block further on. I trotted, gasping, to the door beside it — this time the right door — thinking of water. I would immediately jump in the shower with the cold water on and drink as I let my pores absorb the moisture, cool me deliciously, wash off the salt and city grime.

I staggered up the three flights, pulling myself along by the bannister. I grimly noted I had traveled the mile and a half in only fifteen minutes. I raced down the hallway to our cubby-hole, frantically threw off my jeans and sandals and headed back down the hall to the shower in my long t-shirt.

I locked the shower door and leaned against it, feeling faint. I hung my t-shirt on a hook and turned on the tap.

Nothing.

I turned off the cold water tap and turned the hot one on full force. Still nothing. I fiddled with the shower head. It was dry. So, I noticed, was the tile floor underfoot.

A horrible idea dawned on me. I lunged for the lavatory and turned on the cold-water faucet. Water gushed forth to be replaced by a trickle, then nothing.

"No!" I said, horrified. Why hadn't I at least been ready to catch the last of the water when it came out of the faucet? I was so thirsty anything would be better than nothing.

Mechanically, I tried the hot-water. Nothing. The toilet. No flush. I pulled on my damp, sticky t-shirt and stalked back to the room to try our two faucets. Nothing.

I walked out into the hall and picked up the house phone to dial the manager on the floor below.

"Si?" said a woman's voice.

"The manager, per piac ere," I said. She broke into voluble Italian.

"No Italiana," I said. "Ingles. Dove es la managera?"

More Italian. She spoke no more of my language than I did of hers, but I gathered the manager was not in.

"No esta agua," I said. "Look, I'm really hot and I've got to take a shower — a douche, parlez Frances? O el lavabo — I'm thirsty! Dove esta la agua?"

Ah, the water. The Italian became liquid. I didn't like its conciliatory tone. Yes, the men were working on the water — hadn't I seen them? Out in the street? There was no water, not in our hotel or any of the apartments and pensiones on other floors of our building. It was terrible, a terrible problema.

"Si, si, es problema," I said. "What should I do? How long — dove...uh — que caunta, que tiempo no esta agua?"

She didn't know how long. The men — they were working, you know. No one had known about it. Perhaps ten hours — she wasn't sure. Esta problema, problema malisimo. Her voice grew soothing again.

"Thank you," I said tiredly. "Grazie." I hung up on the still-comforting voice and trudged back to my room. The key didn't seem to fit the lock and for a moment I thought dully of waiting for Jim at the top of the steps so I could cast myself, weeping, upon him as he arrived.

The key turned. I closed the door and locked it from the inside. I stared at myself in the tiny, dull mirror over our useless lavatory. My face was streaked red and white, my hair hung limply in my eyes. The salt left from tears and sweat itched incredibly. I longed to rip my skin off.

I threw open the doors onto our crowded balcony and straddled a plant. I opened my mouth and howled — a long, piercing, satisfying scream. "NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!" I drew in a breath and tried it again an octave above. "NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!" I shrieked. Figures appeared on the other balconies facing the courtyard. A woman across the way yelled at me. I shook my fist at her and yelled again, this time wordlessly. "AAAAARGH!"

"What are you doing?" Jim asked. He shut our door quietly in back of him. "Mary?"

"There's no water," I said. "No water. And I'm so thirsty...I hate this."

"No water?" Jim said.

"No water," I snarled. "Water, water, H<sub>2</sub>O, the water's off, they're working on the mains in the streets or some damn thing." I was uncomfortably aware that this hardly explained my performance on the balcony.

"No water," Jim said again.

"My God, are you simple-minded?" I said. "NO. The water is off. And I'm so thirsty..."

Jim moved to the lavatory. "For God's sake, there's no point in trying it, I said. "It won't be on for ten hours." I choked. "Ten hours! I'll never last ten hours."

Jim tentatively turned a tap. Water gushed out and didn't stop. I stared at it for a second and plunged my face underneath it.

