

PANDORA

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Letter from the Department Head

It is always exciting to be able to see and enjoy the “results” of a Volkshochschule course. Pandora - the semi-annual literary magazine, published by the English Writing Department of the VHS Frankfurt - offers us this opportunity. Our international group of students, all writing in English, have been developing their skills further in a series of creative writing courses at the VHS Frankfurt. In this third issue of the VHS literary magazine, we are invited to read for ourselves what they have been working on. From archaeology to tango, personal change, life decisions, cats and dogs... The themes and writing styles are varied, the emotional impact is strong and the quality of writing (remember, most of the contributors are writing in a foreign language) is very high. It makes for very great reading...

Congratulations to our students and their tutor, Patricia Bartholomew, on another wonderful selection of writing and artwork. We welcome any budding writers out there who are inspired by this issue to try out our creative writing courses themselves.

-Julia Shirtliff
Director of Studies, English

From the Editor's Desk

What do we think of when we think of spring? Green, flowers, change, regeneration, rebirth. Each story in this issue of Pandora, and indeed each work of art, is a creation--a regeneration of experience and observation from each artist's perspective.

After publication, each story begins to take on a new life of its own. It passes from the mind of the writer to the reader, and there makes itself a home in the imagination of others. In this way, each of the pieces in this issue of Pandora will be reborn time and time again.

I am proud to be able to bring you these new stories, poems, and art in this third issue of Pandora and to celebrate the wonder of spring together.

PANDORA

PATRICIA BARTHOLOMEW, EDITOR

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Puppet Play

Fiction by Beate Becker

Once a year within a period of two or three weeks Buenos Aires is immersed in an intensive violet – a color considered to be appropriate for females only. The windows of the traditional bar where I just had ordered a coffee with a lot of milk – called lagrima - looked on an avenue close to the center of the city. I couldn't rest my eyes. The trees were in full blow. Once in a while some petals fell down, incited to capricious up-and-down movements by a light breeze from the river. Once the wind had calmed down, small violet blurs were painted on the road. Most of the locals did not pay much attention to the gorgeous spectacle that unfolded in front of me. I saw a man strolling up the street, looking up at the trees as if he was doing a strange sort of exercise. On the other side of the street there was a group of tourists, easily identified by sunburns and shorts. They stopped walking for quite a while, petrified like the statues in the nearby graveyard, unimpressed by the buses whose loud snuffle aimed at counterbalancing their overweight. Not even the jostling of those driven by more down-to-earth motives seem to bother them.

Yesterday a friend of mine from Denver had arrived and had recommended that I go to see a milonga¹. He had invited me to join him today. I arrived half an hour early, so I decided having a coffee before I would enter the tango place. We had agreed upon meeting inside. As I fancied contemplating the coloured explosion

in the streets and observing the passersby even a little more I now thought of his invitation not exactly with wild enthusiasm. I had asked José for the trees' name but he could not tell me. Today I asked my neighbour when I met him in front of the lift. Neither could he. Accordingly, I settled for indulging their nameless beauty.

~

The building was one of the lower ones and decent. Next to the entrance the whitish paint had crumbled away. I caught a glimpse of stairs covered with a purple-red carpet and a wardrobe at the top of the stairs. I heard the murmur of people. I heard laughter as well which soon got overshadowed by the sounds of a bandoneon, austere and harsh. Once I had put my feet on the stairs I felt the vibrations of the music reaching my toes, my plantar, my legs, ascending in my body up to my breast and head. Filled with music and excitement I arrived upstairs. The wardrobe lady smiled me a welcome. There was a heavy velvet curtain, purple-red as well, separating the wardrobe from the room where the music came from. Somewhat awkwardly I grasped the curtain, it slipped off my hand and fell over my shoulders. For seconds, I felt the velvet sliding over my skin – smooth and seducing. When I finally drew the curtain I had to readjust my skirt whose widths had got caught up in it.

1 Milonga is a term for a place or party where the tango is danced.

The stage was crowded. The dance event was in full swing. Tempted to step backwards to find shelter again between the crinkles of the curtain, I could not abstain from thinking of string puppets. The puppeteer had forgotten to attach strings to the upper part of their bodies which mainly remained stiff and rigid. Instead of that there were plenty of strings fastened on their feet, knees and legs. They were moving around an imaginary point in the middle of the room. All pairs were rotating in the same direction, some of them even turning around their own axis. Within the pairs they stood extremely close to each other so that by contemplating some of them I got the impression that the puppeteer had been a lazy one, having fixed only one string to a man's and a woman's leg, respectively.

My location prevented me from looking for my friend. Instead I saw a man, dressed in black and white, heading for me. He assigned me a seat in the women's line opposite to me. Their position allowed them to keep an eye on the curtain, not unlike female divinities savoring their power in matters of life and death. It was hard to defy them. They were sitting closely to each other. I felt how their concentrated look



"Tango Series" Brush and Ink by Hye yeon Cho



"Tango Series" Brush and Ink by Hye yeon Cho

scrutinized my appearance. Were they weighing my steadfastness? Was I expected to answer some impossible riddles? Would I have to stay outside unless I had solved them?

All around the dancing floor there were small round tables, nicely arranged with red and black table-clothes. The area behind the tables was the space available for those who were not busy on the dance floor. Reluctantly, I blazed a trail towards the only free seat I could spot. I squeezed my body between two of the goddesses. The one on the right side was in her sixties. She had on a kind of leggings, tightly fitting, a yellow, slightly transparent blouse, décolleté, decorated with butterflies and a broad, flashy belt. She seemed to be in for airing her feminine charms. In her left hand she held a little chinese blower whose golden threads clung stridently whenever she moved.

"You are here for the first time, I guess..." Not knowing whether I should take her statement as a question or a conclusion I looked at her.

"I have never been to this place before." To make sure that she was able to understand me I bent towards her. I smelt her perfume. The aroma was not unlike that of jasmine on a day in springtime, associ-

ated with a kind of sweet magic, sometimes exceeding the threshold of pleasantness, shifting to a penetrating annoyance.

"It is one of the places where the best dancers meet. On every saturday. I always enjoy being here." A look of gleeful anticipation appeared on her face. Her shadowed eyes wandered to the men's line. I found it difficult to look at her. Her painted features did not allow my eyes to dwell on them. On slippery a surface as her face my eyes could not find any anchor.

"Oh, Marcelo has just asked me for the next dance." She flittered up, flattened her blouse. The tables in front of us prevented her from reaching the dance floor as quickly as she wanted to. Trying to pass through, she could not help pulling down some of the table-cloth. "She is an excellent dancer. Marcelo is her favourite partner, besides."

