



MASTHEAD

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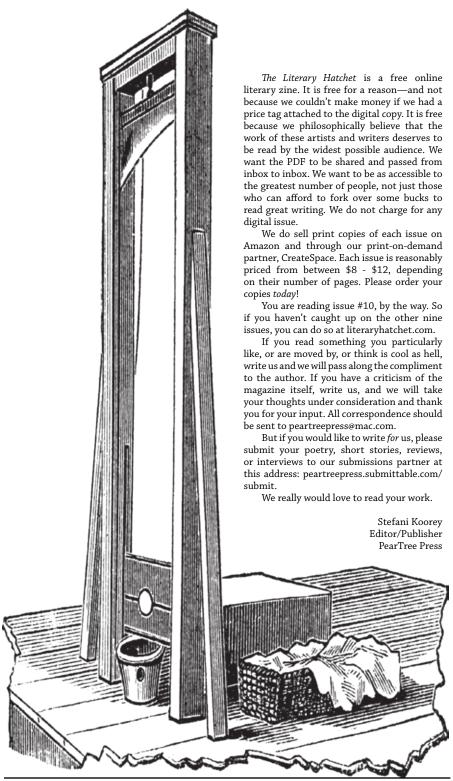
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ISSUE #10

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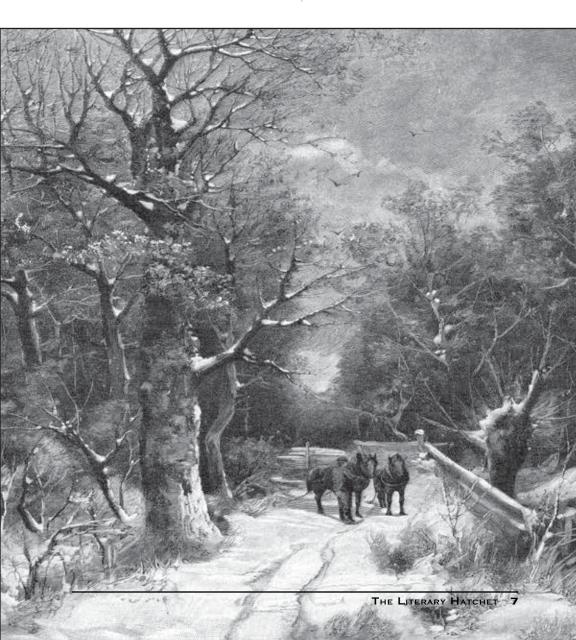
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YOU CAN'T BE TOO CAREFUL

Robert Kite avoided stepping on sidewalk cracks and walking under ladders. He didn't consider himself superstitious—just cautious. Still, there were quirks in his behavior some considered just plain crazy.

Like his refusal to utter the word "preposterous" in public. There was no apparent reason for this phobia, except he feared something horrible would happen if he spoke the word. Now most of us could go through life without ever even experiencing the urge to say the word aloud, but not Robert. Whenever he talked with friends or family, the word "preposterous" occupied the forefront of his mind, and no matter how much he tried not to think of the word, it was like trying to ignore a rhino sitting on his living room sofa drinking a beer. It became such a problem for Robert that he would often blurt out "pumpernickel" or "pasta primavera" for no apparent reason. Friends thought him eccentric. They enjoyed his playfulness.

But this wasn't Robert's only quirk. He also felt an irrational need to skip whenever "Amazing Grace" was sung. This created a problem for him at the Lutheran church, so Robert began attending a Jewish synagogue just to avoid hearing the song.

Otherwise, Robert led a nearly normal life, considering he always wore plaid pants and a Hawaiian shirt for fear of an earthquake and entered his car from the back seat.

Of course his need to flap his arms like a chicken and cluck whenever someone said, "You know what I mean?" presented a problem. But this eccentricity actually improved the quality of life for most of Robert's friends and family, who had also grown tired of the expression. They took secret delight in watching Robert's cousin, Frankie, become tongue-tied whenever in Robert's presence.

Despite his quirks, Robert managed. He had a good many friends. After all, while most of us strive for normalcy, the people we most fondly remember are the eccentrics. And Robert was memorable. He always wore suspenders and a belt, even at the beach.

"You can't be too careful," is what he would say. Robert would explain himself with a smile on his face, aware that he tightrope-walked his way between reality and absurdity.



by wayne scheer

People made allowances for Robert because, like a young child, he was fun to be with and he remained a gentle man who never harmed a soul. It was a miracle to many people, but Robert even managed to keep a steady job as a copyreader for the local newspaper where no one cared what he wore or how he entered his car, as long as he put his obsessive compulsiveness to good use and scoured copy for misplaced commas and the incorrect use of "it's."

But Robert grew uncomfortable with his behavior. Although he had friends, he had no intimates. Esther Bleismueller, who lived with her mother across the street from him, was his closest confidant. "I admit I take a certain pleasure in people paying attention to me," he confessed to her. "Especially when I wear my red stocking hat and sing show tunes in line at the supermarket—which, of course, I must do to keep the computer scanner from catching fire."

"No, you don't," she said bluntly. "If you stop pedaling, the world will continue spinning on its axis, I assure you. Like the rest of us, you don't have much control over your environment. Stop acting as if you do."

This shocked Robert, for no one had ever spoken to him quite like that before. He vowed to at least reduce his quirks. For Esther.

The next day, he chose not to wear a Hawaiian shirt, although he looped an extra belt over his plaid pants and, of course, wore his suspenders. The earth did not quake. At the office, when he heard a co-worker's radio playing Patsy Cline's rendition of "Amazing Grace," he fought the urge to skip. He knew that Esther would remind him that logically he had nothing to fear from the song. Breathing like a woman in labor, Robert didn't skip, and nothing bad happened. He undid his suspenders. The earth didn't crash. Nor did he lose his pants.

A co-worker, seeing that Robert was undergoing an epiphany, shouted, "You know what I mean?" Robert didn't cluck like a chicken.

"Preposterous!" he shouted with all his might. And the ceiling over his head collapsed, killing Robert instantly.

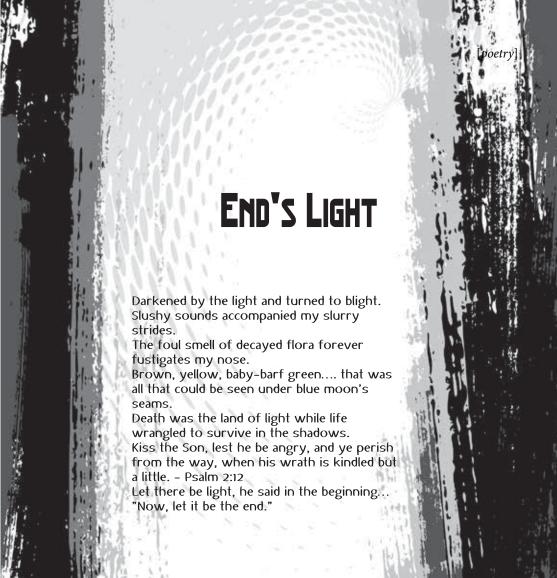
Che Anxieties of a Widow

May stretched its legs into grave. The thunder heralds the rains. A hut on the bank of Kanoli canal Is not re-thatched this year. Her infant's illness made the doctor gay With all the wages she had kept. Summer takes the last breath. But the coconut leaf thatched roof Is not re-thatched this year.

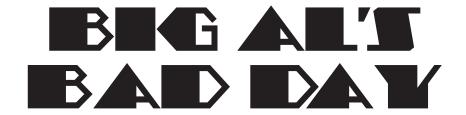
As the widow stands on the threshold. The rain clouds gather over her sky, And the wind scatters terror in her corridor. Will the tattered roof be flown away? Will the rain drops make pores? On the roof of her life? Where will her child crawl and smile? Question waves are thus getting high; Her canoe is ready to be tossed.

(The summer season ends in the month of May and rainy season begins in the month of June in Kerala)

—fabiyas mv



—john edwards



by jim courter

Big Al DeMarco sat in gridlocked, rush-hour traffic on the expressway with his window down and the air conditioning off so his clunker of a car wouldn't overheat. But the outdoor temperature sat at ninety-seven degrees, humidity hung in the air like a wet wool blanket, and not a hint of a breeze came through. His white T-shirt was soaked with sweat. Here he was with his first serious job for The Family, and nothing was going the way he had always imagined or seen in the gangster movies.

In his frustration and anger, Big Al leaned on his horn and delivered a long blast into the sea of cars around him. From one of those cars nearby, someone yelled, "Hey stupid, how much good is that gonna do?"

Big Al opened the door and charged out, looking around for the mouthy punk that had insulted him. Nobody talked that way to Big Al DeMarco and got away with it. Nobody outside The Family anyway. Inside The Family was another matter.