After the shower, I had the problem that comes, I think, with every quarrel: how to end it without apologizing when you feel you are not to blame — nor is the other party. I sat on the balcony and read *Middlemarch* by the combined light of the late Italian sunset and that of the room behind me. Even George Eliot provided fuel for my fire. I found quote after quote which supported what I miserably decided must have been the root cause of our problem. It was not just that Jim and I were hot and tired and our moods were not matching as exactly as one might have hoped for an ideal vacation — nay, what in my heart



I wanted to call our real honeymoon. (We had had four such real honeymoons in the three years we had been married.) No, it was far more serious: it had a socio-economic base; it was a symptom of the chauvinism pervasive in our culture.

Why didn't Jim suffer the way I suffered in our quarrels? George Eliot spoke to me from the early Nineteenth century.

"A man's mind — what there is of it — has always the advantage of being masculine — as the smallest birch-tree is of a higher kind than the most soaring palm — and even his ignorance is of a sounder quality."

— Middlemarch

How true. How maddeningly complacent men were in the midst of their shortcomings! I listened viciously (or at least listened, feeling vicious) to the even breathing behind me. Jim obviously had gone to sleep as I read and pondered our problem; was sleeping while I stayed awake, had forced me to finish our disagreement alone. I determined not to be the one to go creeping back to him, but it was too dark to read on the balcony any longer and the only other place to sit was on the bed.

I eased onto the bed slowly, trying not to awaken Jim who might consider my presence an overture of peace. I opened Middlemarch again, but I didn't want to read. My eyes stung and watered: from having read too long in dim light, I told myself. And why shouldn't they water, anyway, with a husband so hard-hearted he could sleep during a quarrel with his wife, sleep so soundly through a beautiful moon-lit soft Roman night?

Someone rolled over on top of me.

"I'm sorry," Jim said. He nibbled my wet cheek. "I know how much you love Rome. And I love you."

"I love you too," I said. I wept painlessly, out of happiness. Jim was not asleep and though his heart certainly wasn't hard, something else was.

Our traditional lovers' quarrel ended in the traditional way. Afterwards, we drank Evian water and some scotch I'd saved from England, and decided to leave Rome the next day.

We decided we wanted the lovely, cool Mediterranean Ocean. We decided to go to Nice.

*(This is an excerpt from the novel, The Robber-Bandits of Nice)*

# Time Forever

*Porter McNeil*

My friend  
My young blonde Chicago  
Sailing friend  
Died suddenly  
At summer's funeral  
Like a white streak  
Across the blue earth  
Sky blue blue Wednesday  
News flash  
Through wires  
That cut  
Into my heart  
In an electric  
Instant....  
And time  
Stretches crazily still.

## Dialectics

*Peggy Boyer*

He is a walker of city streets and a dreamer of open skies.

There, his is the body of the sleek roamer of unbounded plains. The cunning fighter of men, fearless roper and rider of wild steeds. A rustler of ladies' hearts.

On these corralled pavements is the frail shuffle in boots grown too big. The knotty hands uncertain scouts along brick fences, each alley a canyon of desperados.

In the dreaming, the grub fills and it's set 'em up every Saturday night. Here, it's trading for a tin of tuna at the trail end of a check.

It's the slow painful journey at dusk for smokes from the corner grocery. And getting held up for the last couple of bucks in change.

By women.



# Gone Fishing

*Thomas A. Barnard*

Chris slung his old willow fishing pole over his bare shoulder, rolled up the ragged bottoms of his jeans, and stuck a handful of fishing worms into his pocket. He started walking, barefoot, down the dusty country road that led from the small frame house with the rundown front porch that he and his parents called home, to the small pond where lived the biggest catfish he had ever seen. Dust curled lazily between his naked toes as he plodded eagerly towards the pond, promising himself that this time he was going to catch that smart old fish. He had tried many times before, sneaking down to the pond to the place among the cattails and water lilies where he knew the fish always came at this time of day to catch bugs that fell into the dingy brown water or foolishly flew too close and were hungrily grabbed and devoured.

