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BLUE

By RON SINGER

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A Sidewalk Anomaly

A woman, perhaps thirty or thirty-five, sits cross-legged on the sidewalk, apparently engaged in some kind of scholarly or literary work. Imprimis: her nails are clean, well-trimmed, and unpolished; she displays neither tattoos, jewelry, nor piercings; she wears her hair in a short, neat Afro; and her un-bloodshot eyes dart out from those fashionable little glasses with the square black frames.

It would certainly not surprise anyone if this woman were a beggar. The neighborhood, Greenwich Village, is full of them, because it enjoys, or suffers from, the reputation of being a soft touch. In recent years, many of the traditional residents—artists, writers, and the like—have been priced out, supplanted by celebrities, dot com millionaires, and the like, so the reputation may be outdated—or more accurate than ever. Whatever the case, the Village continues to host legions of able-bodied men jiggling Styrofoam cups while they openly glug wine or whiskey from pint bottles, and dirty, hunched, depressed and depressing young runaways, male and female alike, intently reading paperback classics, with cardboard placards beside them retailing in spidery black marker longwinded half-truths about their histories and needs. Not to mention the numerous Vietnam and Gulf War vets, the inflation-ruined elderly, the horrid entertainers (a quarter to shut me up), and the obnoxious accosters. (“Hello, honey, hello, hello, big man, do you have a hundred dollars you can spare tonight?”) In common with at least three-quarters of these people, the woman on the sidewalk is African-American.

Not that other beggars never look well-cared for, decked out, as some of them are, in new construction boots, stiff jeans, and warm, spotless down jackets. But this woman’s prosperity seems more organic, and her clothes are wrong in other ways, too. It is a cold mid-March morning, yet she wears a long black lightweight skirt, a short rust-colored suede jacket, black cotton tights, and cute square-toed navy pumps with straps across the open tops, creating little black cut-outs. And, although you could get this outfit dirty without even trying, the woman is sitting directly on the pavement, not even on a piece of cardboard. Neither does she seem to be, in any sense, an official beggar. A tall red plastic coffee cup stands beside her, but there is no telling whether it contains coffee, coins, or, for that matter, anything. Nor is she imploring or accosting the passersby. What she is doing is copying, or taking careful notes from, a manuscript. In fact, she may not be a beggar, at all, but something else—an embedded journalist, say, investigating life among the homeless.

An onlooker might be excused for entertaining a little fantasy. The woman has set up shop just to the left of the entrance to a stationery store just beyond a fancy pet store on the east side of Sixth Avenue between Twelfth and Thirteenth Streets. Three or four doors back up the block, near the corner of Thirteenth, stands a chi-chi bistro with several little outdoor tables. (Quite a few men pretend to work or read at these tables

while they check out the gorgeous passing models, those tick birds on the backs of the rich neighborhood rhinoceri.) The onlooker might fancy that, for some very obscure reason, the woman in question has slid off one of the chairs and rolled down the block to her present position, where she has simply resumed doing what she was doing at one of the little tables.

This same onlooker might also find something familiar about the woman's manuscript, which is clean, computer-generated, and perhaps 50-70 pages long. But this sense of familiarity can be attributed to the fact that most clean manuscripts, especially computer-generated ones, have a generic quality. The woman is doing her transferring, or note-taking, with a blue bic pen into a small, fancy, semi-hard-covered notebook --red with white marbling. Her handwriting is curly and large, about five lines to the page. Read upside down, what she appears to have written is:

The Bagel, Blue, at Dawn.

Could this odd phrase have originated from the *plume* of some *surrealiste* or *symboliste* —a translation from, say, Breton or Apollinaire? (Did early twentieth-century French poets even eat bagels?) Or is the phrase more personal? The "bagel" may have come from the appetizing store on the corner of Twelfth, a few doors below the stationer's. The "blue" is anyone's guess, perhaps the mood of homelessness. There is one further possibility: the onlooker could not be blamed if the words "delusional," "bi-polar disorder" or "schizophrenia" were to flash across his or her mind.

An hour later, the sidewalk auteur is gone. Gone, along with the red cup, the notebook, and the manuscript. (Was there also a bag of some sort? There must have been.) All that the woman has left behind is a feeling of absence. Even the abandoned patch of sidewalk seems unusually clean: no trash, no signs of dog. What remains is bare, light-gray pavement, marred only by those ubiquitous black spots that begin life as pieces of gum.

