

# The Alchemist Review

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*(groupings in alphabetical order)*

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"FLOOD WATERS" was originally produced by the Mid-America Playwrights Theatre, Inc. on August 17, 1990. It was directed by Shannon Keith Kelley with the following cast: HELMA.....Tim Osburn, MAMA.....Nancy Nichols, MICHAEL.....John Iffert. "FLOOD WATERS" was also presented in November 1989 as part of a fund raiser for The Writers' Bar-B-Q and was directed by Shannon Keith Kelley with the following cast: HELMA.....Tim Osburn, MAMA.....Marian Levin, MICHAEL.....Greg Godbey.

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ECO-EXPRESSIONS

## FOR THEIR SAKE

—Mike Ramsay

"mustn't let it go  
to waste"

reasons the Enlightened Obese  
between chews

"think of the world's  
starving children"

---

## **THE ECOLOGIST**

### **—Mike Ramsay**

"sad about the potato, though,"  
he said, and ate another french fry

## Cottonwood

### —Ruth Siburt

This Titan was a sapling  
when Grandfather bought our land.

Through summer droughts  
and winter storms it struggled:  
pushing down, down  
strong tenacious roots,  
stretching sky-hungry limbs  
closer, closer to the sun.

In time,  
Grandfather could light his pipe  
and take his ease  
beneath its sheltering boughs.

Then, did he dream  
of a yellow swing  
and a laughing child  
suspended  
between heaven and earth,  
sailing higher, higher  
in the rustling dappled shade?





# **TENDERONI**

## **—Mary Brancato**

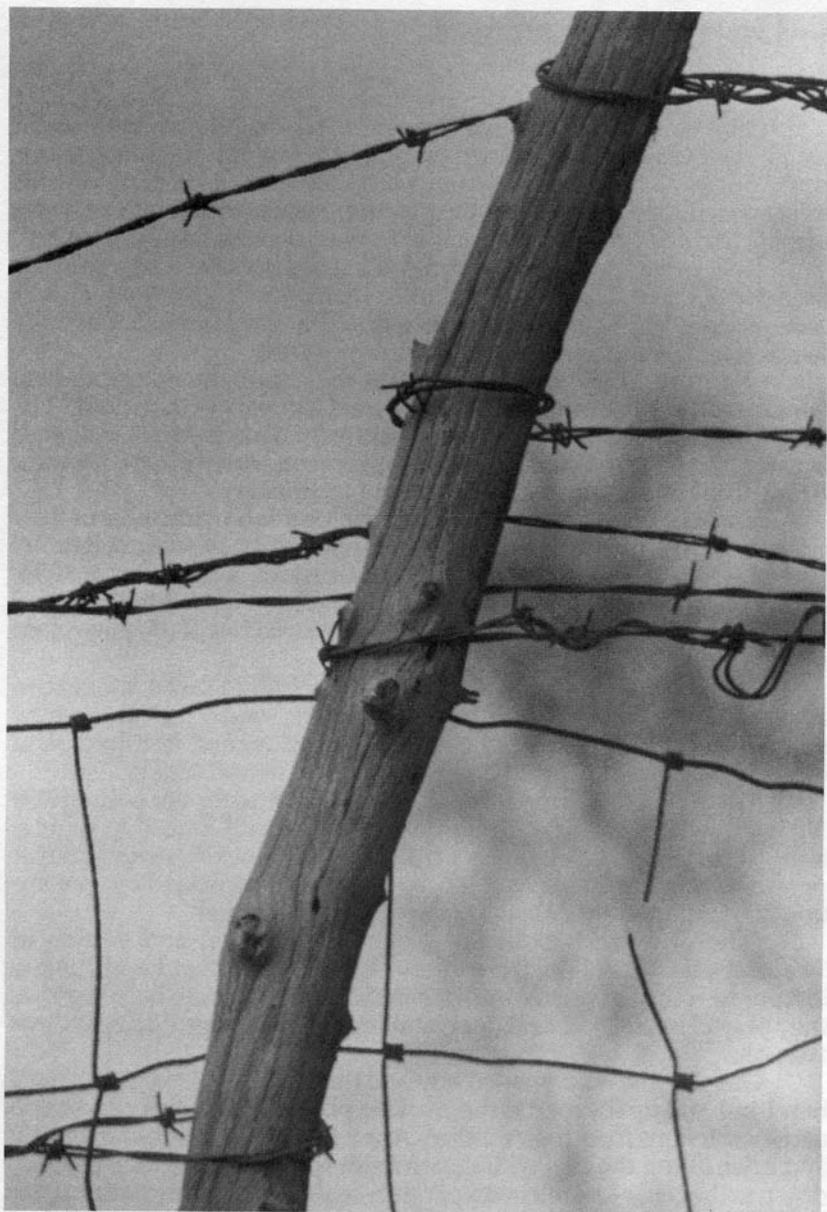
*[Rap by a woman who appreciates the male form]*

