

EINSTEIN'S IPOD

"The real problem is in the hearts and minds of men. It is not a problem of physics, but of ethics. It is easier to denature plutonium than to denature the evil spirit of man."

— Albert Einstein

The tears began to stream down my face as I watched him play and I didn't even care if the degenerates who were there with me saw it and made fun of me for it later. There was something so beautiful, so perfect about the performance that it made me not care. It was Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto Number 2. Usually I didn't go in for Tchaikovsky: *Swan Lake* and *The Nutcracker* were too fruity for me. I was more into the sterner Teutonic fare like Beethoven and Wagner. But this piece had some bite to it, unlike the Tchaikovsky to which public radio had accustomed me.

The pianist was in a league of his own. He was a curly-haired, doughy-faced Russian guy in his late twenties—not that much older than I was. More than simply getting the notes right, he played with a flair, a flourish, that was mesmerizing. I knew nothing about pianists, but I had to think that this guy was among the top five or ten in the world. I simply could not imagine ten people who could be better at it than he was. Maybe that got to me, too—seeing a true genius at work. It's not often one gets an opportunity to do that. But, then again, perhaps



Sophie's Chair by Julis Rix © 2013

the cause of my tears was that all of the counseling the courts had forced me to undergo had just made me soft.

In the 1930s, scientists learned that nuclear reactions could be both initiated and controlled. It began with a large isotope (a misleading term

because it's actually one of the smallest particles of matter in existence), usually of Uranium-235 or Plutonium-239 because of their ability to produce an excess of neutrons. Scientists bombarded this isotope with a smaller isotope, typically a neutron. The collisions then caused

the larger isotope to break down into two or more smaller elements. Using Einstein's equivalence principle, it was possible to accurately predict how much energy would be produced by this nuclear fission.

The story of how I'd gotten to be in that matinee audience at Heinz Hall was a cautionary tale from which it was unlikely anyone would ever learn anything, least of all me. During what was supposed to be my junior year of college, I'd gotten involved with the "wrong crowd." Of course, that's a relative term, depending solely on one's perspective. They were the "wrong" crowd if one desired to accomplish anything of value in life, or to stay out of jail. They were the right crowd, however, if one's goal was to obtain narcotics with which to get high. At the time I met this crowd, that was the driving force in my life—my *raison d'être*. It hasn't escaped me that if an opiate represents one's reason to, well, *'être*, then one doesn't have much to live for. I didn't. As far as I'm concerned, in spite of what my judge and counselors have tried to tell me, I still don't.

I had help getting in with that wrong crowd. My accomplice's name was Mia. Not much of a name for a femme fatale, but she wasn't much of a femme fatale. She was thin, short hair, kind of pale. Put pointy plastic ears on her and she could've passed for an elf. Not a Keebler Elf, more like those mischievous pixies in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Of course, I was no leading man, either: too short and thin through the chest and shoulders. Mia and I attended the same college and met one night during our junior year at some douchebag frat party. It was a pretty big university and our majors were in different departments—I was school of science while she was studying art history—so I couldn't recall ever having seen her before. I had just enough beer in me that night to approach her when her female friend disappeared momentarily. Walking up to

her, I asked, "Can I buy you a beer?"

"They're free," she replied.

"All the better."

She smiled and shook her head: "I don't drink that swill. I'm only here because my friend was hoping to see some guy. More of a hairdo than a guy but, whatever. He didn't show so we're heading to a party thrown by some art students. Care to tag along?"

A simple truth of human existence is that almost everything bad that happens to us, we cause ourselves. Sure, Job was God's punching bag. But the rest of us, those whom the Old Testament Jehovah didn't decide to use as subjects of social experiments, bring about most of our problems through the choices we make, whether it's smoking cigarettes, driving too fast, having unsafe sex, or whatever. There are lots of little steps along the path to our downfalls so that if we had in some way, we have been able to avoid completely. Granted, we're all going to go down in the end. But plenty of us go out of our way to expedite that process. I didn't know it at the time—one rarely does—but this was the first step on the way to my demise, and I leaped into it with both feet.

I peered to each side to see if anyone

from my group had taken note of my tears. There were five of us in total, plus one counselor from the halfway house there to chaperone us. I was situated in the middle. The two guys to my left, Gerald and LaRon, were sleeping. Gerald had his head tilted back and a river of drool flowed out of the corner of his mouth; LaRon was snoring—loudly. To my immediate right, Ty was playing *Angry Birds* on his iPod Touch. Beside him I could see that Walter's attention was completely consumed by his unsuccessful struggle to hold in the farts from the Mexican food we'd had for lunch. God bless him for trying. Mike, the counselor, was the only one in our group aside from me paying attention to the concert.