The Reading

In life, as opposed to stories, the other shoe may not always fall. At least, in life, it sometimes only falls because the leg has rotted off. Never mind. In early October, the hideous summer weather finally begins to break. What symbolic meaning can be squeezed from the fact that New York's most disgusting season is so often succeeded by its loveliest? In this light, "fall" is a misnomer, but no one, of course, calls autumn, "rise." And, of course, about a month afterwards, the shoe does fall. That is, "The bagel, blue," once more, "at dawn."

This memorable phrase, or line, recurs in one of those Barnes & Noble ads which supplement the list of upcoming readings with little photos of the authors, all of whom have just published books --an ounce of literature to the pound of celebrity and self-help. The photo is a good likeness: the Afro, the fashionable glasses, the angular face with the little walnut jaws, and a complexion that looks light even in a black-and-white head shot.

Also, of course, the writer --poet-- now has a name, Rona Wallace. Mellifluous. Above the photo, the ad displays a reproduction of the book's tasteful cover: medium-sized black type on a white background, "*The Bagel, Blue, at Dawn*" larger by half than "Rona Wallace." The font used for both title and author's name is Janson, a nonsense old Dutch font. There is no artsy photo, drawing or painting, no blue, no bagel, and no dawn --Rona is her own Aurora. Anyone who saw her on the sidewalk that day eight or nine months ago might assume this is her first book, perhaps because its apparent genesis would seem to have been so odd and strenuous.

The reading is scheduled for 6:30 p.m. on a Wednesday the second week of November at a B & N mega-store on Sixth Avenue and Twenty-Second Street. The air

this evening is brisk and clear. There are forty-two attendees, mostly the usual melange of reading-goers, including some writer-types, about a dozen of whom are conscripts from a creative writing class. Included, as well, are four more-or-less presentable homeless people, three men and a woman. This foursome, who are not together, have wandered in off the busy streets, presumably to rest for an hour, and perhaps even to enjoy the proximity of the more fortunate. Will the poet acknowledge kinship, however bogus, with this section of her audience? To anticipate, she will.

To further set the scene: fifty or sixty folding chairs, a good estimate, have been set up in an alcove. Appropriately, too, the space is framed by books: Theology, Sociology, Psychology, and Women's, Gay, Black and Chicano Studies. Up front stands a lectern, on which rest a water pitcher, glass, and microphone. There is no special lighting for the event —no spots or anything— only the store's usual soft, pleasant mixture of fluorescent and incandescent.

The reading begins five minutes late. First, Ms. Wallace is introduced. The honor, or job, has fallen to a nervous young twenty-something, who is dressed for the occasion in trousers, shiny ankle boots, and turtle neck, all black, with no tattoos, makeup or jewelry other than a chaste diamond nose stud. Tall, skinny, pale, flat and tousled, the woman might be anything from an intern to junior management. After issuing the customary polite admonitions to turn off cell phones and not to record or photograph the event, she semi-reads her piece from an index card, giving the essential facts and the essential puff.

Facts: RW, 28, immigrant from Chicago, first book (yes), graduate of So-and-So State in such and such a year (six years before), major, Writing, minor, Women's Studies. Two sojourns at Yadda-Yadda art colony, previously published in This-and-That little magazine and on-line in That-and-This little e-zine.

Puff (with an example of each): spontaneity, craft, experience, freshness, genuineness, originality. The puffer should have realized the irony of several of these items.

Then, to polite applause, up from her seat beside the lectern pops the poet, R.W. She is wearing not the street outfit, exactly, but a slightly more flamboyant twin: blue tights and green shoes; the rest, the same. She begins as expected, by offering the customary disclaimers and thanks while she flutters with the water pitcher, glass, and Book. About ten or fifteen pages have been marked by post-its, auguring a short reading.