There's a guy I know  
he puts the other men to shame.  
He's just like a wild creature,  
one never to be tamed.

Or a painting of a Grecian god,  
a human work of art  
Framed and hung so nicely  
in the gallery of my heart.

He's a tenderoni, yes he's so fine.  
He's a real tenderoni and I want him to be mine.

When he struts down the avenue  
I have to stop and stare.  
His body is so very fine,  
I fantasize that it were bare.  
And when he looks in my direction  
I melt just like ice cream.  
That man is true perfection  
The star performer in my dreams.



# BEHIND A DOOR

## —Ruth Siburt

*(Harvard Divinity School, July 15, 1838)*

Ginny tucked a damp, gingery curl beneath her white maid's cap. She took a slow, silent breath, trying to quiet the throbbing in her throat, in her breast. If she were discovered spying it would go worse for her than having gotten herself pregnant by one of the serious young men who studied at the long polished tables.

No matter. She had to come. Sneaking away before the fine white china of the graduation dinner had been cleared, she closeted herself behind the gleaming mahogany door of the sanctuary's storage room. Amidst torn prayer books and soiled altar cloths, she took her refuge. She listened to the vaulted room beyond the door for the sounding chord, the solemn shuffling of feet signaling the advent of this year's commencement.

The sonorous drone of the opening prayer reached Ginny's straining ears. Turning the brass knob, she gently opened the door a crack. The air inside the closet stirred. At last the dean finished. Another man stood up: one Ginny had never seen before.

"In this refulgent summer, it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life," he said. Ginny thought of this her fifteenth summer, of a shimmering moon across a green-black river, and the scent of honey-vine after midnight, the sweet touch of the serious young man's hands, the songs of the tree frogs with cicadas in counterpoint. ...

"What am I? and What is?" The speaker continued. Ginny's heart dropped. She knew the answer. She was wicked. Her mother said so, for Ginny was constantly overstepping her place. She was evil incarnate. The preacher intoned it from his pulpit every Sabbath morning. Worse yet, the young man told her too. Perhaps not in words, but in the way he avoided her eyes when she served at dinner — the way he scrubbed his hands more furiously when she chanced to pass the basin in the hall.

"He learns that his being is without bound; that to the good, to the perfect he is born. ..."

Ginny shook her head. She must not be hearing aright. She opened the closet door another inch. She could see a little crescent of the chancell area. The dean sat very still, a frown etched deep between his bushy eyebrows.

Ginny wished her ears were larger, or wiser. The man said, "Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets ... alone in history, he estimated the greatness of man. ... He saw that God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew. ..."

Now the dean shifted in his chair. His face glowed red from more than the July heat.

"Would you see God, see me; or see thee, when thou thinkest as I think."

Ginny's head buzzed.

"The time is coming when all men will see, that the gift of God to the soul is not a vaunting, overpowering, excluding sanctity, but a sweet, natural goodness like thine and mine, and that so invites thine and mine to be and grow." The unknown man went on, "...Men have come to speak of the revelation as somewhat long ago given and done, as if God were dead."

