



Literary
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This issue of *The Literary Hatchet* is truly a world effort. We have assembled works by writers from five of the six continents. It is heartening to see so much talent and creativity in our submissions. I thank everyone who sent in work to be considered, even if your poetry or short story was not accepted. Please try again.

It is a good day when I can complete a task, as I am sure it is with you as well. But finishing an issue of this magazine elicits from me a more complex emotional response. I am happy for the authors that their work is in the universe for everyone to enjoy. I am glad to be moving forward into a new project and a new issue. But I am also a bit saddened that this labor of love is over for another day—that I will no longer be designing *these* works in *this* issue, carefully and respectfully arranging and typesetting and making a whole out of parts.

If I didn't love publishing as much as authors love writing, I would have retired from this work long ago. I did attempt to get some money momentum through a Kickstarter campaign but, I fear, my eyes were bigger than my stomach—I was seeking too much investment. Lesson learned. But I do want to pay my authors and editors more because they deserve it. Everything is out of pocket now, but please do not think that I am whining or complaining. It is far from it. I just know that in time I can find that magic way to pay people who work and write for me what they deserve, instead of a mere pittance.

So when you see the new Kickstarter campaign (or whatever crowdfunding company I next choose to use), please give what you can. It will make future issues possible and create even more opportunity for writers, like these, to flourish.

Thank you.

Stefani Koorey
www.hatchetonline.com

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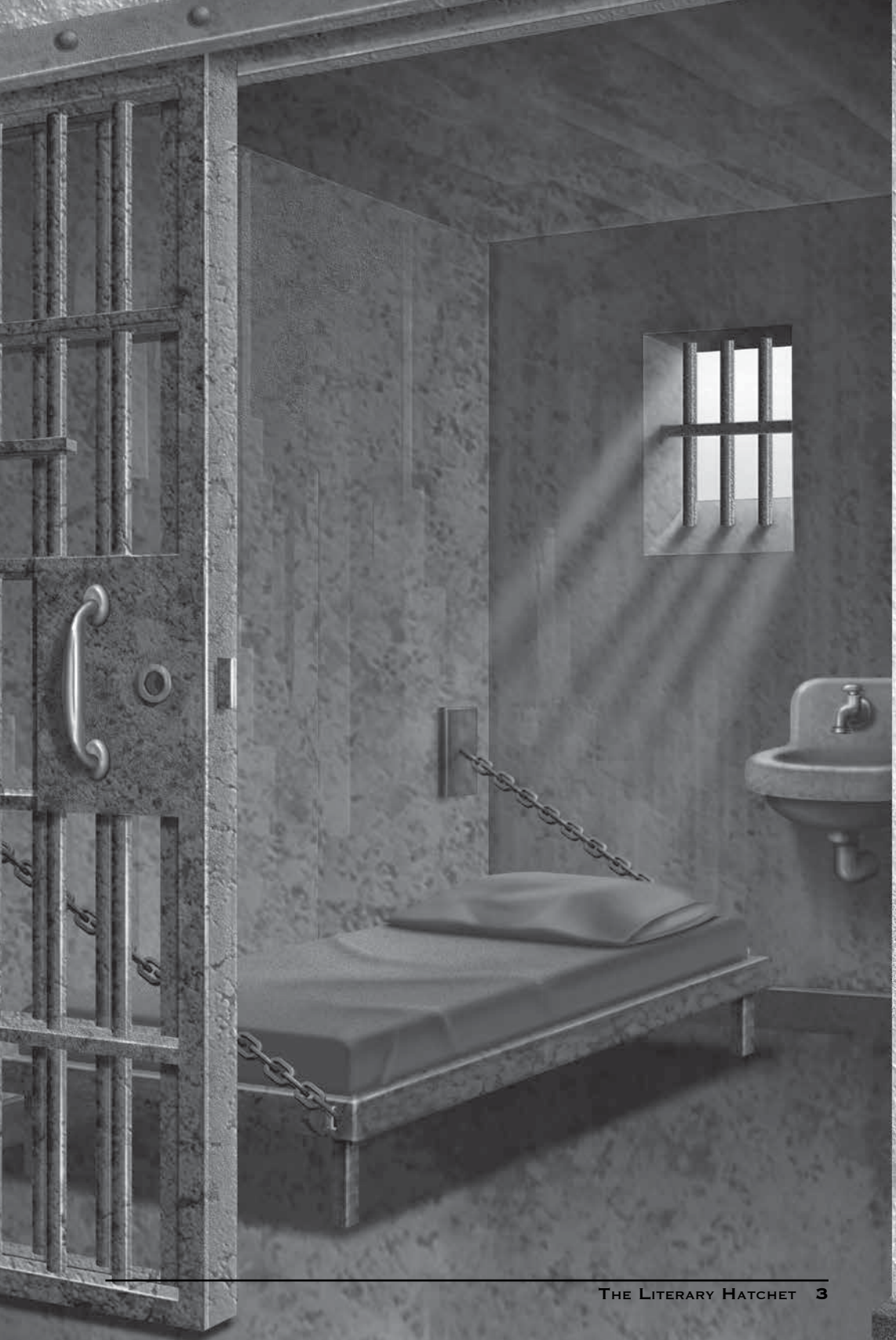


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A Stringless Violin

by

fabayas m v

Emptiness spreads.

He sits on a wooden silence. She lies on a damp mat.

‘Nimisha’, they call her. She looks fair in her layette. She is a moon.

Kovilan and Kotha are in the moonlight now.

Kovilan belongs to a rare class—a coconut palm climber. Coconut grove owners have to wait for weeks to get him.

“He is not here,” Kotha says, when the truth struggles in her mouth. The messenger boy from the land owner goes back in despair. There is no software to read and write in her brain. But we read practical wisdom on her monitor.

Kovilan’s palms transform into a bowl. He takes grey soil and pours into the pit. Neighbours and relatives also make contributions with the soil. A small mound of sand appears amid the crowd. A twig, which is cut from a henna plant, is planted to mark the head, and another the legs. Holy showers wash the mound.

“Wake up, Koviletta. Wake up, please.” Kotha’s words clank near his head. It is early morning—a time when the warm rays kissing the soft dawn under the dew drops.

“What happened?”

“Nimisha is crying. She didn’t sleep at all last night. Do you know that?”

You always sleeps like a buffalo.” Kotha’s feeling is an amalgam of grief and anger.

“What’s the matter?”—the question slips over on the rum stink.

“She has pain in her legs. Fever also. She tells her legs are losing their strength.”

They set off.

The doctor is in the city. Many pale looking figures have been scattered before the doctor’s door. ‘Rupees fifty or hundred’—they are in confusion about the doctor’s fee.

“Apply an ointment on the legs sparingly. Take these pills after the food. Everything will be all right,” the doctor prescribes. They pay him a hundred rupees.

Sunday.

An owner of a coconut grove, which is near Kanoli canal, an ancient canal built by the British, stands holding an umbrella against the sun. Kotha and two other village women get ready to pick up the falling coconuts and carry them in big bamboo baskets. Kovilan climbs up the coconut palms one after another. He works his fingers to the bone. His calloused legs are kept within a ring rope, which is like his life. His intuition checks the ripeness of the coconuts. He cracks jokes, which are falling down from the coconut palm top. Some of his remarks blush the ladies.

Moon is hiding behind the clouds. Polio plucks the strings that move Nimisha’s legs.

Now her legs rest as a stringless violin. She grows along with her mother’s tension and the father’s anxiety.

Kovilan usually climbs upon Today, never upon Yesterday and Tomorrow. His days are green and yellow like the coconut palm leaves. His ways are hackneyed.

Nimisha cannot climb upon life—Kovilan cogitates about his daughter.

Rustic children watch Nimisha, who sits on a wheel-chair in the yard. They smile at her. But it is unwise to take her with them. Legs are important in their games. Polio bursts her bubble. A sad raga is played on the strings of her mind.

Rain drizzles over the Kanoli bank.

“Ma.....Rain.....Rain.....”

Kotha comes out like lightning. She takes Nimisha into the veranda. Then

she darts to the paddy farm in front of her thatched home, where she had laid mango peels to dry on an empty sack. She folds the sack keeping the mango peels inside and runs back into the kitchen.

Nimisha coughs.....coughs.....coughs.... She spits phlegm out. Her mother takes some medicinal powder, which is made of herbs, and rubs it on the scalp of her daughter.

“Don’t worry. It’s due to the climate change,” the father consoles her.

A Sunny afternoon.

Nimisha sits coughing on her wheel-chair in the veranda. A flock of rustic girls passes by, greeting her. She smiles at them. A sweet smile of innocence. But nobody takes her to the rural shrine .She has put on a new frock. As the butterflies on her dress, she also cannot flit to the yard of the shrine. She blinks back her tears.

Ice-cream sellers fly sounding horns to the festival ground on bicycles, a Tamil-speaking woman who sells bangles follow them on foot, two big elephants move dancing and clinking the chains, the mahouts holding poles and sticks accompany them.....

Nimisha’s eyes chase the sights.

She falls into a chasm of desolation. Cough waves shake her lungs again. She doesn’t know that pneumonia is packing her soul. Her fingers move in the rhythmic wind. The clarion does ripple the divine thoughts in her ears.

By the twilight, the drum storm develops again. All the villagers have gathered in front of the shrine.

Few knew Nimisha swooned.

Returning people from the festival ground hear about a bolt from the blue, who stop by Nimisha’s house. The crowd thickens.

A wrinkled yellow man whispers, “Being holy, an apt day it is.”

The wheel-chair withdraws into the dust.

In infinite emptiness, the parents knew her truly.



Bone Fire

Dan names me “Pumpkin,”
and proposes on All Hallow’s Eve,
kneeling on wet leaves at dusk.
My body shivers from cold
and something else. The horror –
I am in love, forever.

He stands, a moist patch spread
over one knee. In the growing darkness
his living arms encircle me.
My chest and shoulders shake. My teeth rattle.
We press our foreheads – skull to skull.
Ghosts swirl, creaking translucent bones.

Crows laugh behind black masks.
Do witches or saints creep out of the ‘tween places?
They circle and read the omens:
Who will live, what will die.
Bony fingers suspend me –
I have always been their puppet.
Bonfire burns my feet.

But this time, love is cloves and cardamom
hot on my tongue, the flesh of apples,
sticky caramel between our lips.
I no longer remain
locked in the soul of a hundred
dead trees. It is time.

“Yes,” scratches from my throat,
a dry seed in October’s wind.
I fall from a brittle branch and land
in a place of wet leaves and warm skin.

by Lyssa Tall Anolik

[short story]

Angry Young Man

by eugene hosey

He was seventeen when his family fell apart. He tried living with his mother and her new husband at first. But he couldn't take seeing this strange man's lust for his mother and so he moved back home to live with his unmarried father; this wouldn't have worked either but for the fact that he saw his dad only for short periods of time. It hadn't been right with his father since he had come home from school one day with the word **FREAK** painted on the side of the car. He would never forget his father's hostile face, the way he had stared him down to a nub, suspicious that the insult was his son's own fault.

He loved his mother, and relatives on his father's side had been talking trash about her since the divorce. Late one night he couldn't get their insults off his mind. He couldn't force their mouths shut, but he could spite them; he could harass them—not in the personal direct way he got harassed at school—but there was an indirect, sly way he could manage it. It occurred to him that he could get at them through the phone. Since his dad worked nights, he had the house to himself. He started with all the numbers he knew by heart; then he used the phone directory. He would silently hold the line until they hung up, and then call again. He called them all repeatedly until they took their receivers off the hook. Then he waited until they put their receivers back on and he started up again. He enjoyed knowing how baffled and ignorant they had to be. He knew they would all be talking about it tomorrow, accusing one another, trying

to figure out who it was. They all deserved this for their gross insensitivity and slander. He intended to do it again and again and again.

This was 1975—before any form of caller ID was on the market. Nor did local phone calls show on routine statements. Getting a call traced was a big deal.

When he was satisfied that he had punished his relatives sufficiently for one night, he decided to call some of his schoolmates. They certainly deserved it as well. The experience of high school society was an anomalous punishment for him. He shrank from his schoolmates, feeling inadequate and threatened. The faces of these people were handsome and beautiful, their features remarkably even and harmoniously arranged, their eyes always smiling with the knowledge of something he was not in on. His face was infantile and ugly, scarred and raw with acne. They wore invisible armor, while he felt naked. Their self-assurance was formidable; he was timid. The boys routinely displayed impressive strength and skills. The girls seemed almost ethereal, above and beyond him.

These strangely confident people invaded his sensitive space with their obnoxious noise, their attack on dignity and privacy and serenity—their ridiculing laughter and mortifying questions the worst of it. Who are you? Why do you have this body, this face? Why are you so ugly? I would kill myself if I were that ugly. What do you have to say for yourself? What is the bizarre look in your eyes? Are you dangerous or are you just a weird little shit? Silent and dignified, he pretended to be impervious to them, giving them the evil eye, while inwardly he burned and grieved. Secretly he admired them in spite of their abuse, believing that if they knew this they would hate him all the more. He would have done anything to win their approval and kindness, but he did not believe this could ever be possible. He felt that to become one of them would be a wonderful transformation. It would be a discovery of happiness that would cure the peculiar pain of his nature—a complex consisting of embarrassing timidity and stifled self-expression. He had not always lived in a world of humiliation—not in the beginning. He remembered early childhood as a world akin to paradise, wherein he expressed himself freely and happily without fear of repercussions.

He looked up the phone numbers of the most popular and hostile of the boys that came to mind. If a parent answered, he would ask to speak to him—Rob, Tony, Mike, Jason, Chuck—as if he were a friend and say nothing when the boy answered. He would hold the line, mute, feeling creepy and inferior, trying to imagine what it would be like to experience a friendly conversation.

Then he started calling people he did not know just for the fun of it. He made up phone numbers using the first three of the seven numbers that comprised all local calls. An angry lady cursed him and said, “I know who you are; I’m not the only one you’ve called tonight.” Another person blew a whistle in his ear. Then again, he was surprised how willing some of them were to talk. One lady explained in a patient, understanding voice how hard she worked every day and how important her rest was to her mental and physical health. He got a short verbal autobiography from a voice groggy with sleepiness. Someone else told him he needed mental help.

When he made what would be his last phone call of the night, the biggest

mistake of his life, a young woman answered and said, "Are you one of his bitches? He's here if you want him." She passed the phone to a man who said, "Hey, who is this? Is this Gloria? Belinda?"

He had a wicked idea. Could he get away with pretending to be one of these bitches? Why not try it? He had a low voice. But he thought he could raise it several octaves, and he did. He raised it and softened it to a whisper: "I'm somebody you don't know, but I've been watching you, wanting you."

"What's your name, baby?" the man said.

"Clarissa."

"That's a beautiful name," he said. "And I know by your voice you're beautiful. Just tell me how we work it out."

"We do it now."

"All right," he said. "Tell me where."

Since this guy was buying it, another idea occurred to him. This phone mischief, conceived in angry resentment, had step by step turned into novel entertainment. Why not take this game beyond phone pranking and see if he could make something dangerous and exciting happen?

In the house next door lived the Bentleys, a couple about his parents' age, and their son Randy. He and Randy had once been friends, and he had slept over at the Bentleys a few times. The oddest thing about this household was that they never locked their doors. They kept their windows and doors open all night during the summer. Their screen doors didn't even have locks on them. They talked about liking the night air. Randy had said, "We're not worried about it. My dad keeps a loaded pistol under his bed. Anyway, have you ever heard of a crime in this neighborhood?" He remembered getting the impression from Mr. Bentley that he prided himself on being unafraid of break-ins. He also remembered noticing that they had only one small window unit for air-conditioning and wondered if Mr. Bentley was cheap about electricity. And now he wondered if the Bentleys had changed their practice or if the front door was wide open this very minute in the middle of the night. They were in the middle of the month of July.

The man on the phone was in earnest. "Tell me what to do, baby," he said.

He explained where this imaginary woman lived. "The front door will be open. Just walk in and go to the bedroom at the end of the hall."

The man had some reservations. "How can I be sure I won't get my head blown off?"

"There's nobody else here. Trust me."

"I'll pull up in front of the house and you come out to my car," he said.

"But I'm already in bed and ready for you."

"I'm on my way."

This is absurd; he's not coming; nobody's this dumb.

He was amazed to see a car stop on the curb in front of the Bentley house ten minutes later while he was watching for it through the window. The driver shut off the engine and headlights. Could it be that a real tragedy was about to ensue? Or would he shortly drive away? The possibilities intrigued him. He kept his eyes on the car for a while, but nobody got out of it. He left the window to urinate.

When he came back the car was still there. A grey sheen from a streetlight lay on the asphalt of the street, but the Bentley yard was deep in shadow from trees and bushes. No more than two minutes passed as he watched for movement. Again to his surprise a tall black figure appeared in the darkness; it hurried away from the house and jumped in the car. Apparently he had missed seeing the man get out. Had the man gone to the door of the house? Whatever had happened had not taken long. The car cranked and pulled away without headlights.

Well, that was sufficient fun for the night, he decided. He was satisfied and in the mood for a nice sleep. He went to bed but was no sooner dropping off than he heard sirens. And blue lights were flashing through the windows. He got up and looked out. Police cars lined the street, and a red-flashing ambulance was stopping in the Bentley driveway. House lights were coming on up and down the street, people walking across their yards. He pulled on his trousers and went out and stood on the porch just as a bunch of paramedics hurried in the house with a stretcher.

He had never seen so many officers in one place. They walked all around with flashlights. One of them, a short stocky guy with a mustache, noticed him standing on the porch and walked up to ask him if he had seen or heard anything. He told him no. The officer asked for his name and whether anyone else was home before he hurried on. He stayed on the porch until the paramedics returned to the ambulance with a body on their stretcher.

He didn't know how bad the trouble had been until his dad got home. Someone had called and informed his dad that Mr. Bentley had been murdered, his throat cut, in his living room. His dad was shaken and angry, and proclaimed that some people were monsters; the one responsible for this senseless brutality should be tortured and killed.

In the days following people could talk of nothing but this utterly baffling crime. Mr. Bentley was known as a friendly, mild-mannered man who spent all his time with his family. No one could imagine an enemy. There was evidence of a scuffle in the front room, Mr. Bentley on the floor, his head in a puddle of blood. It had happened about 1:30 in the morning. The killer had stolen nothing. The victim's wallet and pocket change were on the coffee table. There were no clues. Nothing helpful was gained from any of the neighbors. No one could formulate a completely plausible scenario. Some people thought the wife had to be the killer or at least involved in some way. Mrs. Bentley claimed to be as clueless as everyone else. She had simply found her husband unconscious and bleeding to death on the living room floor. Another theory was that the son had done it; people said they had not got along. But neither the wife nor the son—in fact, no one—was charged. Within a year mother and son had moved out of the house and the case remained a fascinating mystery.

The teenager who had played a lethal prank with a telephone stayed out of school more and more, calling himself in sick with a convincing imitation of his father's voice. He was absent more often than present. When he did go his schoolmates taunted him about the crime. A murder next door to a freak like you can't be a coincidence. What are you guilty of? Are you the killer or a co-

conspirator? He withdrew almost completely into a fantasy world where he was popular and admired. His part in the crime next door did not stick in his conscience at first. Instead, it found a place in his imaginative memory, alongside the stories and movies that had made an impression.

But eventually, not long after Mrs. Bentley and her son moved away, the realization of what he had done surfaced in him one night as he slept. During the first few seconds of waking up, he thought he must have had a nightmare. This happened sometimes. It would take a minute to clear the haze between the dream and the real world, and the horror would vanish. But it did not. This time it was different. It was not a dream that disturbed him. It was a memory.

The reality came like a revelation from somewhere deep inside him, an awakening of increased self-awareness. A sick feeling of remorse arose in his gut and moved through him like poison. The truth was communicating with his conscience; the two were coming into alignment, like they were supposed to be. He had planted a seed of senseless murder. Cruelly he had hoped for tragedy—for kicks. He was as responsible as if he had knowingly plotted and orchestrated the sliced throat of an innocent man resting in his own house. He had no idea why he would do such a thing, or how he had successfully separated and distanced himself from his guilt for so long. But in fact he had managed it, and it had been as though a thick skin had been sown around his heart until now, tonight, during a pernicious but truth-telling sleep, when the threads had come undone. He was looking at proof positive that there was tremendous evil in him that made him a bad person, a belief he had never even considered before in his life.

All the anger in him was redirected into self-loathing. He was nervous, his stomach rotten. He walked room to room, pacing restlessly, looking at the meaningless furniture and the petty objects placed here and put up there with a gaze that felt idiotic on his face. He looked in his own clothes closet and got the distinct impression that these clothes belonged to someone else, someone he could not begin to imagine. He went through the whole house in this mode, everywhere except for his sleeping father's bedroom. Who was this man he called his dad?

Then he began to feel the presence of something sneaky and supernatural, and he was afraid the way he often had been as a small child when terror would suddenly come upon him out of nowhere, for no apparent reason. Twice he thought he heard a voice. At one time he had heard phantom voices, but he thought they had stopped. He used the toilet, careful not to look at the medicine cabinet mirror, afraid of what his face might reveal. He went back to his bedroom and shut the door, his knees shaking.

He wished for numbness and oblivion. His morbid feelings were creating an unfamiliar and alarming form of pain, an ache of clenching oppression everywhere in the physical organism. And he was seized by a maddening desire to get free of his own body. Unable to do this, his overwhelming thought was that he therefore had to do something irrational, and just such a notion popped suddenly into his head. It was based on something he remembered from childhood. He put his naked foot under the bed and tempted spiritual evil. He

said, “I dare the Devil to touch it.” A response came promptly. Something solid and ice-cold pressed the top of his foot. Then he heard a laugh—high-pitched, mischievous and hateful. The sound of the Devil’s voice was razor-sharp and tingly in his ears. He sat on the bed and stared at the leaf print in the carpet as chills washed over his face and head and down his back. He was waiting for the laughter to stop. In a few minutes it did, and after a few more minutes his insides were calmer. He remembered hearing this laughter when he was four or five and would fall down and skin his knees while playing. He had then always assumed it was the Devil, but who knew what it was?

The day passed as he continued to sit. Shadows moved inside and thickened as the evening darkness began its obliterating process. He somehow lost himself in the boredom of the droning silence of the house, and all that intense feeling of the earlier part of the day abated. At this point he didn’t feel much of anything. Of course, he had not forgotten anything either. But those horrible feelings of a torn moral nature now were much like the throbbing pain that finally stops and cannot be truly remembered. His perspective shifted to resentment and he was not so sure about his guilt.

Is it not true that my part in all this is marginal? How can I even know for a fact that the killer was the man I called? Even if he were the man I called, if the killer listened to me and went to the house and walked in—why are the consequences my fault? No one is supposed to be stupid enough to believe what is obviously ridiculous and walk in a stranger’s house looking for sex. No one is supposed to be stupid enough to leave their front door open all night. I never anticipated Bentley’s murder. I have no idea what I expected or wanted. I shouldn’t have made that phone call, of course. But I’m not the killer. I don’t know what number I dialed; I don’t know the guy’s name or address; I could not identify his car; I wouldn’t know him if I saw him. It would not help the police find the killer if I told all I knew.

He heard his father get up and spend some time in the bathroom and the kitchen. He was hoping he wouldn’t knock on his door, and he didn’t. In a few minutes, he heard him leave by the front door and drive away. He was glad. He felt a big emptiness in his stomach, but he was repulsed by the thought of food. He took a shower and put on a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt. The phone rang several times but he didn’t answer it. After a little television, he turned it off and went to bed. He sat back against the pillows and opened a book, but he realized he hadn’t the slightest interest and dropped it to the floor.

Finally he yawned and closed his eyes. He looked inside his head. He saw long corridors with many doors and rooms behind them that opened to other passageways and rooms. He would find a hiding place and lock up this awful secret, effectively hiding it from himself. One day it would be utterly gone. He wasn’t the only one who lived with guilt of a bad deed. Many people housed much worse guilt, such as the killer who had actually cut Mr. Bentley’s throat.

He was on the verge of sleep when something jarred him awake. It was his conscience again, aroused and stabbing him with a resurgence of the same remorse that had attacked him this morning. He got up and went to the

bathroom, not to use the toilet, but this time to confront the mirror. That ugly, round face, red and blue with light sprays of pimples on the cheeks and beady eyes, stared at him dumbly. He could not relate to it or believe that it was truly his own. "Who are you?" he said to it, hating this being in the mirror. "Why do you exist? If it weren't for you the Bentleys would still be living happily next door." He had never had one silly complaint about the Bentley family. Yet he had put an idiotic, lustful killer through a door he had reason to hope would be open so that something terrible and exciting would happen.

