

The Broken Teacup - Volume 9

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Jeffrey Zable is a teacher, conga drummer/percussionist who plays for dance classes and rumbas around the San Francisco Bay Area, and a writer of poetry, flash-fiction, and non-fiction. He's published five chapbooks and his writing has appeared in hundreds of literary magazines and anthologies, more recently in *Rundelania*, *Beach Chair*, *Streetcake*, *Piker Press*, *The Amazine*, *Dark Winter*, *The Ravens Perch*, *The Opiate*, and many others. His selected poetry, *When I'm Dead and Feeling Blue* is now available from Amazon or directly from Androgyne Books.

THE BEST I CAN DO by Jeffrey Zable

There are times when I have to remind myself
that I'm still here,
and therefore should try to make the most of it.

This isn't easy
because very little makes sense to me.

I got old so fast
that it seems that I went from the crib
to the aches and pains of the body and mind
in the blink of an eye.

Nonetheless, I try to be civil,
entertaining, and as caring as I'm able—
letting others know that I see them
and want to connect.

Some of it is natural
and some of it isn't
which, for the most part,
is the best I can do.

Christine Jackson is retired from her day job, professor of literature and creative writing at a South Florida university. She continues to clock in on a life-long night shift writing poetry. Her work appears in an array of online journals, including *Ekphrastic Review*, *Verse-Virtual*, *South Florida Poetry Journal*, *Chameleon Chimera: An Anthology of Florida Poets*, and *New Verse News*. My poem accepted by *Anti Heroin Chic* just came out yesterday, Fourth of July.

Late Night Monster Movie by Christine Jackson

About time you showed up, baby.
 Yes, the cops were here again.
 What do you think I said?
 Exactly what you told me.
 You were here until morning.

No, they didn't buy it at first.
 One kept eyeing me, like,
 sure, a sleep over with his ex?
 I said we do that sometimes—
 you come in wasted
 so we watch a movie.
 You should have heard me.

I never said a word
 about the blood on your shirt.
 So what the hell happened?
 I deserve an explanation.

By the way, if they haul you in,
 we watched "King Kong,"
 the one with Jessica Lange
 tied up as a captive.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *Midnight Mind*, *Willow Review* and the *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*. Latest books, *Bittersweet*, *Subject Matters* and *Between Two Fires* are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in the *MacGuffin*, *Touchstone* and *Willow Review*.

PEELING ONIONS by John Grey

A woman peeling onions
sheds tears from the sting

in her eyes. With every
layer removed, the wincing

is more pronounced,
and the watery flow drips

further and further down her cheeks.
In her house, living with

her man is like peeling onions.
And the trouble her kids get

into is the same.
And so is the situation

with her mother, a proud woman
in the early stages of dementia.

Put her in a home?
Set her up in the spare room?

Now there's a whole bushel of onions,
and they're all rind,

all fodder for her knife.
And now she's in the kitchen,

dealing with the real thing.
An actual store-bought onion.

And it's creating havoc
on those eyes of hers.

But it must be done
for she loves the taste of raw onion.

Just like, despite everything,
she loves the life she leads.

Jeannette de Beauvoir is a poet and novelist who lives and works at Land's End—Provincetown, Massachusetts—and finds herself influenced by the liminal space created by the meeting of land and sea. Her work has appeared in *Midnight Ink*, the *Amethyst Review*, *Looking Glass Review*, *Avalon Literary Review*, *Blue Collar Review*, *Sheepshead Review*, *On Gaia Literary*, *Merganser Magazine*, *Adirondack Review*, *Perception*, and the *New England Review*, among others; she was featured in WCAI's Poetry Sunday, and received the Mary Ballard Chapbook Prize and the Outermost Poetry Contest national award. More at jeannettedebeauvoir.com

Terrorist by Jeannette de Beauvoir

I wonder what was sitting
on his kitchen table, left behind
as he thought, *I'll put it away later*:
the dirty cup in the sink, the pair
of socks on the bedroom floor,
the email half-written
on the computer—

and someone would have to sort
through it all, their heart shredded
with loss; his mother, perhaps,
holding a sweater that still faintly
smells of him, emptying rooms
that still echo his voice. Her grief

is not hers alone. The world lights
candles, creates signs, says his name
everywhere: He belongs to the whole
planet now, united in anger
and grief

and yet...

I still think about what he left behind,
the cup, the socks, the email messages,
small imprints of a life interrupted.

The people who killed him don't care.
His life has been deemed subversive:
they say we are all terrorists now.

Joseph Victor Milford has been teaching college literature courses in the classroom, on the ground and in the cloud, for almost 28 years now. He has two poetry collections out currently (*Cracked Altimeter*, BlazeVox Press 2010, and *Tattered Scrolls and Postulates*, Vol. I, Backlash Press 2017).