Now the dean fidgeted in his throne-like seat. Ginny saw his manicured hands clenched into fists in his robed lap and half expected him to rise and chase the man from the pulpit. But the dean only sat staring, iron-jawed.

The man instructed the learned. "The faith should blend with the light of rising and of setting suns, with the flying cloud, the singing bird, and the breath of flowers."

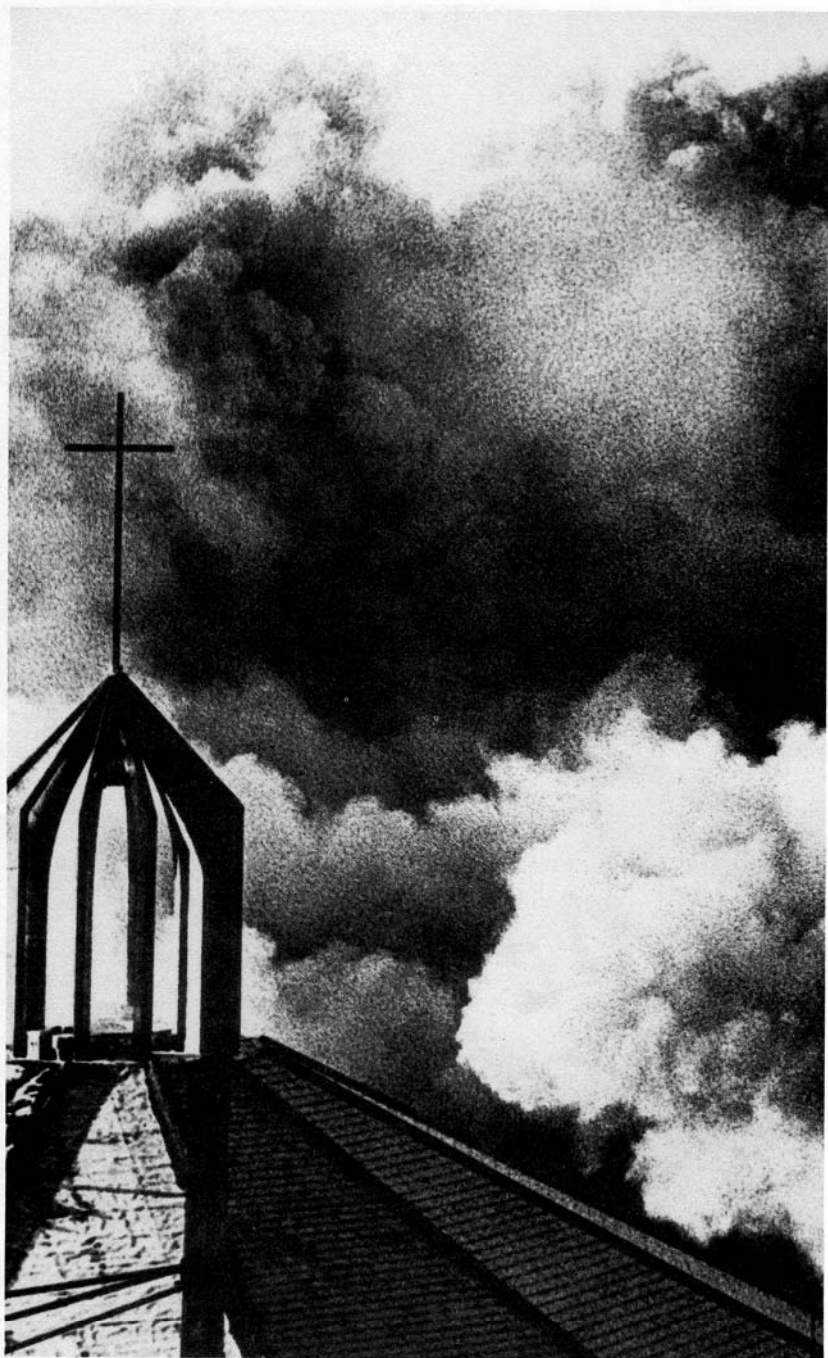
Ginny drank in the stolen words.

