
JERSEY DEVIL PRESS
Issue 98
February 2018

JERSEY DEVIL PRESS
February 2018, Issue 98

ISSN 2152-2162

www.jerseydevilpress.com

Table of Contents:

Editor's Note

February is like a polar bear hug—it's uncomfortably cold and you're worried it might be getting ready to kill you. Our ninety-eighth issue is here to keep you company. Let Neal Lipschutz take you on a contemplative "Last Bus Ride." Ponder the mysterious "Man in Front of Our House" with Robert Sharp. Have a sensuous encounter with Hannah V. Warren's "Beautiful Mite" and relearn Classical philosophy with Frances Klein's "Socrates the Frog."

And don't worry about that rumbling sound. That's just how polar bears purr.

— Laura Garrison

Socrates the Frog

Frances Klein

The man next to me on the MAX
-car is empty why so close-
clears his throat noisily and hocks spit onto the floor.
Something moves in the fluid,
-that a maggot what the hell-
then shudders, stills.
He clears his throat again
and my eyes slide back,
expecting to see white
writhing between chapped lips.
Then he's nodding at my book
on Socratic learning, leaning in
-too close too close too close-
confidentially to tell me,
"Socrates was a frog, you know."
-frog can't be frog-
"A . . . fraud?"
A snort of derision, another
jet engine intake of mucus collected
and ejected into the puddle at his feet.
Crushed carapace glint
in the fluorescent lights.
-jesus mary and joseph oh christ-
"Yeah, that too, I guess."
He sniffs a wayward antenna

back up one nostril,
wipes on his sleeve, coughs.
“I never could figure out how that frog motherfucker got so famous.”
-saying frog not fraud frog-
He leans his head back,
apparently content with the course
our conversation has run.
The vent above us
starts wheezing heat and he murmurs
with pleasure, rolling up his sleeves
to reveal hair covered arms.
-barbed those hairs are barbed what tarantula shit -
It slow opens one eye
to fix on me again, smile spreading,
translucent film hammocked
between row after row
-too many too many so many too many-
of needle teeth.
“This right here’s the best spot. Get that vent goin’, feels like the fuckin’ swamp in here.”
I sit past the end of the line,
book long since fallen from my hand.
Inchoate fear and unseasonal sweat
web me to the slick plastic seat
as it wallows in the humidity,
-no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no-
ecstatic, obscene.
“Yeah man, I tell ya, feels just like home.”

FRANCES KLEIN is a high school English teacher. She was born and raised in Southeast Alaska, and taught in Bolivia and California before settling in Indianapolis with her husband Kris. She has been published in *GFT Press*, and *Molotov Cocktail*, among others.

The Man in Front of Our House

Robert Sharp

Early afternoon and there is a man standing in front of our house waiting for the people that used to live across the street. He doesn't know that they have moved away, so he stands in front of my house waiting in its shadow, waiting and watching for my neighbour.

It's late afternoon. I'm home from school and some kids have joined hands and are dancing in a ring around him. They dance and sing and stamp their feet. He looks at them and laughs, but he doesn't budge from his spot. Soon the children will go home for supper like I have. I wonder; will the man have something to eat? I watch from my window.

It's early evening. The sun's going down. The man is just finishing off some Kentucky Fried Chicken a delivery boy brought him. Still eating, he carries the empty cardboard carton up our laneway to put it in the garbage pail. Dad says that in a moment the man will be coming up the front steps and ringing our doorbell so he can use the john. Dad's not too keen on the idea, but he will let the man in; I can tell by the way Mom is looking at him. "How does the man sleep?" I wonder.

It's early morning. I've just awakened and gone downstairs to the living room window to look out. The man is standing outside not moving. His head has fallen forward. His shoulders droop. I watch him till it's time to go to school. As I'm going out the door he comes to life. He lifts his head. He gives his shoulders a shake and he stamps first one foot, then the other.

“Poor dear,” my mother says. “I wonder if he’d like a cup of coffee?” His body looks like a shadow against the morning sun.

I’m home from school now and I’ve been watching him for hours. This morning, he walked across the street to get out of the sun, Mother says. Then, in the early afternoon, he moved back to his original spot. Some children have joined hands and are dancing around him and chanting, “Gone away. Gone away. Your lifelong friend has gone away.” He laughs at them a little. In a few minutes, when the kids are gone, he will come up on our verandah and ring the doorbell. Mother will let him in.