At six-one and 275 pounds—none of it muscle—and with a face that looked like it was asking to be punched, Big Al practically invited mockery. He had recently attached the "Big" to his first name to try to make himself sound more intimidating. But he was the only one who used it. Some in The Family called him Doughboy, others The Incredible Bulk; even others used names that referred to his slow wits. When they really wanted to irritate him, they called him Alphonse, his full first name, because they knew he hated it. "Yeah, like Capone," he would reply, thumbing his chest to try to turn the jibe to his advantage. But his feeble attempts to gain respect drew even more mockery, and with no blood connection to The Family, he had nothing else to fall back on.

Big Al's mother and father had been from the neighborhood. When his mother died from the strain of birthing him, her first child—Big Al's father, unable to cope with being a single parent, went looking for someone to marry without even going through the traditional period of mourning. His chose Tina Fratelli, whose father

had just about given up on marrying her off; Tina was the half-sister of Archie the Gecko, a low-level street soldier for The Family. When Big Al's father died in a car accident less than a year after his second marriage, Tina—now Tina DeMarco—was stuck with him, and none too happy about it. But she didn't have the heart to cast him off. As years passed she would come to regret that decision.

Loose as this connection was, it placed Big Al on the fringes of The Family, close enough for him to hear stories of crime and the gangster life. Over time those stories loomed like myths in his imagination. By the time he reached puberty, he yearned to someday be cracking skulls and breaking bones, to carry a wad of cash into nightclubs with a lady on each arm, to wear expensive suits and shirts and silk ties like cold ruthless Vince, the Silent Assassin with the eyes of a cobra. To be a gangster! That was all Big Al dreamed of and lived for. In his bedroom at night, upstairs in his stepmom's small house, he practiced in front of a mirror—the menacing look, a swagger in the walk, lines he picked up from the gangster movies he rented from the video store.

A break of sorts came when Zito, who ran The Family's deli, needed someone to help out. Big Al, now sixteen, jumped at the chance and dropped out of high school, where he was a gross underachiever and an annoyance to his teachers. Never mind that it was menial work in no way related to the gangster life. Big Al saw it as a foot in the door. Once on the job he was delighted to discover that while working alone in back he could indulge his voracious appetite on the sneak, loading up on slices of this and chunks of that—meat and cheese, pickle spears, and pepperoncini.

Three years later and thirty pounds heavier, still slicing and dicing and sweeping the floor and no closer to living an exciting life of crime, Big Al grew impatient for more meaningful work. And since Family members of various ranks often came into the deli for a sandwich or to plot and plan in the back office, he had plenty of opportunity to fill their ears with appeals: "Uncle Lou, why can't you get me on with Acne Truck Company?"

"It's Acme, you brainless lump of sausage, and I'm not your frigging uncle."

He had no better luck with any of the others—Bruno, who ran numbers; Artie, who oversaw the docks; Spider and Joe, who made sure people paid what they owed.

Which was not to say that Big Al's incessant pleading had no effect—it just wasn't the effect he was after. Word got around that The Family had on its hands not only a whining pain in the ass with no blood connection, but also a drag on the bottom line—this being obvious from Big Al's habit of talking with his mouth full while devouring product meant for paying customers. Even Big Al's step-mom lamented that he was nothing but a drain on her time and energy and pocket book, and a fat, disgusting one at that.

Complaints about Big Al eventually rose to the highest level, and so often that The Boss decided to take action.

"Either Alphonse can live up to his own hype and be a contributing member of The Family or he can't," he told Gus, to whom he delegated the task of resolving the matter. "Let's find out. Give him a job and see how he handles it. If he comes through, then maybe we can put him to work. If he messes up, then ..."

Gus didn't have to ask, "Then what?" He knew. Then it wouldn't look so good for Big Al.

Shorty came into the deli around five o'clock, carrying a zippered canvas bank bag. He nodded to Zito, who was behind the front counter, expecting him; then he went to the rear of the store. Big Al, having just filled his mouth with a large chunk of pepperoni, was working his jaw.

"Gus's got a job for you, Alphonse," Shorty said, holding up the bank bag.

Big Al's eyes got wide. He chewed fiercely and swallowed hard. "A job for me?"

"Yeah, for you—you ugly tub. It's what used to be Nick's job, but as you no doubt heard, Nick got in the way of some flying lead and is no longer with us." He made the sign of the cross. "May he rest in peace."

He put the bag on a counter and said, "This goes to Johnny over on 75th and Kelso. It's the month's take from the operation here in the neighborhood, and it's uncounted. Johnny'll have his boys count it; then you'll get paid. That means you gotta hang around until they're done. There's also an envelope inside with some other instructions—for Johnny's eyes only. You think you can handle that?"

"You can count on me, Shorty," he said.

"That's Mr. Shorty to you, dimwit."

Shorty left. Big Al took his apron off and went out front.

"Zito, Gus has a job for me. Okay if I leave?"

"Yeah, I heard," Zito said. "Go on, get outa here."

Big Al went out through the back, where his car was parked in the alley. He started it and drove out into the street. He was a block away when he remembered that he had forgotten the bank bag.

He cursed and executed a U-turn in the middle of the street, almost running over a young mother pushing her daughter in a stroller. He re-entered the alley, parked and ran into the back of the store. The bag was still on the counter. He grabbed it, opened the refrigerator and took a thick slice of ham and stuffed it into his mouth, returned to his car and peeled off again, singing "Volare" as best he could around the mouthful of ham.

Fifteen minutes later, he was stuck in traffic on the expressway.

After not moving so much as a car length for ten minutes, Big Al laid on his horn. For reply he heard, "Hey, stupid, how much good is that gonna do?"

Already flushed from the heat, Big Al grew redder with rage until his face looked like one of the sausages back at the deli. He got out of his car and looked around for the culprit. But so many cars sat within shouting distance, most with their windows down and with drivers at the wheel looking straight ahead, that he didn't know who to go after. Big Al shook his fist at more or less everyone—at which point, as if miraculously, cars began rolling all around him—and Big Al suddenly found himself standing in the middle of moving freeway traffic.

His clunker was blocking the middle lane, and the drivers stuck behind him blasted their horns and shouted threats and insults. With a middle-finger salute down the line of blocked cars, he got back in the car and put it in first gear—only to kill it when he let out the clutch. Amid a volley of more threats and insults, he got it started and joined the flow of traffic.

He hadn't gone a hundred yards when he came to another standstill. This time he had to stop so abruptly that the bank bag, which had been sitting on the passenger seat, fell forward onto the floorboard.

Big Al put the car in neutral, maneuvered his bulk to the side and reached down to pick up the bag. For the first time he was struck by its heft and thickness—his fingers on both sides of it were spread at least three inches apart. He set it in his lap and fingered the pull on the zipper. Finally his curiosity got the better of him, and he slowly slid the zipper open and looked inside. The bills were held together in a neat stack by a rubber band, the sealed envelope behind it. He took the stack out and fanned it at one end with his greasy right thumb.

His eyes bulged and he licked his lips. The stack held mostly fives, tens, and twenties, with a dozen or so fifties and a few Benjamins—not a one-dollar bill in the bunch. It was more money than he had ever seen at one time.

He remembered what Shorty had said back at the deli: "... it's uncounted. Johnny'll have his boys count it; then you'll get paid." Big Al couldn't see how Johnny or anyone else could know if a few bills were missing from the stack. And who knew what they'd pay him? The way he'd been treated for so long, they might throw him a lousy fin for his troubles and never give him another shot at the action. Surely his having to sit in rush-hour traffic in this heat and humidity, not to mention all the insults and abuse he had put up with over the years, was worth a few bucks. Again he fanned the stack with his thumb.

When Big Al put the bag back on the passenger seat, traffic began to flow again.

Johnny was sitting behind his desk in his office when Big Al appeared in the doorway grinning like a possum, his bulging white T-shirt dirty from his shift at the deli and soaked in sweat.

"You're late," Johnny said.

"I got stuck in traffic." Big Al said. "Rush hour was murder."

"Your first job, and you come to me with excuses."

"I'm real sorry, Johnny. It won't happen again."

"Gimme the bag, Alphonse. Have a seat while Ed and Lucky count it."

Big Al sat in the chair across the desk from Johnny, his back to the door of the office.

"How come both have to count it, Johnny?"

"Because, Einstein, if they come up with the same number, we know it's good. If they're off, they count it again until they agree."

Johnny took the envelope out of the bag and laid it on his desk. He pushed a button on a console; a few seconds later Lucky appeared. Johnny gave him the bag and told him what to do.

"Shorty said I have to wait," Big Al said.

"Shorty told you right," Johnny said. "Your pay'll come out of the bag after it's counted. Just sit tight and keep your trap shut."

Big Al fidgeted.

"You nervous or something, Alphonse?" Johnny said.

"Me, nervous? Why would I be nervous, Johnny?"

"Yeah, why would you be nervous?"

