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The Avenue

GRADUATE LITERARY MAGAZINE



THE AVENUE

SAINT JOSEPH'S UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE WRITING STUDIES PROGRAM

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CONTENTS

Poetry

<i>Is this sin?</i>	5
<i>Elegy</i>	7
<i>Teeth</i>	8
<i>A Mother's Song of Seasons</i>	9
<i>She's Leaving Home</i>	10
<i>Le Marathon</i>	11
<i>My First Day on the Railroad</i>	12
<i>I'm Wild and Wonderful; Don't Call Me Pistis</i>	13
<i>Other People's Children</i>	14

Prose

<i>GODDESSES</i>	16
<i>It's Not Goodbye, It's I'll See You Later</i>	17
<i>Liber Nupturum</i>	19

Alumni Spotlight

<i>A Chapter from Notes to the Wise from a Lord of the Sky</i>	26
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Poetry

Is this sin?

Shekinah Davis

I continually return here
like a stray that is lovingly fed
by a stranger when they have the means

under the suspension of the moon we meet
the walls and its contents
have been my audience since I've discovered you

what a job you've done luring me out of my first skin
she's just scared, she means nothing by it

are you harmless

I'm finding myself more fond of silk and lace now
the way it drapes off my shoulder

it is only in the dark hours and silence
that I can see this self-clearer
as if permission is in the unspoken tongue
of the night

I'm enamored by this reflection
a merriment marvels back at me
all is heard is what the heart yearns
for until the sun has taken its bed

I've laid conviction to rest
I let her sleep and then morning comes

in the day I silently scream for you
to be fed from your hands
when you have the means
and when I am disarmed
and can sink into my sensuality
subtly and unashamed

Elegy

Brianna Vassallo

Last month's moldy meatloaf stumbles out of the trash can,
joining the protest of the browning apple core and spoiled
ice cream carton, flat, fizzless beer, and chunks of sour milk soaking
the already-stained carpet. They make a united stand –
demanding to be seen, refusing to be shoved face-down
into smells that don't marry – since I can't.

Their silent revolt gathers my attention, but not yours.
Are you content with piles of garbage that can overtake us
like the zombies dog-piling against the boarded-up door,
one small, precarious nail between us and our humanity,
until they devour one gnawed piece of gray mush at a time?
Or do you not think about bloodsuckers stalking you at night,
cornering you like a wounded rabbit, sleek, pale neck theirs
for the taking – your veins bursting like a juice box squeezed
too tight, the toddler's chubby hands too eager to slurp
its contents dry then toss into the rotting dumpster,
hordes of flies gathering to contaminate the remains
and lay eggs, preparing for their future young.

I wonder: can I make you feel the same?

Or am I doomed to join the voiceless revolution,

I too becoming just another splatter
added to the tainted, matted carpet?

Or, can I summon just enough courage
to leave?

Teeth
Caroline LaNoce

Colliding back and forth
Running side to side
The weight of the world on my poor teeth

Resentment lies on these teeth
So does fear
And anger

Clench and unclench
Release and breathe
Revealing uncovered truths
Sharpening in the night
Unconsciously during slumber
Jagged in the morning

The sound is addicting
Collide, run, clench,
Release, bite, unclench
A symphony in my mouth
Playing over and over again

Until the curtains are drawn
And I can breathe again

A Mother's Song of Seasons

Christie Butler

In early April light, beneath the morning sky,
She holds her newborn baby close, her breath so soft against her skin.
The trees wake up around them, shaking sleep from branches high,
And tiny buds appear like little hands just reaching in.

She smiles as newborn leaves unfurl, so fresh and full of green,
Their sleepy bodies dancing in the warm and gentle air.
She rocks her child, so small, while all the world feels new, serene -
A quiet joy that drifts between the whispers everywhere.

The baby shifts, her fingers curling toward the budding trees,
As if she knows the secret life that stirs inside the bark.
The sap begins its rise again, with every passing breeze,
And life begins to hum its song from morning until dark.

Then summer slips away, and now the sun is hiding in,
The days are tired, leaning toward the chill of autumn's breath.
The leaves, once green, are fading fast, their edges wearing thin,
And soon they start to fall, their dance a quiet song of death.

She holds her still, though now the wind is cool and leaves descend,
The golden whispers of a season that has come and gone.
Her child, grown older now, hums softly as the branches bend,
While autumn sighs, undoing all that spring had once begun.