One of Rona Wallace's "thanks" is to the homeless. After the other, more usual acknowledgments --editor, friends, fellow-writers, a nod to the woman who has brought the class, but a conspicuous omission of family-- she pauses, then adds, "I also want to thank the many street people who were generous enough to share their experiences with me while I was writing my book. In particular, Charlie Davidson --is Charlie here tonight?" She scans the crowd in vain. "Oh, well, guess not. Anyway, besides everything else he has done to me --I mean, for me--" [polite laughter] "Charlie once gallantly shielded me from, let's just say, one of the more horrible experiences to which women on the streets are vulnerable. As you will see, there's a poem about that."

She pauses for a deep breath and a brave smile, and, then, sounding more formal, continues. "Before I read, however, I would like to make an announcement. Thanks, in part, to the generosity of my publisher, thirty per cent of all sales from the book will automatically be donated to ... " and she names a big, well-known charity, or, as she puts it, "a great organization devoted to caring for the less fortunate." A cynical onlooker might calculate that the total amount likely to be donated will be in the vicinity of \$15 or \$20.

With that, she begins to read.

Most of Wallace's poems are not half-bad; some are even better.

The Bagel, Blue, at Dawn

Thus it is to waken on the streets,
to waken on this ground, stiff, sick with cold,
your face turned toward an unfamiliar wall.
The bagel, blue, at dawn, the milk, curdled,
the red sun, squat, astride the rooftops,
forlorn, your possessions scattered, displayed,
the matches, coins, cosmetics, disarrayed
across the palette where you spent the night.

Up on an elbow, raggedy breath exhaled,
before you face the day.
Why, look at all those legs and trousers,
hurrying on their chartered way!
Helter-skelter, licketty split,
caffeinated, scrubbed, wearing shoes that fit. ...

Hardly Breton or Apollinaire --if anything, Auden. And did you catch that Blakean "chartered"? Next comes the one about her absent rescuer.

To Charlie Davidson (My Hero)

We men and women of the nightmare life,
citizens of a world of fear and strife,
though damned, distressed,
we, too, have our ways.

Our table-round, a cardboard box, dumpster luck,
at the back of an unguarded construction site,
the meal arrayed with dignity,
plastic forks and knives in proper sets.

Eight of us came to the table that night,
women at the head and foot, bum royalty ...

You get the idea, I'm sure. The wine flows, Rona wanders off with "Jack," a sneak who tries to jump her in a dark corner, Charlie to the rescue. The poem's narrative arc is strong: R.W. understands suspense.

These first two are followed by ten or twelve more, all fairly short, most fairly similar. However, somewhere toward the middle of the reading comes an image so striking that few in Wallace's audience are likely to forget it. She --the persona-- observes a fat homeless man asleep on a burst mattress in the middle of a junk-strewn lot. The sleeper's pants are halfway down, and his mealy buttocks appear to merge with the exuded mattress stuffing.

But the best poem of all is the last one in the book, with which she aptly closes the reading. To quote it in its entirety:

Farewell Kiss

(again, to Charlie)

The Navajo way to say "kiss" is

“Two round objects meet.”
When we kissed it was more like
two pairs of parallel lines
meeting at various points.
Of course, the geometry was complicated
by the fact that arms were also wrapped
around bodies which pressed each other,
all of these parts, too,
being somewhat straight
as well as somewhat round.

Now, since this was a farewell kiss,
the straight round objects were parting
as well as meeting.
Yet by meeting as we parted
--and I believe some of the objects
also parted as they met--
we --and they-- were perhaps agreeing
or even asking
to meet again.

Yes, “Farewell Kiss” is minor, but, not to go overboard, it is charming, witty and original, polished, but unaffected, and it uses the cross-cultural material with taste and facility. Plus, there’s more than a bit of John Donne, isn’t there? And, finally, there is the finesse with which “Farewell Kiss” appears to turn the page on Ms. Wallace’s homeless interlude --without quite closing the book.

After the reading, the creative writing students rush forward, and line up to have their hands shaken, and copies autographed. As the beaming teacher stands alongside, the generous poet lavishes two or three minutes of individual attention on each and every one of the twelve students .

The Interview

A few days later, a young free-lance journalist named David Allen, who was present at the reading, calls Wallace’s editor and sets up an interview. First, following the poet’s instructions, the editor express-mails him the sidewalk manuscript and notebook, plus a reviewer’s copy of the book. When these materials arrive, he spends the better part of a day poring over them, like a scholar collating incunabula.