The woman on the left was dressed in black. The severe impression she gave was stressed by her hairstyle: a savagely tightened bun in her neck which conferred her a whiff of masculinity. She was definitely younger than the other woman. Her face was pale.

"How have they come to an arrangement? The men are sitting far away."

I hadn't seen any verbal interaction.

"It works through eye contact." She explained to me, pleased to brief the newcomer. They negotiate the dance drawing on eyes games? The lady in black had managed to perceive my confusion.

"It is the man who initiates the contact. When the desired partner meets his gaze, he confirms the invitation with a raised eyebrow, or a head tilt towards the dance floor."

I did not find the idea of the man being the crucial factor especially appealing. I thought of the effects an accidentally raised eyebrow could have. Did they practise to raise eyebrows, to tilt heads, to smile at a face situated on the other side of the dance floor at home, looking at themselves in the mirror? What was the nature of the criteria the men rely on in order to establish their mental ranking list? What made them decide to choose a specific partner? What made them place another in waiting position or disregard her entirely?

"What about the woman? Is she expected to accept the invitation?"

"If she is uninterested in a dance with him at that time, a gesture of withdrawing, such as turning the head away, lowering the eyes, or avoiding further eye contact is used to communicate politely that she does not want to dance with him." I tried to imagine a woman in front of the mirror practising how to play dumb. The scent of jasmine came over me.

"He has such a nice embrace. What a pleasure!"

The clinging of the blower nearly absorbed her voice.

"What about you?" She gazed at Claudia, her hot face leaning over a little too confidentially, ignoring my presence as if I were a kind of bothersome piece of furniture.

"You know that I feel uncomfortable staring at them. I prefer to wait for my fairy tale prince to come." She defended herself, the emphasis heavy on wait. She tossed her hands up in the air, which made me suspect that she hardly trusted her own words.

"Claudia, please, do look at them! Don't turn away when they look at you! Over there the one who sits next to Marcelo, he seems to be a good dancer."

"Maybe you are right. I think I heard them say, he's English."

"Is he? So he is likely to neglect the emotional side. They learn to do their steps and movements as if they were about to obtain their driver's license. The amount of resistance they offer is tremendous."

"To what?" I dared to inquire, irritated by her fervour.

"To their feelings. You can't dance tango without having access to what you feel. It's hearing, feeling and dancing, not the other way round." I kept silent but her claiming for herself a dimension of sensitivity she did not concede to other people set up some resistance in me and the clinging of her blower began to interfere with the music.

"Claudia, I would have loved to dance with Mario, especially this tanda of Biagi², but he is about to leave."

"It's eleven o'clock. His wife ..." Claudia's voice drifted off. They exchanged a conspiratorial look. It implied emotional entanglement, disappointment, deception, perhaps culminating in emotional abysses which the lyrics of tango usually refer to, save in this case it was presumably the woman who had got abandoned.

"What does she think he does?"

"She continues cherishing her illusions, I guess. Not everybody can cope with the plain truth. At any rate, he doesn't leave her alone."

"He leaves her alone every evening." The sulky tone suggested a stubbornness I hadn't thought her capable of. Despite the paleness of her face, her views didn't seem to lack resolution.

"He couldn't continue staying with her if he hadn't the possibility to escape from time to time." I wondered if she was reliably informed. She seemed to be the confidant not only of Mario, but also of his wife. Just as I faced the men's line, curious, looking for

2 A sequence of three or four tangos, mostly written by the same composer. Rodolfo Biagi (March 14, 1906 - September 24, 1969) was an Argentine Tango musician.

the unfaithful Mario, I caught sight of my friend. He was sitting over there, chattering with his table neighbour. How strange it was! To speak to José was an appealing, but unmanageable idea. We had arranged to meet here in order to spend some hours together and now we found ourselves separated by the dance floor.

“Claudia, what about the people who are sitting at the tables close to the window?” I had discovered that some male and female dancers at the extreme edge of the room did sit together.

“They are couples.”

“Do you mean they dance frequently together?”

“They are supposed to do everything together. They are couples. In real life, I mean.”

I felt sorry for the fact that my position did not allow me to see the faces of those who brought the necessary degree of reality into the place, a place dominated by the caprice of the puppeteer and fairy tale princes. The roundabout of dancing pairs did not stop to rotate. Therefore I could see no more than small cut-outs of the real world, snapshots not in the least representative for real life. Through a little gap I could see one of the real-life-couples. They both sat at the table. A man stood beside the sitting man. They talked loudly and laughed cordially. The sitting man had placed his right hand on the woman’s thigh. With his left hand he drank a toast to his friend. A few seconds later, my spyhole was closed. When another gap opened up, the standing man had disappeared but the man’s hand still petted her thigh.

~

Claudia began to hum.

“Nena, dame un beso aquí en los labios y que borre aquel agravio...”³

She might have noted my amazement.

“This tango is an old one interpreted by d’Arienzo. It’s lovely, isn’t it?” At that moment, it was a piano that turned out to be the leading instrument.

“It is. I like the lyrics.” I tried to concentrate for grasping more.

“No me canso de mirarte...”⁴ The singer came across as a particularly determined, powerful and committed lover – core characteristics of the fairy tale prince.

“... tengo celos, tengo miedo, mucho miedo...”⁵ He continued, adding to the picture of the committed lover his fragileness and vulnerability, the human touch which fairy tale princes usually do not have.

I turned my attention to the dance floor. Overriding the men’s privilege to choose and the women’s right to accept or refuse, the puppeteer, once again, had mixed up the composition of the pairs. A tall woman found her-

self partnered with a rather short man whose face reposed on her breast, an elderly man with a woman in her thirties, the Englishman with an Argentine lady, a tastefully dressed man in a black suit with a woman wearing a red mini-skirt and striped thighs, pink and white. I didn’t have the impression that the puppeteer cared a lot about those he brought together. Despite all the effort the dancers made their performance fell short. Some of the women were leaning on the men compelling them to sustain their bodies’ weight. I saw a couple bumping into another because they had taken no account of the dance direction. The men started to insult each other. The majority of dancers had their legs firmly placed on the floor which made sense in terms of security. Occasionally, some dancers were eager to enrich their performance, for instance, the lady who held one leg back. Then she swivelled it and returned on the supporting leg with a whipping action of the working leg. I could see how difficult it was for her to not lose her balance. She was still recovering from the frightening activity when her partner caused her to lean forward and fall off her axis. Painstakingly, he succeeded in catching her again. Watching them, I realized that they were doing steps, turns and a lot of movement with her legs and feet. Where was the puppeteer in order to breathe life into them? I appreciated the effort they made but I had a little trouble with bringing together their steps and the music. Right in front of me I saw a couple committed to the technique of dancing every beat which made their performance chopped and stumbling. The lyrical piece they played at that moment did not go with their staccato dance. All their trouble was for nothing. Shortly after that, they played a rather dramatic piece. To accompany the singer’s voice, choppy and driven by inexpressible pain, an equally expressive dancing style was required. Instead of translating his desperation into movement, their turns showed a serene and frivolous attitude. By no stretch of the imagination I succeeded in figuring out the meaning of what they were doing. I had to give my attention to either the dance performance or to the music. Although I was rather inexperienced the unnatural splitting between the audible and visual stimuli put me at unease. An abrupt movement close beside me set up a rattling noise.