GREVER by Joseph Victor Milford

the word “grief”, from “grever”, which means “to burden”

i used to eat peanut butter on Nilla wafers and watch *The Muppets*

the burden is tough—to get better might mean not honoring the dead

enough—to not get better might mean not honoring the living enough

burdens can strengthen you, like a power-lifter, or weaken--or kill similes

i want to be able to catch a bullet—to have Schrodinger’s cat always alive

maybe we can channel M.C. Escher to design the urn—the burden could be

a scar, a tattoo, a secret—it could even be the thought you never shared

that you wished you had—there’s no point in burdening another with that

i remember hating my first sip of beer—recall needing more beer now

everyday—would you walk with me now over to this crape myrtle?

it is burdened, needs to be trimmed in the crooks of its arms, a campfire

of a tree—a luminous high-maintenance thing—you start thinking

of the simplest burning things—making a rug less crooked, organizing

the toothbrushes—any maintenance will do—busy work—the windows

inside of you broken and the doorknobs all taken

i used to fry bologna and put the Mayo on the Wonderbread and watch *Space Ghost*

calves back against the cold concrete steps in my shorts waiting

for you to come home—secretly waiting for you to light a cigarette

so i could inhale with you—i never started smoking because of my stepfather

did you watch the first *Star Wars* at a drive-in eating hot dogs on top of a VW van?

the burden is memory, but that is a shifting load, like those trucks that

you are scared to be behind on the freeway—it's worse on some days
than others—people tell you that time will help; it just takes time
well, that's fucking bullshit—what you really want is a time-machine
uranium and plutonium—these things take time to erode—they have
half-lives—i have a full life—limited time, of course, my meteor could hit
anything out there, just like yours—to grieve, to carry a burden
isn't that what we do? the minute we come into this world with the cancer
of gravity upon us? the minute we leave the womb?
on the carpet with the power out eating the ice cream before it all melts...

everything is by anonymous
everything is
cramps, and loose change, and thick perfume
suffocating jeans and google history
"lose 30 pounds in one month" > "Generally considered unsafe and unstable"
broken phone chargers, chattering teeth, and crumbs
fuck, so many crumbs
funny though, i can't remember the last time i ate
spam emails, heavy eyes, text messages i save to read
when the buzz hits and the cameras turn on
like a christmas present.
scratchy throat, two second interactions, waving at the stop sign
"you can go ahead"
because i have no where important to be.
starring forever at nothing, turning in bed,
putting one leg out from under the comforter.
gentle piano alarm clock, fraying shoes, parents calling
make up something quick.
shame blindness, acne patches, sinking to the bottom of the pool
hating music, hating tv shows, starting to hate books unless
they remind me of myself, therefore i am worth writing about.
broken down businesses, bicyclists, lines outside the liquor store
blurry, one big mosaic, swirls of gray and grayer...
everything is

Rip Underwood owned a dental lab for many years, but has retired and wishes to devote his energies to poetry. In Austin, he has volunteered with deaf clients and with developmentally disabled residents at the Austin State School. He has also volunteered at the local women's shelter and for Victim Services in Austin. He is eager to explore a more inward artistic journey and to see if the work he has accumulated has a place in the world. His poems have been published in *Nixes Mate Review*, *Change Seven*, *Panorama*, *Poetry Super Highway*, and more.

At the Arches of Utah by Rip Underwood

From between to a *thatness*, a walking to
and from, an everything always yet, a belief
the scene can be had and held, one sees the onyx-
orange plains and pock-terraced heights waiver,
bracket between instances, thither and quip.

To settle down,
to lie flat, the circle must elongate
without snapping: our Greek has told it.
We are drawn to the line that was,
the one before gravity, before evaporation,
before time's frantic orthodoxy.

We name anoxic seas
before dead weight bore down, before
lines fractured and salt and water
made their collusion: before grit-laden air
carved portals in stone, risen stone,
before there were namers naming,
gods clambering through.

So much space chastens: the stonescapes
stacked at range, the complexities and foldings,
the stubborn little thickets all draw the eye
along walls to figures scratched there, then slosh
back along and across, unawares.

The stag, the rider, remain.
On your walk, you come upon tufts, bones,
astonished striations, dulled by bright air,
picked at from above and below, de-
scented, made abstract, ejected
from their place in a hierarchy.

It is a sight
and it causes an unease, a fleeting commotion.
On and turning, you follow your way back out, past
remains and image, past all need to find
an immortal eye, a demiurge loading grain
upon grain, with near eternity at its disposal.

You motor away, arrive

at the lobby where you began, wanting quiet.
A woman approaches: ah yes, Mrs. Wray,
the one from breakfast, the one with the bosom-
clutched terrier who always says hello.
You say *hello!* in passing, glad at the chance.

Paul Moffett is a writer and teacher whose fiction appears in *Agnes & True*, *Bright Flash Literary Review*, *the Lowestoft Chronicle*, and *Flights from the Rock (Engen)*. His poetry appears in *Riddle Fence*, and he was also the winner of their poetry contest. He lives in St. John's, NL with his wife, two teenagers, and one beagle.

Hungry by Paul Moffett

A parasite the hunger gnaws
grows if I feed it, God knows I feed it
the scraps of an ego.

The worm inside me eats my ambition
screams for more (feed me Seymore)
all I get is fatter.

Older weaker puppeted
by parasite paradoxes
getting bigger makes me small.

The worm is never sated
eats me from the inside inside
out lasts all the me in me.

It sucks my bones dry
wraps itself around me makes me round
but insubstantial.