She knows the world is turning, though the loss feels bittersweet -
For even as the leaves fall, something deeper starts to grow.
In every end, she sees the way new life and love repeat -
A cycle that a mother's heart will always somehow know.

She's Leaving Home

Mickey Schuster

Like Janis, I have duties pertaining
to the hearth and the sweeping
of back-porch steps.
The wind blows in
through a storm door that doesn't close
all the way, pushing our Sunday's best
tablecloth and throwing
the daisy-printed napkins at the China cabinet
where the teacups rattle when Daddy drinks.
The gnats hang in the air
like stale sheets and nip at my ankles.
Who am I? If not bled
dry, if not a woman
as consistent and relentless
as a pan to the skull,
a vase to the ear, chipped at the rim.
With cut lips, I will deny
that I am a visitor only in dreams, writing
I'll be home soon
like dew, I'll leave before breakfast.
I will stop to rest in hotel rooms along the highway
unstirred and airless
like the wind-chimes in summer
on Gram's back porch
where our linens dripped dry off the clothesline
and gave the ants something to drink.

Le Marathon
Jonathan Procopio

Running from the typer and I've
sought to escape the memories of the false
self that I confess on this page in order to feel
true. Running from prostitutes at Rodeway Inns
in farm town America while on railroad business.

Running lately. A trip home to upper tip of country
a jamboree of comments from my Jewish aunts about
weight. I can hold my own. And running. Across state
lines and into ATF agents. Running so far I wish I was
kidding. Golden Caboose Casino in Eureka California.

No curriculum for breathing— life's biggest run.
Running with outlaws in strip bars in Portland where
pole and pool table were main attractions. And just the
same I've sat in front of the desks of people with plaque stacks
and dined with dudes with license plate resumes.
Had a desk with a picture of my lover on it.

My First Day on the Railroad

Jonathan Procopio

I was told to “sit down
and shut the fuck up.”
Two old heads that were
supposed to be teaching,
(which by the way I
speak of not discriminately
but rather respectfully as
that’s what was said
and accepted and such was
an honor to be earned),
were quiet the whole ride
from Portland to Seattle
not one managing to muster
interest in the Bald Eagle
with a wingspan nearly
as tall as myself, taking flight
over Tacoma’s Pudget Sound.
Nor did they smile at
children on the sides
of the tracks waving hello
and, fists bound up, asking
for a toot of the horn.

I'm Wild and Wonderful; Don't Call Me Pistis

Keli Birchfield

Anon, the lady becoming reigns o'er shadow
And light prior to Æons, plenum, or symbols
Which hold their hour's pleroma source – a shower ware
Of beauty's nascent beating, playfully alive –
Confined through logos bare to ceaseless codas, bound
By rapacious mutations born of her
Own heart, envious they can't egress gracefully,
Freely, nor by their own accord. In secret she
Holds sway, o'er Unity and o'er All, while they pose
As her caretakers; protectors; guardians for-
Ever with whom she's requir'd to cocreate for
Fear she might resolve a better world beyond their
Domain; they claim no further effluence may be.

Other People's Children

Edward Malandro

Without preamble, the morning sun begins to tan the
skin on the faces of the day laborers and the
junketeers, presiding indifferently over other peoples' children.
Quietly suffering through their pecuniary betrothals and erratically formed alliances

Mustached men park gray Mercedeses in fire lanes and
direct traffic along Church Street. On behalf of the
nearby social club, they dispense ribbons and oak carved pendants
of Saint Brigid crosses on distressed leather strings.
On the inside, ordinary time is tempoed by resonant footfalls. For ritual's
sake, children are corralled into a small
room with a hole pocked door to
conceal their blue jeans with rope bound albs.
The girl child collects the folded paper money and
places it into a sequin zip purse

given to her by her much older sister. She instinctively knows
to take the crucifix tipped staffed and balances it
on her clavicle as the church begins to swell. She
leads the procession down the flecked marble aisle
visioning her wedding to a boy who she does
not yet know that she will forget.
They arrive at the altar flanked by floral displays
and a battleship blue casket. The unaging priest looks to the exposed
beam ceiling at first when he hears his name
whispered by the uncertain boy child.
Stifling his laugh, he motions for holy water and the
orbed brass scepter. He realizes right then that he must make his
return to the trigonometric shrine alongside the Indian Road.