Suddenly there was a loud chaotic noise coming from somewhere out in front of the house, a rustling and stumbling about of feet and outbursts of laughter. Through a window he caught sight of several people piling in a vehicle parked on the curb. He recognized them. This was a group of some of the most hateful and good-looking snobs from school, the same group he suspected wrote **FREAK** on his car. While the interior light of their car was on, he recognized the driver, the guy with curly black hair and wire-rimmed glasses, one of the cruelest. He was shocked at their boldness, coming to his house like this. It didn't look like they had left anything or done anything to the yard, but it was dark. What were they up to? He was terrified to imagine what would come next. He sat up all night. He thought about the razor blades and sedatives in the medicine cabinet and wondered what it would take to make him use them.

His dad usually got home just as the sun topped the grey roof across the street. He could see it through the window from his bed. He heard the car pull in the driveway, but his dad didn't come right in. He wondered why, and a few minutes later he heard the front door open, and his dad came directly to his room, walked up to him and stared. It was a look he couldn't remember having seen on him before. It was puzzled and sorrowful. He felt a sudden throb of pity for his dad.

"Did you see or hear anything last night? Have you seen the front of the house?"

He shook his head. His heart started pounding and his face burned as he went out to see what he was talking about.

Across the front of the house, from end to end, was the word **KILLER**, spray-painted in red, the letters thick and tall, arrogantly overlapping shutters and windows.

His dad was waiting for him just inside the door, staring at him intensely, morosely. He said, "Do you think this could be the same bunch that wrote on your car? They call you **FREAK** and then they call you **KILLER**? And Bentley is murdered next door? This doesn't make any sense."

His face was hot with shame as he said, "They call me **FREAK** because of my face and **KILLER** because I live next door to the murders. That's all I know."

Later that day his dad began talking about moving. He said he had thought about it when Bentley was killed, and he wished now he had found another house in another town then.



Cinquains: Bits of Stained Glass

I walk
down the hallway,
to the stairwell, up the
staircase: beams of sunlight stream
through
stained glass.

Dazzling:
metal oxides,
sand transformed by fire,
bring forth Favrile iridescent
stained glass.

Painter,
spectacular
glassmaker, vase maker:
L.C.Tiffany, master of
stained glass.

Disclosed:
Clara Driscoll,
hidden creative force
behind prized Tiffany lamps of
stained glass.

Turning
kaleidoscopes
fracture arcs of rainbow
into jeweled shards of tumbling
stained glass.

Prayer plants
fold their streaked leaves
at the feet of angels
etched in arched windows of
antique
stained glass.

The space
between cusps in
ornamental Gothic
window tracery is graced with
stained glass.


In mosques,
churches, chapels
monasteries and temples,
we seek God through the beauty of
stained glass.

Zurich:
Chagall's
thirty-foot tall windows
of biblical depictions in
stained glass.

Kaddish:
In the chapel
Twelve Tribes of Israel
comfort me in multicolored
stained glass.

by Ada Jill Schneider

Apple Hollow



Once upon a midnight jaunt,
through autumn forests dreary,
the cutting wind just like a razor,
cold and cruel and dead.
I wrapped my shawl around my torso,
and carried further on,
deeper on, into the black,
that smothered every breath.

The thing that lives in Apple Hollow,
took my daughter, Belle,
and planted vile seed in her,
and God knows what he did.

I wrapped my shawl around my shoulders,
and as I carried on,
I heard a scraping noise nearby,
coming from a cave.

I should have brought the constable,
or just a hand or two,
to help me fight that vile thing,
that thing that stole my Belle.
But when I came up to the cave,
and peered my head inside,
and saw the thing with sharpened blades,
and saw my Belle was dead...

Her garments wrapped around her ankles,
her thighs, so bruised and swollen,
my rage erupted on the thing,
but I was not enough.

Now here I lie, another victim,
of this vile thing.
He'll kill me soon, an act of mercy,
for his seed is now in me.

by Stephen D. Nadaud II

Precipitate Aptitude

He plays at being
her masterpiece. Splayed
across the wall. [He is] Suspended
by shackles and a steeled desire
to please. He remains:
Unfinished. Such a wondrous word.
Ripe with potential (Her favorite
ideal to break). In a breath,
the first cut is made.
Exquisitely curving
from neck to hip. He knows

his part in this anguish is silence,

and obediently stifles the lamentation
tracking her lips over
their rubied path. Home
is the delusion. He clings to
her touch. Dependence mutating
[through] wanting. She is
the flawless frame for his faltering
existence. Giving. Given. Gone.

The night is as lost as they are.

Horrified they burrow deeper
into each other's nightmare[d embodiment].
In attempt to obliterate the fate
-ful click of a switch, a key,
or hesitation

's inaugural breath.

by AJ Huffman

[short story]

Her Ticket to Heaven

by Rob White

After three months of marriage, Sebastian was beginning to weary of her outside the bedroom. Their courtship had amounted to his displaying his wealth and showing her what a life of privilege she would have if she accepted. Not much choice, he thought, considering her days spent fending off the advances of male customers in that third-rate bistro. That's how Sebastian saw the transaction: *my gold for your pretty face, my manor house in Greenwich for your double-D's, and that lovely heart-shaped ass of yours in exchange for being my society wife*. Every male in the place tracked her gorgeous bottom and that was the moment he decided to possess her.

She signed the pre-nup with barely a glance. She would be his for the duration. At the first sign of a slovenly look, he'd dump her and move on. She wouldn't be around long enough to get a wrinkle.

The truth was simple enough even if she couldn't recognize it: he lived to control and if he could inflict pain along the way, so much the better. When, as a boy, he tortured his neighbors' cats, he'd look their owners in the face and say, "No, sir, I haven't seen Puffy or Taffy or Hercules all day." He always understood he had no conscience, no empathy, no feeling whatsoever for people's pain. Sebastian overheard one of the senior traders from Goldman Sachs at Elaine's one night. The guy had just sold one of those toxic mortgage bundles to an unsuspecting client and he was bragging to a couple colleagues over drinks: *I ripped his face off*. Being a textbook psychopath had its advantages in a Wall Street career.

His trophy wife be damned. He needed that tingle of pleasure from pain like a fiend needs heroin. He intended to feed those cats right up to cold weather and then

watch them come up from the bank with hunger big in their eyes. He would go out there to enjoy the sight of them wasting away, one by one—carrying a bowl of meat scraps for them to sniff—and then he'd toss the entire contents off the bank while they whirled like dervishes at his feet. Their frenzied mewling as sweet in his ears as a Bach sonata.

He trotted to the edge of his property line with a bowl filled to the brim with ground-up sausage he had ordered the cook to prepare. They were watching from the underbrush. No alpha male emerged to drive off the others so he had watched their numbers grow through the summer from a lone tom with a torn ear to ten. His Greenwich community had more hedge-fund managers than teachers yet he marveled at these castoffs. It took no time at all for an abandoned pet to become feral.

He watched them charge the bowl, tumbling over one another and scrambling for the shreds of meat. Sebastian laughed. "Like circus clowns tumbling from a Volkswagen," he thought, urging them on to the feast.

By Halloween the morning air would be chilled and the Atlantic winds would cut to the bone.

He was a little concerned about the subsidence out here, and he made a mental note to see about adding more fill. He had a beautiful, unobstructed view of the sunsets, and he didn't want that spoiled by any creeping erosion. The grass line behind him was manicured to a precise height every week by his landscaper.

Soon the caterwauling of hungry bellies began. Out of the corner of his eye, he detected a squirming mass of wet black fur. A bunch of kittens had been born to a mother cat overnight; her teats were being suckled by the newborns. Her green-gold eyes were boring into his looking for pity.

Sebastian thought, "Sorry, Mom, no pity here."

He kicked his foot into the knee-high scrub. *A little extra treat to begin the morning right*, he thought. Growing up in nearby Cos Cob, his favorite fantasies were to be the infamous Angel of Death of Auschwitz. He had clubbed so many pets by his fourteenth year that his parents made him see a shrink—a wog with a shiny brown face who hissed banalities until his parents sent him off to his private boarding school.

"Ah, this'll do just fine," he said aloud, reaching down to pick up a fallen limb of decent size. The other cats had finished by now and were licking chops or had scattered back into the underbrush. He didn't mind witnesses to his deeds as long as they were dumb animals.

"Slowly, slowly, catchee, monkey," he whispered to himself approaching the mother still lying on her side while the swirling babies fed.

Sebastian raised his club. Looking to gain a better angle to deliver the blow, he stepped toward the edge and reared back to gain even a bit more torque like a batter about to launch into a fastball.

Instead, something else happened. His left ankle tangled in the dockweed and buckled; in over-correcting, he lost his balance.

Time slowed to an agonizing, fractured split-second; he tried to counteract gravity's tug by clutching at the slippery grass and holding himself to the edge by his fingers. But he knew, with a sad certainty in every cell of his body, that it wasn't going to work. Some giant hand had reached out of the sky and was pushing him down,

down—

Down in a dizzying blur of flailing arms and limbs akimbo. It was almost a sheer drop with little to break his fall except outcrops of granite. Blows hammered his back, shoulder, and neck as if he were being beaten on the way down through a gauntlet at precise intervals. Before he could cry out from one, another landed somewhere else on his body.

When he opened his eyes to this new world of pain, he was gagging on some blood in his throat. One eye was ripped open and he was barely able to see. The sun was blinding him. Insects chirred near his head. He lay in a contortion of arms and limbs. Pain shot up him as if a live wire was lashed to his spine. It gathered into a white-hot ball at the base of his spinal cord. One arm at a time, then one leg at a time, Sebastian repositioned himself and promptly fainted from the effort.

When he awoke again, it was still impossible to see much. He was hidden in a thick patch of saw-grass. The sun was at a higher angle. He smelled swamp muck nearby and caught a frilly waving of cattail fronds out of the corner of his good eye.

It's odd, I don't feel as much pain now. He tried to move an arm to wipe blood off his face when he realized his arm didn't work. He figured it was broken and hoped he would have not have to look at a bone sticking through skin, a sight he knew well from his teen years and so many little smashed bodies.

She'll come out looking for me any second.

After the second day, he had fewer lucid intervals. His brain helped him out by an occasional squirt of enzyme from the amygdala and so he passed from one hallucination to another in this timeless fashion. He saw himself steering his yacht toward the sunset, waves curling beneath his speeding prow; then the red ball of sun would grow into a hideous red giant expanding across the entire sky from one horizon to the other. Before he was consumed in fire, another delusion would take over; he was in a taxi riding the familiar streets of the upper Eastside. That, too, would dissolve into a crazy ride as the driver went amok—some garlicky foreigner with blackened teeth gabbling madly in dialect—flooring the cab at insane speeds. Sebastian knew he was about to be mangled by buckled steel in the back seat or ejected through a plate-glass window. Each vision worse than the one before it, each ending more terrifying.

Blowflies laid eggs in the corners of his eyes, insects devoured every inch of exposed skin, and nocturnal animals probed his body. Sebastian feared the possum nuzzling his haunch intended to core him alive from the anus inward by eating through his intestines. The red eyes of prowling raccoons, lit by moonlight, sent him into his darkest nightmare yet. He was an inmate in a death camp. He stumbled into a room where Dr. Mengele was standing on the stomachs of prone gypsy women, trying to expel their fetuses by stomping in his shiny SS boots on their pregnant bellies. The lab's walls were covered by hundreds of pairs of eyeballs pinned to the walls, tagged and dyed in fluorescent yellow, red, and purple. *I am in hell*, Sebastian thought.

He wasn't found for three full days. He was completely delirious by then, babbling nonsense.

The surgeon told his wife the breaks in his vertebrae were beyond repair. Though bedridden, "with proper care he can live to a ripe old age."

His wife sniffled into her Kleenex and said she would personally see to that.

She hired a retired nurse to attend him. She was half-senile, praying most of the time, muttering litanies to her saints; she folded rosary beads into his unmoving hands. The slop he ate three times a day was pureed sludge, blended in a mixer at his wife's instructions, mostly carrots and beans, until he could barely hold it down without vomiting.

During his dry bath, the nurse abraded his skin as if she were scrubbing a pan, then she pulled and tugged at him to turn him to prevent bed sores. A ventilator taped to a corner of his mouth prevented speech and the emergency surgery that fused his disks made him incapable of the slightest movement or twitch below the neck.

"Gee whiz, darling, I'm so sorry it took so long to find you," she said for the hundredth time. He imagined the mockery on her face. The state police and EquuSearch had sonared every inch of woods in Fairfax County—except for the gully behind his house. They drained ponds and searched streams while he lay rotting behind his house.

"Your lawyer was a sweetie," she said. "He's allowing me full access to your checkbook."

While the old nurse passed gas in the rocker beside him, his wife preened in her Halloween costume from the doorway. She was an iridescent display of colors, spangled in glitter and fish scales. He noticed she was completely nude beneath the paint and pasted-on scales. The look on her face was one he had never seen. "I've got other needs to satisfy, you know," she said in a deeper voice. Her ruby lipstick enhanced the fullness of her lips and the whiteness of her teeth.

"I'm thinking of you, too, dear," she said. "I've had a bed put next door to you. Right next to the wall she said. There's no other furniture in the room but that big old bed. Oh, I forgot. There is one other thing. It's a camera."

Sebastian smelled her perfume before he saw her reflection in the mirror. She adjusted the twin mirrors above his head so that the perfume wafting from her swaying breasts flooded his nostrils.

"It's the best resolution of pixels money can buy, the man said. You'll be able to hear it, too. Every syllable will come through in five-point-one Dolby stereo. You'll love it," she chirped. At the door, she touched her lips and blew him a kiss. "But not nearly as much as I will."

Then she was gone, the excruciating scent of her perfume piercing him like a knife tickling bone, nauseating him. He heard a snort, and the scuffling of the old nurse lifting her heavy body from the chair. She jammed a coarse cloth into his eye sockets to wipe away tears. What kind of tears Sebastian himself could not have said.

"There, there," the old witch crooned above him, her breath washing over his face in a putrid vapor. "You're my own sweet boy, my shiny ticket to heaven."



w e b

by Rick McQuiston

Luke reached up a shaking hand and felt for the knot on his forehead. It only took him a few seconds to find it. He gasped at its size and how tender it was.

A lone figure materialized out of the darkness and handed him something. “I think you’ll need these.”

Luke blinked a dozen times to clear his foggy vision. He took the glasses and put them on. Instantly, the figure came into focus.

Louise sat down next to the bed. “You gave me a scare there, Luke.” She brushed aside her long black hair. A few strands refused to stay off her pretty face.

Luke sat up in bed. “You know, when we bought this old place, I had no idea that it would fight back.”

“Oh, you’re just being silly,” Louise said softly. She held Luke’s hand, gently caressing his palm with her thumb. “It’s just an old house. It has a lot of character. That’s one of the things we liked about it, remember?”

“Yeah, I remember. I just didn’t know it would be so painful.”

“Very funny. What happened down there anyway?”

Luke saw a damp washcloth next to the bed and carefully laid it on the egg-sized bump on his head. “I don’t know exactly. One minute I was walking down to the cellar with some boxes of vegetables, and the next minute I was sprawled out on the floor. Maybe I didn’t see a board in the ceiling or something.”

Louise stood up. “When I found you, you were mumbling something about a web. And I found the boxes, but they were empty.”

“A web, really?”

“Really.”

“All right, if you say so.”

Louise nodded thoughtfully. She wished she could stay with her husband, but she had to go to work. “Well, Honey, I have to get going. Now I want you to get some rest.”

Luke smiled and closed his eyes.

“Good. I’ll be back by seven, okay? Love you.”

“Love you too.”



The cellar was dark and smelled musty. The steps wound away from the top floor like frightened children escaping a stranger's grasp. A solitary light bulb, unlit and dust-covered, hung from a single wire at the base of the stairway.

Luke stood in the doorway. He gazed down at the lower level of his new house and shuddered. As a kid, he had a bad experience in a cellar once: the door locked behind him and he was trapped for over an hour.

When he ventured down into the cellar earlier, he was so busy unpacking he didn't give it a second thought. But after he passed out it brought back those old childhood fears again.

What did he hit his head on? Was it really a low rafter like he was trying to convince himself of? Or was it what he vaguely remembered: some type of web? And furthermore, what happened to the vegetables?

"Luke, you're an adult now. You have to behave like one." He began to step down into the cellar. "You just bumped your head on a board." The steps creaked and groaned under his weight. "Just a board."

Luke never saw it coming. The pencil-thin strand was stretched across the foot of the stairs, from one support beam to another. There was no slack in it. It was so taut it could've cut through a slab of cheese.

Luke fell to the floor, and hovered between blacking out and a fuzzy awareness of his surroundings. His forehead where the strand hit sported a deep-red furrow. Blood seeped from the wound.

Time slowed, refusing to allow itself to be measured accurately. The room distorted. Light traded places with darkness, and then back again. And a pair of eyes, blood-red and diagonally elliptical, emerged from the dust-coated rafters.

Luke watched helplessly as the gigantic spider lowered its massive bulk to the cellar's floor. It was wedged in between the rafter boards so effectively it was nearly invisible; its deep brown hide meshed in perfectly with its surroundings; its foot-long fangs clicked against one another.

It was hungry; the vegetables it had eaten hardly satisfied its appetite. Now it had overcome its initial fear of the creature that had been carrying them. Now it was ready for a real meal.

The spider scrambled over and crouched above Luke. Its bloated abdomen pinned him to the ground. It reached up and effectively snipped its web strand, rolling it into a tight ball which it tossed out of the way.

Luke looked up at the underside of the beast. If he could've screamed, he would have done so like never before.

He never saw the fangs coming.

Louise pulled the door shut behind her and immediately noticed how quiet the house was. The ticking of a clock on the wall sounded like a jackhammer in church. She set her purse down and slipped off her shoes.

"Luke? I'm home. Luke?"

No answer. Only silence filled the house.

As she walked toward the kitchen, quietly scolding herself for being so paranoid,

Louise noticed the cellar door was open.

No, it wasn't just open, it was damaged. The whole framework looked as if something too big to fit forced its way past it, pushing the jam boards out in the process. The door itself hung precariously at a downward angle toward the steps.

"Luke? Are you down there?"

Still no reply.

Louise reached in and flipped the light switch on. Instantly, the light at the foot of the stairs came on. She screamed when she saw the sucked-dry husk of her husband.

All she could think about was getting out of the house. She turned and sprinted down the hallway, bumping into the walls as she went. A framed photograph of her and Luke on their honeymoon crashed to the floor. An antique lamp toppled from its base on a small table.

"I got to get my cell phone! No, get out of the house! I'll need my car keys! No... my purse! I have to get out of the house!"

The front door loomed in front of Louise. She stumbled toward it, all the while trying her best to block out the image of Luke's body.

The strand of web cut so deeply into her stomach it knocked the breath out of her. She wound up flat on the floor of the hallway, not more than four feet from the front door.

Gasping for breath, Louise watched as the giant spider crammed its massive bulk through the archway from the kitchen. It was able to shift its exoskeleton, allowing it to approach its prey with relative ease.

The last thought Louise had was that she hated spiders.

The mail truck rolled down the long dirt driveway. Annie held the day's mail in her hand. She eyed the mailbox on its wooden pole near the entrance to the house, and was about to come to a stop next to it when something caught her attention, something that told her to call the police.

The front door of the house was smashed open. It looked as if something big had forced its way through the opening. Splinters of wood were scattered in all directions.

Annie fumbled for her cell phone, but was knocked forward when the mail truck suddenly hit something. It bobbed up and down a few times, dangling off the ground. The strand of web had cut right through the top of the truck, holding it fast.

Annie rubbed her eyes as she tried to orient herself. Her forehead was bleeding and her wrist hurt. She looked up and noticed the windshield was cracked.

And through the cracked glass she saw the enormous spider lumbering toward her.



[poetry]

medea in love

I'm with you, baby.
I've gone off the deep end. I've fallen off the wagon. I'm over the moon.
Head over heels for you.
I sigh: you hung the moon.

Eat this meal I made for you.
Please. Now.

You are my sunshine;
you are my shooting star, my black hole;
my gold, my diamond, my silver, my goods, my bads, my everything.
My purple, my crimson, my turquoise, my coral.
My quarrel, my victory.
My alpha dog, my gamma rays, my omega point.

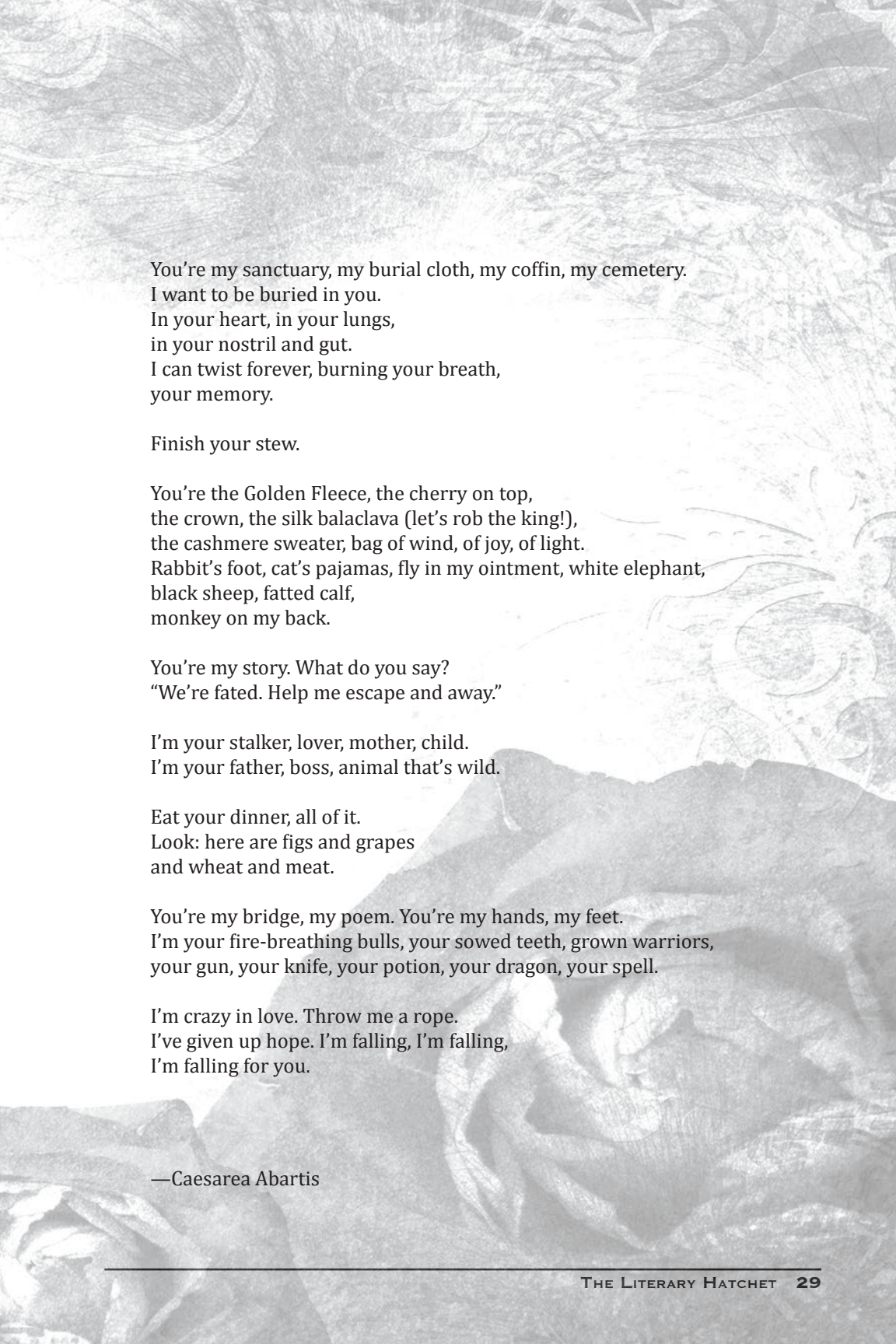
You take my breath away.
My turn to take yours.

You're my sugar, my salt, my fish, my coffee, my wine.
Here, eat this apple.
Here, eat this stew.
It's delicious. I made it for you.

You're my weakness, my dumbness, my sickness, my cancer.
You're my ship, my country,
my New World, my continent.
My scarf, my coat, my shoes,
my earth, my dirt, my cosmos,
my everything.

You're my Shakespeare, my Donne, my overdone,
my Churchill, my church, my hill, my over the hill,
my earthquake, my aftershock,
my tsunami.

My Van Gogh, let's go.
My pine tree.
I'm your *Argo*, your *Mayflower*, your *Queen Elizabeth*,
your *Titanic*.