At length, the man finished speaking.

All was stillness. Amid the dusty smells of parchment and linen, a strange new feeling stirred in her, like that of timid fingers tapping at her ribs, or the voice of an innocent calling, "Here I am."

Ginny pulled the closet door to. Silently, she listened to the sounding chord.





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## **GIRL SCREENED OFF**

### **—Mike Ramsay**

hands pressed against her  
flyscreen of oaths  
she stares, misty eyed  
at this world she can only see

a tear comes:  
the cost of security.  
the screen like a brand  
cuts her palm



her pigtails petition  
for her release!  
"surely," they cry  
"she would endure

the frightening  
above-even-wind approach  
of a fly  
for a day of life"

## THE RELATIVES

### —Mike Ramsay

once more i find  
i have a piercing stare

i peek beneath the peeled-back skin  
of my shoulder. blood  
rushes to my eyes

i am afraid. there!  
just under the flesh  
it's my great uncle

he's ghastly  
and lies there breathing

he vanished last year  
but i had no idea

o god not my wife  
lucille she is cramped  
and withered

beneath them, aunt mabel  
cousin bill  
most of the family

their bones nearly bare  
it's hot in here  
i can't breathe

Oh ... lighten-up goon  
crying's too good for them ...  
words with a mission out of the ancient Orb  
from forests, deep and placid ...  
uncalled till now to echo creation  
on to the ears of wall street,  
a piercing shrill crashing into stocks,  
the pseudo-deities trade ...

clickety-click-click....



## **MEA CULPA**

### **—Martha Miller**

Sister Mary Paul found it hard to remember. She remembered holidays on her grandparents' farm, and aunts and uncles and cousins, and all of their names and all of their children's names. She remembered the early days at the convent, when habits touched the ground, and novices all in white walking across the court yard to chapel looked like pairs of ghosts in straight lines, floating in a pre-sunrise mist. But, she couldn't remember if the lesbians came before the old man died, or if he'd died and then they'd come. The events, she was sure, were close in proximity.

The catalpa trees had been budding and the tulips poked through the garden soil. Sister Bridget's favorites were the black tulips. She'd seemed obsessed with them when the bulbs were set in the fall. She'd ordered them from a catalog and planted them herself. That spring the lesbians moved into the apartments across the way, her father died and the heart of the garden grew rich with black petals.

Later, the other women of the small teaching order whispered about premonitions. Though, when the old man died, they spoke to her only of John 3:16 and "God's will."

From the first, Sister Bridget said the new women were lovers. She'd been in such a dark mood, that Sister Mary Paul and the others had humored her. It was the only thing the little nun had seemed interested in since her father's funeral.

"Oh yes," they agreed, "those women must be lovers. Of course, they can't touch in public, but look how they put their heads together. Look how they seem to share some great secret."

The lovers (as they became known at St. Stephens) strolled every evening on the sidewalk that bordered the convent and gardens. They spoke in low tones, as though the walk was a kind of meditation.

One evening while cutting lilacs for the supper table, Sister Mary Paul heard them talking. She told the others that the short stocky one called the tall red head, "Baby."

Sister Bridget quickly nicknamed the short stocky one "Butch."

And thus they became "Butch and Baby."

Morning and evening the nuns sent up quiet prayers that Sister Bridget's grief would pass and her thoughts would return to her third grade pupils and her teaching.

One evening, Sister Bridget walked in the garden with Sister Mary Paul. The crab apple trees were heavy with blossoms.

"What a beautiful evening!" Sister Bridget exclaimed.

"You're feeling better then?" the old nun asked.

"For now."

"You know," Sister Mary Paul smiled, "grief is a wretched business, but somehow part of the natural order of things."

"The natural order? You mean God's will?"