Prose

GODDESSES

Maria Neatu

Ages ago, I found Athena, Artemis, and Hestia. Has it really been that long? Why, yes, so they know me best. Athena provides wisdom and courage to face life's battles. Artemis opens my heart, my eyes, and my ears to nature's untamed beauty. Hestia prepares my space at the end of every day, soft as a nest.

Athena, the wise owl who sees through the twilight forest. Artemis, the fierce buzzard who slices her prey like silk. Hestia, the cozy fireplace that welcomes me after a long day. They represent the best of Ancient Greece, heroes and independence and family. Since my angst-ridden adolescence, I've felt them around me always, encouraging me to shine.

Wisdom and nature and home. Really, what else does a girl need to find her happiness? One day soon, when my path returns me to Greece, to myself, I'll dance in the Kalamata olive groves under the full moon's glow, my bonfire's light reflected in my eyes, my spirit full of joy, of gratitude.

It's Not Goodbye, It's I'll See You Later

Maureen Berner

Sometimes God brings you a test. A way to prove, if not to others, but at least yourself who you truly are.

Sometimes these interactions begin innocently over burpees and strict presses, over “fuck this” and sweaty brows bringing an acquaintance who you barely consider. Parties, a wedding shower, some cocktails with life conversations peppered in, you gain trust and solace in the feeling this is one of the good ones.

To an outsider, people can be trusted here.

To an outsider, we all come with smiles and loyalty, if not love here.

To an outsider, the snake in sheep's clothing is not easily spotted here.

But to the insider, keeping people at arm's length is a good idea. The snakes are too ingrained in everyday life, and while we must engage, no way should we be getting in bed with them.

She came with hope and love. She took friendship so seriously that when welcomed with open arms what was to question?

Then came the phone call.

Why did you say what you said to me? Did you know?

Know what? What's going on?

I'd seen it happen before. There were moments in our tipsy conversations that gave me pause. So... I said so. Call it life experience. Call it negativity. Call it wizardry....

She does.

He was found six days after the wedding. In their car, with someone she

knew. Someone we all knew. Because that's how it happens, right? The snakes aren't strangers. Far from it. They've eaten your food, drank your wine, befriended your dog. All while plotting your demise.

Death is final. Heartbreak is not. The best type of heartbreak brings death to who you were. It changes you. Sometimes it changes everyone around you. From blame to brunches, tears to tattoos, perplexity to peace. Sometimes it takes strangers to bring you from the darkness the snakes who pose as friends bring.

She put in her time. Didn't run like they thought she would. Took her shame and created a life outside the drama she found herself in center stage. But now, it's time to go. The POD is parked outside the small cottage she was graciously offered many months ago.

But we are better people for her. We are all now aware of who we are or better yet, who we are not. And so is she.

Sometimes God brings you a test. A test to prove you are not one of the snakes hiding in the grass even if only to yourself. It's safe to say we've passed.

The others can await their own results.

Heads Carolina, tails California. See you in the sunshine, my friend.

Liber Nuptarum

Jessica Heichel

It might be the first time I smelled mildew.

I can't recall specifics like an address number, or whether there was a front porch. I can't tell you if there was an upstairs or a basement.

I can tell you that I was in an oppressively damp room with an unshakable, clinging chill and that it smelled like the worst parts of the outdoors were making their way indoors, but slowly, and in a way that could only be measured in centuries.

I was 10 or 11 years old, and this was one of those trips you are simply taken on as a child. That's wild to think about now, isn't it? Imagine someone just telling you to get into the car, and then imagine you simply doing that. You have no advance warning. It is time for you to be in the car, so you are.

In this particular case, it was nighttime. The dark added to the otherworldly feeling of the house we were visiting; a new home, recently bought by my mother's best friend.

Years later, when I was old enough to ask the right questions, I would be able to fill in crucial gaps in information about this place. For instance, it was built onto the bones of an original 18th century log cabin. Entryways and exits were built with a mind toward necessities we could scarcely imagine today: can a draft mule drag a full tree trunk into this room, so we can burn the whole thing as fuel for weeks on end?

At the time, the entirety of my knowledge boiled down to "I don't like it here."