It’s the middle of the night and the man is still standing out front. His head has slumped forward so his chin is on his chest. His shoulders droop. His arms hang loosely by his sides. I’m very tired and yawn. They expect rain tomorrow. Will my parents give him an umbrella? I don’t know. If he gets soaked to the skin he might go home. I press my nose against the window.

It’s morning and it’s raining. Mother says that Mr. Schultz, on his way to open his store uptown, sold the man an umbrella. And now, there’s policeman standing under the umbrella talking with the man. Mother has gone out with two cups of tea and a towel. A few minutes later, she comes in soaking wet and the policeman goes away. “What about his feet?” I ask. “Won’t his feet get wet?”

It’s after school. The little red-haired girl from down the street is talking to the man. She can barely toddle and shouldn’t talk to strangers. The neighbours are angry and Dad has agreed to speak with him. I can listen through the screen window. Dad tells him he doesn’t think the people across the street are coming back. The man asks in a low voice if he can stay a while longer to make sure. Dad tells him he’s on public property and it’s a free country. He offers

the man a cup of tea. I want a cup of tea. Mother gives me one. I don't like it and I pour it down the sink.

It's the middle of winter. Snow is piled everywhere around. I take the metal doorknob in my hand. My hand freezes there and I have to wait till the handle warms up before I can open the door and go inside. The man in front of our house is wearing a coat that's way too big for him. He also wears a wool hat that falls over his eyes; fleece-lined boots he forgot to zipper; mittens, plus a scarf that is wound around his neck three times. He huddles sometimes, and sometimes he swings his arms to keep warm. The house across the street has been vacant for several months. Still he watches. The little red-haired girl has strung Christmas tree lights across his shoulders. He merely shrugs them off into a snow bank when he wants to come inside.

Mother wants him to move into the spare room at the back of the house. Father says it's a big step bringing someone into the house. "But I'm sure I don't mind, my dear, if that's what you want to do." Mother mentions it to the man when he uses our phone to order Kentucky Fried Chicken. "I don't mind waiting out there, if it's all the same to you," he says. "My friends might come back anytime, and I wouldn't want to miss them." The red haired girl is glad. She likes him.

It's spring. The house across the street is coming down. The workmen are there. The man watches the house disappear brick by brick. He's wearing rubber boots to protect his feet from the slush. He doesn't look very well. Toward the end of winter, he looked worse. We brought him warm drinks; vitamin pills; cough mixture; we even offered to call a doctor at our own expense. He refused. He improved as the weather got better. Today he is watching the

house vanish. The little red haired girl has brought him cake and cookies and orangeade, but for the first time, he ignores her.

The house is gone. The man is going through a crisis today. He spent the morning staring at the vacant lot across the street. This afternoon, he is pacing up and down, waving his arms around and from time to time gesticulating. He's repeating bits and pieces from Hamlet. "To be or not to be..." he mumbles."Word, words, words," he mutters. "A rogue and peasant slave!" he shouts. Towards the end of day, his pacing slows to a shuffle and his shuffle stows to a standstill. "There is a providence in the fall of a sparrow," he recites, his arms hanging loosely by his sides. "What will you do?" my mother asks, for she is now standing beside him. "We are what we are what we are..." he answers staring wistfully at the vacant lot.

The man has been standing there for seventeen years. Time has flown. He's been a part of my life from my early days at elementary school, through high school to college where I flunked out. I watched my parents age. I moved away. I married the red haired girl and became a parent myself. I remember once, as a child, I fell off my bicycle in front of him. He helped me up, brushed me off and sent me inside to my parents.

Of course, it hasn't been good for him standing outside all these years. He aged more rapidly than anyone else in the neighbourhood. We worry about him a *great deal. We wonder what goes on in his head when he stares at the vacant lot across the street.

We have all suggested that he go somewhere else, that he go into a home or something. My wife tied to reason with him, to coax

him, and in exasperation to threaten him. My father even offered to take his place on the sidewalk. But none of it worked.

"I'm a part of here," he told me once. "I'm settled. This is my home. I want to end my days here." There was a slight dribble of rain and he opened up the umbrella my wife had given him. "All my friends are here," he added while looking across the street.

This morning, the postman gave him his first pension cheque. He endorsed it and asked me to cash it for him. I said I would. I wonder what would happen if after all these years his friends did show up. I wonder what he'd do.

ROBERT SHARP is retired and lives in Toronto. This story originally appeared in print in *Who Torched Ranch Diablo.*

Beautiful Mite

Hannah V. Warren

Uninhibited, she swims
deeper than sand. When she sings,
I hum her rhythm and sink softly
after her chords, weaving
in the woman's easy thrum.
If she is infamy, I want to quit
this bare-bristle burning.
I feel a turning point
pushing me over the ship's
side, tossing me into/out of
waves. She plucks at my thighs,
inching beneath my skin
and pulling away molecular strands.
I don't remember if I turned
in on myself or if she folded
me into a tight, red pocket square.