Approaching the pond, Chris knew he had to be careful or he might spook the old bullfrog who sat in the mud just to the left of the cattails and send him skittering into the water with such a fuss that no fish would dare to venture near that spot for at least an hour or more. Peeking cautiously over a clump of dried grass, he could just barely see the green tip of the old frog's nose. He wondered how long frogs lived, for the same big croaker had sat on the same muddy throne for as many years as he could remember. Chris thought he must have been a very wise old frog to manage to keep away from the huge water snake that he had seen the year before and to stay out of the jaws of the fish he had come here to catch.

Moving far enough to the right so as to keep out of the sight of the frog and avoid the commotion that would arise if he were seen, Chris took one of the worms from his pocket and began slowly to thread it on the new Eagle claw hook he had brought just for this occasion. He hoped the old willow pole and the new fifteen pound test line would be strong enough to withstand the powerful, fighting lunges of "Old Monster," as he had named the fish a couple of years before. He knew the pole, though a couple of years old, was still pliable enough to bend with the fish's struggles, but he wasn't sure the line would be strong enough, although Mr. MacElhaney at the bait shop had assured him it would be.

Staying low to the ground so the fish wouldn't see him or his shadow reflected on the water's surface, Chris gently dropped the hook, with a squirming worm on it, into the water at the exact spot he had hooked Old Monster for the first time three summers before. This was also the time Chris had sworn to himself that someday he'd catch and eat that fish.

The bright red cork bobbed lazily on the soft waves stirred up by the hot summer breeze that rustled gently through the willows and out over the dingy waters of the pond. Two red winged blackbirds perched precariously on the stems of some tall cattails, chatting busily with one another. Then, with the red patches on their wings flashing gaily, they flew erratically to land near their nest in the willows. The big green bullfrog, sitting regally upon his throne,

croaked loudly with his deep throated rur-burp, rur-burp and was answered with the higher pitched ree-deep, ree-deep of a smaller frog on the other side of the pond. There was a small commotion near the far end of the pond as the pair of wood ducks who lived nearby landed on the water, their webbed feet spraying it high in all directions and their brightly feathered bodies settling gently in tiny rivulets on the glistening surface. A family of whitetail deer came cautiously out of the forest and down to the water's edge to quench their thirst. Some small frogs made soft ker-plunking sounds as they splashed into the water, scared from their perches by the thirsty deer. A small water snake swam lazily across the surface of the pond, making zig zagging ripples, and a large snapping turtle stuck his nose up out of the water to get a breath of air and take a look around, barely making a ripple. Dragon flies flitted busily back and forth among the cattails and the lotus flowers blooming on lily pads. Still the cork bobbed lazily on the surface, not yet making the tell-tale ripples that would indicate Old Monster had shown up for lunch and was nibbling at the bait.

Chris was almost thirteen now and had been trying to catch Old Monster since he was nine. He wondered how he would feel inside when the red cork disappeared beneath the water's surface, as he knew it would, and the sharp hook was set deep in the big fish's jaw. He hoped again that the line would hold and that the old pole was resilient enough to withstand the powerful runs that so large a fish would make in his efforts to get away. As he sat there, legs crossed, pole resting gently in his hands, watching the line sway back and forth in the slow, warm breeze, he wondered if fishing would be the same if he did succeed in catching Old Monster. He smiled to himself as he thought of the look on his parents' faces if he actually did bring home such a large fish. He thought of how the other kids at school would envy him as he told the story of how he had outsmarted the wiley catfish and wrestled him from his watery domain. He thought of how it would impress his girlfriend Sharon when he invited her for dinner and she ate one of the big "butterfly steaks" cut from the catfish, breaded and deep-fried the way he knew his mother would fix them.

Then suddenly Chris's day dreams were shattered as the cork exploded across the pond and disappeared beneath the surface with a swirling gurgle as the waters closed behind it. The pole bent almost double over the water, groaning from the strain, and was nearly pulled from his hands as his fingers closed tightly around it. Catapulting his feet beneath him as the taut line sang through the water, Chris set the hook, once, twice, and then a third time, making sure it was set deep and true.