Half an hour later, Lucky returned.

"Me and Ed got the same on the first count, Johnny," he said.

He handed Johnny a slip of paper with an amount written on it: \$3,495. Johnny

took a stiletto from a desk drawer and slit open the envelope. He took out a sheet of paper and read silently to himself: "The money in the bag was counted and double-checked before delivery. It comes to \$3,595. Pay the one who delivered it accordingly."

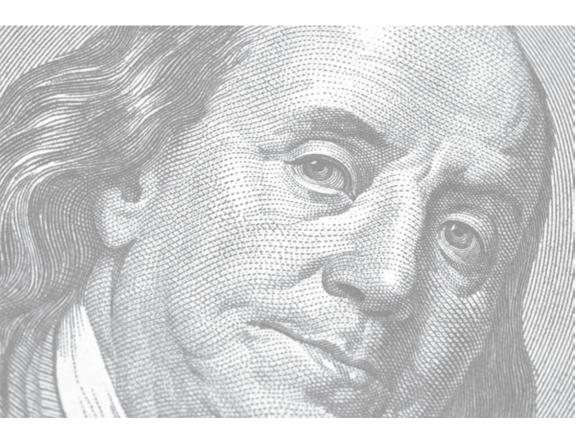
"Sit tight," Johnny said to Big Al. "We're gonna take care of you real soon."

Johnny scratched a note on a piece of paper and handed it to Lucky. Lucky moved his lips as he read under his breath. He shot a sharp glance at Big Al as he left, but Big Al was too absorbed in his thoughts to notice.

Big Al smiled to himself, thinking of how he might spend the money from his first serious job with The Family—what he had skimmed and whatever they might pay him. He saw his neck adorned in a fine silk tie of the kind Vince always wore.

Big Al was still smiling a few minutes later when Vince came up silently behind him. He had both ends of a silk tie gripped tight in his gloved hands, leaving enough in the middle to get around Big Al's fat neck.





I scan him slowly

the way people scroll down newspaper columns for Unclaimed Funds.

He is my fund and I have claimed him but I scan him slowly in case I lose him.

I can't take him with me so I scan him slowly, absorb him slowly like the green ink blotter

I used in 5th grade with my scratchy nib pen at P.S. 184 in Brooklyn.

He was 6th grade Captain of the Safety Guards. He scanned me slowly and claimed me fully.

Hardly calmly, I scan him slowly.

—ada jill schneider

THE SCULPTOR'S APPRENTICE

by stanford allen

The air was clear and a bell tolled as the sun rose in the blue sky over the village between Carrara and Florence in June of the year fifteen hundred and twenty-two.

Each morning when the priest called the faithful to Mass many remembered the night when the old wooden church tower collapsed, and the bronze bell fell to the ground.

At the centre of the village in a stucco-walled building with a red tiled roof, a boy lifted his head from a straw-filled sack, stretched his arms above his head, and got to his feet. A rough-hewn marble monolith, with charcoal markings drawn on four sides, dominated the studio that had been his workplace and home for two years.

His eyes still heavy with sleep, he threw some pieces of wood on the embers of a grey ash fire and brought it back to life. He picked up a bucket from the floor and shuffled, bare-foot, to the empty street. Outside the building he urinated noisily on the already stained lower part of the side wall. When his bladder was empty he walked to an iron pump standing on a plinth a few yards away. After a few strokes of the handle, sparkling water cascaded from the spout. When the pail was full, he continued to draw water and offered his head to the chill liquid.

"Brr! Buongiorno," he said to a reflection of himself in the wet stone at the foot of the pump.

Returning to the workshop he settled the container above the now lively fire, and taking a broom, he swept marble dust and nocturnal rodent droppings into the street.

"My master will be here soon. When he has made the statue, he will let me cut the letters for the inscription," the boy told a family of pigeons that lived in the rafters above his head. Then moving to a shelf laden with iron chisels, rasps, hammers and mallets, he selected a heavy pointed tool that the sculptor would need for the work, and took it to a yellow whetstone to prepare it for the day.

"Good morning, Aldo," the familiar basso voice of Lorenzo Brunelli, the master craftsman, greeted him. "Morning, sir." Singing the words, he turned to greet his mentor. The large avuncular man was not alone. A thin youth with blond hair and large pale blue eyes stood with his hand holding on to the rope that gathered the sculptor's smock around his middle.

"This is Pietro. He is going to work with you," said Lorenzo.

Aldo felt acid in his empty stomach as he looked at the other boy. "Shall I get the mead?" His voice was low. "Of course, Aldo. I have brought bread and meat. Fill three mugs for us."

Breakfast was eaten at the workbench, and the stone carver sat with one arm around the newcomer's shoulders.

"Right, lads. Now we start to work, Pietro." He moved to the stone, and slapping its solid bulk with the palm of his fat hand, explained to the boy. "Inside this magnificent piece of marble is hidden the figure of a beautiful man. We will dig in and find it. Si?"

The boy's eyes lifted to take in the full height of the stone in front of him. His mouth opened in awe, then facing the other boy, closed it to form an angelic smile.

Aldo placed the pointed tool he had prepared into his master's waiting open hand, followed by a mallet into the other. The two boys stood and watched as pieces of white stone flew from the corners of the block.

Aldo anticipated his master's every need all through the morning—sharpening points, filing claw-tools, and brushing the dust from his master's hair. Twice he had to push Pietro out of the way when a point broke, and it was necessary to place a fresh one into the carver's hand without losing rhythm.

"Bene. Not bad for a morning, eh, my little Pietro?" The sculptor cupped the new boy's face in his hands, leaving white dust on his pink cheeks.

Aldo went to the cooler and brought back an animal skin filled with red wine; he handed it to his master.

"Here, my cherub. Take a swig," the artisan coaxed the newcomer.

Moving slowly around the studio with his besom, Aldo gathered together the morning's debris of the sparkling white crystallized mineral from the floor.

"Come, lads. We will go to the tavern for some food." The carver, with Pietro on his arm, stomped down the street. Aldo followed behind, petulantly kicking a stone before him.

It took several weeks for the figure to emerge from the rock and another two were spent carving the finer details and polishing the marble.

The time had arrived for the lettering to be incised around the plinth. This would be done by a literate and sufficiently skilled apprentice.

"Aldo, raise the statue one metre. Pietro will carve the inscription tomorrow."

Each word pierced the boy's heart like an arrow. He had earned the right to cut the letters. Lifting the figure was nothing. He had done it many times. Drive in the wedges. Place wooden blocks in the gaps. Repeat the process, centimeter by centimeter, until the required height was achieved.

"You will sleep here with Aldo tonight." Caressing fingers were laid on the boy's head. "I will mark the stone for you in the morning. We will work together. I will

guide your hand. Buonanotte." Over his shoulder, he said, "One metre up, Aldo."

"It will be done, Maestro." The five words came quietly from Aldo's tightened throat

The day's labour was finished. Little was said between the two boys. The weeks had passed without any bonding between them. Pietro did not always sleep in the studio. When Aldo slept alone, the sculptor and the new apprentice would arrive the next morning arm-in-arm.

"Take the paillasse by the fire, Pietro. I will raise the stone before I go to bed," Aldo said. And he began driving the oak wedges between the floor and the base of the figure. When the work was exactly one metre from the ground he placed timber supports at its four corners and braced them.

Sitting on the floor, with his back against a wall, Aldo lovingly admired his master's work.

While dancing flames from the fire animated shadows on the walls of the studio his companion slept beneath the raised statue and a rat arrived to search for its nightly meal of scraps.

Before the cock had finished its early morning boast, Aldo was running down the street, calling, "Master! Master!" Banging on the door of the sculptor's house, he cried, "Please, Signore Brunelli, wake up." When the sculptor eventually opened the door, Aldo panted, "Come quickly! Come quickly! The statue has fallen!"

They arrived at the atelier and the white marble figure was lying across the straw covered floor, near the cooling fire. A lock of blond hair showed itself beneath the statue's right arm.

"Santa Maria! Get the priest," Lorenzo intoned.

Aldo ran to the church. The sculptor embraced the marble figure, and with a deep intake of breath through clenched teeth, he lifted the statue back to an upright position. Bending down again, he picked up two halves of one of the wooden supports. Wood splinters and a narrowing of the timber explained to him why it had broken, causing the platform to tilt and bring down the carving with such deadly effect.

Aldo returned with the priest, and after kneeling and putting an ear to the dead boy's chest, he began to pray over the body.

"Look at this, my boy. Rats." Holding the two pieces of the broken support in his hands, Lorenzo brought his face down to Aldo's. "The priest will take care of everything. Come home with me, now. We will not work today."

The apprentice walked, with his head close to his master's side, and the older man sheltered him with his arm, as they neared his house.

No one noticed the iron rasp, on the stone worker's bench, with wood fibres embedded in its teeth.