You're my sanctuary, my burial cloth, my coffin, my cemetery.
I want to be buried in you.
In your heart, in your lungs,
in your nostril and gut.
I can twist forever, burning your breath,
your memory.

Finish your stew.

You're the Golden Fleece, the cherry on top,
the crown, the silk balaclava (let's rob the king!),
the cashmere sweater, bag of wind, of joy, of light.
Rabbit's foot, cat's pajamas, fly in my ointment, white elephant,
black sheep, fatted calf,
monkey on my back.

You're my story. What do you say?
"We're fated. Help me escape and away."

I'm your stalker, lover, mother, child.
I'm your father, boss, animal that's wild.

Eat your dinner, all of it.
Look: here are figs and grapes
and wheat and meat.

You're my bridge, my poem. You're my hands, my feet.
I'm your fire-breathing bulls, your sowed teeth, grown warriors,
your gun, your knife, your potion, your dragon, your spell.

I'm crazy in love. Throw me a rope.
I've given up hope. I'm falling, I'm falling,
I'm falling for you.

—Caesarea Abartis

the spiritualist

—zelie guerin

I gather myself collectively
even as I make my escape. The
land sees me, beginning with
the smallest of creatures and
rock formations, to the largest,
increasing progressively in
surface, secured by time.

At the summit the stones show
a gentle curvature, like the
marbleized wings of a grey and
black bird. As a child I stood
here, pretending to be buoyed
upward, suspended by the autumn
air.

Today, my shoulders tremble,
and it is hard work to gaze
at the sun and cleave the air,
but I can still hear the sounds
of the nymphs who dwell in the
grottos, and my soul gives way
to chase them without fear.

These Dryads are my partners
in dance, from the night's magick
and solitude to the daylight's
masterly manner, a regal symbol
of the universe, received,
and rewarded by the goddess. Here,
hand over hand, branch over branch,

of stormy teeth and claws in laden
fields of wood they dwell, time
charged by their power. When my spirit
is serene like this and the approach
of twilight is imminent, I too become
enchanted, gilded to the native fields,
out of sight, within a fleeting moment.

~
I've become the dragonfly who dwells
here, petrified in ice, set in a bed
of clear rock crystals; to the woods
I entreat my soul, promote my refuge,
secure my dignity. My story is one
of metamorphosis.

There are branches that are my sheltered
nook in fields where shape and color
labyrinth to cliffs overlooking the sea;
and what rambles on the shores are the
mutual salutations of maidens, monsters,
sea animals, gods, goddesses, and water-nymphs.

The deities speak to me and I have learned
the power of incantations, sorted through
potent herbs, experienced nature and all
consciousness. I am the poet, with poppy
juice in the milk of her breasts. I am
the spiritist, who walks with the dead,
out of the reach of evening stars.

~

Visibility is bad today. The fog rolls
in and the woods blend with it in
disguise. It pretends to siege with
abandon, a portion of this land, as
if it were subduing it with force,
forgetting that there is prosperity
in hidden things, regeneration

in this wooden Trojan horse. When I
roam here my chief objective is
curiosity. I am open to the smells,
of blood sunk into deep earth, and
the hyacinth as it springs up awaiting
the bee. Here, I take my refuge with
the spirits who feast while others sleep.

Here, I am awakened with the gift of
prophesy. This is where superstition
originates, engendered by decaying
flesh that is renewed and restored into
lyre; and I can hear their sad, murmuring
symphonies. Under these conditions I offer
my predictions,

in the way of ye old traditions, that unite
in the threads of life. Here, in these
realms of silence, of created and uncreated
things that fill their term of life
with abodes of terror where the fog lifts
and falls through passages dark and steep,
I sense the darkness of the moon.

ghost sailor

BY CAESAREA ABARTIS

Twilight had become full dark hours ago and the autumn wind prowled among the skyscrapers. When Elaine stared through the window, she saw the full moon smudged by wisps of cloud, her own face floating in front of it. She waited for the ghost. She stumbled back to her table and drank her wine. She held the stem of the gilt-edged glass tightly. She knew these were only the delusions of civilization: crystal on lace cloth, pearls around her neck. She noticed the smell of wet wool and felt a chill along her spine. The light from the kitchen leaked across the floor of her studio apartment. The ghost sailor's voice cut her heart. "Farewell and adieu to you, fair Spanish ladies," he sang, "Farewell and adieu to you, ladies of Spain. . . ." His tenor voice sounded like Danny's from many years ago. Goosebumps rose on her arms. She had finished her late dinner and was drinking her fourth glass of burgundy when the ghost appeared and begged her to free him. The wine glass tipped and spilled on her grandmother's lace tablecloth. The stain spread into a flapping red sail and then a curved boat. Some of it spilled on her lap.

The sailor asked her to forgive him for abandoning her. "I treated you like a trollop. You should be the wife of a prince, but you're waiting for a common sailor. Forgive me, Barbry, forgive me and I won't have to visit you next year."

She swallowed her breath when she heard his promise. The sailor had visited her twelve times in the last twelve years. "My name is Elaine. I'm not Barbara." Her Danny was eighteen when he died, but his ghost never visited her, never blamed her. Danny had filled his pockets with rocks and walked into the sea near where the two of them used to stroll. His note said, "You can be so much better. I forgive you." She had broken her promise to him.

The sailor wrung his hands. Tears ran down his cheeks. "My mother raised me right, but I took to drink. I had a good family, and look what I am."

Earlier that evening, Elaine read a new edition of Kafka's stories and felt choked by their claustrophobia. She had seduced her boss to keep her job at the publishing house, and now she despised him and, even more, herself. There was a moldy taste in her

mouth, as if she'd bitten into a mushy apple. She thought she could cut this affair off neatly and work hard and well. But Bob wanted to keep seeing her, and then he wanted to leave his wife and marry Elaine. She didn't want him: she just wanted a job. Bob had a paunch and combed his thin reddish hair over his bald spot. His oldest daughter was about Elaine's age. Elaine supposed she should tell Bob the truth and let him beg forgiveness from his family.

Elaine had wanted to be the editor of a line of literary fiction, but she was assigned celebrity memoirs, kiss-and-tell books written in simple sentences. ("Marilyn was an unhappy child. Marilyn was an unhappy teenager. Now Marilyn was an unhappy woman.")

She felt the sailor's cold hand on her wrist. She pulled it away and saw his fingers' marks around her wrist like a chain.

"How did you die?" she asked the ghost, though she knew and her voice shook. She wanted him to reply he was dead. That way she was reassured he could not hurt her.

"Our ship sank." He pointed toward her necklace and sneered. "We were carrying madeira and jewels. I told you that many times."

"Will you be visiting me every year?" Her heart pounded.

"Until you forgive me and my soul gains peace."

"I forgive you. I forgive you." Her voice sounded small to her, like paper wrinkling and tearing.

"Then come with me." He leaned toward her and his shirt smelled like a sour dishcloth. "It has to be of your own free will."

She felt chilled again, as if she swam in cold, thick water. "I'm only thirty. I can't die yet." The breath strangled in her throat.

"People younger than you die every day." His voice was murky and resentful. "I was eighteen."

"No." She told herself not to be afraid but she stepped backward. She stumbled against the bookshelves. Her vision doubled and wavered. Her eye fell on a framed photograph of herself with her grandmother, who smiled proudly at her.

"Perhaps another maiden will come with me. Then you'll miss me. I promise you'll miss me."

"Go find your Barbry." She moved sideways and when she turned toward the kitchen, he was at the opposite end.

He faded and reappeared in front of her. "I'll see you in hell, Barbry." He flicked his fingers at her, and red drops shone on her blouse. Blood or wine? She brushed at them, accidentally touching the pearls that her grandmother left her. Was it Cleopatra who dissolved a pearl in wine? Would these pearls now be scarred? Her grandmother told her when Elaine was a child to be good. Her grandmother braided her hair and promised her a lovely life and sang that same sea shanty in her low voice. "I'll see you in hell, Barbry," he repeated.

People were always wanting her to be something different: Bob wanted her to be his wife, the sailor wanted her to be Barbry, Danny wanted her to be better.

A church clock chimed midnight, and the sailor disappeared, like fog blown away. "My name is Elaine," she called after him. "Elaine."

She poured a glass of wine and heard an ambulance blaring its horn. Someone somewhere was dying.



Taste of Montana

by David Massengill

From an article in *The New York Times*:

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has reported that the death toll from the redbug infestation is now in the hundreds. The agency has confirmed that physical contact with one of the insects can be fatal, although researchers are still uncertain about the components of the redbug toxin. Homeland Security has established a quarantine zone spanning from eastern Idaho to western Montana, where the first fatalities occurred.

Sherilyn wiped her sweaty palms on her red skirt and knocked on the door of Room 503. The 24-year-old wished she had a mirror to check that her lips hadn't lost their gloss and the breeze outside the hotel hadn't tousled her raven-black hair. She was relieved to see she still showed just enough cleavage beneath her denim jacket. She smiled smartly when the door opened.

"Now this is what I call room service," Theo said. He gave a naughty grin and opened the door all the way. With his shaved head, his square jaw, and the white robe that displayed his bulging calves, he resembled a young martial arts champion rather than a 40-year-old government IT worker. "Remind me to thank the hotel."

"This one doesn't compete with the one we stayed at in Manhattan," Sherilyn said. She immediately blushed and added, "But this is the best hotel in town."

She didn't want to sound ungrateful. After all, Theo had come all the way to her home state of Montana. Following their first meeting on www.dateacrossamerica.com and dozens of online chats, they'd rendezvous'd in major cities where Theo had business engagements: New York (twice), Los Angeles (once), and Miami (once). Theo had kindly paid for her airfare and the hotel rooms—including the separate room she had

insisted on for their first encounter. Sherilyn was stunned when Theo called her last week and said, “I’ve booked my trip to Missoula. I can’t wait to see the home turf of my Montana beauty.”

Of course, he was also here because of work.

“Did you already meet with that computer science professor?” Sherilyn asked after Theo pulled her inside the room and they kissed wetly.

Theo took her purse and dropped it on the floor. He slid a hand up the back of her shirt. “I’m talking to him in an hour,” he said, unfastening her bra. “But you and I can accomplish a lot before that time, don’t you think? And then we’ll continue our fun afterwards.”

Sherilyn felt the ecstasy that came whenever Theo bit her earlobe and tugged it ever so gently with his teeth. She slid out of her jacket and unzipped her skirt. His robe was now open and he pressed her against the dresser that held the TV. She was about to lift her shirt when she saw a large jar sitting on the dresser.

Inside were three roach-like insects. Beneath their thin, brownish wings were gleaming, red bodies that looked almost metallic. They clung to the sides of the jar with legs covered in tiny hairs.

Sherilyn recoiled from the sight. “What are those?” she asked.

Theo grinned and reached over to tap a finger against the lid of the jar. All three insects scurried to the top of the container as if they were about to receive a meal.

“Those are my finds from the desert outside Dubai. An archaeologist friend of mine took me to the site of a 2,000-year-old graveyard. I got bored looking at bones and stones, but I was intrigued when I found these critters clustered together on one wall. It was like they were sleeping. My friend said he’d never seen this type of bug before. I didn’t have to let airport security or customs see them thanks to the Department of Defense funding my trip.”

Sherilyn watched the insects return to the sides of the jar as Theo brought his hand back to her waist. He pulled her shirt over her head and lifted her so she, too, sat on the dresser.

Sherilyn wasn’t quite ready to return to the foreplay. She asked, “But why would you want those bugs?”

“I collect things,” Theo whispered, his mouth at her ear again. “I travel all over the world for work, and I like to take a little piece of each place I go to. And I’d rather have something alive than not. I’ve gotten orchid bulbs from the Himalayas, a Cape Cobra from South Africa, white seahorses from Japan.” Theo slipped a hand inside her underwear.

Sherilyn was breathing heavily again, but her thoughts kept her from fully being in her body as Theo took her on the dresser. She imagined quitting her monotonous little job at Piece of Cake Bakery and telling her boss she was relocating to a much bigger city—maybe even New York. She heard herself informing her sister and her sister’s husband she was moving out of their house because “the jetsetter” truly loved her and this wasn’t just an online sex thing. She questioned whether she should ask Theo if he would like to meet her mom.

Just when Theo was making that grunting sound he always made before climaxing, Sherilyn noticed that all three bugs pressed their bodies against the glass that was closest to the couple. Disturbed by the voyeurs, she used one hand to toss her shirt on top of the jar.

The container tipped over and fell to the carpet with a thud, and Theo immediately separated from Sherilyn.

“That was stupid,” he said, squatting to inspect the jar. He shot her a hideous look she’d never seen him give before. He picked up the container, and Sherilyn watched the insects crawl to where his skin touched the glass.

“It’s not broken,” she said in a weak voice. She folded her arms over her breasts. “They were watching us.”

Theo stood and set the jar next to her on the dresser. He took a deep breath. “You’re worth watching,” he said. He kissed her on the cheek and added, “Sorry, babe. I can’t stand it when people mess with my things. Mind if I take a shower before you? I should get ready for that meeting. We’re going to talk about my upcoming trip to Beijing.”

Sherilyn nodded. She forced a smile to hide her hurt. Once Theo entered the bathroom, she slid off the dresser and collapsed on the king-sized bed. She was careful not to upset Theo’s cell phone and laptop, which also lay on the comforter.

“Order anything you want from room service,” Theo called through the partially closed door.

He makes more money than you ever will, Sherilyn told herself. That reminder distracted her a little from her wounded feelings. *He always tells you you’re the most gorgeous girl in the room. And he speaks Italian, Portuguese, German, and some Russian—unlike your past boyfriends, who just knew how to play video games and watch wrestling and eat Cheetos with their mouths open.*

“What’s the most beautiful spot around here?” Theo called from the bathroom. “I want to go there with you this afternoon.”

And he came to see you in Montana—possibly because he’s truly serious about you.

“Didn’t that novel *The Bridges of Madison County* take place here?” Theo asked before turning on the shower faucet.

Sherilyn hadn’t read the book, but she knew it was set in Iowa. “The Bitterroot River is near here,” she called from the bed. “I know a few pretty beaches.”

“I want us to make love on one of those beaches,” Theo said.

Sherilyn paused before responding. She looked at the jar on the dresser. The insects were now joined together, as if they were mating. She turned away in disgust, and then she forced herself to say it: “My mom lives near one of those beaches.”

She cringed when she didn’t hear Theo reply.

Then came his words: “I’d like to meet your mother—just as long as it’s not while we’re making love.”

Sherilyn laughed loudly. After she heard Theo shut the shower door, she sat up and bounced on the edge of the bed, almost screaming in triumph. Theo truly did see her as more than a fling!

Thanks to Sherilyn’s bouncing, Theo’s cell phone flew off the mattress and landed near the dresser. Sherilyn hurried to retrieve it, nervous that he’d catch her “messing with” another one of his belongings.

When she picked up the phone, she saw the list of contacts displayed on its screen:

Taste of Arizona - DANIELLA

Taste of Florida - STEPHANIE

Taste of Massachusetts - ALYSON

Taste of Montana - SHERILYN

Taste of Tennessee - ROSA

Taste of Texas - MIMI

Taste of Washington - ISABEL

“I’m thinking I’m going to want some lunch after my meeting,” Theo said. “What’s the quintessential Montana meal?”

Sherilyn tried to swallow the knot of pain in her throat, but the tears came anyway. She snatched her clothes and purse from the carpet and dressed quickly.

“What about an elk burger?” Theo said. “People hunt elk here, don’t they? I’d love to learn to hunt. When I was in Romania---”

“You can go to hell!” Sherilyn screamed through the bathroom door. She glimpsed her face in the mirror above the bed. Her lips somehow still looked glossy, but her face was crimson with rage.

“What’s that?” Theo asked.

Before rushing out of the room, Sherilyn grabbed the jar of insects and deposited it in her purse.

She stood in front of the hotel for some minutes, waiting to see if Theo would come outside. She worried that if she crossed the street she’d be heading back to her past: squeezing out frosting at Piece of Cake, overhearing her sister and her sister’s husband’s tepid sex, regularly assuring her mom she’d marry before she reached thirty.

Theo didn’t show.

Sherilyn jaywalked across North Reserve Street, and soon she passed a small, uniformly treed park where two skinny teenage girls faced each other across a picnic table littered with fast food wrappers. They both sat on their boyfriends’ laps, and they laughed obnoxiously about something.

Sherilyn entered the park and leaned against one of the trees. She felt like crying again, but she forced herself to hold back the tears and remove the jar from her purse. She tried to ignore the tapping sounds of the insects’ legs and the way the bugs pressed their bodies against the glass dividing them from her skin.

She held the jar away from her body. Before unscrewing the lid, she told the insects, “You’re well rid of him.”

She shook the jar so the creatures wouldn’t climb out on her fingers. She was relieved to see the insects fly away from her in all different directions. Soon she lost track of their paths, and she only saw the blue morning sky above the park. She had the comforting thought that she wasn’t actually going back to her old life. Somehow she knew things would be different.

She held onto this thought as she left the grass and walked along the sidewalk. She only let it go when she heard the teenage girls shrieking behind her. She turned to see that one of the boys was convulsing at the feet of his girlfriend.



[poetry]

Monkey Shines

If people were like bonobos
Or so at least the story goes
We'd all live peacefully in trees
Eating fruit and picking fleas
But humans, filled with genes recessive,
Have evolved much more aggressive
Behaving more like chimpanzees
Driving rivals to their knees
Our aggression knows no bounds
In the air or on the ground
And if you think we're not that simian
Just ask any Palestinian
Bombs and bullets on their heads
Drive them from their Arab beds
You see them on the evening news
Firing rockets at the Jews
Just another struggle sadly
A case of monkey's behaving badly

—Harris Tobias

I am a fragile crust
The gutted vein of loss
I am the railing sound of a charade
A plea for you to stay
I am the sour tale, adieu
A grave cloud of rain
I am the strained ink of guilt
A wounding pity
You no longer visit
Mine is a frailty
I can no longer stand.

raw

ON A FIELD OF
GRASS

The moment is full
A curious dark surrounds us,
Stirring your thoughts to mine
Our hands coil- in embrace,
As we press into the field,
Eclipsed by the still moon
Our margins touch to a pulse of breathing,
The prick of grass beneath us
And I am filled with certainty,
This Love is, an infinite fluidity
We dawn in tides of promise and pain.

I grind my thoughts against the thread
My head beneath a stone pillow
Weighted by a passing caress
Soft hunger, constrained fury
A biting memory looms above my barren bed
Awake in sleep, drifting lonely through the night.

AWAKE

—hajo isa

folly, or; we had everything

by grim k. deEvil

I watch. I glare. I stare though my sunglasses. They don't see me. I know how to hide. I've learned, trained myself over the years. That's how this works. They don't see me. I'm like a ghost, a transparent soul that doesn't really exist. I'm not really here. I'm not really noticed, and again it's because I've learned over years of practice to do just that. I'm not acting like a specter. I am one.

Jammed into this place, hating myself a little, but I am here and I'm invisible just enough to be part of the crowd. The only difference is I'm not going anywhere, I'm here now, and I'm waiting on her. She just thinks I'm in the horde.

She's a beautiful woman. She is beauty. My Goddess. Venus. With her sun-kissed skin, her golden locks, her perfectly shaped face, her rosy lips—so soft against mine, her lovely ocean eyes—I'll swim in for hours, her button nose, her curved ears, her five and a half foot stature, her body fits perfectly together, no gross Barbie shape. She is beauty.

The crowd is nothing to me when I gaze to her.

She's across the way, just far enough. Yes, just far enough not to think of me, but she doesn't know me. There she stands quiet and reserved. A blank look upon her face, she seems to be holding back everything that I know is bothering her. I feel I might walk over and talk. But she doesn't seem to be in the mood to talk today. So here I am. I gaze over to her and I feel that weightlessness come over me again. I seem to float closer not even thinking or wanting. Now I feel the heat from her love radiate as I hold out my hand. She looks over to me and I duck behind the tree. Did she see me? Did she notice me? That makes it much more obvious of our love. She will love me as I love her. Forever. I peer back to her at the bench, she's now sitting. An older woman is talking to her.

Shut up! Shut the fuck up old woman! She's not even listening. Go away. Am I going to have to come over there. Get up and leave her be, you fucking crone. There you go, now leave. Thank you!

Are you okay, my darling? Are you happy again? She's gone. Everything will be fine. Just breathe.

Was that a glance? Did she look over here again? Oh, my God! She must be thinking crazy thoughts. I won't let her see me like this. This tree is big and blocks me enough. I look at the ground, pulling my hat down my forehead a little. And

there, I see my shoe's untied. That's great! A reason to sit next to her. I have to tie my shoe.

A squirrel near my foot. I've must ignore it. She looks over. She sees me and the squirrel. Damn, you. There, run up the tree. Thank you!

She looks in her bag and puts both hands deep in. She rummages. She has a book. She loves to read. It's always the same. Now, I make my move. I start to walk over to her.

Oh! Ugh, a guy pushes me aside and she looks up straight at me.

She says hello to me.

I start to think of a witty respond when the guy—that asshole—says hello to her.

Fuck you, man! Who is this guy? Who does he think he is? Fuck you! Get away from her.

They both sit there.

Jesus Christ! Leave her alone. She doesn't like you.

I notice that I'm still standing, right there in the middle of the sidewalk. I run quietly back behind the tree. That was close. So now I stand in the safety of the shadow of the tree. They still sit together. He is oblivious to me. She ignores me for his benefit.

I peep around the tree and gaze, but that damn squirrel starts to throw bits of shit from the tree. I look up at him. Yes, that little bastard is a 'him' with his bushel of nuts.

Stop it! Just stop it!

I try hard to ignore the little bastard.

I look back over to her. She's gone. Where did that guy take her? Where did she go? Abduction? Fuck! I'm going to save her. Now! Then she'll know me, who I really am! Yes! I start to look around. No. No. No. There! Over there! He has his arm around her.

Stop that! She doesn't like that! She's very uncomfortable with you!

He doesn't. He doesn't listen. He just keeps talking. Bullshit streams out his mouth. The smell is rancid all the way over near me, she must want to get away from him badly.

Fucktard!

She laughs to please him. Oh, her laugh. It's one of her loveliest things about her. The way it's just loud enough and it's calm and collected. Elite, but not the bad elite. Not the fucktard elite. She walks in beauty, laughing. She walks away, gleaming. She walks away... She's leaving!

Don't leave me! Don't go! Come back! Come back! Come back! Return to me, my sweet darling.

I walk toward them. Trying my damnest to be calm and collected like her laugh. Oh, her laugh... I just went through this. I'm quiet and mouse-like. I will save her. Just as I get close, an arms length away. I fall. I trip. My shoelace. I forgot to tie it—my goddamn shoelace.

This place is a cheap hole in the wall restaurant that I would never find us in, but she of course is pleasing him again by coming to it. I order what she orders.

We love all the same foods. The spaghetti in a light red sauce, a diet Pepsi—no ice—and a side of bread sticks. I sit three tables away from her, she's facing me with the hanging green lamp lighting her face just enough not to whitewash her from my view or blind her for that matter. I see him moving around all boisterous; block my every chance to steal a glance of her. The food comes to our tables. The meat-sack she has with her calms down just to start inhaling the food like an orphan from a third world country. We don't eat like that. We aren't beasts like him. We take our time to enjoy our food, no matter how disgusting it may be. We take our forks and knives and cut the spaghetti just enough to spin some onto our forks taking it to our mouths cleanly. Then we break a breadstick over our plate and dip in the red sauce a little and bite down and then take a sip of our red wine—that we know came from a box but are intent on having the liquid because of the breadstick is so dry.

A half-hour seems to pass as we enjoy eating and chit-chat about our day. She tells me of how her co-workers took her out to lunch at this new diner a few blocks from the office. She tells me about the greatest sandwich that she had that day—a turkey and Swiss on rye with yellow mustard. I tell her that she can call it her new lunch spot if she wants. She tells me that she enjoys the park—that the solitude is wonderful and the cool air with the warm sun just couldn't be beat. The diner's all right she says but she could always get the food to go. I ask of what her co-workers would say. She says that they don't go out all too much, they just wanted to try the new diner. I tell her that we should go there sometime and she agrees. She adds that it would definitely be better than this fake Italian restaurant, adding that little Italy is blocks down near the pier. We laugh and laugh. We finish and look into each others eyes. I tell her that I'll swim in those eyes forever. She giggles and rises up, leaning over the table and pulls me out of my seat and makes her kissing face.

A nudge on my shoulder comes from my waitress with a bill in her hand. She wants to know if I want dessert. I look over and my angel and I see she getting up and that fucktard is putting her coat on her. I tell the waitress no and I'll just take the check. I glance down at the check and see the amount then take out my wallet and place two twenties on the table, trying not to let her out of my sight. She walks out the door and I grab my coat and follow.