The snapping turtle's head slipped silently beneath the surface with barely a ripple as the startled deer dashed back to the safety of the forest and turned to watch the battle being waged between boy and fish. The wood ducks splashed noisily across the surface with wings flapping as they rose into the air, frightened by the sudden appearance of the boy and his wild yells of excitement and triumph. The red-winged blackbirds complained angrily at this sudden intrusion into their world; and the big green bullfrog split the water's surface, giving one loud, surprised croak and splashing water onto Chris's bare feet as he struggled to land the monstrous fish fighting on the other end of the line, stretching it almost to the breaking point.

Curious eyes of neighboring wildlife watched as the battle raged, first one and then the other threatening to win. Sometimes it seemed as if the pole would not be able to withstand the strain and would shatter with the pressure or as if the line would be stretched beyond endurance and snap, keeping Old Monster out of the frying pan one more time.

The fat fish fought hard, dashing for the safety of the water lilies where he could tangle the line and snap it, saving himself again. But each dash was shorter; and the effort required, much greater. Old Monster was tiring. The battle was coming to an end.

Then as quickly as it had begun, the fight was over, Chris sat at the water's murky edge watching the ten pound catfish tugging, almost lazily at the end of the stringer, exhausted from his attempts to remain free. The old bullfrog's yellow eyes and green nose appeared, almost magically, on the surface of the pond as he came up for air to see if it was safe to return to his spot on the shore. His green body floated just under the water's surface as he stared at this boy who had so upset the peace and quiet of his personal kingdom.

The red-winged blackbirds had settled down now and no longer scolded Chris. They resumed caring for their young and no longer considered him to be a threat.

Everything had nearly returned to normal around the pond and Chris' thoughts went back to other battles he had fought with this pond's superb warrior. He felt a little saddened over his victory, kind of like he felt after old Dawg had died, but not quite as bad. He knew now there could be no more battles, no more anticipation of that wild moment when his bobber disappeared beneath the water's surface. It was over. When he pulled the fish from the water and carried it home dangling on the end of his stringer, truly then it would be finished.

Chris stood up then and looked down at the catfish. His sudden movement caused the blackbirds to begin their scolding again and the frog to slip silently beneath the surface and swim farther away from shore, leaving little ripples to tell where he had just been. Chris decided the butterfly steaks and the bragging could wait as he reached down and pulled the stake his stringer was tied to from the mud. The old catfish didn't struggle at all as Chris removed the stringer from his gill and placed him gently back into the water. He lay motionless for a moment, then slowly rolled over once and with a flip of his tail splashed water at Chris, as if to say, thanks, goodbye, and come back to fight another time, then slowly swam out of sight in the deeper water.

Chris watched for a while as the ripples disappeared across the pond, then turned and headed back down the dusty road for home, whistling some nonsense tune and feeling good about letting the fish go. His mother exclaimed as he walked merrily through the door, "My, you sure seem happy. Did you finally catch Old Monster?"

Chris smiled and answered, "Naw, fish just weren't biting today. Maybe I'll try again tomorrow." And try again he did, but that's another story...

# Astronauts Don't Cry

*Lynne Weller*

On the way home Muriel decided that it made a difference to her that she'd bought the wig in a salon and not a beauty shop. People who had salons knew what they were about. A beauty shop could be owned by some skinny-assed teenager who'd just put in a few months at one of them beauty academies they advertised on the television all the time. She should have gone to a salon in the first place when she had the permanent. Wouldn't be any need to be buying a wig now if she had. She shifted her mind back to the wig and her new outfit she'd bought because she didn't want to think about her own hair; she didn't want to get upset.

The day was cold and wet, and the drive seemed long and boring so she was relieved to finally pull into her driveway. The familiarity of her home, the warmth, the thick carpeting, the smell of furniture polish, and the ticking of the grandfather clock all pleased her. After she'd put away her hat and coat, she returned to the hall table where she'd left her parcels. She tried to avoid looking into the mirror, and when she failed, she instinctively touched her hair, fussed with it, coaxed it, as though she might convince herself that it really didn't look so bad. But it did look bad. The permanent had damaged her hair, and most of it had broken off not more than two inches from the scalp. And even though this was the condition of her hair, she felt that somehow people should not associate this with her — it was an altogether different type of woman who would have hair like this. Despite the embarrassment she felt, she did derive some comfort from the conviction that people would surely realize the incongruity of it all.