THE WOODS OF ARKHAM

No small unease to hear my name in whisperings where none should be, trees long settled into calm

nor solace in the madness of Escher's cabin found outside in, inside out, no sound above the din of my own screaming

reminding of that greater fright, bane of all who venture where those dusky woods invite, shadows of the Others seen as through a veil too thin

more than should be known of there

-alan meyrowitz

BENEATH SHADOWED WAVES

Upon my deathly still form shadowed waves Of cruel design did fall, while slowly my thoughts Were dragged without remorse beneath the last

Enclosures lit with earthly light and plunged In endless dark abysses tunneled deep From the fearful minds of men. No path from which

An exit might be reached was seen by eyes Of clouded vision, eyes of mine soon lost Amidst such vast subconscious wilderness

Never meant for exploration, and there, More silent than the breath of air, I heard Faint steps behind my own, a predator

Close to catching its weak, unknowing prey; I saw a form of human shape stalking The echo frantic feet had made in haste,

A shape shrouded in flames pale as bone Dried under sleepless suns, and chanting with Its patient gait, a ghostly chorus sang

Dreadful notes of dead, long buried rites, "Kïar, kïar, Sehkaraph kïar, the Faceless hunter of us all." Hiding from

This seething horror brought me deeper Still to nightmare wastes overgrown with foul Decay, where husks of distant memories

Fated never to be born lay hollow And cast in ruinous disarray. Left Abandoned under obsidian skies

Forever frozen in silence with such Perverse, looming monoliths being the Only company about, I thought myself Alone, when voices of sharpened teeth took Hold within my flesh, and whispered dreams of Darkest desires from a thousand hungry

Mouths, dreams that began to thrash and squirm in Sickening clarity, desperate to be Given tangible form. And once again

Did the ghostly chorus begin its low, Ancient chant, moaning verses thick with greed And lust, "Kïar, kïar, Urrhagh kïar,

The festering worm inside of us all."
How long I sat, held captive between words
Of dripping slime and visions swept with grand

Empires of perfection, I cannot say; But at some forgotten crossroad in time I dared answer and give insidious

Ambition safe passage through stagnant voids Of thought into realms swimming with boiling Blood and fountains of flowing viscera,

Where now I danced with vicious savagery Atop the fallen remains of those doomed To stand against my path. From their broken

Bodies I will stitch and weave together A singular mass of dead existence Spurred ahead through no purpose but my own,

And astride this moving mountain wrought of Corpses bound and writhing, the ending notes Of this being will tear themselves from my

Throat with cataclysmic display, screaming, "Kïar, kïar, Ahirahm kïar, the Living carnage given shape from us all!"

—aleksander volkmar



by leigh harlan

Tiny drops of red dotted a path in the fluffy white snow to the Butcher family's front door. The house was adorned with colorful lights and a glowing, inflatable Santa Claus waved at passersby from the porch. A tree covered in glass bulbs and handmade ornaments was framed in the front window. The inside of the house smelled like pine. There was no place for artificial trees in the Butcher home.

Karen Butcher was preparing Christmas dinner. She sprinkled brown sugar on top of sweet potatoes and set them on the counter next to the pumpkin pie.

"You should have started the meat hours ago," Colleen said. Colleen was Karen's mother-in-law. She crossed her thin arms across her chest.

"Now, Colleen, I told you, I want to try something new this year."

"Christmas is the time for tradition, not for trying something new."

"Well, Jenny sent me this article that said raw meat is supposed to have a much richer flavor and be better for you."

"Humph. In my day we didn't have any of this raw food nonsense. I ate mine like a civilized person. Baked in the oven or fried in a pan."

Karen's husband, Edward, poked his head in the kitchen. "Now, Mom, you hosted Christmas dinner for thirty years. It's Karen's turn. I'm sure however she cooks the meat, it will be delicious."

"Didn't you hear? She's not going to cook it. We're eating it raw. Like savages." Colleen threw her hands up in disgust.

David raced into the kitchen and bumped into Colleen. "Slow down there, little one," Colleen said.

"Mom? Can I have a cookie?" David danced on his tip-toes.

"David, you ran into your grandmother. What do you say?" Karen set the gravy on the stove.

"Sorry, Grandma."

"That's better. And no, you may not. You'll spoil your dinner."

David stood up on his toes and looked at the human on the table. It was male and in perfect condition. Just the right amount of fat so that the meat would be marbled and not so much muscle that it would be tough. He poked its open eye and pinched its cheek. It made muffled noises and tried to escape from David's curious fingers.

"David, don't play with the food." Colleen gave him a soft swat on the behind.

David jumped and ran away into the living room.

"Colleen, we don't do that," Karen said.

"Do what?"

"I've told you a thousand times; we don't spank."

"No wonder my grandchildren are so spoiled. Besides, that wasn't a spanking. Eddie can tell you what spanking is. That was just a swat. The boy shouldn't be playing with dinner. Of course, dinner should be dead and in the oven where he can't poke it."

Karen sighed. "It's too late to change it now. It would take hours to cook and all I have left to do is bake the sweet potatoes, make the mashed potatoes, and heat up the rolls."

"I would be willing to wait for a properly cooked meal," Colleen said, "And why isn't Ashley helping? She should be learning how to do this. She'll be hosting Christmas dinner someday."

"She's reading in her bedroom. Leave the girl be. There's barely space enough in this kitchen for you and me," Karen said pointedly.

"Ashley!" Colleen yelled down the hall.

A door closed and Ashley came into the kitchen. "What's up?"

"I don't know why you always have your nose buried in some book. It's Christmas; you should be out here with your family," Colleen said.

Ashley stared down at her feet. "I'm sorry."

Karen caught Ashley's gaze and rolled her eyes when Colleen wasn't looking. "Why don't you keep us company? Your grandmother could use someone to talk to." Ashley looked at the human trussed up on the table.

"We got a good one this year, don't you think?" Karen asked.

Ashley nodded. Then she took a deep breath, straightened her shoulders and looked at Karen with a determined stare. "This is cruel."

"What's cruel?" Colleen asked.

Ashley pointed at the trembling human. "This! This is cruel."

Colleen grunted. "What? Are you a vegetarian now? It's all that reading. It gives a girl strange ideas."

Ashley shook her head. "No, I'm not a vegetarian. But it's scared, look at it. I don't see why we have to keep it alive."

"Well of course we have to keep it alive, you silly girl. That way it's as fresh as possible. The meat starts to go bad as soon as you kill it. Plus, who ever heard of keeping human meat in the freezer?" Colleen laughed.

"Ashley, honey. I appreciate how much you care. I do. You're a sweet girl. But your grandmother's right. That's just the way it's prepared. I've had it after it was frozen before and it's definitely not as good. Besides, these last few hours might be scary,

but it lived a long and good life. Your dad caught it running free inside a department store."

Colleen shook her head. "You two are taking all of the tradition and joy out of Christmas with your foolish ideas."

Karen sighed. "Does it really mean that much to you that the meat be cooked, Colleen?"

"Yes, it does. I came to your house for a traditional Christmas dinner and that's what I would like to have. I have other children I could have done dinner with, you know. Daniel got a 200-pounder eating at a French restaurant. You know that will be well marbled. And his wife wouldn't dream of serving it raw."

"Edward, could you come in here a moment?" Karen called.

Edward stepped into the kitchen. He glanced back and forth at Karen and Colleen with nervous eyes.

"Would you mind if dinner is late, or are you starving?" Karen asked.

"I'm getting pretty hungry. But if I can take out the cheese tray I'll be okay."

"Fine. Would you go heat up the oven?"

Edward looked relieved. "Of course, honey."

Karen put butter into a bowl and melted it in the microwave. She brushed it onto the human's skin. It squirmed and thrashed.

Karen struck it on the nose with the handle of her brush. "Stop your wiggling."

Colleen stood over her shoulder. "You're not using enough butter; its skin won't crisp properly."

"I'm using just the right amount, Colleen." Karen poured salt into her hands and rubbed it on the human's skin.

"Could you pass me the stuffing, Ashley?" Karen asked.

Ashley handed her a warm bowl. Karen pulled one end of the tape up off the human's mouth.

"Oh, God! Stop! Someone, please help me!" it screamed.

Karen shoved a spoonful of stuffing into its mouth, being careful not to let her fingers get too close to its teeth. It choked and spat bits of food back out. She shoved another spoonful in. When its mouth was full she slapped the tape back over before it could spit out more stuffing.

"See? Look how scared it is. You could at least drug it so it doesn't know what's happening," Ashley said.

"I would never want my family to eat meat from a human that had been drugged. Who knows what kind of side effects that might have? I'm sorry, Ashley, but I care more about you and your brother than I do about it. Its suffering will be over soon enough," Karen said.

Ashley gave an exaggerated sigh. "You just don't get it."

Edward came back into the kitchen. "The oven is heating up and ready to go." He brushed his sooty hands on his jeans.