With the exception of Walter, who'd gotten popped for his fifth DUI and was in his mid-forties with a wife and kids at home, the rest of us, including Mike, were all in our twenties. Aside from Walter, we were all first-time offenders, arrested on drug-related charges. Since none of us had committed violent crimes, the courts system had sent us to a halfway house rather than jail. That was a gigantic relief to me because, even though I'd done everything I could to kill

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brain cells, I was still quite protective of my rectum. The program supervisor at the halfway house, a graying former hippy who was clinging to some misguided faith in humanity, had arranged for us to attend this matinee with the hope that the exposure to culture would somehow elevate us. As I surveyed the sea of white hair, evening gowns, suits, and tuxedos filling the ornate concert hall, I thought it much more likely that we would bring the rest of the crowd down, that we would be uplifted ourselves. It's not that any of us were evil. Speaking personally, I wasn't as good as Jesus, Mother Teresa, or Princess Di, but then again I wasn't as bad as Hitler, Charles Manson, or Walt Disney. What we were was misguided and weak—losers, if one insists on reducing the subject to binary thinking

They used to call it splitting atoms, though that wasn't really an accurate description of the process. The enormous amount of energy released during nuclear fission is caused by matter being converted into energy. If the masses of all the atoms and sub-atomic particles the process begins with are measured against the masses of the sub-atomic particles that remain after the process is completed, it is apparent that some mass is "missing." If the reactions are controlled, enough energy can be released to either power or destroy an entire city. While the atomic bomb isn't grounded upon Einstein's $E = mc^2$, the bomb does cogently illustrate his theorem. Energy equals mass multiplied by the speed of light squared. Neutrons colliding with atoms and worlds are destroyed...

People say opposites attract. That is true when it comes to chemistry. Protons and electrons exert a pull on one another that holds together the nucleus of an atom. But when it comes to human chemistry the most elementary intro psych textbook will insist that like

attracts like. That was our problem: at core, we were too similar. Even though Mia was a right-brain art student, and I was a left-brain physics major, at the core we shared more or less the same strengths and weaknesses. Not proton and electron, but more like neutron and neutron—two common fissile isotopes thrown together by the life's nuclear reactor.

It was Mia who first introduced me to weed, then blow, and finally junk. I bounded over the various gateway drugs like an Olympic hurdler. We both had holes to fill. The crater that Mia was trying to seal was the aftermath of something bad that had happened to her as a kid, something that she would never talk about. Whatever it was, it affected her outlook. It's funny, because even though her behavior and the things she said would've gotten her burned as a witch back in the Pilgrims' days, she nevertheless shared the Puritans' outlook on humankind, thinking that everyone was essentially evil at bottom. Like the Puritans, she believed that evil should be scourged away, only instead of using a hair-shirt and cattail whip, she employed heroin and cocaine. My situation was different. Aside from my parents divorcing when I was eleven, I'd had a pretty

standard, trauma-free upbringing. When my father left, my mother placed all her hopes for the future squarely on my shoulders. It was a heavy burden for an eleven year old to bear—and it hadn't gotten any lighter by the time I was twenty-one.

I glanced at my program. The orchestra had progressed into the second movement: the *Andante non troppo*. The pianist was really getting into it. His curls were flapping in the air as he jerked his head about violently with each note. I was amazed at how high he lifted his hands above the keyboard before bringing them crashing back down again, while always striking the correct notes. I recalled when I had taken piano lessons as a kid—I was hesitant to remove my fingers from the keys for fear of losing my place. But this guy was a maestro. He literally could've played with his eyes closed. I glanced over at Mike to give him an appreciative nod and caught him with his index finger buried to the first knuckle in his right nostril.

Nuclear fuel contains millions of times the amount of free energy contained in a similar amount of chemical fuel, like gasoline. The earliest fission bombs, for instance the Fat Man



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and Little Boy bombs that were dropped on the Japanese cities Nagasaki and Hiroshima, were thousands of times more explosive than a comparable mass of conventional weapons. Modern nuclear weapons are hundreds of times more powerful for their weight than these first pure fission atomic bombs. All of this is brought about by the collision of particles of matter so small that they cannot be seen, even though an electron microscope which is able to produce magnifications of up to about 10,000,000 times.