Her feet ached; shopping malls were hard on her feet. She made herself a cup of tea and took it into the living room to relax and watch television for awhile. It was Cape Canaveral — the launching of a space capsule. She settled back in the recliner, propped her feet up. She enjoyed such things as these launchings. They aroused in her pride and patriotism. They brought a lump to her throat, water to her eyes, and gave her the momentary exultation of believing that man was standing on the brink of some glorious age — that things were going to get better.

There was a break for commercials, and she sipped her tea and wondered if her boss missed her at the office when she took a day off. Eighteen years she'd worked for him; she was just thirty when she went back to work after her divorce. Her boss depended upon her a lot more than he realized. If she would ever take her vacation all together instead of taking odd days as she did, he might just find out how much he did depend upon her. Sometimes — although she thought he was a very nice man — sometimes she felt that he took her a little too much for granted.

She glanced down at her feet. They looked swollen, and she noticed that there were tiny threads of reddish purple. They were ugly, and the sight of



them bothered her until she told herself that she had just done too much walking around that mall. Keep my feet propped up like this for an hour, and they'll be back to normal she told herself.

She watched the smiling, fresh-faced astronauts. Then there was the countdown, her favorite part, and then it was zero, and she smiled as she heard a man's voice saying, "Keep going baby," and the space shuttle was streaking through the sky, and she was smiling and feeling very fine, and then there was a flash of light, and for a second, she thought that it was on fire, going to explode, but it must have been a reflection of the sun because it kept hurtling along.

She wondered if the astronauts were afraid. She knew she would be terrified — too scared to function in such a situation. How things change over the years. There had been a time, when she was a teenager, that she sought out guys who owned motorcycles, and not one of them drove fast enough to scare her. On the back of a motorbike, she felt a sense of power as the machine knifed through the wind, and moving like that, without the protection of glass and steel, she had felt defiant — defiant of death because back then she felt special and indestructible. She had bought herself a sportscar and driven it so fast that her hair had lashed against her face like a strap. She'd had a few accidents, but every time she escaped unhurt, her feelings of invincibility strengthened.

She had often thought of those times — had tried to put a finger on the incident that changed it all, but she couldn't. She had tried to recognize some chain of events that might have influenced her change of attitude, but all she knew was that there had come a day when she did not feel special and she did not feel indestructible. There had come a day that she began to fear for her life.

She decided to take a long, leisurely bath, and spend a lot of time on her makeup. Tonight she wanted to look her best. At 7 p.m. she would drive across the small town to the bar, and she would see Joe. It was Friday, and he was always there on Fridays. At least she knew he had been there the last four in a row, and she had sat and talked with him for an hour or more on every one of those Friday nights. He was shy she thought — perhaps intimidated by an older woman — afraid of rejection as all young men are. But all week she had been thinking of how she could reassure him that he would not be rejected. Subtle things — she had to be subtle. She despised brazen women. She thought of him now. How his t-shirt fit tight against his thick shoulder blades and hung loose at his narrow waist. She thought of how he leaned forward and cupped his hands around a light offered for his cigarette, and how the tanned skin glistened in the glow of the flame. His body looked solid and heavy, and somehow she knew that he possessed tremendous strength, and she wanted him to make love to her. She wanted to feel that strength of him around her.

The wig made a grand difference, and when she looked in the mirror at herself, at her tailored black slacks, and the white blouse, tastefully trimmed with lace, good lace, she felt very pleased with herself. She was convinced that if a woman didn't believe that she was attractive, then no man would ever find her attractive. During the weeks since her hair had been ruined, she had tried so hard to believe that she was still attractive, and when she couldn't believe it, she had tried to bluff it. It had all been an awful struggle. Tonight it would be

easy. And she had lots of interesting things to talk about — people had always told her that she was an excellent conversationalist — and she would add a good measure of humor, and tonight she would not have to come home alone.