It will be satisfied
with nothing less than more
and more

D. Walsh Gilbert is a dual citizen of the Republic of Ireland and the United States and lives in Connecticut on a former sheep farm at the foot of Talcott Mountain, the prior lands of the Tunxis peoples to whom she gives deep gratitude and promises good stewardship. Her latest book, *Snarl* (Kelsay Books), was released in July 2026. Alumna of Wesleyan University, she leads a poetry workshop for members of Connecticut Poetry Society as well as a creative writing program for residents of Masonicare at Middlewoods of Farmington. She has recently joined the board of the Sancho Panza Literary Society.

Being Perishable by D. Walsh Gilbert

The best witchcraft is the alchemy
to change the dead of gray lead
into golden koi able to swim
underwater, gills swollen and exposed.

The universe calls it normal
to watch the stars die one by one,
without any funeral or elegy. Somehow
they echo summer's leaning sunflower.

I want the Montana bison to bring back
my dead, a kind of resurrection
only dry prairie grasses can provide.
From a few wild beasts, came many.

Can't you see I'm grappling to conjure
an afterlife while I'm still alive?

Jaden Goldfain is a PhD student in Rhetoric at Indiana University. Her work has appeared in *Discretionary Love*, *Gastropoda*, *Rough Diamond Poetry*, among others. She loves Jesus, her friends, and people who either don't exist or don't know she exists. Twitter (X?): @j_goldfain

Telling Chewbacca I Swing Both Ways by Jaden Goldfain

because he looked alarmed
at the red lightsaber in my hair,
but fear not, fuzzy creature,
my hands aren't that good
with a sword anyway,

better at pressing
into hers on the ride
this morning,
because I love
this space world,
but I needed her to tether me
here,
and I breathed along
her palm lines
as we flung through laser cannons
and droids and a morally
complicated man I think
is devastatingly alluring,
yet I'd never want him
to look at me—

No, darling,
I want you to keep looking
at me like you did
when I told you I didn't
want to do Rise again
and nudged you through the gate,
once, twice,
blinking like it'll help me
resist your eyes,
bright and panicked,
like you actually want me
with you—

Go,
I murmur,
go, go, go,

I'll wait for you,
don't beg,
because I'll follow
you anywhere,
and I can't handle
being tossed
against the stars again.

You don't beg,
and I don't go,
and I spend the first
half of the fireworks alone,
convincing myself
this is what I wanted

Jackie McClure writes poetry and fiction aiming to illuminate commonplace segments of our shared landscapes. Her poetry can be found in a variety of literary journals and anthologies, including *Wild Roof Journal*, *Split Rock Review*, *Wild Willow Magazine*, *Locust Shells Journal*, *Mocking Heart Review* and *Sage Journal* from Yale School of the Environment. She publishes new work regularly on Substack at *Pouring Word Tea*. She lives in the northwest corner of Washington State.

Sleep Lace by Jackie McClure

Set aside those dreams
bound with their worry laces.

When a morning blinks again
with cats unable to resist the whiff of dawn

with skeins of light winking
whether clear or cloudy—

remember that the forecast storm
blew only in your faulty dreamscape

not in the baleful tree trunks still wearing
all the leaves of their bracing crowns

not in the dew still clinging
unscattered by a shuddering gust

because brains that can make dreams
do that—turn beauty into dust with a single shrug—

and in this quiet moment
I choose my waking eyes to tint the day.

A.N. Walls is a writer from the rural Midwest who writes pieces here and there. She had been published in *Pulse* and *Corporeal Lit*. More of her work can be found on her substack @thescavenger.

A note left at a grave: the family tree is rotting. by Alexandria Walls

You couldn't have known when your father died on the operating table, his chest opened and his failing heart being prodded, that your son would go from the same problem; from a heart attack in middle age, and that the hole in your heart would become metaphorical, and not just physical. I remember when they patched that hole in your heart up, went into your arteries to fix you up; apparently it did no good. You couldn't have known that that hole, too, would exist in your daughter, and in me, there would grow a stuttering heart that beats without correct rhythm. You could not have known, nor could your mother or your mother's mother know, that our joints would all start to come unglued and we would be reduced to faulty, creaking machines of bone on bone. No one could have known that we would be so exceptionally good at being unwell, that this is the one way we would stand out, and that sickness would cling to us, to this family tree of ours, like a gluttonous tick swelling up fat on our blood. Each branch, each leaf, is overcome. It is part of us. Limbs are falling off, and day by day the tree hollows out.

There I see him behind me in the distance, but growing closer. He's in a tattered flannel and blue jeans all polluted with dirt. This man I see, he's gaunt, his face like a moon with two deep craters for eyes. He holds an instrument to bring an end to this all, a chainsaw. I can hear the motor start, see the chain begin to turn and the little blades blur together as he moves closer to the tree. I am not afraid; I think this may be the best thing for us.

I'm sorry, Agnes, the family tree is rotting.

Michaela El-Ters (she/her) is a creative writer who lives in the cool pines of northern Arizona. When she isn't chugging coffee and working on her next writing project, she spends her days playing video games and taking her sweet tripod dog on adventures. She has published work on numerous writing and entertainment websites, including *The Utrecht Pigeon*, *Spillwords*, *Read Only Magazine*, *MovieJawn*, and more.