“Look over there! Eduardo is dancing with Giselle. A good match, I think. But I am wondering if his battered clothes date back to the olden times when they still had no more than one suit to put on.”

“That may be true, but dressing up for a milonga is only common decency. I appreciate the idea that a man, even if out there he is a low-life char-

3 “Darling, give me a kiss here on the lips, and one that erases the wrong ...”

4 “I never get tired of looking at you.”

5 “I’m deep in doubt; I’m jealous; I’m afraid”

acter, dresses up whenever he sets foot on the stage. I take it as a sign of respect. What do you think?" Claudia seemed to be sure of my agreement. I told her that I considered a good appearance essential for every kind of social activity.

Once more, I turned towards the dance floor. I saw the woman with the mini-skirt when she was pinching her fingers in the man's neck. Oddly enough, the man did not show any sign of resistance. Some men's hands were tempted to lose their way, sliding down, on the brink of overstepping the bounds of good taste. The woman who sat on my right side danced cheek to cheek with her partner, pouring out the aroma of jasmine, her mouth half-open, eternally prepared for receiving his kiss. Suddenly, I felt grateful for the presence of the small tables, faithful allies to my intention to be a detached observer.

~

Certainly, it was not my fault that I didn't see them earlier. There were too many couples, accidentally put together by the vagaries of the puppeteer, that had obstructed my view. I looked to the right and saw what I had never expected to see. At the very first glance, I noticed that they had got away from his sphere of influence long time ago. They had their own lives. They danced



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from head to feet.

"D'Arienzo is one of the most ..." Somebody spoke next to me. I could not listen. I could not answer. The music made their pliable bodies glide over the floor. They sat their feet on the floor with a touch as gentle as a breeze in the evening hours of a hot summer day. I was almost sure that the choreography could be splitted into individual steps although I saw nothing that could be considered to be one single step. What I saw was a flow of movement, a proposal given by the man, picked up by the woman who in turn created a new proposal, inspiring her partner to come up with a new idea, unexpected, beautifully interrelated and sophisticatedly refined.

They were present and they were not. Among dozens of dancing pairs, they were alone. I suspect that, to a certain extent, they even felt alone in spite of the extreme physical proximity to each other they were exposed to. Especially the man's face showed a high degree of concentration as though he was in contact with his own inner life in a way he usually was not. Quite disturbingly, it was a kind of concentration fully free of effort. His inward-looking smile was the one a mature and sage person could display, a person who had come to terms with the existential questions of life. He relished holding her in his arms. In that particular moment, the purpose of his arms was to hold her. As he was taller than her the right side of her face was almost entirely covered by him. Most of the time she had her eyes closed.

Sometimes they interpreted the music by following the melody of the violin, sometimes the one of the piano and, most surprisingly, at times they followed the absence of a specific instrument. Their alternating fast and slow times built up tension which was transformed into energy running through my veins. Often the suspense they kept me in made me clasp my hands, longing for release. There was the figure when he stopped her. He stopped her with foot contact and led her to step forward over his extended foot. Before stepping over his foot, she lifted up her right leg, let it bent in the air and drew small circles with her gracefully stretched foot. Then she led her leg slide down, being all the time in contact with her supporting leg. She led her leg slide down slowly, smoothly, defiantly slowly. It was this delay before she had both feet on the floor that sent me a flood of pleasure. Only when they started to pass over to another sequence I was allowed to breath again.

At that moment, their performance assumed another note. At a first glance, I thought she was making him fall over. She placed her right leg against his left leg, transferred her weight to her right leg and moved into his space while displacing his left leg. He didn't fall down. Her attack, skillfully placed and playfully interwoven, seemed to stimulate him to try out more daring variations.

From the other dancers they were separated by an invisible boundary. For mixing up with them they should have bursted through a cloud of soft white cotton. The impression of ethereousness their presence evoked was underlined by her white, backless dress, lined with rose satin. Within their cloud they were alone, absorbed by their very own feelings and the music. At the same time, their fitting was seamless, a figure cut out of one single stone, the perfect fusion. The cautious, almost hesitant touch of his left hand that rested on her back made her delicate skin shine. She had laid her left hand on his back, hidden in his long, grey hair. Was she caressing him? She did not need her hand as support; she rather placed her hand like that to bring him closer to herself. With every turn the ornament in her undulated, chestnut brown hair floated short lightnings as piercing as sharp-edged crystals.

~

More than anything else I would have loved to keep looking at them. After the music had faded away, they remained some time immobile as if they were reluctant to separate. Just as slowly as she started to free herself, she raised her eyes. She watched him, their eyes met. A shy smile appeared on her face. She kept looking at him as if the recently regained distance could allow her glance to linger a little longer on him. Tenderly, she eliminated a wisp of curled hair from his face. Not till then

she noticed that one of her little scintillating slides had got stuck in his curls. She whispered something in his ears. His response made her smile again. Then he assisted her with removing the slide from his hair. Still smiling, she reattached it in hers.

He accompanied her to her seat. She sat down. He went away. Some minutes later, she waved at him who already had resumed his seat in the men's line. He reached for a table napkin to wipe off the sweat on his front, unique relict of his involvement. Then I saw her white silhouette disappear behind the crinkles of the curtain, leaving behind rough drafts of feminine beauty.

~

I had to resist the desire to prise his secret out of him. I had difficulties putting up with the sitting arrangements, the artificiality of the separation by gender stroke me as an unsuccessful attempt to bring to life an obsolete tradition. How was it that they failed to see the demands of the current age? I had half a mind to go over to the mens' line, intercepting him when he was on his way out, invading him, unscrambling by what he was driven. More than anything else I would have liked to dismantle him like a relentless child whose curiosity was stroken up by an enigmatic toy. There was only one thing that could satisfy this kind of curiosity: at first, taking the toy to pieces and afterwards recomposing it in all possible ways.

I looked at him. He was busy with his mobile phone, completely unaware of the impact their performance had had on me. The man I saw now was an ordinary person engaged with checking short messages. After having slipped off their cloud, he sat over there between his fellows, fully taken up by minor matters. Suddenly, I was ashamed of my piercing inquisitiveness. I felt like a voyeur who, clandestinely behind a curtain, had pursued an intimate moment of his victim's life.