"Good, help me carry it." Karen said.

Karen and Edward each took an end of the large pan that contained the human. It struggled and yanked at the ropes that bound it. Its eyes bulged and its face turned bright red. They carried it down the stairs to the basement.

Edward opened the oven, and they shoved the pan inside. The human's muffled, unintelligible screaming followed them up the stairs. Karen shut the heavy door to the basement, and they could no longer hear the ruckus.

Edward wiped a bead of sweat from his brow. "I caught a big one this year."

Karen put her arm around his waist and gave him a squeeze. "You did good, sweetie."

"Thanks." He leaned down and kissed her.

"Yuck," David said and scrunched up his face in disgust.

Edward made exaggerated smooching sounds and kissed Karen on the cheek.

Karen laughed and pushed him away. "You goof. Go back to your football game."

"Let me know when you need me to help get dinner out of the oven," Edward said.

Karen turned to David. "And you, go join your dad; he has snacks. Dinner is going to be awhile."

David scampered into the living room.

Karen and Edward set the human down at the center of the long table. Karen sliced through the ropes around its wrists and ankles and pulled the tape from its mouth. Fluffy stuffing spilled out into the pan. Its skin was a perfect, crispy golden brown. Karen and Colleen arranged the mashed potatoes, sweet potato casserole, green beans, and jello salad around the human centerpiece.

"Everything looks perfect," Edward said.

David reached for the spoon that was in the sweet potato casserole. Colleen smacked his hand. "Wait until we say grace, young man."

"Mom. I'm not going to say it again, we don't strike the children," Edward admonished.

Colleen rolled her eyes. "You coddle them, Eddie. You turned out just fine."

Karen sighed. "Edward, say grace for us."

They all bowed their heads.

"Heavenly Father, on this day we celebrate the birth of our Lord. We pray that you continue to bless this family. We thank you for the wonderful feast we are about to enjoy and ask that you bless the hands that made it. Amen."

Karen scooped up mashed potatoes and then dropped the spoon back in the bowl. "Oh my God, I almost forgot the rolls." She went into the kitchen and grabbed a basket full of warm bread and set it down on the table.

"Now it's perfect." Karen sat back down.

"Shall I carve?" Edward asked.

"Of course, dear." Karen handed him the carving knife.

Edward cut slices of the loin. He put the hunks of meat on a big plate.

"Make sure to get some thigh," Colleen said.

"I know, mother."

Edward passed the plate around.

Karen poured thick gravy over her mashed potatoes and human. "I think I'm glad we cooked it. It really is more traditional."



SADLY, WE DIE

Sadly, we die in little black suitcase boxes, cave into our fears and the top falls down.

Save the laughter, celebration, thunder clapping, rats experimentally test shed light at end of life's tunnel.

Death is a midnight stoker, everyone living goes home.

All windows bolted, all smiles switched off.

Sad on examination tables, in little rooms, red, with lightening we die, move on.

-michael lee johnson

ELECTRIC

Don't look.

The screen flickers opencheckerboard teeth, white bullet points tattooed across the zigzag black, back to front.

The molar buzz of static, chomping down lines of untranslatable code, rat-a-tat rustle of information, transferred.

Don't look.

Sweat hot and cold on your skin, acrid flavor of defeat curling around your tongue.

It can hear you breathing, it can hear your brain bubbling as loud as screaming through the lightning air.



a woman is singing, sweet siren of melodies. gentle notes, soothing, and you can breathe again, you can raise your eyeballs, creaking with strain.

Maybe you were wrong. Maybe there is nothing to harm you. Maybe you will wake in the morning, laughing as the night terrors lose their grasp. Maybe-

—alison mcbain



THE THING IN THE CLOSET

by lawrence falcetano

"Did you hear something in the closet?" Harold said.

"I didn't hear anything," Wally answered, his eyes, ears, and mind engrossed on his video game console as he lounged on Harold's bed on the other side of the room.

"I know I heard a sound," Harold said. "I think it's come back."

Wally looked up at Harold with sudden interest. "You think who came back?" he said.

"Not who," Harold said, "but what?"

Annoyed at having been disturbed, but curious, Wally shut down his video game and looked over at the closet. It was a big closet, a walk-in, with one big door with open slots at the bottom. It would be easy to hear any sounds coming from inside. But how could anyone or anything have gotten into the closet? He and Harold had been studying most of the day in Harold's room and no one had come in or gone out of the house since his mother left for shopping.

"There it is again," Harold said. "Something's moving around in there."

"Something?" Wally said. He got off the bed and started toward the closet.

"Don't go near it!" Harold shouted. "There's something evil in there."

Wally stopped after taking a few steps, surprised and concerned. "Whoa, man," he said. "You've been reading too much Poe."

"I mean it," Harold said. He got up from his desk, grabbed Wally's arm, and pulled him away from the closet. "Don't go in there. Sit back down. I'll explain everything."

Wally sat on the edge of Harold's bed and waited for a plausible explanation. Harold went back to his desk and sat, then closed his computer screen before he began. "I know this sounds crazy," he said, "but I've been hearing sounds from inside my closet for the past week."

"What kind of sounds?" Wally said.

"Nothing I can explain," Harold said. "Just sounds, movement, like something's in there."



"Doing what?"

"I don't know."

"How often have you heard these sounds?"

"Mostly at night—late. But today is the first time I've heard them in the daytime."

"Have you seen anyone—or thing?"

"No. I just hear it moving around and sometimes I see moving shadows."

"Has anyone else seen or heard this thing?"

"It's only in my closet," Harold said.

"What would something be doing in your closet? Wally said. "And how would it get in there?"

"I don't know," Harold said. "You're asking me questions I don't have answers to. I only know something's in there and it's in there for no good reason. I believe when it's ready, it'll come out with the intention of causing terrible harm."

Wally could see Harold was genuinely afraid of whatever he believed was living in his closet. He could see the fear in his eyes and the sweat breaking out on his forehead as he spoke about it.

"You'd better take a deep breath," he said. "What you're telling me makes no sense."

Harold jumped up suddenly and cast a fearful look at the closet door. "There it is again," he said. "See how the door moved." He pointed a shaky finger at the door for Wally to see, but when Wally looked, he neither saw nor heard anything unusual.

"I think you've been studying too hard or drinking too much beer," he said. He walked closer to Harold, placed his arms on his shoulders and gently guided him back into his chair. He could feel Harold trembling.

"Don't make jokes," Harold said. He stood up again, pushed past Wally and walked across the room to his bed, keeping a wary eye on the closet door. Kneeling beside the bed, he reached beneath it and brought out a worn shoebox. He carried it back to his desk and set it down carefully. When he opened the lid, Wally saw the box contained a nickel-plated 9-mm handgun.

"Where'd you get that?"

"It belonged to my dad," Harold said. "He kept it in the house for protection. I keep it under my bed now."

"What're you gonna do with it?"

"Whatever I have to," Harold said. He took the gun out of the box and the fully loaded magazine beside it and slid the magazine into the gun with a loud click.

"I wanna be ready when that thing comes out of the closet," Harold said.

"You better be careful with that," Wally said. "Somebody could get hurt."

"I know how to handle a gun," Harold said, releasing the safety and laying the gun down carefully on the desk, its muzzle pointed toward the closet.

Wally was beginning to feel uncomfortable with Harold's behavior. Although Harold had been under a ton of stress since his father unexpectedly left his mother, nearly a month ago—putting the obligation of "man of the house" solely on Harold's shoulders—he had never seen his friend act this way. No one knew for sure why Harold's father had suddenly disappeared. Marital problems were the consensus in the neighborhood.

Harold's relationship with his father had been tenuous at best. He had confided in Wally that he held ill feelings toward his father and believed his father was physically

abusing his mother. After Wally swore an oath of secrecy, Harold recalled to him how he had laid in his bed at night listening to the sounds his mother made-muffled cries of pain and abuse emanating through the wall between their bedroom and his. He had even heard the sounds his father made, and the sounds they made together. He had fallen asleep many nights with his pillow pressed against his ears, tears in his eyes, and hatred for his father growing in his heart.

Harold carried his burden of anger and frustration for a long time, helpless to do anything until it began to affect him emotionally. His mother, finally realizing her son's sudden inordinate behavior, set up the sessions with Doctor Nugent. The Doctor had assured Harold's mother that together they would resolve just what was troubling Harold, but that it would take time and patience and understanding. Wally had been doing his part to bring things back to normal for his best friend, but this afternoon had been a setback. Harold was seeing and hearing things that weren't there. He'd have to mention it to Harold's mom so she could bring it to the attention of Doctor Nugent before things got worse.

"Have you looked in the closet?" Wally said.

"No way."

"Then how can you be sure something's in there?"

"I told you, I see shadows moving and hear weird sounds."

"Is it always in there?"