The Creative Process

The sidewalk manuscript from which Rona Wallace was copying that day turns out to be a draft of a bad, but literate, sea novel entitled “The Bugle Blew at Dawn.” The manuscript was discarded by someone who lives on Thirteenth Street between Sixth and Seventh Avenues. The author’s name and address are on the title page, as well as on the ten-by-twelve manila envelope in which Wallace has kept the manuscript. The envelope is slightly torn and smudged; it smells faintly of garbage. The poet has used this manuscript in an original way. Her creative process becomes clear to the journalist only after careful collation of manuscript, notebook and poems.

Wallace’s title, *The Bagel, Blue, at Dawn*, sets the pattern, although it is also the nearest to a literal borrowing. There are ten or twelve other lines from the manuscript, but these have been slightly altered as they were copied into the little red notebook. And every one of these lines has, in turn, also found its way into one or another of the poems.

Perhaps, the reader would enjoy a little guessing game. Here are four of the manuscript lines, and you can look back at the poems already quoted (and don’t

forget the mattress image):

1. "The ship was kissed by a following breeze."
2. "The ship had become its own little world, rife with fear."
3. "Sprawled on his ragged mattress, the second mate snored and gasped, digesting the heavy meal."
4. "Francis McElroy, ever the scrupulous boatswain, saw to it that all anchors and cables were perfectly arrayed in their proper sets."

I am sure you will agree that Wallace's borrowings are so spare and oblique that no just observer would accuse her of plagiarism. After all, the poet has taken material that was useless to the person who wrote it—he threw it in the garbage-- and made something good from it. Like an alchemist, you might even say.

The Interview (cont)

At the poet's request, the interview takes place at her residence in Astoria, Queens the day after Thanksgiving. She buzzes him in and waits for him in the doorway to her apartment, where they shake hands.

DA: Hi. Ms. Wallace? David Allen.

RW: Rona, please. Let's go in the kitchen, it's warmer there.

He follows her down the long hallway of the pre-war floor-through to the kitchen, a big square room at the back with two long windows facing an unkempt yard and its similar neighbors. Lots of late Autumn scruff, many clotheslines stretched between fire escapes and telephone poles, a few loaded with wash, one load still steaming. In the kitchen, a huge radiator bangs away. The yellow paint is faded, smoky and cracked, and, in addition to the pale light from the windows, there is a florescent fixture precariously attached to the high ceiling. They sit at a big rectangular formica-topped table with chrome legs and a set of four sturdy, institutional-looking chairs, also chrome-legged, their seats covered with red vinyl. She offers him a choice of beverages, and he chooses water, which she serves them both from the tap. They face each other from the ends of the table.

DA: You look tired.

RW: I am, a little.

DA: Did you cook? Big dinner?

RW: Twenty-two, most of our friends.

DA: No family?

RW: Nope.

DA: That's right, you're from Chicago, aren't you? I remember that from the reading.

RW: Yes, that's right. Chicago, Illinois.

DA: Right. And Charlie? Is he from Chicago, too?

RW: "Charlie"? Not really. I guess you could say he's from here, there and

everywhere, he's a military brat. I think his dad is posted in Europe, someplace, Germany, or maybe they've sent him to that stupid war by now. But his mom—they're divorced-- she could be anywhere. And the siblings, from both families, are scattered, as they say, 'to the four corners of the globe.' 'Corners!' Huh! David? Hello? Is your hidden tape recorder running yet?

DA: No, uh, it's right here. [gesturing to backpack] Let's talk a little more first. I think we're working our way toward the interview. Okay? So. Tell me more about your friends, the 22 people you cooked dinner for.

RW: Well, Inspector, as I was saying, there were 27 of us at table—no, 43. We took our places at 1602 hours. And, at 1608, the guest of honor, Mr. Turkey, made his piping hot, grand appearance. Er, you're making me nervous. What was that question again, please?

DA: Who was there? At the dinner.

RW: Oh, yeah, right. Just the usual bunch of bums. We invited the mayor, of course, but he had a prior engagement. Why do you keep asking me that? Who do you think was there? Why do you care?

DA: I see. Okay. We'll forget about Thanksgiving, then. Let's begin the interview, proper. [takes out his small tele-recorder and starts it.] Ready?