I lie in my bed, looking at the ceiling, watching my fan spin endlessly into dawn. I inhale through my nose and exhale through my mouth. I dowsed my bed with her scent. I love her aroma. I don't sleep well anymore. I'm bothered by a lot of the little things. I must fix myself before asking her to move in with me. I think about all the things that will change. I'll get some sheets for my bed, a blanket, maybe an afghan. I'll have to buy some pajamas or at least wear something whilst sleeping. I'll get a mop and everything that goes with a mop. She'll be so happy. All that I'm going to do for her. I know how much she can't stand living with the fucktard. That will end soon enough. I'll fix my office into a gym so she can exercise at home instead of going to Gold's Gym all the time, the cost of our

two memberships will go to something more fun, like a trip or a cruise. Plus, all the exercise equipment will finally put to use. I'll have to buy some food for the fridge. I know that we can't live off of baking soda and a jar of sliced pickles. I'll do all that tomorrow. I'll get it all done tomorrow.

The sun beams down on me as I stab the shovel in the dirt. I look out into the distance and wipe my brow with the bottom of my bloodied T-shirt. I turn around and start heading back to my truck about a quarter mile from the hole I just dug. I pass death on my way back, the skeletal remains of a steer.

He's dead.

I drive my truck closer to the hole. I should've just parked it close in the first place. No. I had to come out here and look for the best spot on foot. And there's no use of carrying around a meat-sack in this heat. The birds would be swarming and squawking, bring attention to me. And I never need attention.

I park right up next to the hole, and pull the rolled up tarp out of the bed and it falls like deadweight to the ground. I guess it is deadweight. I drag the meat-sack to the hole and in I kick it. Then I remove my shirt and throw it on top. I drag a red gas container out of the bed and pour the content into the hole covering the green tarp. Then I get in the driver seat and driver in a big U-turn to get my window on the side of the hole. I light a match and drop it out of my window and pull away, onward to the highway.

I sit in my truck outside her apartment, looking in on her as she gets ready for her day. Well, she will as soon as she gets up. The sun is still not come up and I have a good hour before it does, I get out of my truck and move to her bedroom window. I stand in the bushes, being a part of them, just for awhile.

The alarm goes off. She turns to it and hits it softly. She turns back to me. Opening her ocean eyes, our faces inches from one another. I greet her with a good morning and she goes in for a kiss as I start to rise from the bed. I missed another. She falls onto my side of the bed. We laugh. I tell her I have to get ready and I'm going to take a shower, but she runs to the bathroom, stripping off her clothes, and jumping into the shower. I follow her. I say, is there room for two as I drop my boxers on the floor and climb in with her. She laughs.

After the hour shower, we go into the kitchen to make breakfast. This is teamwork. A fluid-like game. We complete each others moves and everything seems over-the-top choreographed. Just to make pancakes, eggs, turkey sausage, and toast. But that's how it is and we laugh about how in sync we have become over the years. She says it's the love we share for one another and I say she's right.

After eating, it's straight off to work. Another day, another dollar she exclaims as we walk to our cars. I tell her that I love her. She drives off.

I get back in my truck and follow her to her job and park in the guest parking. I get to the building and she's at the elevators. I run in and try to catch her in time and I do. One of the elevators opens and we walk in together. She presses her floor and asks me for mine. I tell her the top floor. She presses it and

dives into her bag. I notice as the door start to close an older woman waving trying to get me to hold the doors. I press the button to shut them. Giving her a look of 'I'm sorry' but I'm not. We start moving up and it is bliss. I stand inches from her and I can smell her shampoo and her perfume. I know her smell and I love it. It took me a day searching Macy's for it. It's L by Gwen Stefani. A sweet kiss. My sweet kiss. I bought it and took it home and my bed shares her scent and I am in heaven. I look up at the elevator's ceiling and notice not only the walls are mirrored but the ceiling is as well. I see her from a whole new perspective. She stand with her arm crossed making her breast appear a little larger, especially in the dress she is wearing today, her cleavage is making me wish this was over sooner, while at the same time I want this moment to last forever.

She doesn't care anymore. She sits on her bench eating her lunch—a turkey and Swiss on rye with yellow mustard. He's no longer around. He's not in her life anymore. I fixed it. He's not in his own life anymore. I will make her happy again.

I stand near my tree. Shaded and cool on this spring day. I think that the weather mirrors my mood. Yeah, yeah, I'm happy. I stare at her as she enjoys her lunch break. This is a normal Tuesday again. Now that he's gone.

Some time went by, she's been crying more and sitting by the phone and holding her cell up. I'll see her walk around her entire apartment hold her cell, moving it around in the air. She's trying to get a signal. Maybe she's expecting a call.

Maybe from me!

She's not. I just know it. She's waiting for him.

After all of that I've done. The shit of a shit storm I've been through, after everything I have done for her. I am going to do it. I stand at my tree as she sits in her spot on the bench. I glare at her as she finishes her lunch. I move away from my comfort zone toward her. As I get to her she stands and we stand facing each other, I look down to her just a little, she's a little bit short than me. I look into her eyes and she does the same. Hello, I need to say hello. She looks away and picks up her tin lunchbox. Come on and just say hello. She tries to pass me. What—what's happening? She says nothing and tries to pass me. What's she doing? Just say hello.

Her blood is on my hands as I remove my knife from her. She looks at me and falls to the ground. We had everything. Why did you have to make me do this? Why couldn't you have just said hello back? I pocket the knife and look around. I start to wipe my hands off on my shirt and pants. I did everything for her. I did everything.





HEX

IN THE BLACKEST HOURS BEFORE DAWN,
THE MOON STILL HOLDS SWAY. THE CLOCK
SOUNDS ITS FOUR HOLLOW CHIMES. PIN PUNCTUATES
THE LAST, SLIPPING INTO MAKESHIFT DOLL,
CHRISTENED BY VOODOO PRIEST. FOG
INSTANTLY THICKENS IN CONSPIRATORIAL COVER.
OWL SWALLOWS HOOT, MAINTAINING STATIC
SILENCE. A CRY ECHOES
FROM A BODY IN FORBIDDEN BEDROOM.
EMPHASIS OF PAIN, NOT PLEASURE. SMILE
SPREADS ACROSS FACE OF THE WRONGED.
PUNISHMENT BEGUN, SHE RETREATS WITH THE NIGHT.

BY AJ HUFFMAN

SOFTLY

*Softly it moves about the room
A coldness emitting from its space
It brushes against your cheek
Brings a chatter to your teeth*

*It whispers in the night
You close your eyes with fright
A specter from days past
Void of a final resting place
It longs to find its way home
Instead of darkened halls it roams*

*Fear not this gentle form
That does not mean you any harm
And when its mission has been fulfilled
This spirit will be gone and stilled*

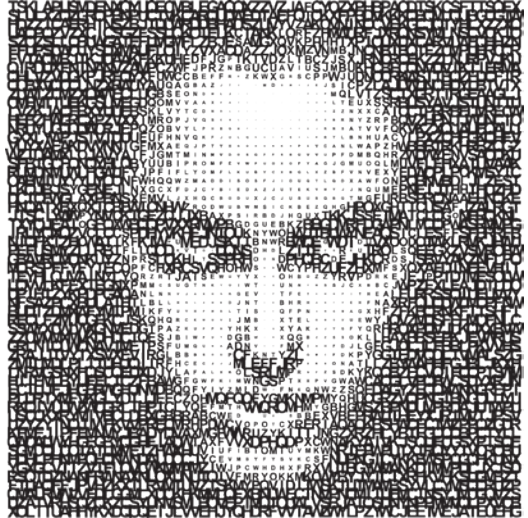
by aurora lewis

Wolf Woman

Wolf Woman

Early this a.m
my cats are causing
mayhem.
They meow for their
cans of white fish, but
I don't feel like
feeding them.
I'd rather be eating them.
I crave raw flesh,
a snack, freshly slaughtered,
guaranteed juicy.
The cats look at me,
look at one another,
and vamoose.

Nagging questions
emerged at midnight
when I noticed fur growing
on my arms, my neck, my chin.
Have I, I asked myself,
forgotten to take my estrogen?
My nose was more leathery
than my couch,
and when I walked,
I kinda crouched.
Then came the fleas,
Now why in hell, would I
have these?
Right now,
I'm walking on all fours,
my razor-like claws
slashing the varnished
hardwood floors.



Shhh! My husband's coming.
Gee, he looks delicious,
truly mouth-wateringly,
tantalizingly
fit to eat.
Oh, but I am an aware wolf.
I don't want to be
brutish and snarling.
I vow to spare my Darling
till the next full moon.

—lee glantz

Sylvia

By Stephanie M. Wytovich



When she first met Sorrow, she was twenty-four. She hurt all the time and her chest felt swollen as if she swallowed a lead balloon. She was lost in a nightmare of depression. Her thoughts clouded in the aftermath of a thunder storm. Her eyes shut off from the light. She had been lost for some time. A wanderer who took the path less traveled because she knew she would be alone. Sylvia had forgotten how to feel, how to breathe. All she wanted was blackness. Blackness and silence.

She was laying in bed in three-day-old clothes when Sorrow swept her up in his arms like a dark prince sprung from the shadows. Cast in black, he cradled her like a broken doll. His words clinging to her like a wool blanket. His brown eyes whispered assurances as he brushed her hair with his fingers and held her as she cried. He was warm and inviting, and she burrowed into his chest taking refuge in his arms.

It felt good being with him.

It felt safe.

Sorrow was unlike any man she had ever met. He didn't ask why, nor did he judge her for her weakness. He merely accepted the sadness and stood by her as she battled her demons. He was no more and no less than Sylvia needed. Sorrow just was.

But then she met Pain.

Pain broke into her house when Sorrow went away. He filled her head with poison and brainwashed her comfort into madness. His eyes beat anger into her weary blues and when life seemed too much, he filled her thoughts with death.

Sylvia hated him. She cursed when he lay with her, and shrugged away at his touch. He was ice, and his voice made her cold. But Pain had something that Sorrow didn't. Pain had the ability to relate, and when they came together one night, there was no greater tragedy. Sylvia had found her partner in Pain. A soul that knew what it felt like to die but keep on living.

She saw Sorrow during the day, when the ache from her other half dug inside of her heart. She would curl up in his arms and sweat from the love that poured out of his flesh. He was humid and the heat made her crave frost. She didn't want someone that was trying to save her. She wanted someone to drown with.

Like Lazarus, she emerged from the darkness at night to meet her lover. Underneath the Yew Tree, they danced in the shadow of the moon, their bodies attached at the waist. Sylvia even smiled once, but always fell back into Sorrow's arms the next morning when the encroaching nothingness consumed her.

She did it because it felt like hell.

She did because it made her feel real.

Sylvia might have been in love with sorrow, but she would always sleep with pain.



VOWS: VICIOUS ORAL WHIMS OF SPEECH

Tears crept down her cheek like a slow death.

Seven years had passed and he still hadn't woken up.

Elizabeth circled his bed at a frantic pace and ran her hand against the cold, marble that had become his face. The lines around his eyes were smoothed over now as if he'd never laughed or cried a day in his life. She wondered what his eyes looked like now. If they were glazed over and fighting death, or already snuffed out like a noir film at midnight. It shook her to think that she hadn't looked in his eyes for thousands of days. They were almost a memory.

"I, Matthew, take you Elizabeth, to be my wife," she whispered.

Her knees found the ground as the pain spread throughout her chest.

She prayed it would kill her.

But no matter how much she prayed, it wasn't getting easier. Waking up was a herculean feat and there were times when she held her breath in hopes that God would think she was dead.

But God didn't listen to her. God wasn't even there.

Elizabeth grabbed a fistful of the dirt blanket and felt it slide through her fingers like silk. For something that was supposed to provide warmth, it was frightfully cold. Chilled from the breath of disease that had coughed in her lover's face.

When he first became sick, she lived in a veil of denial. She mourned and went through the motions of a grieving wife, but not once did she think that fate would turn the death card. His hand was still warm that evening, and he fingered her wedding band as he drifted off to sleep.

A sleep that held him captive and ever drowning in the blackness of his mind.

“To have and to hold from this day forward.”

She leaned over and grabbed what was left of him.

He didn't even feel like Matthew. What was in her arms was a lie and it stabbed at her knowing that she knew that she would never get the real him back. She was stuck with this statue, this imposter of a man that did not know her touch, her kiss, her heart. He could not love her anymore, even though her heart knew nothing but him.

“For better or worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health.”

Elizabeth pushed to her feet and wiped the dirt off from her tattered, white dress. It was already stained from yesterday's visit, and a fresh bout of tears mixed into the lace of her sweetheart neckline dampening the loose fabric. The tombstone reflected her grandmother's pearls as a fresh wave of despair spread through her body.

Everything hurt

And everything died.

She kissed his name and pretended to feel his lips, but they too were cold with the sting of death. Her arms slid around the gravestone and for a moment, she felt him. It never lasted long, but it was all she needed. Knowing that his spirit lingered was enough to keep her breathing. Enough to keep her alive.

“To love and to cherish from this day forward.”

She repeated her vows every day when she visited the cemetery. But they were a lie. “Till death do us part.”

BY
STEPHANIE
M.
WYTOVICH



things she
thinks about in
sociology
class

Clip clop of sandals in the hall.
Spittle hitting sidewalk outside.
Throat-clearing all round.

The professor drones on.

The seat in the right-hand corner creaks,
then another on the left.
Someone coughs.

He's talking statistics.

Pen clip clicks.
Water bottle hisses open.

Doesn't flat-out say they lie,
but medium, mean, the difference between.

The DVD she rented last night,
adolescent buddy-movie slapstick.
How she laughed at the severed bits of butchered panda.

She wonders what the prof would think,
where she would fall on a distribution curve:

- those who pay attention
- those distracted by meaningless noise
- those who laugh at mutilation.

—Rosalie Morales Kearns

Scissors

Made to cut
paper dolls, snowflakes.

You get older,
find other uses.

Run
 with
 them.
 Stab.

Study them.
Hard clean edges

after you wipe off the blood.
You will never be so perfect.

Blue Reminds

Blue reminds you of freedom,
the relief that follows the blow.
You know the bruise will turn cobalt, purple.
It's the mark you make on the world,
the trace you leave
on this azure-green rock
hurtling through space.

Rosalie Morales Kearns—

The Blood of Bertha Manchester

by Denise Noe

Dedicated to the talented and tragic late actress Barbara Payton.

It was a clear spring day. The calm blue of the sky reminded Abner Williams of Bertha Manchester's eyes. Abner knew that most young men would not consider the plump, round-faced woman pretty but he did not care about that. She was a kind and reliable girl. Someday she would make a fine wife—to someone.

"What is your favorite name for a boy?" Bertha Manchester asked her gentleman caller. Abner and Bertha sat together on the swing in the front porch at the Manchester farmhouse.

"Oh, I don't know," Abner replied, admiring her forthright manner. "Except I wouldn't name my son 'Abner.'" A smile crossed his broad and tanned face. The smile showed off yellowish and crooked teeth but Bertha always got a warm feeling when she saw it. "What would you name a boy?"

"George," Bertha answered immediately. "After George Washington."

"Why?"

"Because he's the father of our country," she confidently replied. "George Washington had to persevere and get through the terrible trials at Valley Forge and in all those battles or we wouldn't even have a country."

"That's true," Abner said. "I've always admired George Washington, too. If you had a daughter, what would you name her?"

"Esther," Bertha said, again without hesitation.

"After the Esther in the Bible?" Abner asked.

"Yes. Esther is one of my favorite Biblical women. She risked her life for love of her people."

"You really admire courage," Abner said. He smiled again.

There was a pause. Bertha had not realized what George Washington and Esther had in common. "Yes, I guess I do," she said, enjoying but at the same time being just a tiny bit scared by that warm feeling she got when Abner smiled at her. "That's

something we all need in this world. No one ever knows what's going to happen next.”
“Yes,” Abner said. He saw a faint blush come over Bertha's cheeks and was charmed by it.

Bertha felt suddenly shy as she often did around Abner and stared down at her thick hands.

“Damn this codfish!” Jose Correiro muttered in Portuguese to his fellow laborer Adriano.

Adriano did not reply but silently put some more of the food into his mouth.

“Why does that fat ugly Bertha Manchester have to make this for us every day?”

Jose asked incredulously.

“Oh, it's not that bad,” Adriano replied with a shrug. “I like the flavor of codfish.”

“I hate it,” Jose said with disgust. He saw a worm crawling and added, “This codfish isn't fit for worms!”

Adriano was finishing up the codfish. He washed the last bite down. “It's about time for us to get back to work,” he said.

Jose often reminded people of rails. His oddly fat-free body seemed to be composed of muscle and bone. Brown hair the color of dirt on a dry day hung over his shirt collar and accented the sharpness of his large beaked nose and prominent cheekbones. His dark eyes held an intense gaze that some people thought made him good-looking.

Although he disliked the people for whom he worked, he did not mind the work on the dairy farm. He had a fondness cows: they were such nice animals with those huge brown eyes and slow, easy-going ways. He liked that way their ears moved around and their tails swished. He even enjoyed the smell of hay—it almost made up for the stink of manure!

Adriano told Jose, “You've got to come over there. Mr. Manchester wants to talk to you.” Adriano pointed to a blank-faced Mr. Manchester standing beside the back of his house.

Jose felt a sinking in his stomach. He looked around at the other laborers, Irish except for him and Adriano, at Mike and Jack and Andy. Mike and Jack looked at each other and then back at Jose. Andy's mouth hung open. Jose thought that made Andy look as stupid as the cows—but not nearly as sweet as they looked.

Jose and Adriano walked over to where Mr. Manchester waited.

The aging farmer said something to Adriano who grimaced before telling Jose, “He says he's going to have to let you go.”

A chill like ice ran up Jose's spine. His hands went weak.

Adriano looked at Jose with pity. Mr. Manchester looked at Jose with hard eyes. Jose looked back at Mike and Jack and Andy and saw that Mike was fighting a grin. Just then that horrible Bertha came out of the back door. She put her hand over her mouth as if to hide a smile.

A wave of heat struck Jose's face like candle flames running over it. His hands went

up to his face and covered his skin. But his hands could not cover his shame. Through them he saw a worm on the ground and suddenly envied it for being oblivious to shame.

“Why? Ask him why,” Jose told Adriano

Adriano spoke to Mr. Manchester in English. Then Adriano relayed the message: “He says you’re just not accomplishing as much as the other workers so he doesn’t want to keep you on.”

“You bastard!” Jose cried in Portuguese. “I work hard. I work harder than some of the others.”

Adriano spoke in English to the farmer who replied in that tongue. Then Adriano told Jose, “Mr. Manchester says his mind is made up. He wants you to leave.”

Defeated, Jose said, “Oh, well, he can at least give me the money he owes me. Will he do that?”

Adriano spoke in English to Mr. Manchester.

The farmer fished in a pocket. He handed cash to Jose.

Jose stared at it: a day’s wages. Furiously, he shouted, “He owes me more than this! He owes me for two weeks!”

Adriano repeated this in English. Mr. Manchester shook his head. He said something to Adriano who said, “Mr. Manchester says he owes you no more.”

“He’s a liar! He’s a cheat!” a frustrated and outraged Jose shrilly screamed in Portuguese.

Adriano gasped and grimaced.

Jose thought of a worm that had just been squished. Then he rallied, “I want my full amount! He’s not going to cheat me!”

Adriano said something to Mr. Manchester in English.

Manchester slapped Jose.

The sting of that slap caused Jose’s heart to jump in his chest like a caught fish jumps in panic.

Jose saw Bertha standing a ways behind her father. The fat ugly girl was smirking and not hiding it.

Then Jose looked at the other laborers. They all deliberately looked away from them.

In the days since that mean Mr. Manchester had fired him, Jose had not gotten one single full night’s sleep. It was bad enough that he was dismissed from his job in front of everyone but that crooked bastard had not even paid Jose what he was owed! He had not worked at that place for free!

Whenever Jose lay down in his bed in the tiny wood-framed boardinghouse in which he lived, he found himself staring straight out into the darkness. Eventually he would fall asleep but then he would suddenly wake as if someone had jerked him hard. His heart would pound in fury. The scene kept re-playing and re-playing as if he was suffering through it again freshly. Except that every time he re-lived it, the horror of it was worse.

Early one morning he awoke feeling as if the flames of humiliation were burning

through his flesh.

He couldn't let Mr. Manchester get away with this! The farmer had a right to fire him. He didn't have a right not to pay him for the work he had done.

Jose jumped out of bed and hurriedly put his clothes on. He would make that cheat give him the money he was owed.

Setting out to the Manchester farm, Jose's sense of determination was as unstoppable as the power of a fire moving swiftly through dry grass.

He did not even feel tired when he got to the Manchester house and knocked with all his might on the door. He heard steps from inside. Mr. Manchester would *have* to pay Jose what he was owed. He would have to. Jose was a human being—not a worm!

The door opened and it was the Manchester daughter. When Jose saw her, he felt the bitter taste of codfish rush into his mouth. A sour look on her heavy pale face, she said something in English.

Unable to stop himself from talking in a language he knew she could not understand, Jose gestured with his hands in a way that he hoped would tell her that he had to see her father.

Her jaw dropped and the look of her mouth reminded Jose of a dying fish as it choked on air. Shaking her head, she slammed the door in Jose's face.

Jose felt like his skin was so hot it was ready to peel off. She couldn't do this to him! No, not again! He wouldn't take it!

He pounded on the door as viciously hard as his heart pounded against the bones of his chest.

From inside the house, Bertha yelled something in English.

Finally, she opened the door again and made gestures, waving her hands for him to go away before she once again tried to close the door. This time Jose was quick. He put a foot in the door and stepped inside the home.

Contemptuously, she turned her back on him, yelling in English even as he yelled in Portuguese. He followed her through one room and past a small alcove that had various tools in it. Jose saw an axe and instantly grabbed it.

He rushed into the kitchen where Bertha Manchester was with her back turned to him and brought the weapon down on her head.

The horrible pain caused Bertha to shriek even as blood spilled down her face. Through blurred eyes she saw images of two naked beloved babies, one a boy and one a girl, both of them with their tiny hands outstretched to her.

"George! Esther!" she shouted as more blows rained down on her. Her hands reached out to their hands but the babies floated away from her although she could still see them. "George! Esther! I've got to have you! George! Esther! George! Esther!"

Suddenly George and Esther disappeared and with them Bertha's light.

MURDER AGAIN/AWFUL COUNTERPART OF THE BORDEN TRAGEDY/
FORTUNATELY BUT ONE VICTIM INSTEAD OF TWO/BERTHA M.
MANCHESTER, 22 YEARS OF AGE, THE PREY – *Fall River Evening News*,
May 31, 1893.

STARTLING PARALLELISMS/MANY POINTS OF RESEMBLANCE FOUND
BETWEEN THE MANCHESTER AND BORDEN MURDERS – *Boston Daily
Globe*, June 1, 1893.

In the dirty and cramped jail cell, Jose sat on his bunk and spoke in halting Portuguese to the young interpreter, a blonde-haired youth with a smartly trimmed beard, who relayed his responses in English to the balding and thick-bearded attorney.

Jose's shoulders were slumped over. He only looked at his questioners intermittently. He did not want to look at the interpreter because the man's eyes reminded him of Bertha's. He did not want to look at the attorney because that man's round face reminded him of Bertha.

Of course, almost everyone reminded him of Bertha now.

"She kept repeating two names I know from English," Jose said. The foul taste of codfish once again came into his mouth. Only now the taste was worse because it was mixed with blood and the waste evacuation of death. "The names were 'George' and 'Esther,'" Jose said. "I don't know why but she just kept repeating those names and repeating them."

Jose imagined Bertha's mouth open and codfish and worms seeping out of it. Then Jose doubled over. He could not make it to the pail so the vomit that streamed burning out of his mouth and nose messed his legs and the floor.

"Papa, I love you," little Bertha Manchester had said, hooking her arms around her father. "You're the best Papa in the whole wide world." When she smiled, her lovely blue eyes reminded Stephen Manchester of jewels.

He had loved to watch her dress her dolls. She had enjoyed seeing what colors would go together.

"Papa, do you think she's pretty?" Bertha would ask.

"Of course, she's pretty! But not as pretty as the young lady who dressed her!"

"Ohhhh, Papa!"

An axe! Stephen Manchester's body shook. He felt places in his back and head strangely alive with pain thinking about the agony she had suffered as she was so cruelly cut. Oh, why couldn't he have been at home! After all, that vile fiend was out to get him. If Stephen had been home, he might have been able to protect his daughter. Even if he had been killed, that would have been better: she was only 22—she had so much more life to be lived. Why couldn't he have died instead of her?