"I hear it mostly at night. It comes and goes."

"What do you think it wants?"

"I don't know, but it's not here for a friendly visit."

Wally stepped closer to the closet door.

"Don't go near it!" Harold shouted.

"I wanna look inside," Wally said.

"No. You'll let it out. It'll kill us all."

"If it wants to come out," Wally said, "there's nothing to stop it."

"It'll come out when the time is right," Harold said.

Harold was working himself into a frenzy and Wally was beginning to fear for his own safety. He thought it best to try and get the gun away from Harold and put it back under the bed out of Harold's sight—and mind. He wished Harold's mother would get back from shopping soon.

"Give me the gun," Wally said. He reached for the gun on the desk, but Harold snatched it up and held it close by his side. "No. The gun stays with me," he said.

"But I wanna take it with me and see who is in there."

"I told you, you can't go in there. You'll cause us all to die."

Wally walked closer to Harold and put on his serious face. "Listen to me. If there is something in that closet and it's as terrible as you think it is, then we'd better find out just what it is, and stop it from doing whatever awful thing it's here to do."

Harold contemplated this reasoning and then said, "But if we disturb it, or upset it, we might be putting ourselves in worse jeopardy. At least now it's content to stay in the closet. I think we should leave it alone."

"Okay," Wally said, throwing up his hands. "If you wanna wait around until some night when that thing decides to come out and strangle you in your bed." Wally saw the terror grow on Harold's face. He put a consoling hand on his friend's shoulder. "Listen, buddy. Maybe there's nothing in the closet. Maybe you're just imagining it."

"I'm not," Harold said. "I've seen it moving around in there. I can hear it breathing in the darkness at night when I'm lying in bed."

"Then if there's something in there, let's find out what it is. Maybe it's a stray cat or a raccoon that got into the house and became trapped."

"It's a lot bigger than a cat," Harold said. "I've seen its shadow as it passes the door. It has massive shoulders and a huge head and it stands almost as high as the ceiling. And it gives off a foul stench. Can't you smell it?"

Wally offered no confirmation but walked back toward Harold's bed, closer to the closet. "I'm going inside," he said. "If there's something in there, I'm gonna find it."

"Don't do it, Wally," Harold yelled. He stood rigid, almost petrified with fear at the thought of Wally confronting the thing in the closet. His body began to tremble as he gripped the gun tighter in his hand and watched Wally approach the closet door.

Wally stopped for a moment and leaned his ear against the door. Cautiously he put his hand on the door handle and pulled the door open.

"Don't," Harold begged. "Don't go in." Ignoring Harold's warning, Wally took a careful step into the semi-darkness and let the door close behind him.

There was silence in the room as Harold waited a long agonizing time. *I need to protect Wally. He doesn't realize what he's doing. I can't let that thing get to him.* Slowly, mechanically, Harold raised the gun in both his hands and pointed it at the closet door, waiting for the inevitable screams and cries to come from Wally as the thing in the closet—provoked and angry—unleashed its rage upon his friend.

Harold stood in the silence, his body nearly convulsing in anticipation and fear, until he saw the yellow light around the edges of the door frame when Wally flicked on the interior light switch.

"There's no one in here, Harold," Wally finally said, his voice echoing inside the hollow closet. "Just a bunch of empty clothes hangers and an old trunk in the corner."

"Don't open it," Harold said. "The thing might be in there."

"I have to see what's in it," Wally said.

"No, don't open it!' Harold screamed, even as he heard Wally releasing the trunk's metal latch.

"Don't open the trunk," he shouted again. But the squealing of the hinges told him it was too late. Wally had lifted the lid.

There was an ominous silence from within the closet until Wally finally said, "You're right, Harold, there is something in it."

"Leave it alone," Harold pleaded.

The gun was shaking in his hands now, pointed straight at the closet door.

"It looks like ... it looks like a body," Wally said. "A dead body!"

"Don't! Don't!" Harold shouted.

"It is a body," Wally said. "Oh, my God. It's ... it's your—"

A single shot rang out, sending a bullet through the closet door, striking Wally in his spine. He dropped to the closet floor dead.

The car door slammed and jolted him upright. He had fallen asleep at his desk with his head on his arms, the gun still in his hand. His mother had returned home from shopping.

He looked around his room, everything seemed as it should be. He didn't know how long he had been asleep nor where Wally had gone. He put the gun away in

the top drawer of his desk and waited calmly as he listened to his mother close the front door to the house and walk into the kitchen. His head felt heavy and his temples ached. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and brushed back his hair in an effort to compose himself, knowing his mother would come up to his room when she was ready. If something looked untoward she would start with the questions, just like Doctor Nugent. Questions—questions— and more questions, he was sick of questions, if they would just leave him alone long enough to—

"Harold, I'm home," his mother shouted up to him.

She was already on her way up to his room; he could hear her footsteps on the stairs. He opened his laptop and the screen flickered to life just as his mother appeared in his doorway.

"Am I interrupting?" she said.

She stepped into the room offering him her phony smile. It was the smile he had come to hate. The smile she had hidden behind all the while his father had been doing those things to her. The same smile she had used to deny the abuse and punishment he had been putting her through, protecting that sick bastard for whatever reason she had. Harold had always loved his mother but lately she seemed as phony and untrusting as his father had been. Maybe she didn't mind what he had been doing to her. Maybe she enjoyed it.

She walked over and kissed his forehead. "Have you been studying all afternoon?" she said.

"Wally and I have been working on that school project."

He tried to remember why Wally had to leave so suddenly, but couldn't. He would ask Wally about it in the morning. He watched her walk to his bed and sit.

She likes the bed. Their bed is where he did things to her; where she allowed him to do those things.

He watched her as she looked around the room at everything that belonged to him: his bed, his dresser, his bookshelf, his desk ... his closet. She was looking for something out of the ordinary, something she could find fault with so she could correct him or reprimand him like she'd always done. She was forever treating him like a child. He wasn't a child and he was beginning to hate her for it.

"When are you going to tidy up your room?" she asked.

Ouestions!

"I haven't had time," he said.

"I've asked you twice this week already."

"I'll get to it."

"You told me that days ago," she said. "If you're not going to help me keep—"

He stood up from his chair suddenly and placed his finger over his lips, indicating for her to stop talking. In the quietness of the room, she watched curiously as he fixed his eyes on the closet door.

He stood motionless for nearly a full minute until she finally said, "What is it, Harold?"

"Did you hear something in the closet?" he said.



Tonya Harding Counsels Lizzie Borden

Just go for the knees, girl, Just go for the knees. Get a two foot length of pipe, Skate right over and give 'em a whack. Crack some knees and they will never Go up those stairs again.

And get rid of that prim and proper thing. I should know. You can take the trash out of the trailer But you can't park the trailer next to the trash... Or something like that.

Try this Lizzie:
As you skate,
Reach behind your back,
Pull your leg up over your head
And spin like the devil.

I don't know if that will help But it sure as heck can't hurt.

—larry allen



Breath of Heaven

I hear a sigh in the air Amid the effortless flapping of wings; A whisper in the firs To which my ears can't help but cling.

My teary eyes uplift, Gazing, hoping, peering, searching... To glimpse the rhythm in the trees, Seeking the grace of the one beyond.

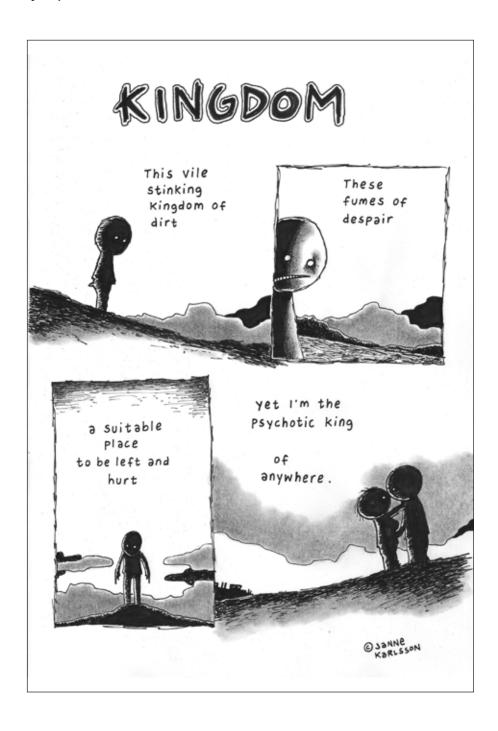
I need a breath of heaven To fill the hole in my soul, To nourish my heart with hope. My life is awash, Gasping for a breath of heaven.

Often I watch the clouds sunder, And agape come the stormy portals; A yawn of lightning and thunder Bearing in air so fresh and immortal.

My soul lift sky-bound, Craving, hankering, longing, yearning... For just a whiff where grace abounds, Seeking the love of the one beyond.