RW: Sure. Go.

DA: First question: I read the materials you had your editor send me—thanks-- but I'd still like you to, please, describe the genesis of the book.

RW: "The gen..." ? What do you mean, exactly?

DA: Sorry, I'll try to be more specific... . Look, to tell the truth, Ms. Wallace, Rona, this is my first interview --literary interview. I've done other kinds, a few, and some book reviews, but ...

RW: Well, that makes two of us. Don't worry, David, it's fine. Just go on.

DA: Right. Did you use any other written materials for ...

RW: Seven manuscripts, total, including the one I had her send you. By the way, you can keep that one, I'm done with it. Or sell it on e-Bay, if you like. Just kidding.

DA: Thanks. My, my! Seven. Oh, speaking of which. .. [slides the envelope, which contains the manuscript and notebook, toward her] Where did ...

RW: Thanks [pulls it toward her]. I'll explain. See, this guy I know who ... begs in the Village -- actually, he's sort of in charge there-- he put the word out, I asked him to, and his men, well ... they gleaned the seven manuscripts. You'd be surprised how many writers throw stuff away in this city. There were two from that block, alone, "The Bugle Blew at Dawn," and a really bad one by someone named Babette Ratzin ...

DA [hastily]: You don't have to tell me their names. "Gleaned," that's a good word for it. Do the writers know?

RW: Not really. Actually, that's one reason I had the editor send you this stuff. [gestures to envelope] I was hoping you might give me some advice. I was sort of afraid to ask her.

DA: Well, I'm flattered, of course. I mean, I have no problem with the way you used

the ... material.

RW: Good, thanks. But you'd better be careful what you say in the article, anyway. Okay?

DA: I understand. The other six? Did you use them the same way you used "The Bugle"?

RW: Pretty much. Want to check for yourself? They're in my study. [smiles, gestures to doorway]

DA: No, no, no thanks, no need, thanks. I'm good.

RW: No, please. [Something starts to slip.] Why not take a couple more home, David. *Dave*. Maybe, *you'll* find something to "glean."

DA: You never know. Where's Charlie?

RW: Charlie? Charlie who? Just kidding! He left, ran away. No, not really. He's out begging, we have to eat and pay the bills, too, you know, just like everyone else. How do you make a living, Dave? Not from ... that thing. [gestures to recorder] Hey! I bet you're not even a real reporter.

DA: Well, I didn't say I was a reporter, did I? Who said I was?

RW: What are you, then? A proofreader? An office temp, or something? I did that -- office temping-- I hated it. I also worked as a substitute teacher for a couple months. In Albany. Albany, New York. That was awful, too. What was the last question, please?

DA: When you were writing ...

RW: Oh, yes, homeless. I was wondering when we'd get around to that. Well, no, I wasn't, exactly, not any more. You see, by then, we had this place. Before that, we lived in his car for a while.

DA: Whose? Charlie's?

RW: No, stupid! That was another guy, Jack.

DA: 'Jack'? But ...

RW: Don't ask. Look, Dave, if you really need to mention all this personal stuff in your article, why don't you just say my life is, well, complex. That's it, "complex," a good, safe word.

DA: How did you get the money for ... ?

RW: Well, it was part of a plan, you see, "our dream." [reciting] We lived in the car the whole previous summer and fall, begging, doing one or two other ... things. We saved, I've always kept a bank account. Then, when the weather started getting cold, Jack's brother, Terry, who has a straight job --he's a security guard, no, a partner in a small security firm-- signed the lease for us. You get the idea, right? It's sort of a boring story, isn't it?

DA: No, no. And you used your street ... experience in the book? How long were you actually on the streets?

RW: That depends. Full-time, eight months, part-time, on and off, let's see, maybe five

years. By the way, how much money do you think beggars make these days?

DA: No idea.

RW: Well, it varies, of course. The guy I told you about, the boss? He brags he can take in seventy-five, eighty during the two-hour evening rush, weekdays.

DA: Hmm! Uh, when did you leave Chicago?

RW [sings]: "Chi-ca-go! Chi-ca-go!"

DA: So. Did things on the street happen pretty much the way you described them in your poems?