~

Outside José asked me about my impressions.

"How did you like it?"

I sighed. He looked at me.

"Oh, you did."

We linked arms. He walked me to the bus stop. I felt that I was not in condition to estimate the effects of what had occurred. However, I knew that it would take me some time to get rid of the that magic moment's picture, tainting my mind with the idea of a life-giving coherence. I could not avoid that there was something left over, having enough power to last for some time, at least until I would have learnt the name of the trees.

Time Out

An Anti-Chekhovian Story

Fiction by Juergen Kruse

At noon Anne stands up. She needs to relax mind and muscles. She needs a break. For hours now she had been sitting at the black walnut writing desk with its faded cherry tabletop and its incongruously small rosewood side extensions. Though an ungainly piece of mock Pennsylvania Dutch furniture, the family had always cherished it as an invaluable relic, the altar, perhaps, on which Saint Nicholas, revered patron saint of merchants, had successfully offered his sacrifices to invoke heavenly favours on even the most mundane business transactions. At this desk her great-grandfather had negotiated the Yellowhead Highway contract; her grandfather had drafted the statute of the Whitehorse and Dawson City Riverboat Company, and her father had sold his shares in the narrow gauge railway to Skagway in good time before the Faro mine was closed. Since each decision had turned out exceedingly well, was it a wonder that the family's already well-developed confidence in their economic abilities soared even higher?

It is said that never-ending success has a lasting effect on the spiritual life of the fortunate. The Bartons make no exception. From generation to generation they have come more and more to believe that the economy is God's primary field of activity; that it is by his invisible hand that entrepreneurial success and failure is dealt out as divine reward and punishment. May be not exactly John Stuart Mill's view of how the economy works, but who among us would criticise this richly rewarded family for educating their children to see accurate management and prudent investment as essential virtues every human being should strive after?

Thanks to her careful education at home and at some of the finest schools, Ann lives up to her parents' ideals. For her, too, business means responsibility, means moral obligation and civic duty; a conviction that has often lead to hot disputes and serious disagreements with husband and children when they felt she was again putting her professional duties above their legitimate concerns.

After her parents had died some years ago she was, nevertheless, glad, albeit without ever admitting it to herself, that her unmarried brother Max resumed the responsibility for the family trust. For more than a year now, however, Max has not been seen in his office on the president's floor of the Barton Tower. He is still staying at the Waldsanatorium in Davos to recover from his severe bouts of listlessness. As Doctor Jessen sees little hope of improvement within the foreseeable future, Max has heavy-heartedly decided to resign by the end of the year. So it is now up to her to make up her mind whether to take up the task of representing the family foundation, or, as Mr Williams, the family lawyer, had put it, "to be the responsible one for letting the assets of one of the few remaining industrial dynasties with a flawless pedigree be squandered by amateur supervisors."

Whenever she has to make a difficult decision, she withdraws to her late father's hunting lodge. The lodge lies some fifteen miles east of Hazelton in a remote valley at the foot of the Babine Range. From her bedroom window she sees the gently ascending slopes covered by endless forests that show no visible sign of human habitation.

While preparing her lunch, the usual meticulously measured dish of mixed salad, fresh pasta with tomato sauce and fruit, she thinks of her family. She needs this time-out to come to terms with herself and to make up her mind; clearly, she had been right to ask Ben and the two kids not to phone. "No need to worry", she had told them in her sober matter-of-fact way, "the lodge is well provided and the helicopter will take me back tomorrow morning." When they had reluctantly given in at last, she could not abstain from thinking that the staff at the tax consultancy firm she owns and runs were easier to handle.

Lunch finished, she thinks of taking a short nap, a luxury she would never allow herself at home, but today is one of those rare calm and hot afternoons

that mark the end of the summer before the long winter sets in. It is a perfect day for walking up to Ridgeway Peak and, besides, hadn't she developed some of her most profitable business ideas on mountain walks?

Convinced, she changes into her hiking clothes, packs her rucksack and sets out. She knows the path well. The small pond beneath the summit had been their secret hideout in the years when she and Max had to spend the last week of their summer break at the lodge. She smiles thinking back on Miss Phelps. She remembers asking Miss Phelps one morning why Mama would call her tutor where-as grandma addressed her always as governess. Miss Phelps had bluntly answered that she was there to put the siblings in the right mood for school again and not to comment on her employers' linguistic peculiarities.

Ann has now reached the plateau. It is called Bel-lavista because of its beautiful view of the rugged high mountains in the west and the undulating green forests stretching endlessly to the east. The magnificent view and the fine weather invite a rest. She wakes up at five o'clock. The contours of the mountains are now crisply delineated. They look like the silhouette her daughter had cut out of the glossy black Chinese paper to make her coloured lantern for the lantern parade. Ann turns to look eastwards. The forest has vanished behind a bluish-grey wall, on top of it a turbulent mass of white clouds, coming nearer like an onrushing avalanche that is getting thicker and thicker by gobbling up everything on its way to her. She is definitely not frightened; definitely is one of her favourite words, for she is fairly well equipped. She never goes hiking without her boots, an extra pullover, and this time the much too expensive lavender Kashmir her husband gave her last year as birthday present, her anorak and her black rain cape, all in all, she sums up, enough protection for the two hours back.

The first twenty minutes are easy. Despite the sunken sun, it is still warm and the path fairly well visible but when she has arrived at the shoulder above the pass, the weather front has caught up with her. The dense soapy mist swallows light and sound. She feels ice crystals forming on her skin and the ice fog makes her shiver.

She knows she has to cross the clearing in a south-

easterly direction to reach the raised hide of the hunters from where their well-trodden track leads down to the cart road. To fight the cold dampness creeping up her body and because she is used to overcome obstacles by showing instant resolution and unwavering perseverance, she briskly sets out. A more detached observer might have called her decision rash and ill-considered. She, however, is still today firmly convinced, so she claims, that it was her never-failing sense of orientation that let her find the raised hide to spend the night in this slightly uncomfortable but nevertheless sufficiently warm shelter.

Whenever they talk about that night, Ben, half mockingly, half seriously, assumes that she must have experienced some sort of divine revelation up there. How else could she have come back as an utterly transformed convert? Naturally, she always denies-- a bit too resolutely to those who know her better. "I'm not prone to supernatural manifestations. It was nothing but the result of seven hours logical thinking about work, family and friends and the rational assumption that there must be a way to do the one and not let go of the others." They both smile.