While he was not directly involved in the Manhattan Project, one year before his death Einstein revealed that he considered his one great mistake to have been signing the letter to F.D.R. recommending that the construction of the atom bomb be undertaken. The justification was the danger that the Germans would devise one first. Robert Oppenheimer, the leading physicist in the Manhattan Project, later commented that, after seeing the first nuclear bomb tested in New Mexico in 1945, a line had come to him from the *Bhagavad Gita*: "Now, I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds." Neutrons and atoms colliding. Mere isotopes. Destroyers of worlds.

At first I spent the money my mother sent me to live off of to buy drugs. But once Mia and I had gotten hooked, the money dried up quickly. So we dropped out of classes (we'd both stopped going anyway) and used the refunded tuition. But that didn't last long. We started selling stuff: books, televisions, computers, even clothes. Eventually, we ran out of things to sell and we were left with two choices (technically, I suppose, it was three, but at the time neither of us really considered quitting an option): we could either steal or turn tricks. We chose stealing as the lesser of two evils. Before I'd gotten involved in drugs I wouldn't have

known how to go about becoming a thief. But one good thing about being in a drug community is that it exposes a person to some pretty unsavory characters. In retrospect, it's probably not all that good a thing after all, but it comes in handy when searching for accomplices.

Garbage was a former biker we'd met at a house where people used. Neither Mia nor I had any idea what his real name might have been and we didn't really care. Everyone called him Garbage and that was good enough for us because, in the end, it was better not to know too much about people. Anyway, he looked like a "Garbage"—big and hairy with a complete lack of personal hygiene. When we encountered him at the flop house, we'd just sold Mia's easel and the last of her paints and canvases in order to score. I was in the process of coming up into lucidity enough to talk when I noticed him on the couch beside us. I had no clue how long he'd been there. From the look of his eyes, I could tell he was in about the same state as me, so I told him we were looking for a way to scare up some cash that didn't involve any of our orifices. He said: "You're in luck. I have a little 'business' and I recently lost my partner."

"Did he get pinched?" I asked.

"No, no."

"Dead?"

"No, nothing like that. I mean I lost him. I literally lost him. He got an insurance settlement for fifty large for a slip and fall at WalMart and we cashed the check

and drove down to New Orleans. I lost track of him somewhere in the French Quarter on the third or fourth day. Had to hitchhike the whole way home alone."

"Oh. So you guys did insurance scams?"

"Naw, that was on the up-and-up. We were into precious metal extraction."

I stared at him blankly and he added, "We steal copper pipes from abandoned houses."

Mike glared at Ty until he finally stopped playing his game and glanced up. An annoyed look tightening his face, Mike nodded for Ty to put the iPod away. Ty clucked his tongue and made a disgusted "Tcch" sound that drew the attention of several of the blue hairs seated nearby. Jamming the phone into the hip pocket of his jeans, Ty turned to me for moral support in his confrontation. Seeing my tear-streaked face, his eyes became wide. I would definitely hear about this later, but I didn't care. The orchestra had progressed to the final movement—the *Allegro con fuoco*, and I was completely enthralled. I was unsure what was eliciting this visceral reaction from me, and I didn't care. When confronted with true beauty, it's best not to question it too much because the mystery of its existence is half of its allure.

I made a mental note to find this piece on the 'net using the computer at the halfway house so that I could download it onto my iPod. Technically, iPods were contraband in the halfway house, but we all had them and the counselors pretty much all knew it. The program the court

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had placed me in had some manual labor for us to perform, and lots of counseling, but those could only fill up so many hours. The rest of my "rehabilitation" was spent watching Jerry Springer, listening to my housemates argue over video games, and staring at the ceiling reliving over and over again everything that happened. My parents phoned almost every night—my mother, anyway. My father had remarried and started another family years ago. When I first got arrested, I think he decided to place all of his eggs in that basket. I didn't take my mother's calls most of the time. When I did she always wanted to talk about what I'd do when I got out—going back to school and all. I played along, but the truth was I didn't care about the future anymore.

When fission occurs with U-235, one neutron is used, but three neutrons are produced. If these three

neutrons encounter other U-235 atoms, other fissions can be initiated, producing yet more neutrons. In layman's terms, it is the *domino effect* in action. This continuing cascade of nuclear fissions is called a *chain reaction*. One becomes three. Three becomes nine. Nine becomes eighty-one. *Now, I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds...*

Mia volunteered to come along and help with the "job." She thought it would be an adventure. Garbage didn't mind because he said it would be another set of hands; I think he had a thing for her. Plus he'd already made it clear that he would get two-thirds of the take whether it was just me or both of us, so it wasn't any money out of his pocket. He borrowed an old, beat-up van that, from the look of it, had probably been involved in some abductions at some point. He'd found a house out in the

suburbs of Monroeville that he insisted was vacant. We arrived late on a foggy night, parked the van in the driveway and did a quick reconnaissance of the place. It was a one-story, ranch-style with a small, neat yard. Peering through a window, I could see there was a minimal amount of furniture and no clutter just sitting around, as though the owners had already moved out, or were in the process of doing so.