They stopped before a small fountain. An angel looked towards them. There was only the sound of a thin trickle of water. Sister Mary Paul thought for a moment, then shook her head. "Life is full of acquisitions and losses. In my life I taught hundreds of children. Each year they moved on and others came. Some were very special to me, but they went on just the same. I think about them these days." The old nun sighed. "There have been many people in my life that I loved. It is sad that it should be so lonely here at the end."

Sister Bridget touched the old woman's shoulder. Sister Mary Paul sighed again. "I came with you to be of comfort and here is your

The day at the cemetery had been in May. Sister Mary Paul looked at the date each time she forgot. She'd seen the doctor about her arthritis. Sister Bridget had driven her. On the way home she'd detoured to the cemetery. She stopped the car and said absently, "I'll just be a moment."

"I'm coming with you." Sister Mary Paul already had the car door open.

Sister Bridget hurried around to the passenger side and helped the old woman out. They walked slowly up a grass covered hill to a place where the dirt was freshly turned and there was no grass or headstone.

The nuns crossed themselves and prayed. The air was cool. Sister Mary Paul felt the warm sun on her face, felt the pain gradually leave her joints. Prayer. A spring day. Six hundred milligrams of Motrin.

"Do you believe in ghosts, Sister?" The younger woman startled her.

"You mean the Holy Ghost?" Sister Mary Paul thought that was not what she meant.

"I mean spirits of those who die, but don't rest."

"I don't know," the old woman shrugged. "I've always trusted the word of God. But, the longer I serve God the less I trust the men who interpret His words."

They were quiet for a moment. The old woman touched Sister Bridget's arm. "You would think," she said, "that faith would be a real comfort in old age. But the older I get, the more work faith becomes."

"My father came to me in a dream." Sister Bridget knelt by the fresh grave. She picked up a moist clod of dirt and crumbled it in her fingers. "He told me to leave the order."

"Have you had thoughts about leaving?"

Sister Bridget answered haltingly. "There are things about me that no one knows. Things that make me feel—unworthy."

"We are human. We are all imperfect." Sister Mary Paul searched for the right words. Sun gleamed off the corner of her gold rimmed spectacles. Her wrinkled face felt hot. She was tired. At last she mustered her courage, "And will you leave?"

Sister Bridget stood brushing dirt from her thin fingers. "I think not. I don't believe in ghosts."

On the way back to the convent Sister Bridget stopped to put gas in the car. She pulled up to the pumps, shut off the engine and got out. She walked to the back of the car, stood there, then circled to the other side.

"What is it?" Sister Mary Paul opened the passenger door.

"Please get back in. I just can't see the gas cap. I'm sure it's here."

"It must be on the other side." The old woman clambered out, and followed Sister Bridget completely around the car.

"Sometimes they put them beneath the license plate." A husky voice startled them.

Sister Bridget stopped so suddenly that Sister Mary Paul bumped

into her. The younger woman was sent stumbling towards a man at the end of the car.

"Whoa," the man held out an arm to steady her. Sister Mary Paul stepped closer. Her concern for her friend turned to surprise. The masculine form at the end of the car wasn't a man. It was one of the women from across the street. The one called Butch.

Sister Mary Paul could hear the women breathing. She was embarrassed and annoyed. She saw that Sister Bridget was staring, and that Butch didn't seem to notice the young nun's poor manners, or didn't care. Butch returned the stare. Sister Mary Paul boldly stepped between them. Butch retreated a step. "Are you all right?"

"Oh my, yes." Sister Bridget seemed flustered.

"The gas cap is here." Butch pulled the license plate down. It was on a hinge.

"Thank you."

"It's nothing. I used to have a car like this. You wouldn't know if you hadn't."

Sister Bridget said, "Thank you," again and turned to the gas pump.

"Can I get that for you?" Butch offered. "You're in your nice—clothes."

Sister Bridget smiled, "That is kind of you, but I can manage."

Butch nodded and started backing away. "Well then, good day to you." She turned and walked towards a black sports car.

"What an ugly woman." Sister Mary Paul whispered.

"I don't think she's ugly." Sister Bridget unscrewed the gas cap and slid the nozzle in place. "I think she's exquisite."