By the way, those who are interested in antique furniture may want to know what has happened to the mock Pennsylvanian Dutch writing desk. They shall now be informed. It now stands in the president's office. There, on a beautiful late summer morning, Mr Williams is expecting Max, who has just returned from his annual cure at the Waldsanatorium in Davos, to discuss the terms of his resignation that now, quoting the eminent Doctor Jessen, "threatens to become really inevitable". However, as every year, lack of time force the gentlemen to refer this vital item to next year's agenda. They have to set out for the said hunting lodge to open the forthcoming hunting season.



Chinese Mountains. Stock Photo

Wind of Change

Essay by Beate Fritz

The illuminated treetops gleamed like pure gold in the setting sun. Like magic, the warm afternoon light drew me away from work. I stepped out on my terrace and was overwhelmed. What a charming late afternoon. A light, gentle breeze caressed my skin and I felt all my senses literally jumping back to life.

Without thinking, I took a seat and the rush of the day was forgotten. "I could sit here for ever." I stretched my body like a purring cat in the warm sunshine and let my mind flow. Thoughts came and went, as they wanted. Nothing was of importance. A bird flew off, and I listened to its chirp. It stopped, and then started again. A second bird took over. While my eyes searched for the little animals, they were attracted by the lush green of the trees. Green was so restful for the eyes, especially for my tired ones.

Little by little, I merged into the surroundings, became one with nature. I totally ignored the ringing phone. Nothing could be important enough to disturb this perfect moment. Duty could be fulfilled later. This precious moment was mine and I enjoyed it wholeheartedly. Surprised, I realized when darkness fell. The day had suddenly changed into night. How long had I been outside? Anyway, it had been worth every single moment.

The wind blew a little stronger now. The air was still soft and gentle, but a little change was already in the air. "The wind of change" a long forgotten song came into my mind, and I started humming the familiar tunes. The little melody would not leave my mind.

Yes - life was constant change. Gone with the wind; the songs of the birds, my own voice and the so-called important people. The world continued to go on without them. Mr. and Mrs. Important were forgotten in a blink of the eye. Exchanged by somebody else. Nobody will even mention them again.

In big American companies, bosses are exchanged fast. To climb the career ladder, they are expected to change position every two years. Their protégées have to get any desired benefits in that timeframe. Otherwise, they go without promotion or word of mouth to another very important person. Any effort, massive overtime and kowtows: gone with the wind. I clearly remember my first realisation of this repeating circle. One day, the marketing director's office was unusually quiet. No visitor waited in line, no

appointment was desired. Surprised, I wondered whether the boss was ill or not.

Then, I learned the real story. The marketing director had been promoted. In his old role, no more favours could be gained. People were already flattering his successor. The game was on the edge to begin again. Later, I could smell the signs and even feel who might be the next one. With every new boss, the game started from zero: new play, new luck. Old achievements: gone with the wind.

When I think of wind, I see my beloved North Sea. With the incoming tide the wind changes direction and blows from the sea. This intensifies the smell of salt. Now, salt can be felt everywhere. Not only on the skin but as a strong taste on the tongue, too.

The weather on the North Sea is constant change. Every six hours. At low tide, just the mudflat is visible. The water seems to be so far away. For a long time this situation does not change. Nothing happens. Suddenly, the situation tilts. Now, the main shallows fill first. Then the water returns with great force and walking on the mudflats gets very dangerous. The seagulls seek shelter on the shore, calling penetratingly. Now, water is everywhere. It is high tide again. The circle has been completed.

Usually, the wind gets stronger at high tide and calms down at low tide. It is fascinating how fast strong wind or a storm comes back with incoming water. At low tide it had seemed as if the uproar of nature had ended. The same development can occur in life. Sometimes a person is granted a calm period and then the wind of change suddenly comes back with unexpected force. As well as by the sea the situation can tilt fast. Then, it might be too late for reaction. Events just take their now irrevocable course.

The North Sea is a showcase for how wind works. Here its outstanding force is strengthened by another strong element: water. This combination can get extremely rough at times. In storm tide, pure power of nature may break everything apart. Compared to that power, a human being is reduced to a tiny nut shell, nothing more.

This nut shell can be compared to a sailboat in the stormy sea. With its sail it is jumping up and down in the huge waves of fate. On a sunny day the sailboat is gliding softly over the calm sea. The sun is sparkling and it looks as if those two elements: wind and water are in perfect harmony. No harm seems possible.

In life there are similar periods. Everything matches perfectly, life is running smoothly, and every desired goal seems achievable. Then success follows every move a person takes. It is like the perfect harmony on the calm sea. The sailor seems to be the boss, makes his own decisions and gets where ever he wants to. However, no one should expect life to continue like that forever. Nevertheless, during those periods people tend to forget that there might be other times.

So did I. I also thought that my perfect summer day would last forever. How silly. When the first clouds on the horizon showed, I simply refused to take notice. I continued playing on the sailboat, dreaming in the sparkling sun, like a child. However, the wind of change was already there. I had just lost the chance to look for shelter, to prepare for bad weather or to reach a safe harbour.

The clouds got darker and thicker, but I still thought they might pass by. "They won't affect me. I am safe in my sailboat. It's strong." I too forgot that I was just another nutshell in the roaring elements. When the storm finally broke through I was totally unprepared. I had not wisely adopted to the forthcoming wind of change. Therefore, I was nearly torn apart in my per-

sonal as well as my professional life.

The wind of change blew through my life, changing everything. But is life worse now? Certainly not. It is much better. Okay, certain privileges are gone. But had not the price been extremely high? The wind of change offered me the possibility to get in touch with my real self. In the old situation I would have never come that far. Found out what I really wanted and what makes me feel vivid and alive. And I won a dear, caring best friend instead of growing frustration.

So, I am grateful to life. It gave me some big presents, which I refused to accept. I constantly sent them back and cried for the old life. Oh my God, please do not ever bring it back. For years I had only been running mad in a hamster wheel. The joy of life had long escaped through the back door. The marriage had turned into the connection of two stubborn children, which successfully hampered each other from growing-up. How much longer would I have been able to stand that situation? Not much longer – illness would have appeared. It had already risen its ugly head, peering around the corner.

I know now: Life is change and change is the only constant factor. I certainly will not play Russian roulette with fate a second time. Instead, I will already follow the wind of change when it is still a gentle breeze in the golden sunset.



Photo by Toni Parras. www.toniparras.com

Ponderings of Misty the Cat

Fiction by Marie Paule Olinger

“Hey, get off my couch!” How can they be so out of touch? How can they not understand what I’m saying?” Is it so difficult to get my drift? After 12 years, they should know by now. After the News at ten, the couch is mine. I keep fixing them with my special stare to get my message across. Sometimes, I do practice the intensity of it in front of the big mirror.