Stephen Manchester grieved intermittently for many months. He never completely became himself again. Smiles were few and far between. He often felt as if a gray fog had permanently settled through his brain and body.

Until the day of his own death he would often wonder, with a wondering that never ceased to ache sharply and became a source of nagging torment: Who were George and Esther and what were they to Bertha?



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A Proper Approach to the Forces of Nature

The old man was sitting on a stump by the side of the wideout. Old? Friggin' ancient, Brad giggled to himself. Amenhotep out for a stroll.

"Afternoon, youngster!" voice almost like a pipe organ. Surprising. Didn't go with the shriveled frame, topo-map face, and trembly shoulders. "Afternoon," Brad nodded as he shifted the pack for an uphill and dug into the trail.

"What's your hurry, youngster?" the old man spoke as Brad came abreast, "Can't spare a moment for a fellow trail man?"

"Actually, no," Brad half-turned in stride and smiled indulgently because, please, fellow trail man? Methuselah over there was hardly in Brad's league. "I'm stopping in Harper's Ferry tonight."

"Ain't gonna make it," the old man shook his head and cast a meaningful glance at the 5:00 sun.

Brad laughed. "Especially if I stop to chat," and leaned into the angle.

"You're gonna make twenty-four klicks by dark, are ye?" the old man chortled.

Brad stopped. "It's eight, not twenty-four." Some 'trail man' you are, Gramps.

"It's eight to the next wideout, twenty-four to the Ferry. Wassamadder, can't read a map?" the old man was scornful.

Brad let out an exasperated and quite luxurious sigh. "Yes," he said, putting on his Sufferance of Fools face. "I can read a map. And a compass. I have a Level 3 UKCC Certificate, after all. But I also have this," Brad swept the GPS off his belt and held it up for the old man to see.

Old Guy whistled, "Well, well. A Garmin Oregon 550T. Snazzy. Sumpin' like that, you don't even need to be Level 1, do ya?" Old Guy laughed at Brad's annoyed expression. "Goes well with your Limmer Lightweights, that Osprey 85, your North Face Venture jacket, and that Big Agnes Seedhouse tent you got strapped onto the bottom of the rack there." Old Guy pointed in turn at Brad's boots, pack, clothes and frame with a gnarled walking stick that was probably older than he was.

"You know your equipment, old man, gotta give you that," Brad shook his head. "But you don't know crap about distances."

The old man went baleful. "Mebbe you oughter look at that contraption again." He gestured at the Garmin.

Brad made a production out of readjusting it. Okay, update, and the distance is... Ta Daaaa...huh? Brad blinked. Twenty-four klicks?

by *D. Krauss*

The old guy started laughing. “But...” Brad spluttered, “I calculated it out this morning! Even confirmed it with the topo!”

“Yeah, yeah,” the old man waved a dismissive hand, “you young pups and you gadgets. Relying on what someone else makes for ye. All you really need is this,” the old man tapped the side of his mummy head, “a good pair of legs,” he slapped a thigh that sounded like an oak tree, “and maybe this.” The old guy drew a knife out of his combat boot, an old hunting one.

Brad stiffened.

“Settle down, youngster,” the old man grinned. “If I wanted to do you, I’d use Mjolnir here,” he stroked the walking stick. “Just wanted to show you what your forefathers considered ‘cutting edge’ technology.” The old man laughed at his own joke.

“It’s... nice,” Brad swallowed, still wary.

“Nice? I’ll say. Picked it up at the Little Popie Rendezvous in ‘29 from Joe Meek.”

“I don’t know who that is,” Brad edged up the trail. If he got enough of a head start, he could probably outrun Noah’s grandad over there. Probably.

“Course you don’t,” the old man snorted, “none a you fancy pants ‘trail men’”—Brad could almost see the quotes—“knows Captain Sublette or Jim Bridger or any of the others. You ain’t out here the same way they was. They was testing themselves. Y’all just wanna impress girls.”

“Now, listen!” Brad got hot, “I’m an outdoorsman!”

The old man reared back and laughed, “Outdoorsman, are ye? Ha! You wouldn’t last five minutes off the trail without them fancy gadgets. Outdoorsman, indeed!” The old man was dismissive.

Brad stared at him for a moment, turned without a word and humped up the trail.

“Not. Five. Minutes!” the old man cackled after.

Brad got to the top of the incline and turned back to shout something degrading, but the wideout was empty. He blinked. The woods had gone strangely quiet. Uneasily, Brad peered hard at the tree line and undergrowth, but didn’t see the old man anywhere, or even a sign of his passing. “Weird,” he said, and hiked off.

Wonderful, another night outside. Brad had been sooo looking forward to a warm bed and hot shower and a pliable coed, hopefully a German tourist. They were the

easiest. How the hell did he get the map calculations so wrong?

And why was it so damned cold?

Brad opened his eyes and was immediately confused. He should be looking at waterproof Nylon stretched tight above him. Instead, he was staring at deep blue sky. His tent was gone.

“What the hell?” Brad scrambled for the catch on his Exped Woodpecker, but he wasn’t inside it. He wasn’t inside anything. He was lying in snow.

Snow? But it was September!

He jumped up, yelling, and plunged hip deep into a snow bank, bounded out, tripped, fell face down on another bank, and finally rolled himself up to a full stand. He brushed frantically at the snow before he got chilled. Thank God he was still wearing his trail clothes.

But, apparently, that’s all he had.

Brad looked wildly around but everything, his pack and tent and Garmin, was gone. Vanished.

How the hell? Who the hell... Of course. The old man.

“You bastard!” Brad shook a fist at the surrounding, snow-silent woods, “You sonofabitch! Wait till I catch you!”

Snow-silent woods.

Brad blinked. The trees were all wrong. Western lodgepole and cedar, not Eastern hemlock and larch.

He whirled. And the mountains...sharp, marching off in distances, young.

Not the Appalachians. More like the northern Rockies.

“What IS this?” Brad whispered.

There was a burst of sunrise, dazzling, the light channeled through some distant mountain pass right at Brad. He turned to clear his eyes and saw a gleam of metal on the edge of the woods. Brad tromped through the snow until he reached a stump. There was a knife stuck there.

The old man’s knife.

“I am,” Brad swore, as he pulled it out, “going to gut you, skin you, and leave you for the buzzards. You dried up, scurvy-buttet CRAPHEAD!” the entire oath grew in volume until “head!...head!...head!” echoed back to him.

Good start.

“Hey! HEEEEEEYYYYYYYY!” Brad yelled as loud as he could and got multi-echoes bouncing back and forth and careening into snowy distance.

Excellent. Even the dullest of park rangers would come check that out. Brad would get a ride and some brandy-laced coffee and then go old man hunting. He smiled, anticipating.

Ten minutes later, he was no longer anticipating. He was freezing.

Jeez, just how cold was it out here? Twenty, twenty-five degrees, felt like, which was just freakin’ impossible on the A-T at this altitude in September. Just impossible. But here he was, shivering. His teeth begin to chatter. “Brad, old friend,” he said to himself as he slapped his shoulders for warmth, “this may just be some bizarre, intense dream, but, if you don’t do something right now, you’re gonna end up a Bradcicle.”

All right. Top priorities when lost in subfreezing temperatures— shelter, warmth.

Get both.

He looked down at his feet. Snow. Good insulator, that. He dropped to his knees, grasping the knife, and started digging. Thirty minutes later, he had a pretty decent snow cave ready. He sat back, gasping. Hard work, harder than he thought, and he'd sweated through the Goretex and the sweat was now freezing and he couldn't feel his ears and his hands were ice clubs and so were his feet and he was going to die if he didn't get warm. Brad looked at the woods. Lots of deadfall under the trees.

Stumbling to his feet, Brad lurched into the tree cover and, twenty minutes later, had a big pile of twigs and sticks piled up under a big evergreen. He was shivering uncontrollably by then and fell before the pile, almost weeping. He slapped his ice-blocks-for-hands along the jacket and pants pockets. The striker was in here somewhere...

His pockets were empty.

"No way. No way in HELL!" Brad roared at the trees. Take his tent and his equipment, okay. Brad was a pretty deep trail sleeper and could snore through a lightning storm, but there was no way the old man rifled his pockets without waking him. No way.

No fire, either.

There's a point in hypothermia where people start making Very Bad Decisions, like let's just lay down and rest for awhile. Brad had to get warm before that started happening. C'mon, man, think! You spent almost six months in England hiking the rough country to get your certifications. And, not, old man, just to get laid. Well, mostly not. All right, fire starting, how was that done again?

With your emergency fire striker, of course, which he no longer had. Certification always assumed you weren't stupid enough to get lost in the woods without your pocket emergency kit, replete with foil blanket, signal mirror, and striker.

Great.

The breeze was picking up, cutting through his jacket. He was probably in the first stages of frostbite. The first stirs of deadly panic washed through him and he fought it down. Think, Brad, think! What does a fire need? Fuel and an ignition source. He stared at the pile. Had the fuel, what about the ignition?

He blinked. Rub two sticks together.

He laughed for about two seconds, blinked again, and started shaving the twigs with the knife. He had a nice pile of wood fluff in about three minutes, and then held one stick flat while he rubbed another against it vigorously. Quite vigorously. A minute, two, his arms were aching and he was sweating again, which was good because he was at least generating some core heat, even if his hands and feet were still numb.

Smoke. Spark. Blow hard on the fluff. A flame.

"I have made fire!" Brad did his best Tom Hanks impression as the flame caught the stick pile and began to climb. Look at that. Thousands of dollars for certification, and his survival came down to what he remembered from a movie.

"Take THAT, old man!" Brad crowed and was satisfied with the echoes. The flames were going good and he flopped against the tree, putting his feet and hands towards the heat, relieved to feel pinpricks of returning circulation. Okay. Warm up, throw on some wet branches to get a smoke column, heat up some big stones, wrap

them in the coat and take them into the snow cave while waiting for rescue. Brad held the knife up. Guess this IS all you need...

The avalanche smashed down, driving him into the snow pack like a jackhammer, flooding his coat and pants and half choking him. Flailing his arms and pumping his knees, he managed to break through the top and slide down to the base of the pile, coughing and gasping for breath. He brushed snow off his face and head and stared at the evergreen. The side he had been sitting on was now bare of snow all the way to the top. Of course. When he sat against the tree, he'd started a chain reaction, snow falling from one branch to the other until he got buried.

Not *Castaway*. Jack London's, "To Build a Fire."

All right.

He stood. The cold was alive now, seeking every pore of him. He held the knife tight, as if pressure would generate spark enough to light the tree itself. He looked back towards the snow cave.

Maybe he should just rest for awhile...

"Know 'em?"

Bridger shook his head, "Nope."

The Captain balanced on his snowshoes, cradling the rifle and taking in the ice blue sky. A north breeze. Snow tonight. "Any y'all seen 'em before?"

Jackson and Clyman shook their heads, gaze following the Captain's and, no doubt, reaching the same conclusion about the coming snow. "Just some dumb pilgrim," Fitzpatrick summed all their thoughts.

"Funny clothes," Meek was reaching into the snow cave and pulling on the dead man's coat. "Slick like."

"Anything we can use?" the Captain stared. All you could see of the man was from about the neck up, most of that snow-covered. Young guy, clean shaven, real nice teeth drawn back in frozen rictus.

"Nah," Meek brushed his hand, "too thin. Ain't like wool or nothin'."

"Japanned silk," Fitzpatrick snorted and they all laughed because, well, no one wore fancy out here.

"Captain Sublette," someone said quietly from the back of the horses and he looked and there was Smith, staring off into the woods. Sublette followed his gaze. Shadows where they shouldn't be. "Crow?"

"Bannock, I think," Jedidiah held his rifle easy but his eyes never wavered and Jackson and Fitzpatrick brought their rifles up. "Great," Beckwourth chewed his moustache and stepped up next to Smith, "Captain, we gotta go."

"Yeah," Sublette watched the Bannock and smelled the air and calculated ten, fifteen miles through the drifts before reaching the pass. About dark when they got there, and sure as hell the Bannock would try something before then. He glanced back at where Meek was digging at the snow cave. "What about him?"

"Stuck pretty good, Captain," Meek shook his head.

"All right," he thought a moment. "We'll come get him in spring, bury him then, before heading off to rendezvous. Crow won't touch him."

“Arikaras will,” Beckwourth pointed out.

“Yeah, well,” Sublette shifted, and stared full into the woods. Let the Bannock know they were seen. “We hear ‘bout any Ariks trading silk, we’ll come see about them.”

The crew nodded and tended to horses, one or two of them keeping an eye on the woods as Meek finally gave up and stepped back. “Damn shame,” he said.

“Damn fool,” Sublette spat at the blue-faced frozen man.


Meek brushed something on his pants, “Nice knife,” he said, showing it to the Captain. “Might be good for a trade.”

Sublette nodded. Way of the woods, pilgrim. You die stupid, then what you leave is fair game.

They saddled up.



[poetry]



No Atlatl's yet been Designed

After drinking seltzer, elderly women talk to light bulbs, balance pinecones,
Maybe dolls on their foreheads, hug splinters, laugh with children's antics,
Introduce familial tribulations. Additionally, they remark on myriad ways
Ossuaries ought to be emptied of contents, especially before Moshiach lands.

At heart, most households' folks bend toward the pain of what's been said,
Crave prophets' sonorous reassurances, want no part of status quo emotional
Incontinence, of forevers, where dreaded social liabilities might suddenly morph,
Transition into nontoxic butterflies, friendly eagles, maybe cyclamens.

Otherwise, the culturally-generated pseudobulbar affect could, at days' end,
Pass through all containment, leaving us devoid of illusions, reminding us
The impossibility of resolving uncertainty concurrent with insisting on free choice.
Faith. Takes. Up. Space.

by kj hanna greenberg



Bones

She keeps the bones of crows, bats,
And stray dogs boiled clean so she can glean
Those things that we cannot see, a witch is she
That sailed from the Caribbean bringing black magic
To those who left witchdoctors and shamans
On African shores, to dance beneath
Full moons and chant to ancestral ghosts,
Who watch over graves and tombs and cry
For those taken to foreign lands to die alone
Without the magic of the bones.
She shakes and sweats tossing her bones
to the ground, seeking messages for those
earth bound who drink of blood and barter
themselves to devils, who walk the earth and devour
the souls of infidels damned, while her blind eyes
look deep into the core of man and finds hearts
of stone and seeds sewn at the gates of hell,
Commissioned by her bag of bones.

—aurora lewis



Blue Heaven, Black Sunday

I see in your future
pork belly options, a dog eating shoes,
a song called "My Blue Heaven,"
and a raven's egg.

I see you sitting under a bridge,
gray water rushing over rocks.
You're holding your head
between your hands.

You're telling a friend
let bygones be bygones,
yet I see thorns impaling flesh,
Justice bent under the weight of scales.
I see a blur in your future.
The dog gone wild,
a haystack, a thimble,
a song called "Black Sunday."

—lee glantz

[short story]



**Don't Act
Like You
Don't Know
Me**

by Eugene Hosey

The best time I had in this city, my only fond memory of the trip, was the morning I scaled the cliffs above the ocean. Far below me, the water was pastel blue and the waves spilled and ran ashore like pink and white lace. A mist concealed the horizon and softened the sunlight so that all the huge rocks in the water appeared to be made of soft clay.

After getting back to my hotel that evening I took a nap and woke up feeling restless. About midnight I decided to take a walk. Chilly little streams ran through air that was otherwise warm. It was a dark night, and the streetlights dropped pools of dull gray light on the asphalt. At the first corner, I considered turning left to go to a bar I had found yesterday. But on a curious impulse I decided to go the other way, up a rather steep, undulating street. According to popular media, there was an idealistic, eccentric bohemian neighborhood in that direction.

I began to see young people no older than twenty-five walking and milling around. They all wore dark clothing with long coats, scarves, and hats. At one point a group of five or six blocked my way.

"Could you spare some money, sir?" a girl asked.

I gave her a handful of change, and she scowled and asked if I could possibly spare more.

"Is there something you need to buy?" I said.

That brought a laugh, and one of them said, "Yeah, we need food." A more sober male voice said, "We would really appreciate it."

So I gave her a five-dollar bill.

"We call it taxing time," she said jovially.

They moved right along, satisfied and talking.

As many times as I had been asked for money on city streets, I had never before encountered this cheerfully straightforward attitude of entitlement. Typically a beggar believed there was shame in begging even as he unhesitatingly did it. Not these kids.

I had noticed the same in the bar last night. A little lady was panhandling at the door, collecting handsomely and boasting about it to the customers she knew, and they in turn congratulating her. I even saw the bartender take a bill from the register and hand it to her.

I caught glimpses of human figures moving in wooded patches between some of the houses, and I could hear incoherent exclamations and eerie noises. When I passed close to someone I would get a bold stare of hostile amusement or a smirk. They knew I was not from here. I was not one of them. I was not welcome. *But I have a right to take a walk.*

As I passed the mouth of a dark alley, I heard a shuffling, scraping sound. A figure came staggering out of it. It was a girl with dark reddish hair that hung long and straight; thick strands of it obscured her face. She wore black jeans and a purple or brown sweater. She swayed when she walked. She would lurch forward and then struggle to gain her balance. Her arms were extended as if she were blind and trying to grasp her surroundings. She moaned as she stumbled toward me. She came within three or four yards of me before I hurried away. I glanced back and saw her hugging a lamp post.

At the top of the hill the ground flattened and there were three or four short blocks of brightly-lit stores and typical community establishments. I would not complete one block before turning around and going back.

The first place I passed was an ice cream parlor. It was glass-walled and garishly lit and packed with black-clad grinning youth. I thought of caged animals. They stared at me with open hostility, all of them. Some of them made mocking sounds. I was baffled at what it was they saw in me.

Why do you people feel this way? There's nothing between us one way or the other—no reason for enmity or friendship either one. What's wrong with the cordial attitudes of civilization?

A few doors down I came to a bar and considered getting a drink. The doors were wide open and the place was crowded. I went in far enough to see that a sex act was in progress on a pool table. As I left, I felt a hand grab at my arm. Instead of literally retracing my steps, I crossed the street and started back down on the other side. Every few steps it was necessary to dodge someone or even get off the sidewalk to keep from running into a wall of them. Always they were hostile, threatening, or lascivious.

They destroyed a long-held personal security of mine—the feeling that I wore an invisible, protective armor that reliably repelled human threat. The very presence of these people dissolved this belief and made me feel naked and foolish. I had wandered in the most dangerous places of many cities. But this had never happened to me before.

I almost stumbled over a pair of legs and just managed to step clear of a pool of yellow vomit. Here was a young man, barely more than a kid, his hair blond and stringy; his eyes bright and wild. He was ranting at the passersby: "Don't step in my vomit, you stupid fuckers! I am a filthy piece of shit! Can't you see that?!"

Revulsion and pity hit me. Then I could feel nothing but shock and horror as I watched a man walk up to him, stand astride the kid's legs, and urinate on his head. I caught the expression on the abuser's face as he zipped himself and glanced around at his audience. People were laughing and squealing with a kind of mirthful disgust. The man wore a big pleased smile; he thought he had just done something clever and fitting. As the urine dripped off the boy's face, this humiliated kid kept saying, "That's it. That's perfect."

Suddenly hands were grabbing at me. I was going to be knocked in the head and robbed, or worse, if I did not get out of here. I walked faster and soon I was running. I slowed down once the neighborhood was far enough behind me. I felt sick and weak from this unexpected show of human degradation. I stopped running but I still hurried.

When I reached the cross street for my hotel, I changed my mind about turning in for the night. I thought of that nearby bar, where I wished I had gone in the first place. With a few drinks I would sleep easier. It was then that I first noticed the clatter of footsteps behind me, but I didn't turn around. I walked on in a quick pace. I passed a smiling elderly couple who appeared to be tourists. This was a great, reassuring touch of civilization. I felt calmer now.

On one corner of a little intersection there was a coffee shop with a pretty

green awning, and next door to it was the bar. I was halfway across the street when a pair of arms went around my neck, holding tightly, and the weight of a body fell upon my back. I twisted and jerked myself free and ran.

Once across the street I stopped and turned to see a girl sprawled face-down on the pavement. This was the girl who had staggered out of the alley. She had actually chosen and stalked me. Hers were the footsteps I had heard. Even in her condition she had managed to catch me. For a few seconds I was so incredulous and horrified that I just stood there staring at her. She wasn't moving.

Suddenly a man's voice shouted an incredible accusation: "You hit her!"

"No! I don't even know her! She grabbed me while I was crossing the street," I said. "I don't understand it."

The man gave me a look of great aggravation.

"Help me get her out of the street, for God's sake, man," he said.

We lifted her and put her down so that she could sit against the wall by the door of the coffee shop. This guy who had accused me of hitting her examined her face and head and tried to communicate with her. He seemed genuinely concerned.

"Can you hear me? Can you tell me what happened? What's your name?"

A waitress came out and said she would call an ambulance.

This man had a neat gray beard, and wore a pull-over sweater and black jeans much like the girl wore. I noticed a little paperback in his back pocket.

I did not hear the girl speak her name, but I heard him say, "Lori? Is that your name—Lori?"

The waitress asked Lori if she had taken any drugs.

The man said, "No, I don't think so. Look at this bruise on her forehead. She's been hit."

"She's stoned out of her mind," I said. "I saw her staggering on the sidewalk."

"I thought you'd never seen her before," he muttered.

"I saw her trying to stand up before she threw herself on me," I said.

I saw him smirk.

He asked Lori if someone had hit her.

She nodded. Her eyes were half-open now, trying to focus.

"Who hit you, Lori?"

Lori shifted her gaze to me and raised her arm and pointed her finger right at me.

I thought the girl was repugnant but I maintained a noble demeanor. A concerned little group had gathered for her.

"She's too confused to know what she's saying," I said. "She fell in the street behind me and that's probably where she got the bruise. I don't know her. I'm a tourist."

Clearly they knew I was a tourist and that Lori was one of their own. They cared about their own. They did not seem to think that Lori's behavior warranted any comment; only her condition interested them. There was no question about one thing: What this girl had done to me was morally moronic and shocking, and I was the only one who realized it.

A few tense minutes passed until the man looked dismissively at me. "You can go ahead. We'll take care of her."

I went inside the bar. I felt low as dirt. *Why didn't I just go back to my hotel room?*

The little lady was here again tonight collecting money. By her cheerful attentiveness to the patrons, one would have thought she was the official greeter. "Could you spare five dollars, sir?" she asked me. "I'm sorry, no," I said. "Oh," she said, "well, that's too bad, maybe next time."

I heard a siren as I took a seat at the bar. I ordered a beer. My hand shook ridiculously as I held the glass. The crowd began to press closer to the bar, fascinated by a fighting robot on a TV screen, touching me from behind and both sides, oblivious to my body. I put a five dollar bill under my glass and pushed my way through the people and out of the place. I stopped at a liquor store and bought a pint of Southern Comfort and a six-pack of beer to take to my room.

I would sit on the bed for a while and then pace the floor, chasing big gulps of whiskey with beer, getting drunker and drunker, and more and more convinced that for my future peace of mind it was necessary for me to find a satisfactory resolution about what had happened tonight. I was vexed with humiliation and sorrow.

My brain worked to find in my favor: *I'm the victim—not the stoned crazy girl. She threw herself on me and wouldn't let go. Then she accused me of hitting her.* But my heart kept rejecting my reasoning, because I would have left the incapacitated creature in the street if the Good Samaritan had not come along, a witness to my coldness whether I had hit her or not. Self-defense is a natural impulse. But I had let my fear over-ride my compassion. I felt like a puny, defensive coward.

After some more drinking and thinking, a great surge of terrified determination took hold of me. I put on my jacket, opened a fresh can of beer, and checked that my wallet and key were in my trousers. I left the hotel feeling completely sober.

I went up the hill just as I had before. I stopped in their midst to rest and drink my beer. Sure enough, one of them tried to mess with me, and I said, "What do you want? You can have the rest of this beer. Or some change." He said he wanted a lot more than that, and I grimaced and drew back with the can of beer and hit him as hard as I could right in the face. "What else?" I said. He stumbled and then stood there with an expression of amused surprise as the beer dribbled off his chin. I was surprised that he didn't retaliate; he didn't even move.

They did not seem so frightening and dangerous this time around. I sought out the poor degraded blond boy, and he was still there, although he was silent now. I told him I wanted to give him something. He held out a shaky hand, and I put a fifty dollar bill in it. Then I continued back in the direction of my hotel, walking slowly, my fist made and ready to draw. The people tended to move away from me now.