The front and back doors were locked, so we walked around the side and Garbage kicked in a window with one of his enormous, steel-toed biker boots. Then he told me, "Climb in there and go open the back door for us."

Observing the pile of broken glass on the floor, and the jagged remaining edges of the window still clinging menacingly to the panes, I stepped back and mumbled, "Why me?"

Garbage looked cross and snapped, "Because I'm too goddam big and you

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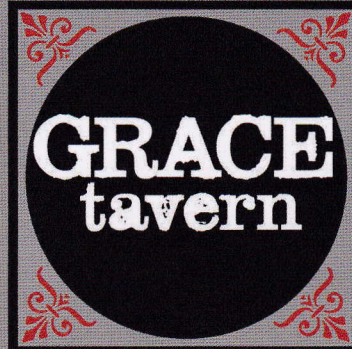
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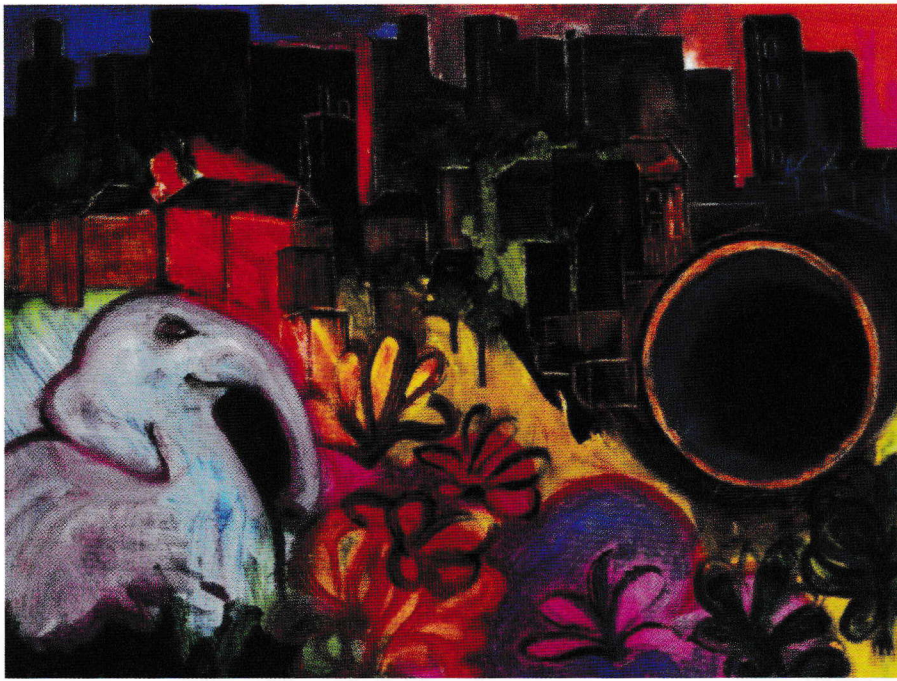
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Elephant at Large by Lesley Mitchell © 2013

don't want your little girlfriend getting cut up on that broken glass. Do ya, bud?"

I frowned and muttered, "Okay." Then I climbed gingerly through the window, avoiding most of the shards of glass scattered across the floor. I made my way to the back door double-quick because I suddenly had visions in my head of that smelly oaf Garbage ravishing Mia against the aluminum siding. She'd gotten high before we left, and I didn't think she was in any condition to fend him off.

When I got to the door, they were waiting. Garbage smirked, "Good job, bud," and gave me a patronizing pat on the cheek. I would've liked to have socked him in his ugly mush, but I'd never hit anyone in my life and I didn't think he was the right person to start with.

We negotiated a rickety set of narrow wooden steps down to the basement. It was finished, but most of the furniture had been removed, which was lucky because I was tripping all over myself until we found the light switch. Garbage located the laundry room and Mia and I followed him in. Seeing several copper pipes running along the drop ceiling, he exclaimed, "Pay dirt!"

While Mia walked around the little room, humming to herself and picking up and examining the various odds and ends, I asked Garbage, "What now?"