HANNAH V. WARREN is an MFA student at the University of Kansas and serves as the poetry editor for *Beecher's Magazine*. Her works have appeared or will soon appear in *Soundings East*, *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, and *Spirit's Tincture*. She often writes about death but hopes never to experience it.

The Last Ride

Neal Lipschutz

Martin Beam wore his grey suit, a white shirt and blue-striped tie for his final bus ride to work in New York City. He figured it was as emblematic as any outfit he'd worn during his twenty-two years, give or take a month, riding the same bus into the city. The 6:10 a. m. New Jersey Transit express. He took the same quarter-mile route to the bus stop, passed the same front lawns and houses (though there'd been a few knockdowns and add-ons over the years) that he walked by so many times since he'd arrived with wife and toddler from the cramped one-bedroom in Queens. Beam wanted on this last ride to keep things as they always had been.

When he got to the stop there were five people lazily lined up ahead of him. Number five or six on line was where he typically fit in. Sometimes as many as twenty people wanted on to the 6:10 at the busy stop, the next to last before the bus headed straight to Manhattan. Number five or six meant you got a pretty broad choice of seats. Sometimes stragglers had to stand, which in Beam's view was a most uncivilized way to start the work day. He granted a collective nod to the three men and two women who stood ahead of him in line. Only a couple of them acknowledged the gesture. Beam knew them all by sight, other 6:10 regulars of a reasonably established vintage.

But people came and went. He figured there was no one he'd seen daily for more than five years. His own tenure was in a different league. You got accustomed to the faces and then one day one of them would disappear. New Job? No job? Relocation? Beam

would wonder for a few seconds about the most likely scenario that spirited off the latest of the disappeared. Then he moved on.

It was so different from when he started. In those days, his daily suit did not stick out like an outfit for a costume ball. It seemed like all the men back then wore suits. And it was just about all men on the bus back then. Those fellows seemed to truly know each other, to chat and laugh on the line in an insidery way. As the newcomer he was deferential to the older men, the regulars who he assumed had already put in decades of daily commuting. Beam noted where they usually sat and if he boarded before them he avoided those empty seats. Out of respect.

Now, the only words exchanged on the line occurred if something worse than the spotty on-time arrival of the bus was in play. If it got to 6:25 without a bus someone would mutter, "Does anyone know what's going on?" Apps would be engaged. Traffic news sites would be searched. No useful information was ever discovered. Eventually, after grimaces and head shakes, the group effort would dissolve back into the usual individual smart phone romances. Beam knew none of their names.

On the day of his last ride, Beam chuckled to himself that no one bothered to dress for the occasion. The casual work attire of men and women continued to amaze him. Okay, a few in the line-up were clearly headed to construction work or some other blue-collar enterprise, so their outfits were justified. But most were heading indoors.

Now, to see another man in a suit was rare, sports jackets and ties just slightly less so. Beam was sure the lack of formality led to undesirable changes in people's behavior. If you were in a decent suit, the clothes themselves pushed you to comport yourself

respectfully, with care. Casual dress encouraged just the opposite. The other day he sat next to a thirty-something woman who switched on the overhead light and proceeded to spend the first half of the forty-five-minute ride to the Port Authority Bus Terminal applying her make-up. There was eyeliner. There were various vials. There was incessant staring into the little mirror that emerged from her purse. Was he now to be forced to witness what should go on in the privacy of one's bathroom? Beam was incensed. He rattled his neatly folded newspaper a few times to make his annoyance known. Of course, she didn't notice. No one did. Not any of the ever-larger number of riders who spent time talking loudly into their cell phones. How were these people raised?

The mid-December weather was kind to Beam on his last ride. It was mild, about forty-five degrees, even at 6 a. m. There was no drama left to this final departure. It was all settled business. That autumn, Beam's boss set up a meeting with Beam and at first gingerly approached the subject of his retirement. When Beam demurred, his boss proceeded less gingerly. The boss noted retirement came with a package that provided Beam's base compensation for an additional year. The boss talked about the big changes coming to the company, the need for people with different skill sets. He was complimentary about Beam's contributions. Couldn't imagine the place without him. Beam was a fixture, as recognizable as the company name on the door. But change was the only constant these days, right? There was nothing to be done, the boss said. Beam had no choice. Beam decided the boss's careful language was meant to avoid the thorny issue of age discrimination. A bravura performance.