Clepsydra by Michaela El-Ters

“Amelia, I’m so sorry, but...Cass is gone.”

The day my sister died, my world stopped. The fluorescent lights in my office dimmed and flickered as I added the finishing touches to some trivial, bureaucratic PowerPoint presentation. I don't remember what I said when I got the call. My coworkers told me I fell out of my chair, curled up under my desk, and screamed. But the enduring memory from that moment was the incessant sound of ticking blaring in my ears, the pounding in my head, and the boiling sensation under my skin. When I started to cry, salty, watery tears didn't stream down my cheeks. A black, gelatinous ooze seeped out of my pores and burned my skin. I felt my chest tighten as the gears in my heart ground to a halt.

“Yeah, I picked you up from work and brought you home. Remember, Mel?” Alex asked gently.

I shook my head, dazed and delirious. Each touch from her hands, normally so soft and soothing, felt like they were setting my skin on fire. She lowered me into the bathtub where the toxic sludge pooled around me and stained the porcelain. My joints swelled and Alex removed my watch when it started to cut off my circulation, turning my skin blue. We tried to close up the wounds, but the toxins kept gushing out of me like blood. The gauze pads she pressed against me greedily soaked up the liquid like parched soil. The sludge flooded our home, until we were wading through oceans of knee-deep, ebony muck.

I don't know how long the world felt broken and torn apart. Long enough that I thought I might like to go, too. Maybe I should join my sister in the place where river water flowed clear and pristine. A place where I could hear Cass’s laughter, light and joyous. I smiled at the memory of her, even as her features blurred over time and looked more and more like mine.

Each morning, Alex stroked my hair and kissed my cheek. The muck secreted from my body saturated the sheets, clinging to everything it touched. I hated the way it stained her lips black when she kissed me and I tried to push her away. My heart ached when she pulled away from me, but the metallic taste of rust overwhelmed my senses. My muscles screamed as I waded through the muck into the bathroom. I stared at the gaunt reflection looking back. Inky tendrils of sludge flowed down my face and neck. I rested my hand against my chest and wondered why I couldn’t feel anything. I grimaced at the sight of myself in the mirror, at what my grief had done to me and our home.

“...Is your jar collection still in the garage?” I croaked.

Alex stood in the doorway and nodded. I felt her hands try to embrace me, but I needed to move, do something, *anything*. Anything to contain the grief from flooding anywhere else. I trudged through the sludge and hoisted boxes of jars into the house. I gagged at the foul, pungent odor of

the ooze as I dunked the first jar beneath the jet black surface, but I didn't stop. One by one, I scooped up jars of the sludge and set them aside. Soon, our house was overflowing with jars perched on every available space, cluttering the mantle, tables, and bookshelves.

But I felt the cracks in my heart filling in just a little. Each day that I basked in the sun's gentle glow, or managed to sleep through the night, I felt like I was finally healing. Alex no longer paused when she reached to hold my hands or tuck a strand of loose hair behind my ear. Her fingers against my skin didn't feel like they were burning me alive. She gingerly fastened my watch on my wrist, lips curled into a small smile. The sludge bleeding from within me slowed, and drained out of our home like a reservoir drying up. My world began to heal.

Alex and I spent days scrubbing the floors and walls, getting rid of the inky stains. She surprised me with a new velvet rug for our living room. It was a light periwinkle, my favorite color. I gasped when my feet landed on the soft material. She pulled me in close and held me with a tight squeeze. I felt my chest stir, like the rust that had encased my heart was finally dissipating. I clung to the back of her shirt and buried my face into her neck.

"Are you sure you want to throw them away?" Alex asked, clutching one of the jars to her chest.

"I'm sure," I replied, unscrewing the lid and watching the sludge swirl down the drain. One by one, I dumped the jars of toxins into the sink, and with each one, I could taste the salty tears streaming down my cheeks. Alex handed me the last jar and wrapped her arm around my waist. I paused, reminded of the woman I saw reflected back at me when I was nearly drowning in grief.

"Maybe not this one," I murmured. I walked into the living room and rested it on the mantle next to the faded photo of Cass and I when we were little. I still remember the day we took that photo, laughing and playing in the pond near our family home. My heart panged at the memory. I closed my eyes and breathed in and out, listening to the gentle tick of my watch. I peeked back at the jar. The ebony poison churned and twisted against its glassy prison.

With a deep exhale, I turned and walked away.

DC Diamondopolous is an acclaimed short story, and flash fiction author with over five-hundred stories published internationally in print, online magazines, literary journals, and anthologies. DC's stories have appeared in: *Amazing Stories*, *So It Goes: The Literary Journal of Kurt Vonnegut Museum and Library*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Broadkill Review*, *Zoetic Press*, and others. DC has two published collections of short stories: *Stepping Up* and *Captured Up Close (20th Century Short-Short Stories)*. She was nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize and three times for Best of the Net Anthology. She lives on the California coast with her wife and animals. dcdiamondopolous.com

Blonde Noir by DC Diamondopolous

Kit Covington sat on the sofa in her Pacific Palisades mansion with a cigarette lodged in the side of her mouth. A cloud of smoke floated around her head. She adjusted the oxygen tube in her nose, then brushed ash from her dog Muffin's champagne-colored curls. The miniature poodle dozing in Kit's lap startled when the camera crew from *The Great Morning Talk Show* banged equipment into Kit's antique furniture.