The moment she walked into the bar, she panicked. Instead of the usual dim, warm glow of light, there was crude, glaring light. In such an offensive light everything looked worn and damaged, and Muriel knew that such a light could be cruel to a woman's face. She asked the girl behind the bar about the lights, trying to sound casual. "Wally's down in the basement farting around with something," the girl told her, "and if you put *them* lights on, these come on too."

Muriel assured herself that the owner would finish what he was doing in the basement soon, and then he would switch out those awful lights. At her usual table in the corner, she sipped white wine and tried to relax, but she noticed how threadbare and dirty the carpet was, and she was afraid that the lights were going to spoil everything. She had so looked forward to this evening; had imagined over and over again how perfect it would be. Things never seemed to work out the way she planned them anymore. It took so much hard work to build a decent life, and there were moments it seemed that it would all fall apart, or dissolve like a piece of ice exposed to the sun.

At that moment, Joe walked in. And as she watched his confident swagger, the ceiling lights were switched off, and she smiled and took a sip of wine. He ordered a drink at the bar, and when he looked around he noticed her, and he looked very pleased to see her. By the time he walked over to her with a glass of beer in his hand, she felt calm and ready for him.

"Hey Muriel, how ya doin'?"

"I'm fine Joe. How are you?"

And before he could answer, a girl, young, with long, silky ash-blond hair slipped her arm through his and smiled pleasantly at Muriel.

"Hey honey," he said to the girl, "this is Muriel that I was telling you about." Muriel thought that she smiled back at them, but she couldn't be certain. "This here's my old lady," Joe was saying. "She usually has to work Friday nights, but she got tonight off."

Muriel watched them smile at each other, and she wondered how you could feel that you belonged in a place one minute, and feel as though you were trespassing the next.

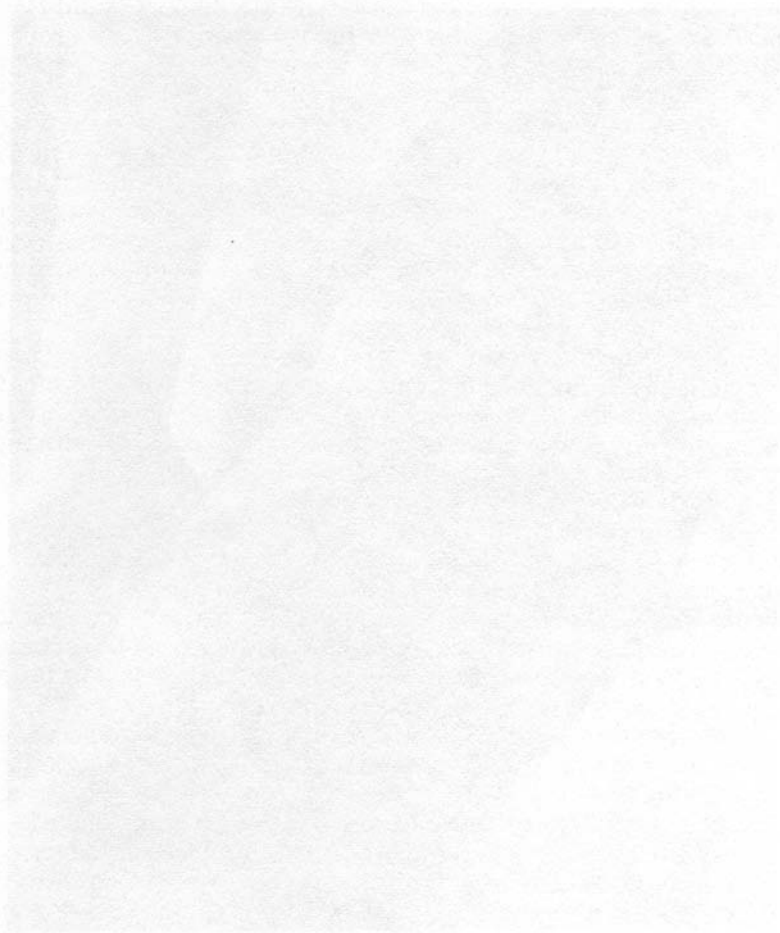
At home, she stood before the hall table and deliberately looked into the mirror as she pulled off the wig. Her own hair was plastered against her scalp, and there were smudges of mascara beneath her eyes. She stood there for some time as though it were some sort of confrontation, as though she wanted to memorize every detail of the image before her. Then she turned away and slowly climbed the stairs to her bedroom.