Well, Beam thought when his boss left the office, it's like anything else. You see bombs fall all around you, but you figure somehow you'll get a pass. He bore no grudges. December fourteenth, a Wednesday, was his last day in the office. Beam had enough unused vacation to get him through the end of the year. On January first he'd no longer be an employee. The retirement dinner had come and gone. His personal mementos of twenty-two years, framed photographs, certificates memorializing incremental accomplishments on projects long forgotten and company labeled knickknacks had been packed and shipped back to Beam's house. Today he'd shake some hands one more time, receive a few more best wishes and be on his way.

The 6:10 arrived on time for Beam's last ride. He boarded and it occurred to him this was the most consistent, best understood thing in his whole life. He started taking it when he worked elsewhere so it outlasted his tenure at the company. His role at work changed a few times over the years, he'd climbed a few rungs on the ladder. They'd even moved offices a couple times during Beam's twenty-two years.

But through it all he stuck with the 6:10, made it make sense for whatever street address he reported to and assignment he had. With the 6:10 (if it was on time!) you beat most of the traffic to Manhattan. The early hours at the office were always the most productive for Beam. Yes, he'd been a husband and father for longer than he'd been riding the 6:10. But only by a few years. And even now, he wouldn't claim to fully understand his wife. She still sometimes surprised him, revealing long-standing annoyances or worries he hadn't known existed. These surprises were unhappy ones for Beam, who preferred things to stay the same, unruffled.

His daughter was grown and in another state. She was a mother now, too. They'd done their job there.

The 6:10 was something Beam knew in every way. The degree of sway the bus forced upon you as it traversed every odd-shaped exit. It differed, depending on where you sat. The varying surfaces of the several New Jersey highways it traversed to get to its destination. This Beam knew and more. The shudder and whrrr of acceleration, the slight forward thrust passengers felt at the unanticipated need to brake, how the road was rutted once you entered the bus-reserved lane near the Lincoln Tunnel. What should have been the left lane of oncoming traffic was a lifesaver for buses, which were uniquely privileged to ride in that morning express lane. Cars trying to get to the city sat mired bumper to bumper on the other side of the road. But the express lane also was a gut-bobbing expanse of nicks and crevices, the price you paid for movement. Beam knew every bleak landmark of the trip. Each told him precisely, without consulting watch or phone, how many minutes remained - assuming no unusual traffic snarls. It was clear, Beam decided, he knew nothing better than this morning bus.

On his last bus ride to New York City, Beam took a seat next to a slim, younger man in a puffy jacket. It was harder to get comfortable in winter because everyone wore heavy coats, and Beam abhorred the touch of his seatmate, the mushed shoulders or connected thighs. Some people removed their coats in the winter. The conditions inside the bus varied, from overheated to almost like outdoors. He wondered sometimes if this was the sole province of the driver or partly determined by the maintenance level of the particular bus. In the many years he'd never inquired nor complained.

He avoided removing his coat. He wanted this ride to be like any other. A quick perusal of his newspaper and a check of his phone for any overnight emails, with the aim of giving those tasks no more than fifteen minutes combined. Then he'd close his eyes. Never really sleep, but become becalmed, at rest, increasingly lulled by the motion of the bus. By the time they got to the bumpy lead-up and then into the Lincoln Tunnel, Beam was typically in a near-sleep trance. He felt then as good as he ever did, better even than crawling into bed at night after a long day. Comfortable was the word he would use, but it didn't do justice to the feeling.

Still, he automatically opened his eyes as the bus emerged from the tunnel into midtown Manhattan, something about the change of light. By then, the bus was only a couple left turns from Port Authority and the trip's end. At that point in the trip, for a moment or two, Beam was invariably sad. In that snoozy state, he wanted the ride to go on.

On this last ride Beam positioned himself, shoulders squared, in a way that he expected would avoid inadvertent contact with the young man sitting next to him. Beam was convinced that aware and experienced riders didn't have to flop over each other or grab onto the seat in front of them every time the bus made a turn or swung around a loopy exit. People just needed to know how to balance themselves. He kept his feet flat on the floor, legs spread slightly. He disdained the amateurs who bumped and lurched on turns, only occasionally apologizing for the unwanted intrusions upon their neighbors.