"Watch it! You scratch anything, you'll pay for the restoration." Since her left lung had been removed, Kit's husky voice had a rattle that lingered between words chaining them together like loose ball bearings.

"Sorry," the stocky, tattooed sound woman said.

Kit wondered if the all-female crew was a set-up—some kind of knife-twisting in the gut. She'd been anxious about the interview and now regretted it.

Her son, Robin, urged her to confront the nonsense. The 1950s blonde bombshell became notorious because of some damn YouTube video a pop singer made by superimposing Kit's dance sequence from the 1956 movie, *I Was a Teenage SheWolf From Mars*, while he sang to her. It went viral. Paramount capitalized on it with a box set of her films. The Screen Actors Guild sent her checks she hadn't seen in sixty years.

Kit would have laughed at the male juvenile obsession with her big breasts, platinum blonde hair, and erotic gyrations in her bullet bra and tight sequined space suit. But it happened at the time actresses came forward and named producers, directors, and actors who raped and assaulted them. The video ignited a firestorm of criticism from young women, who blamed her for their being sexualized. She became the poster girl, Adam's Eve, the anti-feminist, the target for all the ills cast upon womanhood—making her name *Kit* into a verb synonymous with "fucks for favors."

What a load of shit!

Kit had had enough after months of headlines, *CNN* pestering her old studio for her telephone number, and the tabloids offering money to anyone who had a recent picture of her.

Centerfolds, headshots, movie-posters, her sexy blonde images from the 50s were everywhere.

She chose *The Great Morning Talk Show* because Bridget Lundgren, the lawyer turned TV host, defended her on the show.

Muffin jumped from Kit's lap and wolfed a piece of jelly donut the beefy, spiked-haired, lighting woman had dropped.

"This isn't a barn! Use a napkin. That's a three-hundred-year-old Persian rug," Kit said.

"Sorry, Miss Covington."

Kit watched Lundgren scrutinize the pictures on the wall. She was a real fashion plate in a navy pantsuit, with her short blonde hair tucked behind her ears. Kit tensed when the woman took a photograph from her carnival days off the wall and examined it, revealing a yellow nicotine outline. How dare she!

"Is this from the Gerling Carnival?" Lundgren asked.

"Could be," Kit said, surprised that Lundgren knew about her carny days.

Lundgren replaced it and moved to the photo of Kit riding bareback in *The Barnum and Bailey Greatest Show on Earth*, where she performed flips until she fell from the horse and broke her ankle.

Above the walk-in fireplace, Lundgren gazed at the huge painting of Kit by Willem deKooning. It was Kit's favorite, by the artist who inspired her to take up painting. Completed in 1958 when she was twenty-five, the painting recalled the memory of sitting for hours, her back arched, her tits pointing to the North Star, pouty full lips, a halo of platinum blonde hair, and the moist come-hither look women still use to lure men into the bedroom.

"This is one of the few deKoonings I've seen that isn't an abstract," Lundgren said.

"He did others."

"My favorite was the *Woman* series. I love how he broke rules."

Kit puffed on her cigarette and flicked ash into a large serving dish sitting next to her. She wondered how much of the art world Lundgren knew. In person, Kit judged her as a cool and calculating woman, the way she inspected the pictures as if they hid the da Vinci code. Why not ask how all the hullabaloo affected her, how it made her irritable, critical, bitchy. She wondered if Lundgren had gone so far as to play nice-nice on TV—knowing Kit would be watching.

Outside the sliding screen door, she saw Robin watering the rose bushes. Since the operation, he'd been pestering her to stop smoking. She cut back from four packs a day, to two and a half. What the hell did he want? She'd been smoking since she was ten. When he tried to scare her with images on his phone of how the cancer could spread to the liver and kidneys, she grabbed the phone and threw it at him. She made him swear that when she died, he'd put her in a box, stick a cigarette in her mouth—preferably lit—and prod a lighter in her right hand.

"I can go without oxygen for four minutes," Kit said. "So break. I don't want these damn tubes on camera. I'll need a cigarette—"

“Your son told us.”

Miffed by Lundgren’s rudeness, Kit said, “When do we start?”

“In five minutes. Do you need to use the restroom?”

“My legs are cramping.” Kit struggled to rise, shooing Lundgren away when she tried to help. She stood and rolled the oxygen tank she called Sherman across the living room floor while pulling a pack of Winstons and a lighter from the pocket of her long flowing gypsy skirt.

“Aren’t you afraid of the tank exploding?” the sound woman asked as Kit wobbled by.

“No, I’m not. If I could walk a tightrope while on my period, I can roll a damn dolly while smoking a ciggie.”

The girl raised her eyebrows and turned away.

Robin saw her and slid open the screen.

“I don’t want to do this,” Kit said. “That woman’s going to ambush me.”

“C’mon Mom, you liked her.”

“Not anymore. She snapped at me, ‘*Your son told us,*’” she mimicked.