The old woman rubbed her hairy chin. "Exquisitely ugly," she retorted.

Sister Bridget watched the black sports car pull away. Then stared for a long time after it was gone.

That nightmares should come to clean and air conditioned rooms, with moonlight shining through the blossoms of the catalpa trees, seemed unlikely. That a ghost would follow his daughter home from the cemetery and sit on the end of her bed, though she didn't believe in ghosts, seemed improbable. Yet, Sister Mary Paul remembered those events that spring.

"What does the ghost do when he appears?" she had asked. "He talks to me—and he cries."

"What does he say?"

"That life is short."

Since the day at the gas station the women from across the street had often stopped their walks and talked to the nuns. Sister Mary Paul particularly liked Baby. Her beauty was subtle, her smile beautiful. She wouldn't believe the women were lovers, and at some point refused to discuss it further. Baby could have had any husband. That she was



romantically involved with the gruff, stocky woman was impossible.

Sister Bridget seemed to carry an extra weight into the early weeks of summer. Even in the garden, among the flowers, her gloom could be felt. The others tried to show their concern. They ignored absences at dinner and evening prayers. They did small tasks that were hers.

Sister Mary Paul sat up with her through the worst, and spoke to no one of the nights she went and her friend wasn't there. Later, she tried to remember the number of times or the nights of the week. But all she could clearly bring to mind was that in the tiny room, amid the shadows, the petals of black tulips had fallen and lay untouched on the fresh waxed floor.

There had come a week of summer storms that the old nun remembered at the end. The northern rooms, normally light with the afternoon sun, had been gray and cool. The sky was dark. The branches of the catalpa trees swayed in the wind. The first heavy drops of rain thumped against the windows.

Sister Mary Paul woke from an afternoon nap and turned on her side. Damp and cool air made her joints ache. The room flickered light and dark. She heard a sharp crash. Lightening had struck something near.

The old woman squinted.

Someone was standing in the doorway.

She rose on an elbow and painfully swung her legs over the side of her narrow cot. She reached for her gold rimmed spectacles. A sharp gust of wind rattled the windows.

Blinking, she slid the glasses on. A large form moved into the room.

It was Mother Superior. "She's left."

The old nun let the information sink in. "She had a hard night."

"When she didn't come to chapel and breakfast, I thought she might be ill." Mother Superior wrung her hands. "I didn't check until now. The storm. I saw from across the court that a window was open. When I got to her room it was empty."

Sister Mary Paul frowned. "I was with her quite late."

"I knew she was troubled. I prayed." Mother Superior started to pace.

"It was the old man's death."

"I must say, her reaction surprised me. They never seemed close. Him with his strange friends..."

"He was a child of God." Sister Mary Paul fumbled with her robe.

"Yes." Mother Superior looked out at the rain. "But not a good father."

"We do not choose our mortal parents." The old nun sighed.

The room was silent. The women eyed each other.

"I feel I should call someone." Mother Superior started towards the door. "But, this is the only family she had. There's no one to call."

The old woman stood for a moment and looked at the door Mother



# SID

## —Susanne Gubanc

"A piece of a churchyard fits everybody," writes George Herbert. You know he's right, you've heard it over and over. Sometimes the feeling lingers a week or more as Life's lessons team up to meet your consciousness, but fade as day-to-day routines cloud your thoughts and deeds. Still, once in a while the feeling takes hold somewhere deep inside you, like a hand holding your heart, and never lets go.

It was three years ago this July, a hot, steamy typical central Illinois day. I was working with my partner, Sid, at a remote for the radio station.

A remote is nothing very special when you've done as many as Sid and me. You unload your equipment, broadcast back to the station and spend three to four hours talking about the GREAT time you're having

**COVER DESIGN:** The cover photo was taken by Jessica Rigney with a pinhole camera in the Rio Grande Gorge in New Mexico. The photo is reversed on the back cover. This Ying and Yang effect is to remind the reader that every landscape reflects the planet.

THINK GLOBALLY ACT LOCALLY.