Last night however, try as hard as I could, none of them got my message. So I tip toed in front of the big mirror. Sat very still. Not moving a muscle, only my white elegant whiskers tremored ever so slightly, as I kept staring into space. Holding the position for up to ten minutes. I felt my body freezing up, but I keep holding, holding, holding, and just before falling into a permanent comatose state, I shook every muscle back to life with a hearty sneeze.

Last night I overdid it. The detonation was such that it even frightened the hell out of me. I jumped into the air, chasing my bushy tail, and holding on to it for dear life. Yet, out of the corner of my left eye I kept observing them. She laughed; He chortled. At last I had gotten their full attention, and as a bonus, it got them off the couch. Ah, the thrill of it. They think it’s funny.

To keep them on their toes, I sometimes use another one of my tricks. I sit at the bottom of the staircase, and I keep staring up into the air, making them believe I’ve spotted a ghost. The ideas humans come up

with! I’ve never seen a ghost so far, but I’m not about to tell them. I do not wish to spoil their illusion. I am after all a sensitive cat.

This morning however, at breakfast, I flung my sensitivity right under their mahogany table. Once again, Him and Her didn’t get my drift. I do not know what’s up with them both. She does not seem to be tuned into my wavelength anymore. He just keeps his nose in the papers. So much said for the praised sensitivity of the human species. Useless, really, when it comes to opening the right tin, for my daily requirements of vitamins and nutrients. They get it wrong. Oh, so many times. The instant she thinks I like one kind of food, she keeps serving it to me, again, and again, and again. Snore. Do you notice already how boring that is? Just thinking about it makes me go to sleep. As if she would serve the Old Boy the same old dish again, and again, and again.

I have to admit I am a bit fussy. Well to be honest, very fussy indeed. But, that’s their fault. They keep spoiling me with succulent leftovers; like the odd fresh lobster piece or the odd giant king prawn. Did I just say the odd piece of lobster, the odd giant king prawn? You see that’s the trouble. The odd one! As you figured, I am a spoilt cat, and a bossy one at times. Then again, nobody is perfect. I enjoy being a drama queen, just to get their attention. Oh, how I love it when they fuss.



“Misty the Cat” Photo by M.P. Olinger . www.mpo-art.com

Pandora's Bench

Fiction by Brian Fisher

He was reading the daily news paper over his breakfast of cereals, fruit, eggs, bread and a large slice of meat pie when his eye spotted an article which revealed that a large find of seventh century artifacts had been made the previous day near the surface of a field in Staffordshire. Experts were suggesting that the historical and archeological value of the find was significant. A great deal of early secret excavation had obviously taken place and the news article continued, "that a lady archeologist had wept when she first saw the find spread out on a table before her." There were many small gold Roman objects, belts buckles, sword hilts, and buttons, "no jewelry", he thought. He read further with utter amazement that the find seemed to have been made in the village where he had been born and had spent a happy youth.

He reached behind the breakfast table and brought down a pile of books and maps. There was a small silver framed picture of his late wife balanced on top. He sat for a moment in complete silence looking at the picture taken so long ago. He remembered this photograph having been taken by a passing stranger, showing he and his future wife sitting together, smiling, on a rustic bench: hands held, a low row of hills in the background. The photograph had been taken on the evening he had proposed to her. He smiled inwardly placing the frame into his haversack and quickly spread the small pile of maps and books on to the table top, *The Antique Dealer's Guide to Roman Artifacts*, *Small Roman Metals*, *Antique Swords and Their Value* the three well-thumbed books fell to the floor. One of his favourites, *Rambling in the Northern Hills*, also caught his eye, and he flicked through the pages looking at familiar photographs before tossing it on to a chair. He shuffled the other books and papers on the table top till he found the map that he was looking for.

Travelling north in his car just minutes later, the map he had found spread open on the seat beside him he noticed that he had to concentrate on his driving; his mind was still stunned by the realization that this rare unique find of Roman treasure had been found in the village where he had been born and spent many of his happy younger years. Images of his early life there formed a depository of unique happy memories which he had always planned to carry into his old age.

He arrived at the outskirts of the village in the last hour of what had been a typical fine late summer's day. It was still warm, and the sun's rays in the golden hour of the calm afternoon cast themselves over the church steeple and onto the chestnut trees along the river-bank etched against the hilltops and the blue haze of the distance. He swung his car towards the village centre and drove through quickly. He recognized his boyhood family home, his old secondary school, the public baths. He slowed his car as he passed the now almost derelict home of his late wife. On the outskirts of the town he looked at his map and at the details on the newspaper clipping about the treasure find. He thought he could place the location from the information before him. He turned right at a copse near the stream, swung the car up a slight incline and stopped.

He was correct, before him lay what looked like a small but fast growing building site, the area quarantined like a crime scene with red and white plastic lines twisting and flapping in the summer evening breeze.

Signs everywhere: "Government Property Keep Off", "Archeological Site-Private". A large board showed the future position of a tourist office. The skeleton of a viewing tower grew from the ground. A large "Question and Answer" board. "Yes, probably there are many more artifacts lying in this area waiting to be discovered"--"Yes the artifacts were found almost on the surface".