He dropped the Army surplus rucksack filled with tools that he'd carried in with him. As he bent over to open it, his leather jacket pulled above his waist, revealing the top third of the crack of his hairy ass. Rifling through the rucksack, he removed a plumber's wrench, which he handed to me. Nodding at a plastic patio chair in the corner, he said, "Why don't you climb up on that chair, little fella, and see if you can't loosen them pipes in the corner."

"What're you going to do?"

He answered me by producing a power saw from the canvas bag, plugging it into an outlet on the wall, and giving it a test squeeze. As it buzzed to life, a twinkle of demented glee filled his bloodshot eyes.

As the *Allegro con fuoco* was rising to its final crescendo, the tears continued to stream down my face. I started thinking about genius. The Russian pianist was obviously a genius, but his genius

lay in interpretation, not creation. Tchaikovsky, the composer, had created the music. He'd made something—something sublime—that had never existed before, could not have existed were it not for him. Even Einstein had never really done that. Einstein merely commented on things that already existed. Of course, they were things nobody else would have been able to see. The rest of us are surrounded by these things—they're the sheet music of the universe—but we're completely incapable of reading the notes. It takes an oddball genius like Einstein to decipher those notes from out of the very ether and play them out for all of humanity.

Einstein had a great love of music, and he was a gifted and enthusiastic musician. I'd read that he'd once asserted, "Life without playing music is inconceivable for me." His second wife, Elsa, claimed to have fallen in love with him because he'd performed Mozart on the violin so beautifully. In addition to Mozart, he'd revered Bach and admired but didn't love Beethoven. I'm not sure what his thoughts were on Tchaikovsky, but I have to think that if iPods had existed in his time, Einstein would have had Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto Number 2 on it.

Einstein was my hero—the reason I'd pursued physics. I even had a poster of him hanging on the wall in my old bedroom in my mother's house. But that was all gone now. As a convicted felon, I could never get the clearances necessary to work in nuclear physics. But maybe, deep down, that's what I'd wanted all along. If Einstein was Mozart, then I was Salieri. Hell, I wasn't even Salieri; I was the organ-grinder out on the street playing for spare change. No, I wasn't even that. I was the organ-grinder's monkey, capable of nothing more than capering about drunkenly and holding up a tin cup for alms.

On the development of nuclear technology, Einstein had remarked, "Since I do not foresee that atomic energy is to be a great boon for a long time, I

have to say that for the present it is a menace. Perhaps it is well that it should be. It may intimidate the human race into bringing order into its international affairs, which, without the pressure of fear, it would not do." You can't be right all of the time...

It had been a few minutes and I was still working on that first pipe joint. Since I had taken college-prep courses in high school, I'd only had shop in middle school and had been lousy at it then. I was better with my mind than my hands—at least, I had been. While I was struggling with the joint, I overheard Garbage finish sawing through his first pipe. I looked over in time to see the two ends of the pipe separate and one end begin spurting water like a geyser. "Shit!" Garbage exclaimed, stepping away from the gushing water and switching off the power saw. "I can't believe they left the frickin' water on!"

Mia clapped her hands delightedly. Kicking off her sandals, she began to dance under the shower of water spewing from the breached pipe, humming the melody to "Singing in the Rain."

"What do we do now?" I asked.

"What do you think, Einstein?" Garbage snapped. "We find the main water valve and shut it off."

"Where would that be?" I asked, not budging from my perch on the chair.

"If I knew that, I would've already turned it off, genius."

That was clearly disingenuous: he was flummoxed. His partner, the guy who ditched him in the French Quarter, apparently had been the brains of their operation. Garbage was the muscle—a pack mule capable of grunting out a few words. He had opposable digits, but aside from allowing him to shoot up, I could see that they provided him not much more benefit than an orangutan wanking himself in the zoo. I didn't like hearing Einstein's name on the lips of

that ape and, still stinging from his earlier jibes, I responded without really thinking. "I'm not the savant who cut a water pipe before checking to see if the water was on. I thought you knew what you were doing."

Mia seemed completely unaware of our confrontation. She raised her hands in the air and spun around like she was at a Phish concert. The water was rushing out at such a rapid rate, and the laundry room was so small and enclosed, that the water on the floor had already risen to her ankles. I could see from the glint in his eyes that Garbage had found a convenient scapegoat for his mistake. "You've got a lot to say, don't you?"

"No." I tried to backpedal a little, realizing there was no one there to pull that gorilla off of me in case he attacked. "I'm just saying, you know, we need to do something."