Kit pushed past Robin and stood above her tiered English garden. Even with her fading sense of smell, she caught fragrances of her lemon and peach trees. Below the garden was a view overlooking Highway 1, Malibu, and the Pacific Ocean. She had bought the house in the fifties while pregnant with Robin and married his father, Daniel, soon after.

The April morning glistened as Catalina Island sat like a treasured cast-off from the mainland. Cast-off. When Kit hit her late twenties, it was over. No producer wanted to hire an old hag at thirty. Her agent got her jobs on TV, as a panel member on *To Tell the Truth, I’ve Got a Secret*, and her big whoop-de-doo, the center box on *Hollywood Squares*. In the 1970s, her agent dropped her.

“You signed a contract, Mom. Let people hear your story.” He peered into the living room. “They’re ready for your close-up.”

Kit rolled her eyes. Robin was always quoting from *Sunset Blvd.*, *The Wizard of Oz*, or *All About Eve*. On occasion he’d dress in drag and perform dance numbers from *Cabaret*, *A Chorus Line*, and musicals she never heard of. Her boy knew how to make her laugh.

Kit counted five strangers in her house, eating, drinking coffee, moving her furniture, and using her bathroom. Well, at least they were women and wouldn’t be pissing on the floor.

“We’re ready, Miss Covington,” the sound woman yelled.

“C’mon, Mom. It’ll be fun.”

“I look like an old beatnik.”

“You are an old beatnik.”

Kit’s chuckle rumbled like a truck bouncing over potholes. She smoothed her long white hair with her ciggie hand. She hadn’t worn lipstick or make-up in years. She lived in sandals and, before the operation, went barefoot.

Robin waited for Kit to enter, then slid the door behind him. Kit rolled Sherman to the couch and settled in. Muffin jumped in her lap and Jezebel the cat slinked around the sofa and nestled beside Kit.

“We’ll open with the video,” Lundgren said. “then cutaway for the interview.”

“Why show that again?”

“It’s the reason for the interview, Miss Covington.”

How sucky, Kit thought. She wasn’t ashamed. She just didn’t like having to defend herself.

“Everyone in the world has seen it.”

“It’s a lead in,” Lundgren said.

Kit scowled at Robin. He came over and straightened the string of turquoise and silver beads that dangled from her neck.

“Quit fussing.”

“Come out, come out, wherever you are and meet the young lady, who fell from a star,” Robin whispered.

“Glinda the Good Witch,” Kit mumbled.

Robin winked at her.

“Ready when you are, Bridget,” the camerawoman said.

“Good morning. Today, we have a very special guest. Kit Covington. In case you’ve been living under a rock the last several months,” Lundgren smiled, “we’re going to play the video that’s caused a sensation. Here’s the Grammy-winning pop star, Walker, singing from the hit video, “You’re My Dream Girl in the Night” along with Kit Covington from her movie, *I Was a Teenage SheWolf from Mars*.”

The video played on a small monitor. Kit watched herself from the 1956 horror movie, dancing, spinning, cleavage bouncing, her generous ass stretching the satin on her sequined spacesuit. It was hard to imagine her wrinkled and shriveled body once had so much oomph and had been so sexy.

She took off the tube and laid it beside her.

The camerawoman pointed her finger, and Lundgren began.

“We’re sitting in the home of Kit Covington, a movie actress known as the Queen of the Bs from

the 1950s, who has become infamous for being the poster-girl for the sexualization of generations of women.”

“That’s a load of shit!” Kit said. “Why blame me? Women have always used their bodies to get what they want. As if women didn’t fuck before 1956.”

Lundgren’s jaw dropped. Seconds went by before she made the throat-slash sign with her hand.

Kit coughed and hacked. Muffin jumped on the floor. Jezebel leaped from the sofa and ran around the couch. Kit took the tube and fastened the nasal cannula inside her nostrils, then lighted up a Winston. She inhaled and glanced at the stunned crew and Lundgren. Robin, with his eyes popping and mouth opened, reminded her of Joan Crawford in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane*.

“You can’t swear on TV,” Lundgren said.

Kit glanced at her, looked away, and flicked ash into the dish. It was a knee-jerk reaction, a build-up from the last several months. Also, she wasn’t convinced Lundgren was on her side.

“You can’t go off the rails like that, Miss Covington. It won’t help you.”

“Infamous. Sexualization. Men sexualize women. Who’s head of advertising? They use sex to sell hamburgers, anything. Look at films! Who runs the networks?”

“It’s a lead-in,” Lundgren said.

“I’ve been assaulted and harassed like all those women. I don’t blame anyone but the shits who hurt me.” Kit blew smoke at the side of Lundgren’s face. “How dare you judge me.”

Lundgren waved away the smoke. “I’m not, Miss Covington. Not at all.” Jezebel arched her back and rubbed against Lundgren’s leg.

Kit crushed the cigarette into the plate. She narrowed her gaze at the blonde, who with her furrowed brow and the gentle way she stroked and caressed Jezebel, didn’t fool Kit. Behind Lundgren’s look of compassion was a frozen dish of ambition.

“Would you like to try it again?” Lundgren said.

Kit caught the rapport—the way Lundgren and Robin shot glances at each other— and now her cat had turned traitor.

She took off the oxygen tube. “Muffin.” The poodle ran to her and leaped in her lap. Robin sat at the far end of the couch.