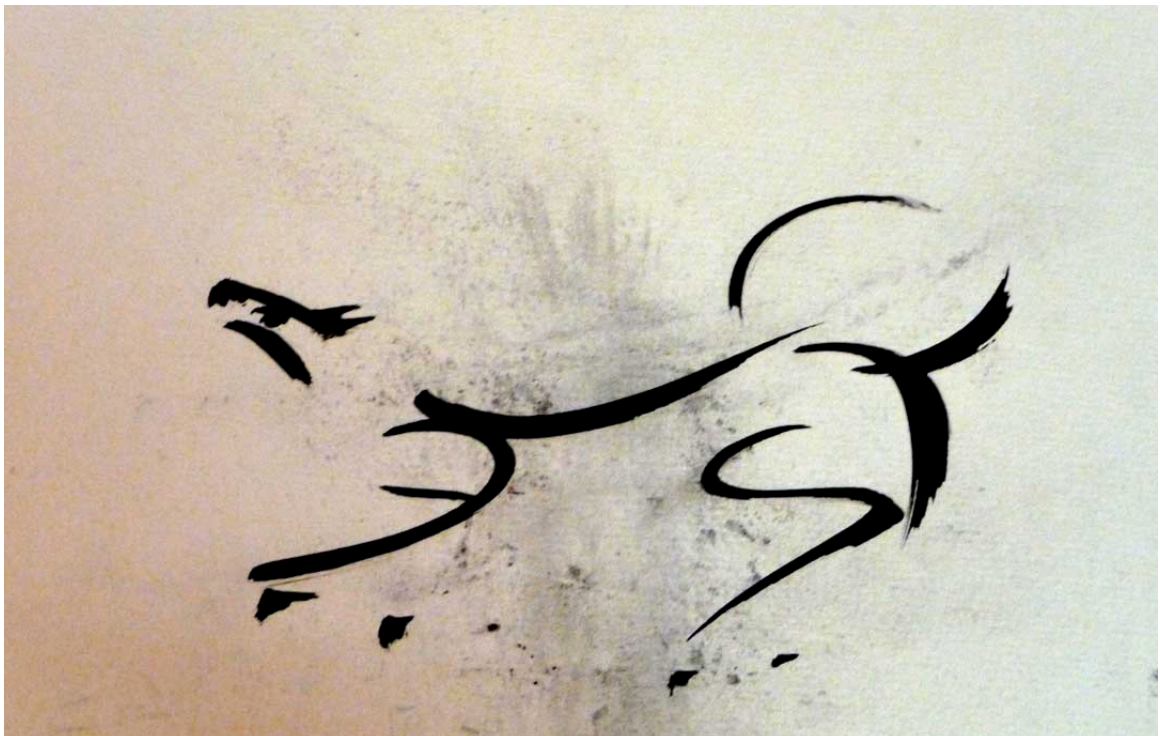
With his foot resting on a rustic wooden bench, his pulse quickened as he looked towards the upper edge of the site and the blue glazed row of hills in the distance. He reached into his haversack and drew out with both hands the small silver framed photograph. Yes, exactly as it had been that day. He lifted his eyes to the hills, one final mind-saturating look at what lay before him before the archeological site would erase it forever.

With the last rays of the summer sun setting behind the hills, he turned and walked back towards his car and prepared for his return drive home.

The Last Run

Poem by Marie-Paule Olinger

Running, running	Down the lane		
Feet are pounding			
Raindrops slashing			
Feet are flying	There's a sound	Once alive	
Over the tarmac	A screeching sound	Forever moving	
Into the rain	Wheels are turning	Now the wind	
	Wheels are breaking	So slowly blowing	
Ears are flopping		One gentle kiss	Dawn is breaking
Heart is throbbing	Air stands still	One last kiss	Softness turning
Chest is heaving	Shattered glass	Over that body	Home keeps waiting
Nose is sniffing	Shattered body	So soft and furry	Waiting, waiting.
Eyes are glaring	Bloody mess		
Eyes are searching	Eyes are breaking	Cars keep flying	
		Headlights blinding	
Only thought	Empty staring	Eyes keep staring	
On his mind	One last flutter	Over that body	
Rushing home	Of that heart	Into the darkness	
Catch his bone	One last flutter	Over the tarmac	
Rushing home	Of that body	Into the night	
All the way	Soft and furry	Humans rushing	
Down the lane		Rushing home	



“Playing Dog” Ink on Paper by M.P. Olinger. www.mpo-art.com

The Woman with the Knowing Smile

Fiction by Núria Planas

I am twelve years old. I ring the bell. I love to persistently ring the bell, which has a high-pitch sound that drives you nuts. I love to let her know that I am already there. I can hear the muffled noise of her footsteps approaching the door. (I know she is wearing her blue slippers with one hole in each one through which her bunions stick out). Poor àvia! She hurries so I'll stop killing her ears with the strident sound of the bell, even though she likes it. An old, beautiful, and knowingly smiling woman with white, curled hair opens the door and again, I, the naughty granddaughter, messing up completely her hair, have to let her know, once more, that I am there, in her place, but also "my place". She is so happy about that.

To the left side of the entrance, there is a room where I smell adventure, and I breathe excitement. A huge painting of Jesus Christ hangs on the right wall. This painting has glass over it, so depending on how the sun comes through the window of the room, you cannot see clearly the face of Jesus Christ. He has a crown of thorns on his head and I think he is in a lot of pain. He has nice, blue eyes, but they are sad, very sad, although powerful. It does not matter from which angle I observe him, he always stares at me. Sometimes I play peek-a-boo with him, but out of the blue, I stop doing it, because he scares me: I cannot escape from his inquisitive sight. Maybe he is mad at me, because again I messed up my àvia's hair too much.

To the left of this painting, there is a smaller portrait of my great grandfather painted by my grandfather in a nice wood frame. My great grandfather shows the right

half of his upper body looking at Jesus Christ. He has dark hair and is frowning. Maybe he is wondering who that girl is that is messing around at this moment in his domain. To the right of the painting of Jesus Christ there are two paintings, also painted by my grandfather, of the same size: one depicts my two aunts (my father's sisters), and the other portrays my father and his brother when they were young. Both boys, next to each other, are doing their homework. My father has one of his elbows on the table, leaning his head on his hand while his is trying to memorize something. Today, just for a moment, he stopped reading, glanced up at me, and kept reading again. I am sure he thinks that I haven't seen this. I like these two pictures: they have such bright colors and the four of them seem so happy.

Underneath the painting there is a table made of dark brown, solid, nice wood with thick legs. I think this is the table from the picture where my uncle and my father are studying. Across from the right wall leaning on the left wall, there is a huge dark brown wardrobe with a colossal mirror on the external part of its door. I am fascinated by Miss Mirror: it is like she told me to come inside a world of secrets and mysteries. I love to open the door, but slowly, peeking in to see what is inside, afraid that something could flee out of the wardrobe. Suddenly the door is open and a ruffled bunch of black dresses is in front of me: they are alive! The breeze caused by these huge ruffled capes messes up my hair; it's fun, though. Without my noticing, the



Photo by Toni Parris www.toniparras.com

dresses' arms turn into fine tentacles and surround my shoulders, pulling me into the wardrobe. The inside, this realm of silence and quietness, is a little windy and dark, but, I do not why, I am not scared. Gradually, some voices in the distance become louder and louder at the same time that I find myself in a room that looks familiar to me, but I cannot identify it. Four kids between the ages of eight and twelve are playing around. Their laughter is so stunning that my mouth is half-open. I cannot see their faces, but I can hear their voices. I know that I have heard these voices before, but... All of the sudden, the children stop laughing and running, and, as if I am something strange, they stare at me. However, immediately and without saying a word, they invite me to their round of games. Astonished and scarcely breathing, I have just recognized them: my father and his siblings when they were teenagers. They do not have any idea who I am. I guess that I had not even been born when they were just kids. With non-stop laughter, my father is listening to his older sister, who is whispering something in his ear. I am wondering if one becomes older because one stops laughing and stops saying nonsense: currently my father is so serious!