I need a breath of heaven To fill the hole in my soul, To nourish my heart with hope. My life is awash, Gasping for a breath of heaven.

-walter dinjos



Gothic Wagnerian

That dark magic wood and every twisted tree Leapt menacingly right out upon untouched innocence And I was in there, lost for eternity Among those winding ways, gnarled and alive with malevolence How strangely dead, yet when not fully seen Black evil eyes penetrated everything And there, chanted in chorus, some unforeseen Terror hiding behind each shadowy ring. It could never have been a holy song In such a cacophony of restless phantoms And yet it drew my spirit in upon Its own strange pilgrimage where ransoms Would hang from outstretched palms to Charon And then one day all would be well, sail on.

—francis j. kelly

"Gothic Wagnerian" was first published in 2013 in Et Ego in Arcadia by Francis J. Kelly.

THE TAXIDERMIST'S

Being the school "goth" means getting a date is no easy feat. Especially here in Maplebuck, a rural community where everyone still square dances and thinks cowboy hats are the latest fashion trend. Then there is me, Gavin—every day wearing black-band T-shirts that display vile images of demons, monsters, and human beings ripped to shreds. As if my attire wasn't terrible enough, my dreadlocks that brush my shoulders assure people that I'm a freak. But by some kind of miracle, perhaps due in large part to being lab partners, Dana Livewell asked me to go on a date Friday. I didn't hesitate to accept, and now Friday is here and I'm worried I made a bad decision. In the excitement of my anticipation, I had forgotten about her father.

Wyatt Livewell, of Livewell's Taxidermy, is your typical backwoods hick. His eyes never look straight ahead and he always has an enormous wad of chew in his lip. Also you can be sure he has a gun somewhere on him. But I couldn't let Dana down; this was my first chance with a girl.

I pulled my barely-running car up their drive, making sure to keep the Cannibal Corpse cassette to a dull roar. To my left was their house, a small doublewide, and off to my right was Mr. Livewell's taxidermy shop. Lights were on in both buildings. After I got out of my car, I looked at myself in the window. I had tied my dreadlocks into a ponytail and put on my cleanest tee; it was as presentable as I could be.

Before I could even step toward the house, a loud drawl called out: "C'mere boy. Let me talk to you before you go off with Dana."

I locked my eyes on the gravel and walked over to the shop. Mr. Livewell stood in the doorway, a bloody apron tight around his waist. When I reached him, I tried to be polite. "Good evening, sir," I said. "How are you doing ton—"

"Zip it. Get in here, you little wanna-be vampire."

I shut my mouth and stepped inside. The smell was nauseating. On the table in the middle of the room was a bear hide, freshly stripped. Throughout the shop were mounted animals and piles of pelts and skins. The door banged behind me, and when

BELLEDUAG

by ray mears

I turned Livewell was standing there looking at me with his arms crossed.

"Sir, is Dana ready yet? Our movie starts soon..."

He seemed apathetic. He shrugged. "You'll see her soon enough." With a smile, he gave a wave around the shop. "Well? What do you think of my work, boy?"

I had to admit, the animals did look as lifelike as I had ever seen a mount look. "You do a fine job, Mr. Livewell."

He continued grinning. "Call me Wyatt. Would you like to help me with a mount?" "Oh, I really couldn't; we need to go soon," I stammered anxiously.

"Oh, you'll be fine, boy. Dana told me about you, how you're into blood and gore and all that. Lend me a quick hand. I bet you enjoy it."

Seeing no way out of this, I nodded sullenly, shoving my hands in my pockets.

"Right through here then," he said as he made his way to a back room.

I wanted to run. Something felt wrong. But I was also eager to see Dana, to finally go on a date and maybe even get my first kiss. Trying to relax, I followed Wyatt through the door of this back room. It was cold in here, and the stench was much worse. A large old air conditioner was blowing full force, and a fluorescent bulb glared from the ceiling.

Wyatt had his back to me, his hands busy at the table in front of him. There was a lot of grunting, and I assumed he was hard at work with whatever animal lay in front of him. Trying to make a good impression, I stepped up beside him. My stomach flipped over. There on the table was Dana—all hogtied up in the clothes she'd worn to school today.

"See, my daughter ain't allowed to date and she knows that. I've told her multiple times. I can't blame you though, boy; you didn't know any better. I was your age once; I know how it is. Dana came home talking all about going on a date with you tonight. She knew what happened to her sister Carla, and so this shouldn't have been a surprise."

He gave a quick nod to a corner of the room. I took a few steps toward it and gasped at the sight of Carla Livewell mounted and looking perfectly alive. He really did do superior work.

I started to run, but what Wyatt said stopped me. "The door is locked and you ain't got the key. I'll do you next if you try to leave. Now get over here and lend a helping hand. She won't stop squirming around."

My mind was screaming at me to find a way out and get the police. But I knew better than to think I had a chance; Wyatt was too good at his work. It was reported years ago that Carla was kidnapped and never found. Yet here she was mounted in her father's taxidermy shop, looking as if she could walk off and go to the football game tonight. Wyatt obviously knew how to get around the police.

I found myself shuffling back to the table. Dana's eyes looked up at me helplessly, begging me to save her. Wyatt seemed angry that I just stood there and stared at the victim. Suddenly he handed me a cleaver. The handle was sticky with blood, but the blade gleamed arrogantly in the light.

"Well, boy, do it. Make her stop squirming for me," Wyatt ordered.

"I can't ... I can't kill anyone, especially Dana. She was the only girl to ask me on a date," I cried.

"Oh, come on now! You don't think she honestly liked you, do you? I mean, no offense, kid, but you're a freak. She's a country girl and you look like you belong in the Ripley's museum. She only did it to try and spite me. Apparently I'm too 'controlling' ... whatever that means."

I gripped the handle a little tighter. So she isn't interested in me ... no girls ever are. I can't believe I was so damn naïve. Dana is beautiful, and I am a freak. Just like Wyatt said. Dana must have seen my face mulling it over, because she stopped moving around. She just lay there powerlessly, sobbing quietly around the rag in her mouth.

"Listen, go ahead and make up your mind. I'm going to the next room to get my good skinning knife. That's key to a good mount, son; you have to make sure you skin them perfectly. When I come back, Dana better be laying still ... for good," Wyatt explained calmly. He had given me an ultimatum ... it was his daughter or me.

As soon as he left the room, Dana tried to reach out and grab my hand. I stepped back. I couldn't get over the heartache. All my life I had wanted a girl to love me, but Dana was just like all the rest of them—exploiting the freak for some sick pleasure.

Except this time, I had the power—all the power. I had the chance to right all the wrongs done to me. One swing of this blade and all that pain and anger could be released. I could feel eyes tearing into my back, and I knew Wyatt was in the doorway waiting to see my next move. He stepped forward and put a vise of a grip on my shoulder.

"Come on now, son; you listen to that devil music. This shouldn't bother you any. She used you, took advantage of you. So what's it going to be?"

I looked down at Dana one last time and saw everyone who had ever wronged me. Maybe Wyatt isn't that bad after all, and I think I can even learn to enjoy taxidermy.



THE SIREN

On her rock, she waited for the promise of passing ships Julia who'd been expelled from her kingdom for her love of men. Father wasn't pleased but she enjoyed peace as much as other things, and when lonely; she'd sing to the few birds who dared so close.

At night when cold, she would sit and watch the green fire of stars, imagining the warmth of long lost lovers swallowed by Pompeii ash. Fathers kingdom was gone and she was all that remained of such bad blood as he who nailed his enemies to walls and put their children to the sword.

Father would allow no shame to fall on his tyrannical name
Julia was ejected to this moss covered rock when she'd loved too much.
It had taken hell itself to open up to rid the world of fathers throne.
Julia twitched her tail excitedly when she saw a red flag through the sunset

talk of dragons would not deter heroes looking for new worlds.

Squinting, she waved her hands above her head and started to sing.

She had missed the flesh of men and pushing away bones of old lovers into the water she wiped her fangs and watched the ship turn toward her.