“We’re ready,” the camerawoman said.

Lundgren looked into the camera.

“We’re here with Kit Covington. Known in the 1950s as Queen of the Bs, she has made a scandalizing comeback—”

“Scandalizing! That’s nothing compared to the shit I see on HBO.”

Lundgren made the throat-slash sign and stood from the sofa.

“We need to take a break.”

“We sure as hell do.” Kit attached the oxygen tube and rose from the couch. Muffin bounded to the floor. Kit wheeled Sherman to the screen door, shooing Robin away, opened it, and went outside.

“Mom?”

Kit ignored him. She wheeled Sherman down the ramp while lighting a cigarette.

She and her boy had been snookered into believing Lundgren was on her side. “Scandalizing,” she mumbled. What did Lundgren know about the life of a girl in the 1940s? Those young punks don’t know a damn thing about what life was like before they were born.

She clamped the ciggie in the corner of her mouth and steered the wheels over the yellow bricks Robin had laid that led down to her studio. She’d shut the door, pick up her palette and brush, and lose herself as she disappeared into her painting.

The white stucco building, with red bougainvillea blooming against the side of the wall, inspired the artist in Kit. She painted color in splashes and dashes, mix-matching paint, blending oil, watercolor, and charcoal onto the canvases. Entering her studio was the closest thing to going to church. It was a place where her creativity transported and elated her.

She mashed the cigarette into the standing ashtray outside. The galleries complained of having to clean her canvases. To show her how the smoke diminished her work, Robin took a moist cloth and gently wiped a painting. The rag turned yellow. Without the cover of nicotine, the colors burst with vitality. It was a huge sacrifice not to smoke while she painted, but for her art, she would do anything.

Kit went into her sanctuary, the studio overlooking her cactus garden. Rows of tall windows allowed light to stream in. And where there weren’t windows, her imagination decorated the walls. Robin had constructed built-ins for stacking paintings, nooks for brushes and paints, a worktable with drawers. Her boy built the studio exactly how she insisted.

In the late 1980s, Robin went behind her back and entered her work in contests. Furious by Robin’s betrayal, even when she won, she wouldn’t talk to him for days. He adored being the son of a movie star, but being her art agent satisfied both his nurturing and dramatic nature. He arranged her exhibits at MoMA, the Whitney, and others, with as much flare as his once movie star mother. He made deals so her work hung in The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Prado.

From the beginning she signed her work D. L. Hawkins, after Robin’s father, leaving off his last name, Sutton. He lived his forty-four years as an art form, free and spontaneous—he danced when other men walked. My God how she missed him.

Kit made a fortune from her paintings, donating millions of dollars to art institutes. Who would take her seriously if they knew the esteemed D. L. Hawkins was once a second-rate sex-kitten?

Kit shut the door against the world. It hurt having those young women wrongly judge her. She knew what women went through, especially young women. Mad at herself for being so sensitive, she hated to admit that she cared what others thought of her.

“I knocked but you didn’t answer.”

Kit turned so fast the oxygen cannula pulled at her nostrils.

The blonde talk show host stood in the doorway, holding Muffin. Lundgren wore the same expression—open mouth, wide eyes—as when Kit dropped the f-bomb.

“Oh my God. I don’t believe it.”

“I’m not doing the interview,” Kit said.

Lundgren gazed at the art on the walls. “Neither am I, Miss Covington.”

“Then why are you here? And why are you holding my dog?”

“I followed Muffin,” Lundgren said, releasing the poodle. “She brought me here.”

“Fink,” Kit said, glaring at the dog.

“I wanted to let you know I cancelled.” Lundgren continued to stare at the art and the unfinished oil painting on the easel. “And to say goodbye.” Lundgren shook her head. “I can’t believe it,” she said, looking at a pastel that leaned against the wall. “*I’m standing in D.L. Hawkins’s studio.*”

Kit hacked, “Th—This is,” she stuttered, “*private.*”

“I’m sorry. I swear—*swear*, I won’t mention a word to anyone. Are you and Hawkins an item?” she said, glancing at Muffin’s bed and water dish in the corner.

Shaking, startled by the intrusion into her secret life, Kit watched dumbfounded as Lundgren made a beeline to the easel.

“You, you’re not supposed—” Kit stammered.

“A merry-go-round, where the horses are riding the people.”

Didn’t Lundgren hear her? Just barged her way into D. L.’s studio as if Kit didn’t exist. She shuffled across the wooden floor, shoving Sherman over to the easel.

Lundgren angled her head. “Animal cruelty. It’s amazing to me how Hawkins takes an idea and turns it on its head. I saw his exhibit at MoMA when I did my post-graduate work. Blew me away.”

“You know his work?”

“I majored in art. Didn’t have the talent, so I changed to law.” Lundgren leaned into the unfinished painting. “He tells a story with brush strokes. What a genius.” She looked at Kit. “I know he’s a recluse, but I’d be honored to meet him.”

It reminded Kit of when Robin told her how critics and docents praised her work at exhibits. But to have someone stand in her studio and express how her art touched them, well, it made her—happy.

“He uses horses a lot,” Lundgren said. “My favorite is the *Equine Series*. You can feel the movement, hear the hooves beating against the ground.”