"I am going to do something," Garbage

replied, flicking the power saw back on. It whirred to life with a menacing whine. "I'm going to give you a lobotomy from the neck, you intellectual asshole."

He began to slowly approach me, holding the saw up at shoulder level like a handgun. He'd gotten about halfway across the tiny room when we heard voices outside the door. "This is the police! Whoever is in there, come out right now with your hands where we can see them."

Garbage froze in his tracks and spun his head to look over his shoulder in the direction of the voice. When he did so, Mia, who was still dancing—too high to process what was happening—bounced into Garbage, causing him to drop the saw. The saw hit the water and made a loud, crackling noise. Mia's back was to me, but I don't think she ever had any idea what hit her. Her body began convulsing. The lights had already cut out when I heard her crash to the floor,



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splashing water into my face. Garbage's face I did see. We locked eyes just before the saw hit the water. He had a look in his eyes like he'd just stepped in dog crap; I don't think he fully comprehended what was about to happen because he didn't seem terrified at all. Maybe he was a little high, too. The electrical surge from the saw hitting the water caused a fuse to blow, so I only had to watch a few seconds of it. Sitting in that plastic chair had protected me. For once in my life I was grounded.

The cop who'd yelled moments earlier

shouted through the door again. His index finger probably caressing the trigger of his gun, he sounded a little spooked. "What the hell just happened in there?"

I explained. They shut off the water and the main circuit breaker to the house, just to be safe, before coming to retrieve me. I wouldn't get out of that chair, though, until one of the cops had splashed through the water to yank me out of it. I was in jail when Mia's family had her funeral back in Johnstown, where she'd grown up. It was probably

just as well that I couldn't go. They wouldn't have wanted me there. I'm sure they blamed me for her death. I blamed me and I knew the truth of the situation. At least, the truth as I saw it. We were inconsequential. Isotopes too small to notice. But when we collided, one split into three and we released enough energy to destroy two worlds. They were small worlds, to be sure, but they were the only worlds either of them had.

The pianist banged out those final triumphant notes and the crowd broke into raucous cheering, shooting to their feet as though pulled up by some cosmic puppeteer. The tears continued to stream down my face as I followed suit. Einstein once said, "Solutions are easy. The real difficulty lies in discovering the problem." But how are we supposed to discover the problem when it lies within ourselves—sewn into the fabric of our being at the subatomic level? Neutrons colliding with atoms until eventually worlds are destroyed. Whatever problems Mia and Garbage may have suffered had been solved when that power saw hit the water in which they were standing.

And me? My problem was I needed a fix.

A Fire During Fall Waits to Be Lit

By Joseph A. Cilluffo

In this season of fallen things
you move your play indoors
below, to our basement
like a cave that the first men
might have huddled in
as wind or night beat outside,
genetic mutation seeking them even there
starlight sneaking in through cracks,
the sun they held in awe begetting cellular change
that we would look back upon
and call evolution

and in our cave, you and your tribemates
fingerprint on the concrete
— a skeleton, a spear, a flower, our dog —
your handprints frozen in an amber of acrylic paint,
a fly's wingbeats held still for me,
the flint waiting to be struck within you
and with it the fire of life and time begun
as once, from its kernel, the stuff of the universe
exploded and was flung
forever outward

Joe Cilluffo is a practicing attorney who spends his free time writing, weeding his vegetable garden, and playing with his three children. Joe's poems have appeared in journals such as *Philadelphia Poets*, *The Schuylkill Valley Journal*, *Apiary*, *The New Purlieu Review* and *Adanna Literary Journal*. He has been a featured reader at the *Moveable Beats Reading Series*, the *Philadelphia Poets Ethnic Voices series*, the *Manayunk-Roxborough Arts Center inaugural ekphrastic poetry exhibit*, and the *Mad Poets Society "A Little Spring Madness" event*.

Stephen Graf is a native of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He holds a Masters Degree from Duquesne University in Pittsburgh and Trinity College, Dublin, a PhD in British Literature from the University of Newcastle in England, and he currently teaches at Robert Morris University. Among other places, he has been published in: *AIM Magazine*, *Cicada*, *The Southern Review*, *The Chrysalis Reader*, *Fiction*, *The Minnetonka Review*, *New Works Review*, *SNReview*, *The Willow Review*, *The Wisconsin Review*, and *The Black Mountain Review* in Ireland. His short story "Hadamard's Billiards" was awarded an Honorable Mention for the 2012 Pushcart Prize.