Dread is a feeling that seems much closer when you're a child. It's crouching behind the benign smile of a too-interested stranger, it's tugging at the eye-bolt keeping your neighbor's ornery dog tethered just that side of your adjoining stoops, and it's definitely lurking in the gloomy atmosphere of this place where, for reasons inscrutable to me both as a child and as an adult, the prior residents simply *left things* in this house.

Even with the advantage of time and lived experience, I have yet to determine exactly why. A hasty departure? A clever but ultimately forgotten hiding spot? It's a question that still bothers me.

I don't think I'd noticed that a hush had descended on the adults among us, but I snapped to attention when that silence broke.

"Girls! Come see this!"

This was my mother, beckoning to me and my younger sister from the other room. We were quick to respond to what promised to be, at the very least, a distraction from the mildew smell.

"It's a bible," my mother explained, gesturing to a book that we immediately clocked as being both very old and very fragile. We soon discovered that the book itself was merely the opening act, because there were *things* tucked into the pages.

"Look at this!" My mom's friend exclaimed, as she reverently picked up a lock of hair. Already, my sister and I didn't like this. Hair? In a book? Why? And whose hair was this? What is the point of keeping hair in a book – no, not just any book – in the bible?

"Oh, here's another one." This time, she held up a darker bit of hair that curled itself up into a letter "C."

As the two adults kept thumbing through, they found fabric cuttings laid between some of the pages as well. Little bits of textile, the roughness and muted colors of which tattled on their age.

“These must be funeral cuttings,” my mother explained.

Before I tell you how my blood hit my feet in an icy crash as this sentence escaped containment; before I tell you how I instantly understood the unshakable truth of it; I want to take a second to tell you how much time I spent as a child literally surrounded by death – in a manner of speaking. My Catholic school’s daily recess took place in the church parking lot, which also means it took place in the cemetery parking lot, since all 19th century churches were built with grave space as a feature.

For an hour every day, I’d poke my saddle shoes through the wrought iron spokes in the fence and stare out at the names of people who’d already been dead for a hundred years before I was even born. I was in the presence of eternity a lot, and I didn’t really mind it.

Yet, I think we can all agree that there is plenty of daylight between a theoretical person I’ve never met, laying under a monument I can see during recess; and an actual person whose hair I can reach out and touch right now; in their respective, perceived levels of deadness.

The girl with her hair pinched between my mother’s fingers was, to my 10-year-old mind, the deadest person there’d ever been. She was in the room with us, not three feet from my face.

When I was a little older, I would come to know, and even love, the elaborate Victorian mourning traditions I was faced with so unexpectedly here. The practice of taking hair and clothing cuttings from deceased loved ones is, when viewed through my adult eyes, lovely,

sacred, and deeply meaningful. This bible is the kind of heirloom your most intense maiden aunt painstakingly curates for decades.

But I wasn't an adult just now, standing knock-kneed on dusty hardwood, feeling like I was trying to breathe through a wet sponge. And with this runaway fear train already hurtling off a cliff, I was confronted with another item folded up and hidden within the pages: a poem.

My mother, not giving us so much as a head start to run away, began reading it aloud.

Married in black, you will wish yourself back
Married in red, you will wish yourself dead...

Now this was really too much. My head swam, the humidity in the air threatened to choke me clean out. And here I'd thought the suit clippings were freaky.

There was more.

Married in green, ashamed to be seen
Married in yellow, ashamed of your fellow...

My sister, her eyes now the size of silver dollars, creaked a terrified gaze in my direction, begging for some clarity.

You see, in situations like this, it is the solemn duty of eldest siblings to become the arbiter of all truth. *No*, they reassure you, no kid has ever gone down the drain with the bathwater. *No*, your face won't actually "freeze like that." In this very specific case, she needed my reassurance that *no*, our mother was not speaking an eldritch hex into existence. *No*, this ancient grimoire of a bible, stuffed with relics and clippings from the

dead, did not wield any true power over our reality. *Yes, you can get married in any color you want, and it will be okay, I promise.*

But all I could do was avoid her pleading eyes and wait for this supernatural ordeal to be over.

It wasn't quite.

Married in pearl, you will live in a whirl

Married in pink, your spirits will sink...

Is “*pearl*” a color? Do they just mean you can't wear pearls? What's “*a whirl?*” Mom, *what are you doing?*

Married in gray, you will live far away

Married in blue, he should always be true...

Was that a hint of positivity I just detected in this doomed soothsaying? Not likely. The word “*should*” is doing a lot of work in that line. I have no reason to trust it. Is there any safe color to get married in?