This day the bus headed away from its final stop prior to New York at near its forty-nine seated capacity. No standers to hover over Beam the whole ride. Good. He started to look at his

newspaper and then heard something over the noise of the accelerating bus as it slipped through the EZ Pass toll and onto the highway. The two men seated just in front of Beam began to talk with each other. Beam hadn't noticed them on his way to his chosen seat, but now he did and he fixed a gaze of fury on the backs of their heads. He hurried through the paper, unable to concentrate because of their voices, which stood out in the dark and otherwise quiet bus. There were no phone talkers. That detestable practice was more typical on the ride home.

Beam rustled his newspaper in frustration and then put it away. There were no emails of import. He was so immensely annoyed at the talking. It was time to rest. He shut his eyes tight and tried to ignore the sounds. He could not. He could only make out a word here and there in the back-and-forth going on in front of him, but it seemed clear to Beam that it was a conversation that would not soon end. He thought about earphones, they were standard equipment among the younger riders who listened to music or watched television shows on their phones.

But Beam did not carry earphones in his briefcase. There was a pair at home and a noise-reduction set he wore on airplanes. Why hadn't he started carrying them to and from work once the cell phone era was fully in gear? Stupid, he thought, just stupid. He closed his eyes again and determined to embark on his usual rest, shut the talkers out. But he could not. He could not ignore it. His last ride was ruined. How dare they.

Beam stood up. No one stands up on a moving bus on a highway some minutes outside of Manhattan. Beam knew that better than anyone. Still, he stood up.

"Could you please be quiet," Beam said in what he thought was a steady, controlled tone. "People are trying to rest."

The two talkers craned their necks to look at Beam, towering behind them. Others in the midsection of the bus stopped what they were doing and also looked at Beam. Ear buds came out of ears, cell phones were turned over, headsets were yanked off. Only a couple of close by riders, soundly sleeping, did not budge. One man was so intent on a rerun of Friends on the small screen in front of him that he too did not glance over. The man at the window seat in front of Beam also stood. Not all the way, because if he had he would have smacked his head on the storage rack above. So he hunched in the tight space and turned as far as he could toward Beam.

"You talking to us?" It was a tough guy question. The man was fiftyish. He had a grey crew cut. He wore a red plaid flannel thing, thicker than a shirt and thinner than a coat. Who knew how many layers he had on underneath. He was dressed for outdoor work.

Beam surprised himself by making this scene. He'd never done so before, not once, suffering a multitude of bus indignities in silence. The man in red plaid was intimidating in his person and his tone. Beam shrank but remained standing.

"Yes, you are disturbing people who are trying to rest," Beam said. Silence followed. Beam and the man in red plaid remained standing. The man's companion turned in his seat as far as he could to face Beam. The bus braked slightly as red lights lit up on the backsides of the cars ahead. Beam kept his feet apart for balance. He didn't want to grab the back of the seat of his antagonist lest it be seen as an aggressive gesture. Then the bus again accelerated. Beam wobbled, but kept his hands at his sides. Finally, into the

silence and the stares of the other passengers, Beam said, "It's my last ride."

Then Beam sat down. The red plaid man stayed up, staring at Beam, not quite understanding what Beam meant. Did that mean Beam had lost his job? Did Beam have cancer? Was he just soft in the head?

"Pathetic," the man in red plaid muttered. Then he sat down.

Beam stared straight down at the worn briefcase in his lap. The show over, the other passengers went back to their ear buds and their phones. Beam knew without turning his head they were passing the high school football field incongruously settled in a nest of highway intersections. The lights were on. That meant they were about fifteen minutes from New York.

They were fifteen long minutes during which Beam did not raise his head. The men in the seat in front went back to talking, more quietly than before. Finally, the ride came to its end. The bus pulled along one of the passenger-dispensing curbs of the open-air labyrinth of Port Authority. Beam kept looking down until it was his turn to leave his seat and walk down the skinny aisle to the front of the bus. The two men got off in front of him without another glance or word. Beam was thankful for that.

The bus driver was a paunchy, bald man who'd been on the route for a few weeks. Not like the old days, Beam thought, when it seemed a driver stayed on the 6:10 route for months, if not years. Now the drivers switched all the time. As Beam paused at the steps leading off the bus, he thought for a nanosecond that he should tell the driver this was his last ride. Just as quickly, he dismissed the idea.

"Thank you," he said to the driver, the same thing he said to every driver of the 6:10 bus at the end of every trip since he started riding it.

"Yep," the driver said. "See you tomorrow."

NEAL LIPSCHUTZ is a veteran journalist. His short fiction for young people has been published in several magazines.

On the cover:

“Untitled”

STEFAN KELLER is an artist living in Germany. He likes to paint pictures, occasionally compose music, live out his creative imagination in digital composing, and occasionally take pictures as well.