Kit was impressed by the woman’s knowledge, her trained eye.

“Where did you meet? In the carnival, or circus? It must have been a hard life.”

“Not as bad as home. Carnival came to town, and I ran away. Fourteen years old, a hoochie-coochie girl. It was roughest on the animals and freaks. In 1948, no jobs for women, but I survived.” Kit hadn’t talked about her life with the carny for years. But like Lundgren said, it showed up in her work, often with horses. “The circus. Then the pin-ups and movies. I survived that too. Not like the other blonde bombshells. So many died—suicides, over doses. Jayne Mansfield was killed in a car crash.” Kit felt fatigued. “Yes,” she nodded, “I survived that life, too.”

Lundgren listened, but Kit observed her inching her way toward the collage series on the worktable.

“This is an incredible studio. The lighting. High ceilings. Skylights. Everything an artist could dream of. Makes me want to paint again.” Lundgren glanced at Muffin lapping water from her bowl and then settle into her bed.

Kit flinched when Lundgren spotted her pink paw-patterned smock draped over the back of a chair and the unopened pack of Winstons on the work table.

Lundgren turned slowly. She didn’t look at her, just stared off. Kit experienced a shock of her own. She saw Lundgren putting it all together—amazement, then the revelation. Oh shit! What could Kit do about it? Kill her?

Lundgren tidied her short blonde hair behind her ears.

“I need a cigarette.” Kit wheeled Sherman toward the door. “C’mon Lundgren. D. L. wouldn’t want anyone but me alone with his work,” she said, making light of a moment that changed both their lives.

Muffin ran out the door. Kit looked over her shoulder. “You coming?”

Their eyes met. Lundgren’s were filled with tears.

“I’m tired. I need to sit down. Coming?”

Kit and Muffin walked down the path to the cactus garden. She figured Lundgren was somewhere behind. Tears. She knew them well. But when others cried, it put her at a disadvantage, made her feel mushy. And the young woman looked so beautiful standing in her studio with the sunlight catching every nuance of understanding that passed over her face.

Kit sat on a wrought iron bench, pulled Sherman close, lighted up, and surveyed her garden.

On a lookout, atop the Palisades, her nearest neighbor somewhere below, she really was a recluse. At eighty-five, with death a kiss away, she'd been angry for decades, for her stepfather's abuse, Daniel's death, even the small slights, building on top of one another making her view of life a vista of loneliness.

Muffin whined. Kit looked up and saw Lundgren. Muffin jumped up on her hind legs begging Lundgren to pick her up. The woman crouched down, petted Muffin, and looked at Kit.

She nodded.

"I have two silkies. I bet she smells them."

"It's more than that." Kit's voice had the tired monotony of a flat tire. It wasn't even noon and she needed a nap. She coughed, hacked, and spit out a glob of phlegm. "Excuse me." Kit took out her handkerchief and wiped her mouth. "I'm not used to company," she said and continued to smoke.

"Hey, Mom," Robin yelled from the top of the garden path, "is everything okay?"

"Yes," Lundgren answered for her. "Tell the crew I'll be up in a few minutes."

Lundgren handed Muffin to Kit and walked around the garden. Her hair was tousled by the breeze.

Kit preferred her like this—mussed. She wondered what the woman looked like at home, in jeans and a T-shirt. Lundgren walked through the narrow aisles, inspecting the plants.

"They're beautiful how they bloom," she said. "Like a miracle. I love the subtlety of the color, the shape, how the sunlight captures the unexposed side of the petals."

Kit remembered how Lundgren studied the photos on the wall. She was sensitive, with an artist's eye. Maybe she wasn't going to exploit her after all. The pretty blonde with the slender build must have put up with a lot of sexual harassment. If so, Kit doubted she'd share any of it with her. She thought of Lundgren as quiet, low-key, except when she talked about D. L. Hawkins, then she herself bloomed.

"I understand why you had to choose a pseudonym," Lundgren said with her back still to Kit. She turned. "I can't imagine what you went through." Lundgren walked over and sat next to her. "Not just your generation. My mother had me young. My father ran off and the only way she could keep me and get an education was to dance in strip clubs. She made a good living. That was the 1980s. It's still hard."

The two women gazed at the garden with the Pacific as a backdrop.

"There's a way to make everyone forget about your video," Lundgren said.

Kit took a deep inhalation of oxygen, closed her eyes, and savored her last moments as D. L. Hawkins. It was her little champagne-colored poodle who had pulled back the curtain and revealed her identity—Muffin, leading Lundgren down the path to her door, giving her away.

Kit could see it now. Robin would take off her oxygen tube and dance her around the living

room, overjoyed that his mom would be coming out of the closet. The thought of his endless euphoria exhausted her, but Lundgren was right. It would wipe that stupid video off the networks and change her name from a verb back to a noun.

She stubbed out her Winston. Leaning on Lundgren, she struggled to her feet.

“I’m going to lie down. Run this by Robin. You guys work out the details. But tell him not to wake me until three. And I’ll want my martini extra dry.”

Kit shuffled along. She pulled Sherman as the wheels made clap-clap sounds over the yellow brick path, with Lundgren beside her and Muffin running ahead.