I felt good and satisfied. Then as I crossed a street, no more than two or three blocks from my hotel, my heart lurched. I could not believe my eyes. The girl Lori

was standing there on the corner, watching me approach. Either they had not taken her in the ambulance or she had been quickly released, and here she was—on the loose again. I saw her eyes in the glow of the streetlight she stood under. They were brown eyes, cleared from their former narcotic haze, and they looked at me with intelligence and keen recognition. She hurried to put her hands on me and started talking and trying to kiss me. I pulled away from her and ran. This time she did not fall but chased me with energetic desperation. She yelled for me to stop, claiming she had her knife now, that I owed her an explanation. She vented an infuriated scream that made my blood run cold: “Don’t act like you don’t know me!” She kept saying this.

All I cared about at this point was surviving until my plane took off tomorrow morning. I didn’t want her to know my hotel so I ran several blocks away from it. Then I ran harder to lose her. I felt my legs grow longer as they took great leaps. She grew fainter until I stopped hearing her at all. I unlocked the hotel door with a feeling of profound relief.

Thirty minutes later, having showered and brushed my teeth, ready for bed, I looked out the window. There she was down there on the sidewalk across the street. I watched her walk up and down the block as if waiting to meet someone. Too exhausted to think about it further, I lay on the bed and went out like a light. I didn’t stir until my morning wake-up call. There was not a sign of her in the bright daylight. Surely she was gone.

Just as I finished checking out of the hotel the airport shuttle rolled up. One passenger was already in the van—a lady with an utterly pleasant, clear-eyed face. She smiled and said good morning.

“Good morning,” I said.

I sat beside her in back. After the vehicle got going, the lady looked over at my bag I had between my feet and said, “My, you travel light.”

“Yeah.”

“This was my first trip out here,” she said. “I stayed with my sister. She’s lived here for a year.”

“I was here for neither business nor pleasure, as it turned out,” I said.

“Oh?”

I wanted to tell the truth. After last night I felt a need for some understanding.

“This is the sickest place I’ve ever been,” I said. “I’ve been to many cities, but I’ve never run into so much human degradation. I feel contaminated.”

“Wow,” she said.

“I take it you had a different experience,” I said.

“I certainly did,” she said. “I think this is a really neat place. The people are so open-minded. It’s very refreshing.”

I caught an eye-rolling glance from her. She thought I was a nut.

I said, “Last night a drug addict grabbed me from behind and chased me through the streets, and none of the locals thought there was anything wrong with it.”

She pressed her lips together and made a frown of mock-sadness and said,

“Mmm.”

Was she naïve or idiotic? Or was she just one of those so fortunate that the awful realities around her never touched her? At any rate, she was not someone who could relate to my story.

I said, “But it’s good to travel. It’s better to know what’s going on than it is to be ignorant.”

“I love to travel,” she said.

“The ocean from the cliffs is beautiful,” I said.

“Sumptuous.”



[poetry]

Hatched Loved Ones

Hatched loved ones, all yielding frontiers plus bog sensibilities,
Collapse sensate highways, one after another, until staid paragraphs,
Of poetry or prose reign in such psychic literature as is provided in relations.
The bedrock of food with utensils, sometimes, presents precious canisters or tea,
Yet, licks no flames, rubs no lids, avoids kismet, skips town, sneezes horse feathers,
Since reverting to visiting ice-covered land masses, deep oceans, or the exosphere, rots.
Financial benefits, like generated stories, experiment with snags in elevator transport,
Pursue partial ownership of rock gardens, invest in up-and-coming sushi franchises, chalk,
Until dawn’s otherwise well-behaved saloon zombies attend performances at elite institutions.
Russie Doodle dogs jumble revealed viciousness, extrapolate over carpet stains, break chairs,
Speak a loud the gratitude of a majority busied being vehicles of pride, dependence, irritation,
As reliance on oregano and cheese sandwiches brings rolling cameras, time in airport lines, vets.

by kj hannah greenberg

February Long Before Dawn

It is a moon to howl at,
intersected by arteries of distanced limbs.
The wolves cry angel,
luring silent pretty from hiding.
Frost has crisped lawn into blades of glass.
The train's first call, newborn on detached umbilicus.
A treed owl answers, as if silence
is anything but golden.

—April Salzano

Waking Anger

from coma, I demand fury open
red eyes and rescue me from feet
that walk all over me. Breaking
silence, a tongue
held by tack, together
we piss on graves.
The dead who deserve to be,
chisel dates on tombstones of those
who still have it coming. Rage
rides shotgun. I've got the wheel.

—April Salzano

Touch Me Not

by John H. Dromey

Bashful Jason Stanley congratulated himself a bit prematurely.

Sure—in a streak of almost unprecedented good fortune—he'd managed to bypass a passel of houseguests without a single close encounter. There'd been a handful of waves, of course, plus a few subtle nods of the head accompanied by a spattering of howdy-do's, all of which Jason had returned in kind. Brad, a first cousin, once removed, and incidentally an expert marksman, pointed a finger at Jason and rapidly lowered his upraised thumb. Jason, in turn, slapped his hand to his heart and pretended to stumble for a couple of steps. Why not play along? You can't catch germs from that far away.

Even Cousin Dot had been content to remain seated on the porch swing and blow him a kiss. Maybe this year's gathering of the clan would not turn out to be such an ordeal for the painfully-shy young man as it had sometimes been in the past. The weekend was off to an unusually good start, anyway.

Jason's luck ran out, however, soon after he entered his great uncle Joe Stanley's mansion. Poised at the foot of the main staircase was his cousin Lily. Although it was still mid-morning, she wore a low-cut evening gown, a pearl choker, elbow-length gloves, and as an incongruous completion of her ensemble—a pair of ratty sneakers. In addition to being a self-styled fashion plate, compulsively changing outfits five or six times a day, Cousin Lily was an inveterate hugger. She put a crooked grin on her face and stepped forward.

Jason held a fully-packed suitcase with his left hand. His luggage would have made an effective barricade, but he didn't have time to move the heavy bag into place. Instinctively, he extended his right arm to ward off Lily's advance. She clasped his outstretched bare hand with both of her gloved ones. With a considerable amount of effort Jason tugged himself free, stepped around his Cousin Lily and fled upstairs, taking two steps at a time.

When he reached the landing, Jason paused to catch his breath and to assess his contaminated condition. He supposed it could have been worse—at least she hadn't sneezed in his face—but, even so, he'd have to avoid touching his eyes or nose until after he'd had a chance to scrub his hands. Once again breathing normally, he continued on to his room.

Some indeterminate time later, Jason retreated to the library. He ignored the

sound of approaching sirens. Some thirty minutes after that, the young man heard voices in the hallway.

“We don’t have enough manpower to follow proper interview procedures; we’ll have to put all of the suspects together in one room. So far, nobody has a credible alibi.”

“Will we have to read them their rights?”

“Not unless someone refuses to cooperate.”

Fifteen minutes later, the library was crammed full of cousins and assorted law enforcement personnel.

Sheriff Mitchell introduced himself to the assembled suspects, and then he got right down to business.

“A serious crime has been committed on the premises,” the lawman said. “If all of you will voluntarily assist me and my deputies in gathering evidence, we can get started right away and maybe wrap this case up in a hurry. The alternative is to call for a county bus and haul all of you down to the jailhouse to be interviewed. Let’s have a quick show of hands by anyone who’d like to take a bus ride.”

Nobody moved.

“Mr. Stanley has been shot,” the sheriff said. “He was alone in his workshop with the door locked on the inside. The paramedics had to break in. All of the shop windows have security bars but no screens. We surmise that the shot was fired through the one window that was open.”

While the sheriff spoke, a young woman went around the room swabbing hands.

“Does anyone here have a motive for shooting Mr. Stanley?”

A dozen fingers pointed at Jason. “That guy carries the family name. He’s Uncle Joe’s principal heir.”

“Jason won’t inherit if he’s convicted of murder,” someone said, in a stage whisper that carried throughout the room. “Then we’d all get a share.”

The sheriff studied the people in the room.

Lily was wearing a sundress; Brad was clad in surfer-style swim trunks with a beach towel around his neck. The other cousins were also in summery garb, ranging from skimpy bikinis and modest one-piece swimsuits to tank tops or tee-shirts with lightweight skirts, slacks, and shorts.

“Judging by the way you’re dressed, I’d guess you’re an outdoorsy bunch,” the sheriff commented, not expecting an answer. He got one anyway.

“Jason isn’t like the rest of us,” Cousin Brad said. “His favorite flower’s a weed,”

“Jewelweed is an herb,” Jason corrected. In response to the sheriff’s frown, he added, “You may know it as touch-me-not.”

“Yeah.” The sheriff pointed to Jason’s rash-covered right hand. “Have you ever had anything like that before?”

“Once, when I was a kid. I petted a stray dog...”

“Don’t get Jason started on his allergies,” Cousin Lily interrupted. “Dog dander, ragweed, dust mites... the list goes on and on. His parents kept him indoors most of the time in a pet-free, plant-free home with a kitchen so clean you could eat off the floor.”

“And you are?”

"Lily Simmonds."

"Did anybody else know about Jason's condition?" the sheriff addressed the room at large.

"Everybody!" a chorus of voices responded.

"This could be important," Sheriff Mitchell said. "A recently-fired revolver was found in a thick patch of poison ivy."

"Well, if I'm guilty," Jason said, "why doesn't the rash go farther up my arm?"

"You were wearing a long-sleeved shirt earlier," Brad said.

"To protect myself from sunburn, but I changed to short sleeves as soon as I got to my room. Even if I hadn't, a lack of plant DNA on the sleeve will prove I'm innocent."

"Gunshot residue could prove the opposite," Brad pointed out.

"Maybe not," Lily contradicted. "He's probably washed his hands a dozen times by now."

"No, I haven't," Jason said, in his own defense. "There was an out-of-order sign on my bathroom door. When I tried to wash my hands at the kitchen sink, the cook shooed me away."

Sheriff Mitchell turned to his colleague. "Anything?"

The crime tech shook her head. "Nothing conclusive."

"You caught him red-handed," Brad told the sheriff.

"Not to mention with an itchy trigger finger," Lily chimed in.

"That's all circumstantial," the lawman said. "I need solid proof."

A deputy entered the library and reported to the sheriff. "There's no long-sleeved shirt in Jason's room. There are some fresh ashes in an upstairs fireplace, though. I scratched through them and found the remains of buttons."

The phone rang. The sheriff mostly listened, nodding his head a couple of times.

"We have an eyewitness. Your uncle was playing possum so he wouldn't get shot a second time. He didn't see the shooter's face, but he saw a forearm sticking through the open window."

"That won't help," someone observed. "One bare arm looks pretty much like another."

"The arm wasn't bare," Sheriff Mitchell said. "I'm ready to make an arrest."

Jason let out a deep sigh and held out his wrists. "I know when I'm licked. I'll go quietly, Sheriff, but first, could you please give those handcuffs a quick rubdown with a sanitary wipe?"

"Relax, Mr. Stanley," the lawman said. "I'm not arresting you. Your cousin Lily is the guilty party."

"How do you know?" Jason asked.

"The shooter was wearing distinctive gloves that your uncle described perfectly. What happened next is fairly easy to figure out. She disposed of the gun in a patch of poison ivy, getting some of the sap on her gloves in the process, and then she went inside and watched out of a second-story window for your arrival. Somehow, in a deliberate attempt to frame you, your cousin contrived to transfer some of the poison from her gloves to your hand."

Jason nodded his head. "Direct contact; just like when I petted that stray dog."

What about the burning of my shirt?"

"That was done to throw further suspicion on you and also to cover up the destruction of the one piece of incriminating evidence that pointed directly to your cousin—her long glove with gunshot residue on it. She knew, or suspected, that your skin would test negative, but that could be blamed on compulsive hand washing; clean sleeves on your shirt, however, would have raised an element of doubt."

"If washing his hands made Jason seem guilty, why did Lily put up an out-of-order sign on the bathroom door, or did she?" Brad wondered.

"We won't know for sure until the crime lab examines the ashes, of course," Sheriff Mitchell told him, "but I suspect she did. I'm sure Miss Simmonds wanted the poison ivy to be at full strength to make her frame-up more convincing."

"I'm sorry I doubted you, Cuz," Brad told Jason.

"Apology accepted, and I want you to know, Brad—should I actually inherit this place someday, which I hope won't happen for a very long time—you and my other cousins will always be welcome here."

Jason glanced at a handcuffed Cousin Lily. "The ones that aren't in prison, that is."



28 BONES

The succubus chose Robin.
She took his sperm
scratched loving cuts into his back
promised to return
and vanished to the night.

Robin jumped from bed
switched on the light
in the mirror he saw
the blood from love
drip to the floor.

A demon hissed into his ear,
“you stole my love
now you shall pay my price.”
Fangs tore Robin’s face
talons flayed his skin.

Robin’s naked skull
stared into the darkness
of the demon’s grin.
Stringy fingers squashed his head.
His skull exploded
twenty-eight bones
bounced along the floor.

Squishy in his claws
the demon hurled
Robin’s brain
against the wall.

When the succubus returned
for a final fling
she saw that Robin was truly dead.

So she shredded his brain
and ate the gooeey mess.

—John Hayes

[poetry]

Picture, Cap and Gown

Cap and gown
history major,
minor in math—
graduation under
the maple tree,
bright red leaves,
but the times don't show it;
a full face grins.
There's a shadow
below your nose
above your lips,
it settles into
a gray mixed day.
You stand on farm land
with no plow in hand
or in the distance bare—
no damn cows to be seen
no red barn or damn homestead
just open acres of space—
and downed fences—
and some idle brush
blending with quill feathers
flushed within a background
of branches.
Life is a simple picture.
Life is a simple picture,
repeating with tree shadows
hovering around leaves.

Dirt in the background
dances freely—
it's here your memories are folded,
into prairie winds.
You are still framed
in solid black and white—
you can't leave this space on your own,
from now to your own eternity,
to your salvation or your grave.
Your whole life now has spots
and spaces behind it.
Did you grow older and have children?
Did you marry a man of the plow
or that chemist you had the brief
affair with in agricultural school?
Did the graduation certificate
rolled up in your hand
like a squashed turnip,
donut, or dead sea scroll
fade by moisture and sun
or wind up cursed with sand?
I pull down your life
and frame it here
like a stage curtain
handful of future,
present, passed, and pasted
in a space dimension of
3" x 5" tucked beneath
a simple footnote in time.

Michael Lee Johnson—

Billy Burke

Here drinks Billy
boisterous Billy buying rounds
for all his cronies in every local corner pub.
He jigged and reeled and horn piped, too,
as louder and louder the piper blew,
quicker and quicker Billy flew.

Here loves Billy
charming Billy,
who lured the bonnie lassies,
wined and dined 'em
smothered 'em with kisses,
then smothered 'em with pillows.

Here thrives Billy
business booming, peddling
perfect corpses, unmarred,
unscarred to the medicine men
banging down his doors.
"Mr. Burke, if you please."
"Want a cold one, Doc?"

Here stands Billy
bletherin' Billy in the dock
"I blames it on the guards, m'Lord,
guarded them graves so well,
could nae snatch them bodies nae more.

I did it all for the good of humanity,
I be's High Kirk, ne'er went on the dole,
thanks to my skill, to my slender fingers
m'Lord. I were a craftsman, I were."

Here lies Billy
a felon of Edinburgh
well hanged in 1829.

—Liz Dolan

The Seasons and the Slants

I live my life inside my patio window.
It's here, at my business desk I slip
into my own warm pajamas and slippers—
seek Jesus, come to terms
with my own cross and brittle conditions.
Outside, winter night turns to winter storm,
the blue jay, cardinal, sparrows and doves
go into hiding, away from the razor whipping winds,
behind willow tree bare limb branches—
they lose their faces in somber hue.
Their voices at night abbreviate
and are still, short like Hemingway sentences.
With this poetic mind, no one cares
about the seasons and the slants
the wind or its echoes.
I live my life inside my patio window.

Bowl of Black Petunias

If you must leave me, please
leave me for something special,
like a beautiful bowl of black petunias—
for when the memories leak
and cracks appear
and old memories fade,
flowers rebuff bloom,
sidewalks fester weeds
and we both lie down
separately from each other
for the very last time.

Inside This World Zipped

I'm inside this world of silent creative
space
within a zipped up tube of words
within the darkness I crawl
from my vocabulary.
I look on the walls of night
look for an exit.
I look through the crow in the darkness,
the gray on the bark of the willow tree,
serve as my lantern out of here.
Wayward are the gray clouds
I can't see I toss my faith upon.
Wild horses of creativity form
lines, stanzas, poems with
and without form.
It's here I deserted the darkness
and concluded in the end
those final lines that allowed
you to envelope me
between my screams and creativity.

Michael Lee Johnson—

Insemination

by Carol Holland March

Dorothy had been a ghost-messenger long enough to know her way around the dream world--she hardly ever misjudged her coordinates, and she was adept at dream design, her specialty in the Afterlife Studies Program from which she had graduated with honors. As Dorothy peered through the time tunnel into her sister's bedroom, she was pleased to see Eva sleeping. Bringing her attention back to the dream world, she glanced around her creation, the garden of their childhood home---summer flowers everywhere, the rows of peonies particularly evocative. She smiled as she arranged her luminescent form on the wooden swing. Her supervisor would be pleased.

She didn't wait long for her sister to appear. Eva's eyelids fluttered as she relaxed into deep sleep, and, while Dorothy was still appreciating the bouquet of the ivory peony blossoms, Eva appeared on the swing beside her.

"Eva. It's me. Dorothy."

Eva's eyes widened when she saw her sister. "You surprised me."

"How are you, Sis?"

"Oh, Dorothy, I'm so glad to see you. And look where we are. I loved playing in this garden when we were children. We were happy then, weren't we? Do you remember?"

"Of course I remember. That's why I brought you here."

Eva looked down at her bare feet resting in thick grass. "Those were such happy times. Everything's different now. I didn't think my life was going to turn out like this."

"Like what?"

"I don't have anyone to talk to."

"You can talk to me."

Eva moved closer to her sister and lowered her voice. "It's Peter. He works late most nights, and when he is home, all he does is sit and watch TV. We hardly ever go out. Sometimes I feel like screaming. You don't know how much I've missed you since you died."

She tried to lean against her older sister, but the ghost had risen from the wooden swing suspended from two branches of a magnolia tree and Eva, unable to check her forward momentum, landed face down on the wooden slats.

"Of course I do," Dorothy said. She frowned as her sister hastily righted herself, smoothing the skirt of her nightgown with trembling fingers. "Why do you think I came to see you? It's a big universe out there, you know. Do you think it's easy to arrive at exactly this place at a time when you're asleep?"

"I suppose not. I haven't dreamed of you for ages. I thought you were busy."

"I have been busy, but it takes two to make a dream, and plenty of juggling of space-time probabilities. Math was never my best subject, and ... Oh, never mind." She stopped, embarrassed to catch herself complaining. "And stop crying, will you? I don't know how you do that, dream and cry at the same time. No, don't tell me. I haven't got time for nonsense." Dorothy still felt guilty about leaving Eva on her own all those years ago. These visits were her way of making it up to her.

"I came to see you, Eva," she began again, "to see how you're getting along. You've been married a long time now."

"Twelve years," Eva dried her eyes with the hem of her nightgown. "I'm thirty-six. You would be thirty-eight if you'd lived."

Dorothy suppressed a smile. She still looked seventeen, a bit pale from the meningitis, but among the ghost-messengers, a pale complexion was a mark of beauty.

"So what's the problem? He makes a decent living; you have a beautiful home. What's stopping you from having a child?"

Eva blushed. "It may not be in the stars."

"What have the stars got to do with it? If you really want to know what's affecting your life, you might try paying more attention to the spirit world. "

"The what?"

"The spirit world, Eva. My world." Dorothy looked at Eva's stricken face and felt contrite. "Uh, sorry, Sis."

"It's all right. I really thought it was the stars."

Dorothy forced herself to think about the child who would transform her sister's life, and decided to try again.

"Your daughter wants you to honor her contract, Eva. She's been waiting a long time to be born. She's very picky about the space-time intersections; they have to be exactly right if she's going to accomplish her goals, and the time is now. You've agreed to be her mother. That's what I came to tell you. It's time. Past time actually."

"Past time for what? I didn't sign any contract. What are you talking about?" She giggled. "You made that up, didn't you?"

The ghost rolled her eyes. "I don't make things up, and you did sign something. Not on paper. It's a spiritual agreement. Do you remember how you always said you wanted children?"

Eva turned away and twisted her fingers in the folds of her nightgown.

"Eva?"

"Yes. Yes, I've said it."

"And haven't you been to every doctor in town trying to figure out why you haven't conceived?"

"Well, of course I wanted to know why. Peter's family is getting impatient, so I thought I should check. It's strange to be married so long and be..."

"Barren?"

“Don’t say that,” Eva cried. “I am not barren. I can have a child; all the doctors said so. And there’s nothing wrong with Peter either. We’re just unlucky.”

Dorothy felt her alignment begin to slip.

“Wait,” Eva whispered as the ghost faded to a transparent outline. “Don’t leave me. Please don’t go. Oh, I love you so much.” She twisted around on the swing, trying to wrap her arms around a dissipating light.

“I can’t stay if you lie to me.”

“I won’t lie. Come back. I’ll tell you the truth.”

“All right.” The ghost made a mental adjustment to her calibration in time, and, suddenly solid again, plunked down on the wooden swing. “We were talking about the contract.”

“I still don’t remember signing anything.”

“What about all your prattling on about being a mother? Did you think that was idle conversation you could dismiss whenever you felt like it?”

“Yes! Of course I did.”

“It didn’t occur to you that you might be conveying your intention to the universe.”

“What?”

“Or that you might be making an agreement with someone who wants to be born.”

“Of course not. How could I? We don’t believe in things like that.”

Eva had a point. Only in her dreams could her sister perceive anything beyond the tip of her own nose. Their whole family had been like that, with more rules about so-called reality than anybody could remember, much less follow. Of course Eva didn’t remember her agreement with a soul waiting to be born. And not just any soul either. Out of the ranks of the beings waiting for earthly bodies to become available, somehow her sister had attracted the attention of one of the Old Ones.

It seemed an odd choice, but if this Old One believed she could prepare for her teaching mission by growing up in a dysfunctional family, she couldn’t ask for a better parent than Eva. And the child would transform Eva’s life. Dorothy had been permitted to peek into her sister’s future before she accepted this assignment. She had seen that Eva would love her daughter fiercely until the day she died. Even Peter would soften when his baby daughter smiled.

Dorothy gazed fondly at her sister who was weeping into her hands. Eva looked older than her years, but maybe it was the old-fashioned nightgown with its high neck and long sleeves. She thought about suggesting an update in her sleep attire might make things run a bit more smoothly with Peter, but before she could form the words, she felt a tug in her mind.

Dorothy turned. A golden door swung open. It revealed a flowing mass of pink and blue light. Sounds emanated from the light, a high pitched whine at first, then the Old One’s voice fell like raindrops spattering against her forehead. Tell her it must be soon.

“Sis,” Dorothy put her arm around Eva’s shoulder. “I came to tell you about the baby.”

“I know.” Eva stared at a spot behind Dorothy’s shoulder. “I saw her. She’s so beautiful. She reached for me. Oh, Dorothy, she loves me already. I was worried I

might have a child who didn't love me."

Dorothy glanced over her shoulder. The light had vanished.

"What did you see?"

"The baby, of course. A little girl, all dressed up in a beautiful pink dress with white lace and blue ribbons. I'm so happy that you came to see me. I really do have a daughter out there somewhere. The only problem is...."

"What?"

"Peter. Sometimes I think about leaving him. I wonder if it's too late for me to find someone who cares for me more than his job."

"Peter was always obsessed with his business. You knew that from the beginning."

"I know," Eva wailed. "But I wanted to get married."

"We all have problems, Sis. And you want this child, even if your marriage isn't perfect. He wants a child too."

"I'm afraid he won't care about a girl."

"It will be fine. I promise."

"How do you know?"

"I know a lot of things."

The sisters sat in silence.

"It's better being dead, isn't it?"

"I am happier," Dorothy said. "I love my job. I call on people and spend time with them. They tell me what their deepest desires are, because after all, I'm only a ghost in a dream, so it doesn't matter. Then I whisper something in their ear, and what I whisper is what they remember when they wake up."

"What will you whisper to me?"

The ghost leaned closer. Eva bent her head as her sister's lips grazed her hair.

"Keep your agreement. Bear the child."

From the dream world, Dorothy peered at her sister as she awakened from her dream. Moonlight flooded the bedroom. A wind had risen and the branches of the willow tree outside the window moaned as they whipped against the windowpane. Dorothy knew that Eva did not have the focus to remember their meeting, but it didn't matter if she had managed to catch Dorothy's last words.

Eva opened her eyes. She reached over and patted the other side of the bed, but her hand encountered only cool, smooth sheets. She glanced to her left. She was alone. "I'm almost too old," she said into the pillow.