RW: What kind of stupid question is that! Of course not! Aren't writers supposed to invent things? to lie? dramatize? I went to Writers' School, too, you know!

DA: How about the incident with Jack? Did you make that up?

RW: "Jack"? Huh! There was no "Jack," that was Charlie. He forced me ... the first time. But I forced him, too. [cunning] I made him use a condom. [pause] That's it! That's all! When is this *interview* coming out? And where will it be appearing? In what *publication*? Can I see it first? There might be a few things, at least a few things, I don't want a bunch of strangers finding out about me. Is that okay with you, *Dave*? [eye contact made and broken several times] ... Hey! I saw that! You want some of this, don't you? [equivocal gesture toward her breasts] Well, what do you say? It only costs a hundred, no rough stuff, but it's worth it. You'll see, a really good time. So. What do you say? Shall we, uh... . [gestures toward doorway again, crazy laugh] Had you there, didn't I, *Dave*! Hey, lighten up, guy! Just kidding! What do *you* charge? No hard feelings?

[At this juncture, Allen ad libs an excuse and beats a hasty retreat. Neither of them speaks again until they are back at the front door of the apartment.]

RW: Well, goodbye, David, it's been *real*.

As he had done upon arrival, Allen proffers a little bow. Then, he slips past the poet, bracing himself for the slamming of the door behind him. But it closes soundlessly, and the lock clicks into place. By now, his legs are trembling so violently he has to clutch the banister as he stumbles back down the four steep flights and through the two doors out onto the empty street.

The Aftermath

On Monday, December 4th, ten days after the interview, Rona Wallace is visited by a city marshal, who escorts her to the sidewalk, helping her carry down two heavy suitcases. The door to the apartment is secured with a padlock that fits snugly around the knob. Through this padlock, a heavy chain is threaded, which is wrapped around an adjacent steam pipe. Posted on the door at eye level is a stark black and white eviction notice indicating that the occupants' belongings will be stored for up to thirty days by the Superintendent, either in the apartment, the basement, or any other place of his choosing, after which they will be discarded.

A year passes. Then, Wallace's editor receives a post card, undated and without a return address. The card has been written in the same big spidery blue bic handwriting she used in the red notebook. The text is a bit smudged, but legible:

MY LIFE, MY NEWS (A Very Brief Synopsis):

RW: presently living in Buffalo NY with two new folks, good peeps,

decent, but temporary, abode.

Charles "Charlie" Davidson (former boyfriend): deceased Aug. 2004, HBBWS (hit by bus while stoned). That's what I heard, anyhow.

James J. ("Jack") Dailey: under court order not to come within 20,000 leagues of
Yours truly,
Rona (Wallace)

P.S. And, who knows, one of these days, I may just find myself back in the Apple. I've started writing again, so dust off my head shot for the newspaper!

Meanwhile,
Keep the faith!!!
Love,
Rona
(picture of smiley face)

By now, it is getting cold in New York, and in Buffalo it is already well below freezing. David Allen has not tried to publish the interview, but he keeps Wallace's book on a shelf, where it stands, ironically, alongside *Leaves of Grass*. One day, as Allen reaches for the Whitman, he thinks to himself, "May she find a thousand manuscripts!"

Note: "Farewell Kiss," by Ron Singer, appeared in *Borderlands: The Texas Poetry Review* (Number 15, Fall/Winter 2000). (4727 words)

In addition to "Farewell Kiss," **Ron Singer** has published poetry in *Windsor Review*, *HampdenSydney Poetry Review*, *Waterways: Poetry in the Mainstream*, and elsewhere. He has written librettos for two performed operas and the Introduction to *Vanity Fair* (Bantam Books). His satire has appeared in several newspapers and in the ezines, *Oregon Literary Review* and *Diagram* (also in their 2006 print anthology). He has written essays and reviews about African subjects for many publications, including *Poets & Writers* (online), *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. Finally, his fiction has previously appeared in *Willow Review*, *Puckerbrush Review*, and *Ellipsis*. Singer grew up and lives in New York City. He studied English at Union College (B.A.) and the University of Chicago (M.A., Ph.D.) For 30 years, Singer has taught at Friends Seminary, a K-12 Quaker school. His wife is also a teacher, as well as a visual artist, and their daughter is a food writer.

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