She undressed as though she were exhausted, and instead of reaching for the pink, silk wrap that lay across the bed, she went to the closet and took out her old, dark blue, candlewick robe. She pulled it around her as though she were desperate for its warmth.

She switched on the television, and then she lay back against the pillows on her bed. There he was — the astronaut. He was floating in the blackness of space. A single cord connected him to time. She envied him, envied the weightlessness and the escape from the earth. She envied him the vast infinity

around him.

She closed her eyes, and tried to imagine how it would be. And then she was there — she was the astronaut — she could see it all. And because there was nothing, there was everything. And she felt safe — not defiant — there was nothing to defy now — she just felt safe. All that was left was time.....





## CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

**Jeanne Bales** is pursuing an undergraduate degree in English.

**Peggy Boyer** is a Master's candidate in Public History and has been a contributor to WSSR Radio and the *Illinois Times*.

**Rena Brannon** is a recent import from Boston, Mass. and a member of the Brainchild Writer's Group.

**Mary E. Coffman** received an M.A. in Literature from SSU in 1975. Presently, she takes classes at SSU and teaches writing and film at Danville Area Community College. Her work has appeared in several literary magazines and she has edited one similar to the *Alchemist* for six years.

**Nancy Graves** is an undergraduate English Major and works at Lincoln Land Community College.

**Mark Harvey** is an undergraduate English Major and has served as an interpreter at the Clayville Historical Site for several years.

**Barbara Lau** is a Master's candidate in Creative Writing, has contributed to a number of established publications, and received an award from the University of Texas for her poetry.

**Diana M.V. Liddle** is a Communications Major and active in the Student Senate.

**Mindy Mills** is a Creative Arts student whose work appeared in SSU's Senior Show in 1986.

**Porter McNeil** is a recent graduate of the PAR Program and has been a contributor to *Illinois Issues* magazine.

**Diane Murphy** is a student of English and History and is on a first-name basis with Joseph Heller.

**Sarah Nelson** is an English Major whose art work has appeared in Lincoln Land's literary magazine.

**Frank J. Novy III** is a recent graduate from the Biology Program and has been accepted at Southern Illinois University's Medical School.

**Tom Peterson** is a Graduate Assistant and a candidate in the INO Program.

**Carol Petrucci** is an undergraduate in the Creative Arts Program.

**Rob Piper** is a Computer Science Major.

**Jin Di Shao** is an exchange student from Mainland China and a teacher of English at Heilungjiang University.

**Lana Shaw** is a Master's candidate in the Political Studies Program and has been active in Eastern Illinois University's student theatrical productions.

**Christopher Simpson** is an English Major whose poetry appeared in the 1986 *Alchemist Review*.

**Gary Smith** has been previously published in *Off the Rocks*, *Alchemist Review*, *The Coe Review*, and *The James White Review*.

**Margie Towery** is a History Major.

**Kevin Veara** is a Creative Arts Major whose works appeared in SSU's 1986 Senior Show.

**Bridget M. Walsh** is a Creative Arts Major. Her work also appeared in SSU's 1986 Senior Show.

**Judson Wagner** is an undergraduate English Major.

**Lynne Weller** is a student of English and Creative Writing whose short stories have been recognized by several small presses.

**Cynthia Young** is the Graduate Assistant for the English Program, editor of *The Alchemist Review*, and film critic for the *SSU News*.