We keep playing and laughing until a voice approaches: it is their mom calling them for lunch time, the same one that is calling me from outside the wardrobe. My grandmother, l'àvia, is waiting for me to have lunch and let her know all the adventures that happened to me in the last days, or in the last hour?

It is time for me to go home, and of course, before leaving I have to mess up her hair again. I think she would be

disappointed if I did not do it. I am a little low and I have the feeling that she is sad as well. However, we both are looking forward to the next time when we will share her place again. I believe she knows what happens in the wardrobe: her knowing smile!

Week after week, I keep ringing insistently the bell that drives you nuts. My grandmother keeps hurrying to the door with that muffled noise of her blue slippers. The holes in them, year after year, become a little bigger to give room to the growing bunions, and of course, I keep messing up her hair. Miss Mirror keeps waiting for me.

I am eighteen years old. I ring the bell that does not have any more such a high-pitched sound. I still can hear the muffled noise of my àvia's footsteps while she shuffles along approaching the door. She keeps wearing her blue slippers with even bigger holes. Poor àvia! She cannot hurry anymore, but she does not have any reason to either: I do not kill her ears by ringing the bell persistently. However, an old, still beautiful and knowingly smiling woman with white curled hair opens the door and I, her granddaughter, do not mess up her hair anymore. She is happy that her place is still my place as well.

I go to the room. Everything and everybody is so still. Jesus Christ, even though he still keeps staring at me all the time, does not want to play peek-a-boo. The mirror does not invite me to come inside in its realm and the bunch of black dresses is just a collection of normal, boring dresses. It is time to have lunch, and my grandmother loves me explaining to her what I have been doing in the last days. Today while I was talking to her, I realized that her smiling has lost power: its marks on the corners of her mouth are fading. Probably she knows that nothing has been happening in her wardrobe for a while.

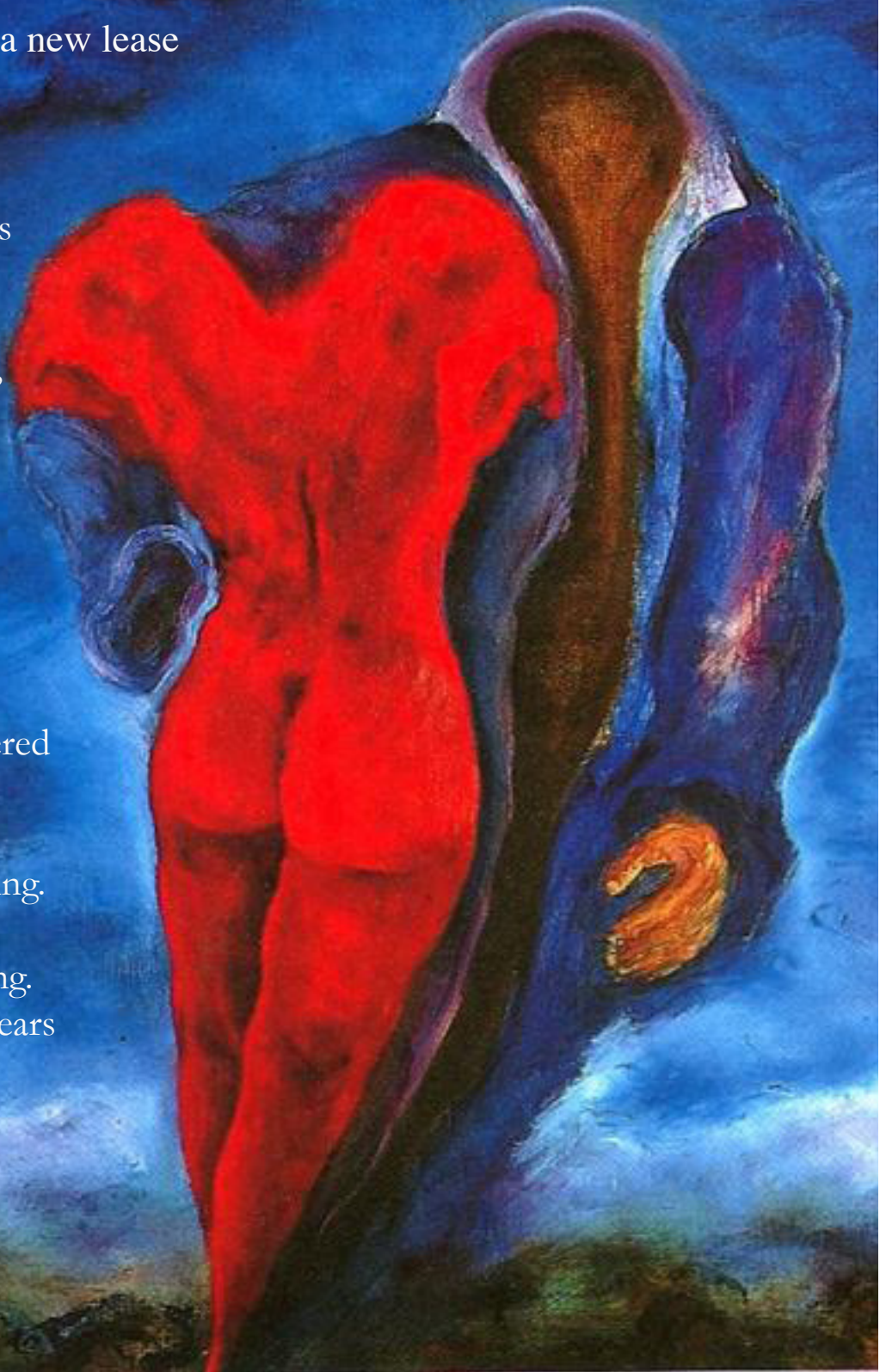
Today I do not have any bell to ring, or any àvia, or any wardrobe with a gigantic mirror, or any ruffled bunch of dresses. However, today I know that in spite of my grandmother becoming older, she was always the same knowingly smiling woman. I was the one who became older: from the moment I stopped insistently ringing the bell, and killing her ears and driving her nuts, and messing up her hair, Miss Mirror stopped being a miss, simply becoming a mirror that did not invite me anymore into its world. Now I comprehend that l'àvia had always known that, but she never told me anything.

Lease

Poem by Elizabeth van Brooks

www.elizabethvanbrooks.wordpress.com

When I was given a new lease
on life
another's expired.
Why he and not I?
Pure chance decides
who will stay
who will go
in the prime of life,
a new chance
or the final curtain.
I do not wonder
why I am still here.
I can only cry
at the loss
and know that I
could not have offered
my life for his.
But maybe it is
an illusion, my staying.
I too will go
one day, into nothing.
Tomorrow or ten years
from now.



"Metamorphosis" Oil on Canvas by M.P. Olinger www.mpo-art.com

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