The poem concluded:

Married in white, you have chosen just right.

The relief my sister and I felt threatened to buckle our knees. Here was permission. Here was redemption! Here was a way to break this malignant spell.

That poem seared itself so deeply into my brain, it boiled away other details like when or how we got home, and whether we talked about it on the way.

What I can tell you, emphatically, is that by the time another 17 years had passed, and both my sister and I had made our own ways down our own aisles, we both did so in sparkling and *immaculate* white.

Just in case.

Alumni Spotlight

A Chapter from Notes to the Wise from a Lord of the Sky

Kevin Priole

Novel Description

A band of four British isles have been lost to time or, in some cases, altered to myth. They have felt tensions in fading wildlife, trade upheavals, questions of leadership, and toils over land and gold. Amongst all these struggles, a lonely trade outpost has only begun to feel the wake of these destructions, the town of Noitamrof. One man, once a scribe, no longer desires to involve himself in these matters outside of his home. For years, Shaun Oscav has retreated to a position in the local stables, as a stablehand. However, between adopting a griffin and aiding a knight near death, Oscav's distance towards the outer regions begins to fade as raiders plot to pillage Noitamrof, perhaps in an attempt to spread their fire across the rest of these Rayneork Isles.

KNIGHT AMONG NIGHT, STABLE AMONG DAY

The sky over Noitamrof reckoned with evading cold as the heavy dew began to quell. In escaping it, the two men retreated to the local tavern, The Blending Spire, which arranged its lingering night to barely reveal a bountiful array of parched common folk. Chatter booming, glasses chimmering. Amongst the sea of customers, the lone stablehand and once sir knight sat amongst the darkest corner of the bar, awaiting their orders to be filled. While Shaun bursted with quivering joy over meeting a

nobleman, the knight appeared battleworn, abandoning his tattered chainmail for a fresh tone of cloth and a hopeful brew.

“Well...” Shaun expressed to the dreary knight.

“Well what?”

“Are you not going to enlighten me with the stories of your KNIGHTLY TRAVELS...”

Henry silently bursted at Shaun, “Shhh...I do not need that kind of attention right now and I would prefer not to discuss anything at all until a drink meets my grisled lips.”

“Oh pray, Sir Alghart...”

“No need. Henry will do.”

“But...you are a part of the royal knighthood. Why should I not address you by your title? It is custom...”

“Not by me. I personally see no desire to wave my title to all around me like a lonely beggar.”

“Surely you like to boast through a good story at least? I am certain there are plenty of commoners like me that would thrill from hearing one of your tales. All I ask is...that I be the first to hear.”

The knight meets Shaun’s child-like optimism with a stony grin sketched by the anger in his prominent brow and the bangs under his bloodshot eyes. Buckling from the weariness, Shaun gives in to the knight’s unwavering ill-content.

“Oh...fine then. You don’t tell stories but if I can offer you a place

to stay, can you not simply say why you are here? If it is my chanteur, then ignore it. It's just...I cannot tell you the last time that any shred of royalty passed through these parts..."

"I fought in battle and was nearly killed," Henry interrupted.

Upon saying this, Henry returned to stoically eying the shadow of the busy-bodied bartender, the one man to quench his woods-long thirst.

"Oh... I'm sorry...?" Shaun stated rather forewarn.

"Listen son, my stories are not some mere lullaby. Iron laid inches from my spine at the moment I was left. I could have rallied on if I was fighting anyone else. Anyone else... besides my friend," Henry enraged.

Shaun responded, "Your friend tried to kill you?"

"He did more than try..."

"Oh....I did not realize..." Shaun said in a heated fluster.

Henry, retracting his ungodly nerves, followed, "Ah, I do not blame you. You would not have known what was to come such as I."

"Fine. If I tell you, listen and take heed. Nothing more. I need a drink before I think," Henry conceded, tending to his pounding headache.

"So be it. Lead on...Henry," Shaun rather nervously conceded.

Henry took a slight breath as he recounted his ominous day on the battlefield.