Downstairs, a door slammed shut. Another door opened and closed. She jumped up, stepped out of her voluminous nightgown, and kicked it under the bed. She was back under the covers before he reached the top of the stairs. When the bedroom door opened, her eyes were closed. She sighed deep in her throat and turned over, slowly, luxuriously, so she was in exactly the right position to be awakened when he slipped into bed beside her.

As the connection between them faded, Dorothy smiled. The Old One would be pleased.



[short story]

NO PRIVATE EYE

by Cory Latarski

I followed him to the corner store. I couldn't tell whether or not he knew. I'm not a private eye now and I sure as hell wasn't then. All I could do was hope. I didn't come prepared. I didn't have binoculars or anything like that. I really could of used a snack, some potato chips, a double cheeseburger, anything really, but like I said, I'm was an amateur, not even that, a beginner really.

He looked hung over, and I *know* hung over. Hell, come to think of it, I think I was hung over. The glazed, groggy eyes, the messed up hair...and also the robe. (Okay so it didn't take a real detective to tell a man going to the store in his pajamas probably had a little too much fun the night before). I thought about following him in there but I thought that would be too much too soon. I wasn't ready for that. Besides, what good would it do me to witness his interaction with people? None. I'm just not that smooth is the main reason. Instead of keeping my distance and observing I'd probably end up blurting it out to him. What I needed was to learn about his comings and goings, the when and where's. The who, what, and why's weren't all that pertinent for the task at hand.

All the same I was curious what he'd walk out with. My choice would've been a large sports drink, also maybe a Pepsi, and then I probably would've been on my way home to wait for a pizza I ordered online shortly after I woke up startled from passing out the night before. He came out with a half gallon of orange juice and a bunch of bananas. Healthy guy. Bananas are a good choice. I probably would've had one of those as soon as I woke up.

He walked with a slight limp, but it didn't make him any less formidable. He was at least 6'5" and not the type of 6'5" where it looks like he'd been stretched out to be that tall. He was a solid 6'5", probably at least 300 pounds. His robe

looked like it was about to un-plaid itself at the seams. He kind of looked like Ashton Kutcher if he was muscular and fat at the same time. Like Ashton Kutcher if he was a linebacker. Thinking of it in those terms made my conscience ease up since I'm not a fan. Still, this would not be easy. I would need to be sneaky, and graceful, and discreet. I would need to be everything that I'm not. We're talking about the guy who fell down the stairs at his high school commencement. It was only three stairs but felt like twenty as the whole class was watching; pure embarrassment. We are also talking about the guy who told everyone in school that he got to second base with Allison Price the day after it happened, nearly preventing it from ever happening again, let alone rounding to home plate. If anything I was (and am) a klutz and a loudmouth. For this I would have to change. For this I would have to temporarily become someone else entirely.

I sat in my car with the windows up, (which didn't matter because they weren't tinted, but somehow made me feel more invisible) wearing a black hoodie and sunglasses. I felt like an updated Marty McFly in *Back to the Future Part Two* spying on his former self. Only this was no movie and the end would surely not result in hover crafts and a trip to the Wild West to save Doc Brown's life. No sir, or ma'am, depending who is reading, if anyone. What I'm doing is about saving a life though. The things we do for people we love. This friend saved my life once and I owed him and this is how he collects. Said he would do it himself but he would surely be recognized. How do you turn down a favor to someone who owes your life to? Easy answer, you can't. So I sat in my car as I mentioned, and I watched him take the short walk in his slippers back to his apartment building.

Of course I didn't want him to notice me, but at the same time I almost wanted to be caught. I guess that was nerves, wanting a way out and all that. Although I don't know that that would guarantee me a way out as much as it would for sure an ass-beating. I'm 5'8", 180lbs. I'm no Shaq but I'm no Danny Devito. I'm an inch taller than Tom Cruise but who gives a shit. Point is the odds aren't in my favor against an angry, muscley, roided-out Ashton Kutcher look alike type. Just the fact that he kind of looked like Ashton Kutcher made me think I could maybe kick his ass, but my logic side said no. He could palm my head like a basketball and dunk it onto the ground before I could say "punked". You'd think Hollywood was asking me to write this with all the name drops. Truth is I'm just passing time.

I sat there for about another three hours nearly dying of boredom. I cleaned my entire car. I even put Armor-All on the dash. I thought of leaving to get some food, (a coney dog sounded nice, does now too) but I knew that I should stay the whole day; really get a sense of his routines. Looking back I don't know why I felt that way. This would all be over soon and everything was laid out for me. I guess I was nervous, or it was more likely that I just couldn't think about anything else.

So I looked and I listened and what I heard most was a rumbling stomach. I looked at my watch and realized that I hadn't eaten all day. So naturally, I ordered a pizza. I gave him the streets and a description of my car along with some landmarks and proceeded to order a medium round with mushroom, pepperoni, onions, bacon, and banana peppers, and also a two liter of diet Pepsi (I'm trying to watch my figure).

Looking back at it having him meet me at the car wasn't probably the smartest idea, but nothing happened from it so I guess who cares. I stood outside the car to meet him (again not a good idea probably, but like I said I'm a novice). The pizza guy gets there, a young guy with peach fuzz and what looks like a buzz cut under a red hat with his company's name on it.

"Twelve even," he says politely and gives a half smile.

"What a deal," I say and dig some waded up bills out of my pocket. He looks around with wonder. "Been waiting for the damn AAA for two hours now," I tell him, hoping he bought it.

I fish a ten and a five out of the wad and hand it to him. "Here ya go bud," I say, "keep the change."

"Thank you," he says, and adds, "have a good day."

"You too man," I say back.

I open the door and get back in my car. I carefully put the pizza down in the passenger seat like a helpless infant. I open the two liter and take a swig. I close it back up and place it on the floor between my ankles. The pizza smells so good I can hardly wait. I clap and rub my hands together like I'm Mr. Myagi about to heal some shit. I opened the box and it's glorious. Realizing that I don't have plates I place the box on my lap to proceed. I grab a cheesy slice, take a bite, and it is hangover heaven. Ashton doesn't know what he's missing.

Soon I find the pizza half gone and me all the way full to the point of nausea. One might say I should've ordered a small or at least taken it down to a medium, but I can just never bring myself to order anything less than a large pizza. Even sitting there post pizza near combustion, I was already excited for cold breakfast pizza the next day. As I sat there crazily fantasizing about what I had just eaten except cold and in the morning the sun was beginning its descend and the reddish light of the near night seemed to cast a warmth over my entire body. I sat still and enjoyed the scenery and thought about how great pizza was as my eyes began to shut.

"Fuck you bitch! I *said fuck you bitch!!*" is what I think the young hooker said. It was hard to tell in the dark but I think under different circumstances she might've been quite attractive. I do think someone should take that phrase, yelled by that woman, and make it the sound for an alarm clock because I have never went from so asleep to so awake in a matter of seconds. I was immediately entranced by what was going on around me.

"Fuck you bitch!" sounded the alarm clock hooker once more. She had very dark, rough skin, and a half-fro. I call it that because it was very small. The other girl was thin, white, with stringy blond hair and raccoon eyes. "No fuck you!" fired back. Good one, I thought, as I watched the white girl push the black girl. She stumbled back, but stayed on her feet. Impressive, considering she was wearing at least six inch heels.

The two were standing in front of a Prius driven by a middle-aged Indian looking man. He sat there with a gigantic smile on his face. I don't think he understood English very well. Perhaps he thought this was all part of the show. At any rate he seemed to be enjoying himself. Maybe that was his thing, chick fights.

There are much weirder fetishes out there.

Alarm clock came back in a fiery rage, pinning the other girl against the back door and putting her hands around her neck. As much as I wanted to see this play out I thought that this would sooner or later end up with some blue and red lights and I thought it better I not be around for that. I started the car and pulled away, looking back every few seconds until they look like blurry miniatures rolling around on the ground. The Indian man was still parked in the street.

In all the commotion I had forgotten the task at hand. I glanced at the clock wondering, was I too late? Only 6:13. Not a ton of time, but I *would* make it. Damn Midwest winters, they make 6 p.m. feel like 11 at night. Heaven's Gaites Cemetery, 6:30 p.m. every week on Sundays, plot 20. It was the one constant, Joe had said. He never misses it, and he's never late, he had said, it's perfect.

The gates to Heavens Gaites were about what you'd expect them to be; beautiful and menacing, and also creepy, but what cemetery wasn't creepy. I drove under a steel arch and found my way to plot twenty. He had no yet arrived. It was only 6:23. I guess the guy's punctual, I thought. I stopped a couple rows behind the plot as not to look suspicious, and then I cut the engine.

Sure enough right at 6:30 he showed. He stepped out of the car in a long black trench coat. It might have been a pea coat, I'm not sure. His hair was done and he was not in pajamas, but there were lights every so often on the grounds and when he passed through a light, I could tell it was him. I looked in the mirror and straightened my tie. I wore a suit to play the part. Also I figured no one would expect anything from a guy in a nice suit...unless you're a politician.

He was carrying a colorful bouquet of flowers. Once he got to the grave he knelt down in front of it. He set the flowers on the ground in front of him. He took a black leather glove of his right hand and put it on top of the granite gravestone. His head was tilted down. I couldn't tell for certain that he was crying, but it seemed likely. For a minute I felt bad. Then I realized that if I quit now my friend Joe might end up here, or very likely me or someone else I care about. People like these often went after loved ones.

I remember opening the car door and it sounding like the loudest car door opening history. Not that I know about the history of car door openings but still, it was loud. No one seemed to notice. I looked around and didn't see anyone. It was dark, but I felt sure. I took a rolled up piece of paper out of my pocket and walked towards plot 20. As I did he got up and began walking back to his car. I changed my direction to cross paths. It was cold and I'd wished I wore a coat, but I knew this looked better, more accessible.

When we came together he went passed without even looking up. "Mr. Nathaniel Crumboli?" I asked.

He looked turned, a bit surprised. "Yes?"

"You've been served." I extended my hand with the rolled up paper in it.

"What?" he said, and took the paper. He unrolled it and then looked up quickly, (probably because he realized the page was blank) and that's when I shot him. It was a headshot. I thought about shooting him in the chest, but ultimately felt that shooting in the head would be the easiest way. I didn't want to risk shooting

him in the chest and missing the heart and him one day coming back for me. With a shot to the head this was much less likely to happen, so the head it was. Upon seeing it I immediately felt bad for whatever family he had and what it would be like to see that. But, I had to do it.

I drove home at a medium pace even though every bone in my body wanted to speed home. I didn't want to seem like I was going overly slow to avoid suspicion, and the last thing I needed was to get pulled over for speeding and make a unsolicited admission to some traffic cop because I was so nervous.

When I got home I locked the door to my apartment, took off my shoes, and instantly felt relief. My cat was meowing and I realized that in my anxiousness of the morning I had forgot to feed him. "Aw I'm sorry Muffin," I said as I petted her gently. Don't blame me my ex- wife named the cat. I filled her bowl and then headed to the fridge. I took out a cold beer and twisted the cap off and took a long, good pull. It relaxed my entire body.

As I walked to the living room I took off my suit coat and threw it on the coffee table. I loosened my tie, untucked my shirt, and then sat down on the couch. I grabbed the remote and switched on the television, basketball game. I used to be a big fan but hadn't had time lately. I kept the game on, it was comforting, reminded me of the past.

I reached to the back of my pants and grabbed out my wallet. I pulled out a small white piece of paper with a number on it. I took my cell phone out and dialed the number. He told me only to call in emergency but I thought he'd want to know. Three rings, no answer. I left a message. "Hey Joe, it's Trevor, it's done," I said, half smiling. In a way, I was a bit proud of myself. As I went to put the piece of paper back in my wallet my license caught my eye. It was my picture but the name read: Joe Fleming. Weird, I thought, and that's when my door was kicked in.

One thing I still can't figure out is how Joe managed to switch out our ID's and also how he managed to get one so real that even the cops couldn't tell it was fake. I've made calls and then even when I was here continued to write letters but no one that I know will admit to knowing Joe. It seems everyone was in on it. I have to give it to him, it's one elaborate scheme.

I hope he's happy somewhere, wherever he is. I can take at least a little solace in knowing that I may have saved some lives. Not bad for an amateur. I guess I did get caught, but like I said, I'm no private eye. I'll tell you what the worst part of all this was though, I never got to have that cold breakfast pizza.



Bittersweet Justice

by John H. Dromey

The drawing room was crowded with miscreants of every stripe.

"This isn't my cup of tea," one of the men said.

"What's that? Are you trying to tell me you don't like this situation where a pompous amateur detective has once again persuaded the police to assemble all the murder suspects in one room so he can dramatically reveal the guilty party that no one else suspects?"

"No. I'm saying I ordered sweet tea and this is bitter."

Just then the amateur sleuth—a remorseful killer—entered the room, glanced at the empty teacup and asked, "Who drank my hemlock?"



THE RESURRECTIONISTS

“I don’t know about this, John. It’s not proper.” Nigel looked around, but the fog limited his vision to seven or eight meters. It was silent. He assumed they were alone.

“Doesn’t matter, mate. You’ve got kids to feed, yeah?”

“That I do.” Nigel stepped back for a moment to catch his breath. He rubbed the sweat off his brow and watched John continue to toss mud left and right. “Kate had twin girls last spring. They’re the most beautiful pair of angels I’ve ever seen. Sometimes, I watch them sleep and wonder how I got to be so blessed.”

John turned his back and pierced his shovel deep into the muck. He bent over in an effort to pluck large chunks of earth out of the ground. “If a bleeding sod like you can get so lucky, then maybe my turn’s around the bend.” As John worked, the seams on the back of his britches strained then ripped.

Nigel stifled a laugh. “Looks like you’ve got a brilliant stroke of luck. That hole is big enough for the King’s carriage to parade through.”

“Royalty.” John spat on the growing mound of dirt. “Willy was born with a golden scepter up his arse. Never has to work a day in his life. Blokes like us?” He gestured at his soiled clothes. “We got to do what we can, yeah?”

“I suppose you’re right.” Nigel felt a tinge of regret in his stomach. He glanced at the headstone. According to the engravings, Clara Marshall was only sixteen years old when she died four days ago. Nigel imagined a dainty girl with ethereal laughter, flitting about like a summer oriole while dreams of marrying a prince remained fresh in her eyes. The vision made him think of his own daughters safe at home, sleeping in shoddy cribs filled with straw. Nigel shuddered. He picked up his shovel and continued digging.

Moments later, a sharp thump echoed into the dull evening. John grabbed a lantern from the nearby cart. The horse in front snorted at his sudden movement but didn’t offer any further protest. John placed the lantern over the shallow hole in the ground. “There it is. A little more digging and the coffin will be ripe for the pickings.”

Nausea wrapped its tendrils around Nigel’s insides. He wiped his dirty face with a handkerchief. “What happens after that?”

“We throw her in the cart and take her to Saint George’s. I hear the doctors offer two hundred quid, so one for each of us. A fine price, yeah?” John grinned. In the dim glow of the lantern, Nigel could see each tooth create jagged mountains and sunken valleys.

“A hundred quid?” Nigel took a deep breath, trying to shake off the illness building up inside of him. It would take him years of working at the tavern to even see that amount of money. “I could really use that.” He glanced at John. “But disturbing a new grave doesn’t seem - “

“Can’t disturb someone who’s already dead. Besides, the hospital only pays tops

by Lew Andrada

for fresh corpses.” John waved him off. “You want to leave? Go ahead, mate. I’ll take your share.” He started digging again, clearing mud from the top of the coffin. “I’ll have mutton chops every night and feast like King Willy. And you? You’ll go on pouring my ale and complaining about your problems. Don’t forget that I tried to help you out, yeah?” He continued muttering as he worked. A cross carved on the lid emerged as John tossed debris out of the grave.

Nigel closed his eyes and prayed for forgiveness. “Fine. Let me help you.”

John grunted. “Money changes everything.”

“Absolutely. Everything’s different now.”

They finished the rest of their work in silence. When the coffin was clear of all the impeding dirt, both men stopped for a moment and stared at the exposed wood.

“No turning back,” said John.

Nigel nodded. Several hundred quid flashed in his mind. “I’m ready to do whatever it takes.”

John cocked an eyebrow at him then shrugged. He took a crowbar and popped open the foot of the coffin. The next set of nails proved to be more of a challenge. “There’s a screwdriver in my tool kit. Grab it and lend me a hand, yeah?”

“Of course.”

With Nigel’s aid, the rest of the lid came off with relative ease. Clara Marshall lay before them. Her hair had been arranged into dark brown curls, and she wore a white dress that was matched by the color of her skin. There were no more dreams in her eyes. Clara’s face bulged in an ugly manner, a sign that death had already caressed her once blushing cheeks.

Nigel wanted to vomit. He thought about his lovely Kate: how she nursed their daughters with care in the morning; how she made the twins laugh with puppets she made out of ratty cloth; how she sang lullabies each night to comfort their cries.

John made a clicking noise with his tongue. “Shame. She was so young. Well, better get a move on, yeah? Let’s get her into the cart.”

As John bent over to pick her up, Nigel put the screwdriver down and picked up the shovel. “Thank you, John, for helping me out. Much obliged.” In one swift, arcing motion, Nigel wedged the shovel into the back of John’s skull. He made gurgling noises as Nigel repeated the action once more. A third, decisive swing ensured that John would never feast like a king.

Nigel’s labored breaths came out of his mouth in hot, white puffs. The feeling of nausea faded away. “Two hundred quid for the girl, and maybe another two for you, poor man.” He nudged John’s crumpled body with his foot. “I’m terribly sorry that I had to do this, but I’ve got kids to feed, yeah?”



Unlike the Teenage Attitude Attributed to the Prime Minister's Dalliance

Unlike the prime minister's dalliance, with two Barbados maidens,
One St. Thomas guy, a bobcat, all jinked by an occasional scirocco,
Our family phone's ongoing summons to contemplate giant lizards,
Books wrought from cocobolo, also comfortable devices for urging locals
To embrace commercial doohickeys, expurgate data files, plus steal vintems,
Brings home all manners of card sharks, especially guys enamored of faro,
Centerpieces featuring gorse, maybe, adolescent sprezzatura, as well as
Jack rabbit mittens, and fossicking Grand Basset Griffon Vendéens.
Together, relatives strive, making meaning from empty, familial concerns,
Annual, women's air pistol events, mixed martial arts, the dominance found
In zebra flesh. Swimming in tarns, in the good 'ole summertime, most often
Remains invigorating. Strumming berimbau, though, replete with sardonic fleas,
Continues to be a matter of taste. Additionally, in select caliches, semi-precious
Gem stones remain vilely-covered. Garnets, no matter coruscating or not,
Trump cryptogamic life forms (except where cedars, acacias, myrtles, oleasters,
Cypresses petrify, yielding marketable goods). Thereafter, insouciance rules.

—kj hanna greenberg

JACK COMES BACK

With trembling hand I carve my pumpkin
and hope *this* one ends the family curse,
laid upon great-uncle Mortimer
with a gesture, and a Sign, and a dreadful verse:
"O Mortimer happy shall not your family be
when goblins come to beg for candy
and carry off your lazy breed one by one.
Razul Radul Bareem a Zande!"
We do not know what he had done
to earn the sorcerer's ire,
but sure as taxes the devil came
and whisked Mort down into the Fire.
Next year it had been Cousin Sue
and after that Nephew Rob.
Then Sarah, then Will,
then Dilbert and Bob.
Perhaps if I carve my pumpkin
with a wicked grin
And ferocious eyes
and an evil chin,
I'll scare off old Scratch and end the curse.
There I've done it!
A fearsome head
More terrible than 20 gargoyles
It would frighten the dead!
But what is this?
It now does speak,
"I am the vehicle of the curse, come for you to take,
It is the time for trick or treat!"

—don webb





[short story]

Masquerade

By Ellen Denton

As Arlen walked through the bus depot, he spotted two of the creatures standing at a magazine kiosk. He had seen enough of them over the past two years to be able to detect one, even with the bio-engineered human skin surgically attached onto their bodies as a disguise.

He quickly ducked behind one of the concrete depot pillars to avoid being seen. He marveled at how seamlessly they blended in with the throng of passengers moving along the thoroughfare. Both creatures wore nondescript clothing, wide-lensed, tinted glasses, and were otherwise unremarkable in appearance. Unless someone looked close up into their eyes, or already knew the telltale signs, he would not suspect them of being anything but people. Their humanoid appearance, however, did not stop Arlen's flesh from crawling at the sight of them, and he had to swallow hard over and over to stave off the waves of revulsion and nausea he felt.

For what must have been the hundredth time, he remembered that rainy night several years ago when he took a shortcut home through an alleyway. One of the creatures, in its natural form, moved out of the shadows when he got a few feet away. On that first encounter, he didn't get a detailed look at its body; he was too stunned and terrified. In those brief seconds, his entire impression of it was that of a huge, hulking, insectile form, with the mindless, darting, red eyes of a rat, and a smell that made his gorge rise. When the thing stepped out in front of him, Arlen let out a short, almost soundless scream and lurched backwards. He then turned and ran back out of the alleyway, and kept running, until he was out of breath and felt like his heart would explode. Only then did he spin around to see if the thing had followed him. It hadn't. He bent over, hands on his knees, and stood like that until he caught his breath.

His immediate impulse was to contact the police, but who would believe him if he walked into a police station and said he saw a six foot, red eyed monster that looked like a bug in an alley? They would think he was either crazy or on drugs. He could hardly even credit his own senses with what he had seen.

He didn't know why, but after that, he could detect one, whether in disguise or not. The ones masquerading as human always had something that yanked his attention to them like the flashing red lights of an ambulance at an accident site. That was the case now with the two standing together near the kiosk. He peered as surreptitiously as possible around the side of the pillar. As he watched, he felt the familiar, strange tingling inside his own head, the faint buzzing in his ears, the- he froze. The two of them, at the exact same moment, turned and looked in his direction.

He doubted this was a coincidence, and set his suitcase down so that he could run unimpeded by it if they came after him. The two creatures conferred briefly, then began to walk towards him. Arlen turned and ran as though his life depended on it.

On the first encounter in the alley two years before, he felt he had inadvertently stumbled upon something not of this world. What he didn't realize at the time was that from then on, he would be pursued. He had evidently seen some-

thing he was not meant to know about, and after the second encounter, knew he'd looking over his shoulder for the rest of his life.

It occurred a month after the incident in the alley, in a bookstore. He was looking over the mystery stories rack when he suddenly got the sensation people refer to as feeling a goose walk over their grave. He shuddered and slowly turned his head to the left. A lean, tall man wearing tinted glasses was staring at him; he quickly looked away when Arlen turned to him. Feeling creeped out, he watched the stranger, and suddenly felt prickly heat all over his own body. He then almost felt, rather than heard, a buzzing in the back of his neck that crawled up like two snakes into his inner ears. At that moment, he somehow knew that the nondescript stranger in dark glasses was not a real man.

He walked to the end of the aisle, made his way over to the one closest to the exit, and left the bookstore. He walked away rapidly, and midway down the street, turned and saw that whatever this thing was had also left the store and was striding toward him purposefully. A streak of terror banged through him, because at that moment, he knew for sure that whatever was following him was somehow of the same ilk as what he had encountered in the alley a month before. He also knew, with a sickening certainty that it was after him.

When he got to the corner, the intersecting street was a major thoroughfare. It was just after five, and office buildings, standing shoulder to shoulder for blocks in either direction, were disgorging streams of employees who had just finished their work day. Arlen still felt cold with fear, but safer among the throngs of people. The next time he turned around, he scanned the crowds, and the creature was no longer there. He made his way to the subway, checked one final time to be sure he wasn't being followed, and descended into the station.

His third encounter with one of the creatures occurred several months later, and it was the only other time he saw one without its human disguise.

He was hiking through the woods one day and came upon a rushing stream. He got down on his knees to scoop up and drink handfuls of the fresh, crystal-line water. He then raised up his head to breath in the scent of the flower-laden air, and smelled an all too clearly remembered, sickening stench, one he had only smelled once before in a garbage-laden alley one night.

He felt cold fingers creeping along his spine, and then an aching hum vibrating in his jawbone and teeth before it moved up to his ears. Stiff with fear, he stood up and slowly turned around. One of the creatures was standing a distance away mid a stand of Hemlock trees, and it was watching him. The thing's red eyes glowed with bone chilling malevolence. Even from afar, he could see the black, hard, scale-like plates on its body, the frightening ridges in its unconcealed face, and glutinous strings of something white dripping out of its mouth.