He, deeply soft spoken, began, "I stood on a hilltop patterned with pillowing rainfall. In my travels, I was accompanied by the lance fournie amongst various swordsmen having returned from the Western border. As my men and I marched our way towards the faroff opposition, we continued to feel the unrelenting pelents of dew, clinging forcefully to the metallic finish on our armors. It did not take long for bodies to fall on both sides once the battle began. Arms freed. Heads and hearts bleed. It was a brutal sight but still familiar. Years of fighting teaches you how to see in order to unsee. Instead of cowering, I ventured forth, fighting for all my brothers. Those left standing. Those left behind. And, those left

unfound, such was the case for my...brother in battle, Richard Hermarlac, who had disappeared sometime since our journey's beginning."

After lingering over the bartender's whereabouts, he continued, "While swords fell in the dozens, mine wavered swiftly through hoards of men. Some of them appeared to have been recruited without thorough training. They fluttered their swords with such anger and ilk without rigour and restraint. I eventually locked eyes with their main swordsman, standing amongst the newly dead from my garrison. I took his lead as a challenge to my life and honour. And his fighting was quite unmatched...in its sheer blasphemy. The officer honed in on the insignificant gaps in my armor from the kneecaps, following with a rapid strike in my back as my knees hit the barreled earth. Hearing an echoing, snarky laugh, I finally saw the opponent's face freed from his pointed helmet. Amidst all the searches, I stared Hermarlac in the face as his dagger carved its way towards my bone. I... still remember his grin..."

Shaun eased his voice back into the conversation as he reassured, "Henry, I know that it helps not, but I am sorry. Do you know where you will go...now that the kingdom is...?"

"For now, lad...I look to get my thick drink and then I will see about reclaiming my legion's honour," Henry followed with a wisped breath.

"I do not mean to pry but I would imagine your 'friend' will not let you back into this kingdom with such open arms. Does he even know that you still live?"

"No but I hope to use that on him. And yet, I do see an attack on his mind will have to go further than that."

Shaun longingly pondered, "Such passion I will never truly comprehend. How do you knights all muster so much courage? Is there truly any good left in this world with the horrors you and your men constantly endure?"

"Is there good left?" The knight retorted, "I looked into the eyes of an honourable soldier that I called my brother since this bloody war

amongst the kingdoms began. Years of aiding townsfolk, liberating regions from toil, and riding our steeds across these lands, yet good deeds were never going to be enough for any man. I would have not fathomed that he among all would join that lead. And yet, I know that war often toils the mind for a reason. For misguided tension. Richard longed for a 'better' life jostled amidst feuding power and ill riches and HE TOOK IT!"

From Henry's bellowing howl, the entire tavern took wind of the stormful rage that boomed through the tavern's bowels. Realizing his cover once more, the knight turned his eye back at the stablehand's fresh, ghastly gaze.

He concluded his tale with firm judgment. "That day, I saw him. I saw a coward. One more inspired to carry a puny dagger rather than face the honour that resides within a nobleman's blade. I saw him look into my frightened eyes whilst his weapon pulled into the remainder of my life's joy, tearing it from shred to shred. From skin to bone. Make no mistake that he reveled at my pain with his cowardice. He took my minimal supplies from my parcel, returning to his borrowed ivory tower, filling himself with the illusion of eternal wealth and prosperity. He will surely be no ruler and neither was he a decent conqueror for that matter. I not only trusted that man, for I dared to bestow my honour to him. He would not be a knight without my words, my actions. Now, I know that his lies within the gleam of a measly coin. I believe there is hope left in this world, Shaun. Though, since that day, I grasp myself tightly to the belief to show him and others of his vile ilk that immortality does not come in wealth but through fellowship."

"Well again, I am sorry if I forced you too much into telling, but you are welcome to stay near the stable, if you still require."

"Oh, do not bother yourself over my pities, Shaun. With your persuasion, I am sure you would have found out sooner or later. I only thank you for your hospitality. I could use the place to stay for now, but I hope that I am not intruding. There is enough of that going around. You know...perhaps I can stay in the stables if it would help..."

“Oh, that will not be... possible,” Shaun interrupted.

“Is it full as it is?”

“Not necessarily...there is room but...”

“But what, Shaun?”

“There is a somewhat dangerous animal in it.”

“Oh...well, why have you not attempted to scurry it away?”

“It's too big for that and...it is mine.”

“It is yours ?”

“Well, it is my company's...more or less.”

“What kind of creature do you hold?”

“It's...a griffin.”

“A WHAT!” Henry acclaimed, falling past his barstool.

“Keep it down! I thought you craved subtlety.”