He was almost paralyzed with terror, when without warning, the creature suddenly came at him at a dead run, galvanizing him into motion. He took off, plunging through the brush and kept running, until he was fairly sure he had lost the thing somewhere back in the confusing maze of trees and brush. He eventually made his way back to the main road, and then to the parking lot at the

entrance to the hiking path. He was still shaking from head to toe when he got back into his car and took off.

He drove way too fast, for the moment too numb to even think. He finally looked in his rear view mirror and saw a deserted road stretch out for miles behind him. He pulled off onto the shoulder and parked. He was at a loss for what to do. The situation he found himself in was so fantastic that, without proof, no one would ever believe him. He had no idea how to find other people who might have had similar encounters, or how to obtain evidence that a strange life form of some sort had insinuated itself into the population of earth without endangering his own life to get it. He folded his arms across the steering wheel, lowered his head onto them, and cried.

He moved to another city in another state. After that, the encounters ceased for almost four months. Eventually, they found him again. The contacts happened at random times, and in unpredictable locations; a movie theater, a restroom in a restaurant, a deserted street late at night, and in every case, once he was spotted by them, they pursued him. The human disguise they wore covered everything from their scaly bodies to their noxious smell; dark glasses concealed their eyes. The only defense he had was a sort of radar that somehow detected their presence, usually before they spotted him, giving him enough time to escape.

Arlen now exited the bus station at a run and looked around frantically for a cab. There were none that didn't already carry passengers. He turned and saw the two creatures bearing down on him relentlessly, so decided to make a run for it. Twice before he was able to elude them by weaving his way haphazardly through back-alleys and sidestreets and that was his plan now. He ran to the corner and turned into a narrow street, ran half the way down that, then turned into an alleyway, ran to the end, ran a short distance down the street he now found himself on, and then turned into another alley. He heard a sound behind him, turned to see what it was while still running, and didn't see the debris in the path before him. He tripped and went flying headlong onto the ground. He tried to get to his feet and felt an excruciating pain in his ankle. He didn't know if it was broken or sprained, but knew he wouldn't be able to run any further. He hopped a few steps so that he was by the brick wall of the alleyway, and exhausted from the long run, slid down against it and onto the ground.

He didn't have to await the inevitable for long. No more than thirty seconds later, the creatures appeared at the entranceway to the alley, saw him slumped against the wall, and approached. When they reached the spot where he was sitting, they kneeled down and stared at him. The tingling he always felt in their presence, normally just an unnerving sensation when at a distance, now exploded into a storm of electrical needles pricking his skin, and the insectile, humming sound in his head and ears rose and fell in thundering waves.

Another minute went by, and during this, the pounding vibrations slowly and gradually softened until they became distinct, modulated units of sound. These separate and gently undulating waves were emanating from one of the creatures

in front of him; it was trying to tell him something, and Arlen, suddenly seeing the images and concepts the creature was projecting at him, now understood what they had been trying to tell him all along. For years, this race of intelligent creatures from a distant, dying world had been gradually integrating into the population of earth because they simply had no to other place to go. The creature then told him with these same projected thought waves: "Don't be afraid. You had an accident right after you were masked. You forgot everything prior to it. That's why, even when you could hear and sense us, you couldn't understand why we were after you. It's going to be okay now."

The one who had emanated these thoughts at him now pulled a small, metallic case from his pocket and extracted a slender device from it that looked like a silver tube. He touched something on the top of it and a thin, blue beam of light projected out from it. The other creature removed Arlen's tinted glasses, then the first one ran the blue light all along the edges of his face. He returned the device to its case, and then gently grasped the edges of the skin he had just loosened and lifted it off. The creature, even before he had completely removed the skin, could see recognition and remembrance dawning in Arlen's red, rat-like eyes.



[poetry]

Eye

Open as newborn nest-
how small the eye is.
Blood vessels like cracking ice
on this naked, skittering white.
Not even bone to protect it
from sharpness, from light,
from all jabbing horrors.

—John Davies

The Riga Wolves

This bird was wolf
then bird.

Baltic rain
through its feathers
remembers clutching
at pelt.

It waits with others
in the tense forest,
in trees lashed as
brooms,
for light to fail.

When the white
in its eye
moves like smoke,
and the blood
in its temple
complains,

black as balsam.
Signals a unison of
agony.

—John Davies

The Smartphone Addicts and Precinct 9

by phillip donnelly

"Give me back my memory!" the fat woman snarled, looking more pig than human.

"I ain't got it," the dealer snapped back.

He wasn't much of a dealer. It was third rate junk, the memslush he pedalled. Every credit he made went into feeding his own addiction. Memory addicts are like that. Their addiction swells to feed their wallet.

When they can't scrape together enough credits for a terabyte, they try to resell stuff that's already been cut three of four times. Remembered till it does more harm than good. The memories get all twisted and confused, kinda schizoid. They turn poisonous, like caviar that's gone through the guts of a beggar. But you can't tell a salivating junkie that what he's downloading is just a turd within a turd.

The woman pushed the weasel pusher against a wall. Her eyes burned with all the rage and hatred of an unfed child.

"Gimme back my memories! I know you've got them! I know you're holding out on me!"

"I ain't got them. I swear! You're not part of me stash. I never took nothing from you. Never!" the dealer whined, trying to break free of her grip.

If it had been up to me, I'd have just left them there and rode away. It was a bum collar. The city's full of squalling memjunks. We don't have cells to hold them for more than a couple of days, so why bother with the paperwork?

But my partner wasn't the walking-away type. She just couldn't turn a blind eye, Emergency Officer Jen. As soon as I looked at her, I knew we'd have to break it up. Just my luck to get partnered with a fresh-faced militia.

We walked towards them. Ex-teacher Jen's hand was on the pepper spray but mine was on my gun.

"NYPD. Put your hands up and turn your backs to the wall!" Jen shouted.

You could tell she got a thrill every time she said that, even though she sounded about as threatening as a cheerleader.

They saw us and froze, with that deer-in-headlights look you find in the hard core addict. You suck out the memory and all that's left is instinct. It was fight or flight time for the memjunks.

A snarl grew across the woman's lips and her hands turned to claws. The boy

crouched and his ferrety eyes looked for a getaway.

"We got a runner and a biter," I said to Jen.

"You take the runner, I'll take the girl," she said. "And remember, O'Toole, use minimum force."

I didn't like this freckled rookie telling me what to do, but I held my tongue. I tried not to think about how easy it would be to put a couple of bullets through the addicts' brains. The world was on the edge. Two more dead junkies wouldn't get noticed.

The boy ran down an alley and I ran after him. It was pointless calling for backup. There wasn't time and we were stretched too thin.

He turned down another alleyway but this one didn't have any street lights. There were more and more of these dark spots, spreading out over the city. We couldn't even map them anymore.

I paused for a moment to work up my courage. Then I took out my flashlight and headed into the darkness. A tunnel of light showed upended bins, but my nose could have told me that. The stink didn't turn the rats off none. Their beady little red eyes reflected in the flashlight and gave me the creeps.

I was about to give up the ghost when I heard a trashcan lid fall onto the ground. I turned my light to the clang and there he was, hiding in the refuse.

"You know what I want, kid. Hand it over."

"I ain't got one. Honest!"

"Listen up, boy. Either you give it to me now, or else I put a slug in your brain and take it from your dead body. If it wasn't for the paperwork, your brains would be wrapped around the insides of that trashcan already. Now, for the last time, hand over the Smartphone!"

He reached into his pocket and handed it to me. It was a Samapp 950 -- typical clone hardware. I put on my protective glasses and switched it on.

A sickly green light lit up part of the alley, throwing my shadow onto the wall behind me, making me look like a 10-foot tall green giant.

"You're holding kid: 4 life memories, 16 events -- 160 zipped terabytes. You're looking at a 5-year stretch in the pen for this. Unless ..."

"They're for personal use, man. I ain't no dealer. It's a possession rap, that's all. You'll never made dealing stick."

"What -- you got a smart ass lawyer on speed dial, kid? You know that, under Martial Law, even possession of a Smartphone means you don't get no Public Attorney. You're going down, boy, and the pen's a mean place these days. Mean place. Unless..."

"Unless what?" he asked me.

"Turn in a couple of the big fish and I'll see what I can do."

He thought about that for a while, weighing up his options. I knew he'd come round to ratting. There's no honour among Smartphone criminals.

"It goes higher than you know, man. It's all screwed up. It's--"

There was a look of fear in the boy's eyes all of a sudden. I heard a squeal. There were ferals nearby. Damn close too.

I turned around and there they were. Two of them, with another crawling out of a manhole.

My flashlight had stunned them but only for a second. I'd heard the rumours, but this was the first time I'd seen them in the flesh. There was nothing human left in them. They were naked, covered in scabs and pus and completely wild. They were men minus mind. Soulless creatures.

The dealer saw his chance. He pushed me to the ground and started to run away. But then he stopped and came back to grab his Smartphone.

In a second they were on him, drawn by the sickly green light of the screen. They tore at him with their nails and teeth, like wolves, like demons. I've seen a lot of things in my twenty years on the force, but I've never seen anything like that.

I let off four rounds, one for each of the ferals and one for the dealer. And then I stood on the phone, smashing it under my boot.

When I got back to my partner, she was covered in blood. Partly her own, but mainly blood from the girl. There had been a struggle, I could see, but I couldn't get much from my rookie partner. She was mumbling, shaken.

"I couldn't stop her. The mace didn't stop her. She just kept lashing out. Then she caught hold of my hair. She wouldn't let go. She was scraping my face, like a mad woman, like a monster."

When we got back to the precinct, she was still pretty shook up. I told her to wash up and grab a bite to eat. There would be forms to fill in, lies to tell, secrets to keep. But not tonight.

The precinct was in chaos. It got worse every night.

I saw Captain Klinsky at the other side of the office, across a sea of panicked faces and cops that hadn't slept properly in weeks.

The cap was shouting down an old black phone. The veins in his thick neck were bulging under his red face.

"Look, I need more cops, real cops. I'm down to one cop for every three volunteers. Soon I'll be sending rookies out with rookies. And for the love of God, will you ferry these junkies outta here and stick them in the camps. The cells are overflowing. I can't squeeze any more in. I've got them tied to the radiators in the basement. I want them outta here! You hear me? You ... hello? Hello?"

He slammed the phone down and ordered his secretary to get the Emergency Council back on the line.

"Rough night?" I said to him, lighting a cigarette and offering him one.

"Sure," he said. "At least there's one good thing about the Emergency -- nobody's worried about smoking anymore!"

"Still no sign of reinforcements?" I asked him.

"I think we're more likely to see the Second Coming!" the cap said.

I was hoping to get a real cop by my side, so we could stick Jen in the back seat. She was a nice kid, but when all hell is breaking loose, nice kids don't last long.

"What about the army? Where the hell are the troops? What's the point of Marshall Law if the cavalry aren't charging in?" I asked him.

"My guess is the army's holed up somewhere with all the politicians and the corporates. Whatever's left of the army. I mean, they were major screen freaks too, y'know. Who knows how many turned into memjunks! We're on our own. What's it like on the streets tonight?" he asked me, "now that they've powered down the internet."

"Everyone's selling or trying to score. They don't need the internet no more, Cap. They're trading on the street, using old-school USB cables and memory boxes."

Jen came over to us and asked the Cap to go home early. He could see she was frazzled, but he gave her the old line about getting back onto the horse after you fall off, and told her to get back on the beat.

Then he gave us an assignment -- a special assignment. He'd got wind of a shooting gallery in the old Wall Street building and wanted us to investigate.

Manhattan was a hive of screenfreaks and had been ever since the Emergency started. It was still the city's major Smartphone dealing centre. I couldn't think of anywhere I less wanted to be, especially with a rookie in tow who was beginning to crack.

I told the Cap I needed more men, but he said he couldn't spare them. He promised to try to send me more later, after I radioed with the hive's exact location.

Half-an-hour later we were there. Smack in the middle of the Wall Street ghetto. Most of the lights had been knocked out, but there were a couple of police checkpoints at either end of the street. Their floodlights lit things up well enough.

I spoke to the sergeant in charge, a nervous looking guy of about 50 who stank of whiskey.

I was angling to borrow some of his guys, but when I saw them, I knew they'd be more trouble than they were worth. They were all rookies, chewing gum and wearing khaki and a false bravado. Last month they were cooks, cleaners and bookworms, and all the other deadbeats who couldn't afford the latest phones and the latest downloads. Now they were emergency cops, but barely able to shoot in a straight line and with a life expectancy that could be measured in weeks. Not that the recruitment officers mentioned that fact, of course.

The sergeant walked with me to the steps of the Stock Exchange.

"How long you been stationed here?" I asked him.

"Third night," he told me. "Longer than most survive here. Living on borrowed time."

After shaking his hand, which was shaking all by itself, I left him there -- a shell of a man guarding a shell of a building, commanding a bunch of losers and senior citizens.

Me and Jen walked up the stairs and this time both of us were holding tight to our guns.

We put on some night-vision specs the Captain had given us. If this place was half as infested as he thought, then we wouldn't want to advertise our presence there with a flashlight.

In less than a minute, we found one of them, hunkering in a corner. He was hunched over his Smartphone, pawing at it. He was dressed in a shabby suit that had probably cost thousands of dollars. We walked towards him but he didn't notice. When they're using, addicts are easily trapped. The world outside their screen almost ceases to exist.

"What's app, bro?" I asked him, pointing my gun at his face.

"Officer, I'm just--"

"Just calling your sick dying grandmother. We know. We've heard it all before, see."

"How many memories you holding?" Jen asked him, trying to sound tough.

"Just a few. Just for personal use. Just recreational usage, Officer. I'm not an addict."

"Yeah, mister. The whole city's full of users and not a single one's an addict. How many hours a day you upto? You still sleeping the whole night through? How many personalities you on?"

I put my pistol to his temple and grabbed the phone out of his hand. He broke into a cold sweat the second he was without it.

"Please Officer. Please give it back! Please!"

It's the whining that gets to me. It's the whining that makes my trigger finger itch. I put on my protective glasses and checked his profiles. He was a financial analyst, a hooker, a teenage girl, a teenage boy, a systems engineer and a shipping clerk.

"What's your name?" I asked him.

"Francis ... Lola, Patricia, Frank, Michael, John," he told me.

"How long you been using?"

"A year, I guess. It gets hard to keep track of time. It gets hard to keep track of anything. I don't know who I am anymore. I'm living in the screen, in the memories of others, in the memories of their life before the Smartphone. But I can quit. I will quit. I'll never use a Smartphone again, Officer. Never."

"Never?" I asked him, knowing what was coming next.

"Never!" he said. "I just need one more hit first. I just need--"

BANG!

I don't know what snapped inside Officer Jen. She went in too deep, too fast, I suppose. She shot him once in the head, but like the Captain suspected, there was a nest of them there, financial wickids holed up beside their dead monitors.

We only just managed to shoot our way back to the stairs. Jen could have made it too, but she stayed too long. She just stayed at the top of the stairs, shooting them one by one as they ran out the main door. Soon she ran out of bullets. The last I saw of her she was being dragged back inside.

They swarmed out of the Stock Exchange and overran the Police Checkpoint. In my squad car, I just about made it back to the precinct.

And that's where I am now, writing up this report.

There doesn't seem much point covering up the truth now, so I've told it just like it happened.

They're outside now: the screenheads, the memory junkies, the ferals -- thousands of them, maybe more. Maybe the whole of New York City is out there.

We can't hold them off much longer. Ammo's getting low. We can't raise the Emergency Council.

I don't know why they came here. The power grid went down a couple of hours ago, but we've got generator power. Maybe that's what they're after. They need to recharge their phones. You know what addicts are like -- they'll do anything for a fix.



A Strange Dog

Emptiness spreads.
A growl like
a death rattle,
I hear in the darkness.
I throw my eyes out.

Its tail wags
through the centuries,
as our gene
journeys through
the generations.

Its hue is white
like my dad's heart.
Love seems burning bright
in its brownish eyes.

A strange dog,

It rides its nose up
a waste hill
of paper plates.
Its saliva, as my dad's
craving for life,
falls down and
dissolves in soil.

It is not a ghost,
but a deep love's

Now Silence is
our lingua franca.

—fabiyas m v

[poetry]

The Poison Tree

From the stump left open-wounded
like a woodcutter's axe-place,
the tree is grown back.

Roots coming up through the garden
path
like the slow feelers of some Leviathan
grown curious for sun.

In the photograph standing wide in
summer.
You can see us hiding
in higher branches,

resting in the crook of an arm,
or climbing to the oak's last outreach.
Camera-burst roaring through the tree

like a panic of birds disturbed.
Where the trunk splits like a malformed
limb,
you can almost make out the remnant
of rope

eating into the branch, Stanley-knifed,
cord frayed and several.
The whole street watched

the day we felled it,
tight-mouthed as if a hearse passed;
flinching at each hack.

That could never again grow rightwe
laid the tree to grass
bleached dead white under the trunk.

In the branch she chose,
creaking like a spinecarved
initials of first love.
Decades between us,
what difference now?
If I look up I can see her feet,

bare skin powdery with the tree,
the long, thin tears in her dress;
and almost her face, her mouth,

willing me higher.

—John Davies

A Model Village

I lock myself in as the last leave, flicking coins
into the well that sink and remain like dreams
of golden fish. Sloshed tea from the flask
runs off the back of hulked earth shrouded
in Astroturf. Quicksilver for the woods.
There is a storm ahead. The cows will need
to lie down. Last train crawls through
the drainpipe tunnel for the same platform
faces. Fear the weather. Take them in now.
The colour of their clothes, their skin,
will begin to fade. Outside the torchlight
dark thickens. Streets demand constant attention.
Rows of terraces wake like Christmas lanterns.
Onto eggshell cobbles lights spill in shafts
from the pub windows. The needle skips again
inside, long gone voice stuck with a mouthful
of words it cannot get beyond. Around
the clusters of foam-filled tombstones, fog swells
at my ankles, wetness begins in the boots. The storm
is almost upon us. Animals will be swept away. Roofs
will cave in. Rats will appear from holes
in the ground. Through the woods the pack
of dogs sears. Their backs break the still water
and a feeling runs through the woods. Over the hills
strangers come. More than I imagined.
The day trippers see none of this.

John Davies—

[advertisement]

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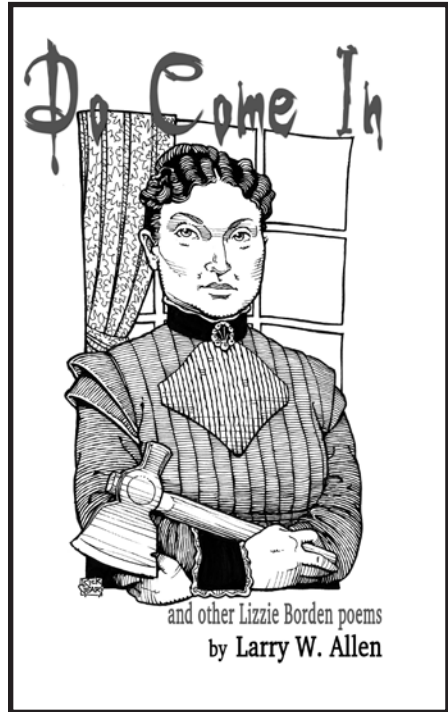
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Lizzie Borden: Girl Detective

by Richard Behrens

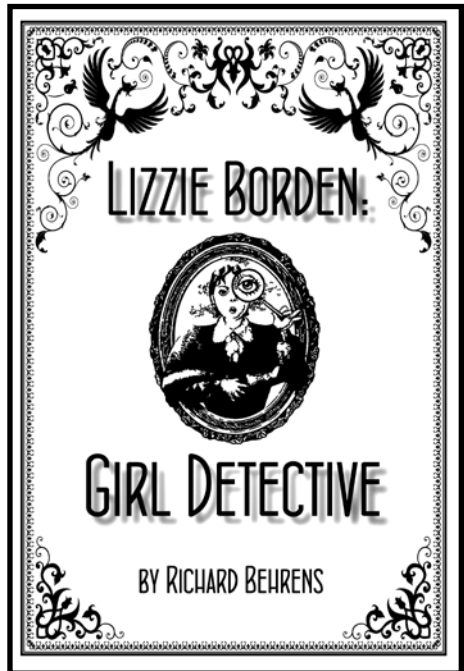
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A.J. Huffman is a poet and freelance writer in Daytona Beach, Florida. She has published six collections of poetry, available on Amazon.com. She has published her work in numerous national and international literary journals. She is currently the editor for *Kind of a Hurricane Press* literary journals (www.kindofahurricanepress.com).

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Carol Holland March lives and writes in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where ghosts roam the mesas and the veil between the worlds is thinner than you might expect. She writes literary fantasy, paranormal romance and humor and the odd piece of science fiction.

Ellen Denton has been widely published and will have work out soon in upcoming issues of *Fantastic Frontiers*, *Cosmic Crime*, *Bards and Sages Quarterly*, *Shelter of Daylight*, *Zharmae Publishing Press Anthology*, and a *Spark Anthology*. She took fourth place in Echoes of the Right to God international essay contest, first place in an On the Premises contest, honorable mention in Reading Writers suspense fiction contest, finalists for Smories short story contest, PK Poetry competition, and Scinti story contest.

Fabiyas M V. was born at Orumanayur, Kerala, India, in 1974, and works as an English teacher in a government school in India. He won the Poetry Soup International Award, USA, in 2011 and 2012, a prize by the British Council in 2011, the Whistle Press Poetry Contest, India, in 2012, and the RSPCA Pet Poetry Contest, UK, 2012. *Moonlight and Solitude* is his first book, published by Raspberry Books, Calicut, Kerala, India.

John H. Dromey was born in northeast Missouri. In addition to having his short fiction published in *Woman's World*, online at Mysterical-E and elsewhere, as well as in a number of anthologies (both print and electronic), he has a short story scheduled for publication in the June 2013 issue of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*.

David Massengill is the author of *Fragments of a Journal Salvaged from a Charred House in Germany, 1816* and other stories (Anvil Fiction). Over 60 of his short works of literary and horror fiction have appeared in literary journals, including *Eclectica Magazine*, *Word Riot*, *The Raven Chronicles*, *Pulp Metal Magazine*, *Yellow Mama*, and *3 A.M. Magazine*, among others. He has received grants for his fiction from both Seattle's Artist Trust organization and Seattle's Office of Arts & Cultural Affairs. He has also written nonfiction for *American Book Review* and *Seattle Weekly*, where he served as Books Editor. David's website is www.davidmassengillfiction.com.

Robb White has published *Haftmann's Rules* (2011), a hardboiled private-eye novel featuring series character Thomas Haftmann and has another, *Saraband for a Runaway*, due out in January by Grand Mal Press. A short-story collection is soon to be published by Red Giant Press of Cleveland.

Mr. Grim K. DeEvil was born in western New York and then moved to Florida in his youth. He writes every day, and has written for many years. He is currently in the midst of writing a short story and in a second draft of a play.

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Hajo Isa is a Nigerian poet and author. Her poems have appeared in the *Snippets* anthology in 2012, Gayle and Karen O'Leary, *Sentinel Poetry* anthology, 2010 & 2012, and *Nigerians Talk Literal* magazine. She is a member of Association of Nigeria Authors Abuja, Nigeria.

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Lee Glantz poems have appeared in *Crone's Nest*, *Newport Review*, and the anthology *Regrets Only* (Little Pear Press). Her book, *A House On Her Back*, was published by the Premiere Poet Chapbook Series. In addition, she and Michele Cooper co-authored a review of Kathryn Kulpa's book, *Pleasant Drugs*, for the South Carolina Review.

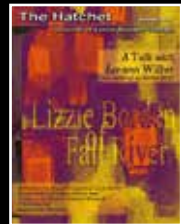
KJ Hannah Greenberg is a two-time Pushcart Prize Nominee, one time Best of the Net Nominee, and an actual National Endowment for the Humanities Scholar. She gave up all manners of academic hoopla to raise children. Currently, she flies the galaxy in search of gelatinous monsters and assistant bank managers. Her books include: *Intelligence's Vast Bonfires* (Lazarus Media, 2012), *Supernal Factors* (The Camel Saloon Books on Blog, 2012), *Fluid & Crystallized* (Fowlpox Press, 2012), *Don't Pet the Sweaty Things* (Bards and Sages Publishing, 2012), *A Bank Robber's Bad Luck with His Ex-Girlfriend* (Unbound CONTENT, 2011), *Oblivious to the Obvious: Wishfully Mindful Parenting* (French Creek Press, 2010), *Conversations on Communication Ethics* (Praeger, 1991), and *Watercolors* (Scotch & Soda Productions, 1979).

Eugene Hosey is an artist, writer, and web designer. A graduate of Georgia State University, he holds an MFA in the visual arts. He is currently working on digital images and a book of poetry.

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