-matthew wilson

... line(s)

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Ruled ...
Ruled ...
A- ...
Out of ...
Tow the ...
Tow the ...
Draw the ...
Draw the ...
Production ...
Picket ...
Hard ...
Unemployment ...
Washing ...
Drop me a ...
Read between the Help ...
Border ...
End of the ...
```

-n.o.a. rawle

TEARING



I'm Sure they'll pass anytime soon

They always do



Now

at...___

where was I







by wendy schmidt

Bernice Baldwin was really hot—but not in a good way. All morning she'd had the dreaded suspicion that something horrible was going to happen.

During her workout, she sweltered through two T-shirts. During her shower, the steam was almost soupy thick even though she'd pointed the handle towards cold. When toweling off, she noticed her skin had turned a bright shade of pink.

Breakfast bagels turned a toasty brown when she held them in her hands. Butter melted before she could even spread it on the bread. Her coffee order required no extra-hot. It was as if Bernice could cook anything simply by touching it.

Gotta get to work. She trudged to her car. A pile of fresh snow turned to slush as her foot hit the outer edge.

Getting sick for sure. Probably running a fever, but I can't take the day off. There was a huge presentation for Sun Travel at ten o'clock and Bernice was the head of new accounts.

On Oak Avenue the car seat seemed so warm she had to open all four windows. This was a rather strange thing to do in the middle of January. Several drivers honked and stared at her as if she'd gone mad. Bernice could understand since she felt as if her mind were slowly melting along with everything else. Little relief came from the freezing winter wind.

"Oh, no," Bernice moaned when the car windows fogged. *I should have got that tune up.* She turned on the radio, trying to create a much needed distraction. A song about being "hot-blooded" came blasting through the speakers. The lyrics challenged an examination to see just how hot-blooded she was and claimed a fever of 103.

"More like 110," Bernice snapped as she unbuttoned her coat. What's going on with me today?

As soon as the elevator doors opened she could see her co-workers buzzing with activity for the new business presentation.

"Thank God you're here!" her boss boomed.

Bernice tried very hard to hide her high-heat plight along with her extreme growing annoyance. Mr. Fleming had a problem with stressful situations and was prone to panic before an important meeting. He needed her steady hand to calm things down.

"No need to worry, John. Everything is under control as usual."

"Sorry, Bernice; didn't mean to ... what's with your face? It's redder than a firecracker. Do not tell me you're getting sick, not today of all days!"

"I'm fine, John, just a little overheated from the car ride and my quilted coat."

"A little overheated? You look like you could light a match just by licking it. Bernice, we can't afford any absences today."

"I'm fine; just need some water is all."

Bernice excused herself and made a run for the ladies' room. In the mirror her reflection was wet. Beads of sweat ran down her back. Stuffing paper towels under her blouse and throwing cold water on her face seemed to help.

"There are several messages for you at your desk, Ms. Baldwin," her assistant said. "Thanks, Jan."

"Excuse me, Ms. Baldwin?" Jan crinkled her nose. "Is that a new perfume you're wearing?"

"I'm not wearing any perfume," Bernice replied.

"Smells tropical. Oh, how clever, it's for the presentation, right?"

"I—right, for the presentation." Bernice hurried down the hall.

"Hey, Bernice, did you fall asleep in the self-tanner or is this a new bit for the travel people?" Stan "The Man" Miller was always teasing her by throwing out lame headlines. "A Sun Vacation will put you in the pink."

"Great, Stan, I'll keep that one in mind." She slammed her office door.

"Geez," Stan said to no one in particular. "Ice Queen is really hot under the collar this morning. Get it? Hot under the collar? Ol' Stan The Man's always thinking on his feet."

The underarm towels were already soaked. I'm too young for menopause! Okay ... okay, get a grip. I'll change my blouse and drink lots of ice water.

She shut the blinds and took off as many clothes as possible without going completely nude. She turned on the overhead fan. She opened a window. That's better, much better. You're fine, Bernice. You've got this.

At that moment the intercom buzzed. "Ms. Baldwin, the travel clients are here. Would you like some coffee brought in?"

"For heaven's sake, Jan, that's the last thing I need!" Bernice snapped.

There was a long pause on the other end of the line. "I meant for the clients. Everything okay in there?"

"Oh, yes, yes and bring water, lots and lots and lots of ice water, please! In fact, bring a bucket of ice to my office before the meeting."

Another long pause. "A bucket of ice, Ms. Baldwin?"

"Yes, a bucket of ice!"

"Would you like a glass with that, Ms. Baldwin?"

Bernice didn't like the insinuation. Several of her team members enjoyed a belt or two before meetings. Not her, never, she was always in control.

"Just get me the damned ice, Jan. And put a fire under your feet!"

Two timid knocks later, Bernice flew out the door and grabbed the bucket before Jan had a chance to hand it over.

"Oh dear God, I need this! Thanks, Jan, sorry about my flare-up before."

"Ms. Baldwin, is everything all right? I mean, do you need anything else before the meeting?"

"Listen, this is very important." Bernice scanned for Stan The Man. He liked to eavesdrop on her conversations. "Make sure there are pitchers of ice water near me and plenty of moist towelettes."

"I'm sorry, did you say towelettes?" Jan asked, looking concerned.

"Lower your voice for goodness sake." Bernice had the insane urge to slap Jan across the face. "Yes, am I not speaking English? I need cool, wet towelettes and some cold compresses, like the kind they use for sprains."

"Are you injured, Ms. Baldwin?"

"Just bring me what I ask for will you and stop grilling me," Bernice cried.

By an hour later Bernice had managed to lower her body temperature. She'd added an order of iced coffee to Jan's list. The ice cubes barely touched her tongue before melting down her throat. But the cold compresses and ice water had done the trick.

She toned down her pink skin with face powder and changed her blouse.

Jan made the announcement. "They're waiting in conference room B."

Bernice straightened her posture and said, "I'm ready."

The conference room was packed wall to wall with clients. Presentation boards depicted a lush tropical island of palm trees, white sand beaches, and a burning hot sun. One headline read "Catch the fever for your next vacation."

Bernice could feel her body heat rise just from looking at the boards. *Keep your cool. Stay in control.*

The presentation was going well until people started to notice a strange fog forming in the room. It seemed to be coming from the pitchers of ice water. Bernice kept grabbing at the cold compresses she'd tucked under her blouse. The tape wasn't holding. She took a deep breath.

"Everyone loves the sexy summer beaches of a tropical coastline. White sands and white-capped waves make life seem almost dreamlike," Bernice said, as a mist began to roll off the long conference table. It was if the hot and cold front were meeting in the middle of her meeting.

One of the clients suddenly began to applaud, "This is great, a simulated ocean mist!"

Mr. Fleming seemed confused for a second and then quickly replied. "Special effects, it's all the rage in advertising now."

"Look at Bernice!" Stan added. "She's got a sun burn!"

It was getting hard to see anything clearly.

"Bernice, perhaps we can turn down the fog machine now." Mr. Fleming said. "Bernice? Did you hear me? I can't see my hand in front of my face."

Stan stood up and ran for the windows. "Open 'em fellas. This has gone far enough! Next thing ya know, we'll be stripping down to our skivvies."

After a minute the room began to clear out.

"Where is Bernice?" someone asked.

Stan searched all over and finally, on the floor, saw a large puddle of liquid and what was left of Bernice's clothes. "It looks like somebody took a match to them."

Mr. Fleming picked up a shoe. "And this looks melted."

The client started applauding again. "Brilliant presentation! I can actually feel the tropical sun!"

Sam snapped his fingers. "How's this sound—a vacation so hot it will set you on fire!"

Several clients joined in the applause. "We love it! Bernice is a genius! But where did she go?"

Mr. Fleming, still holding the shoe said, "She seems to have evaporated. Bernice can be rather coy about taking the credit. Don't worry, we'll find her after the break. Stan, why don't you finish up while I send out for more coffee?"

"Sure thing, sir. But I just want give credit where credit is due. Bernice is always hot on the heels of any new trend in advertising. This presentation proves it."





Waiting for Charon

With grim, hooded, old Charon of the blazing eyes, Grumbling in his surly way across the Acheron, And bad-tempered as ever, with all the afterlives He has to ferry laboriously, all with one obol on Their silent gaping mouths, still all must sail away. And though endowed with immortality, the old man Is strangely white-haired, miserly about his pay, And devoid of any sentiment about souls who stand For centuries with hands outstretched, broken With the weight of miseries, before and after; But in the murky mists he wraps his cloak around His open frailty, too busy to allow exile or disaster Humanise his heart; his was a job to be done and well, For the gods goad the ferryman to Elysium or hell.

—francis j. kelly

"Waiting for Charon" was first published in 2013 in Et Ego in Arcadia by Francis J. Kelly.

THROUGH THE FIRE

Walk quickly through the fire as doomed men scream from cages you have no time to watch the show as mad men fill their pages with crimes of damned men who had no softness and no love for devoted wives and widows when they walked the world above.

It is best to pick up speed little tourist in so vengeful a place now the walls have shown their teeth, the masters seen your face. This is no world for the gentle soul, doomed are the soft hearted. The best of men have gone upstairs now hope has all departed.

Death is but a doorway, marked with arrows left and right detailing crimes of the wicked and all actions of the knight. Flustered are the fallen, with all their plans undone. No time to confess now, no more days to feel the sun.

Do not dare into the potent darkness, those caves between the fire where weeping widows beg for company, their heart pierced on the pyre. They have made their nailed bed, these lovers here do dwell but this pit is not for tourists now, walk quickly through this hell.

-matthew wilson

A=N=O=L=D=P=I=N=K=B=E=D=R=O=O=M=

I slowly begin to slip beneath, Fingers tingling at icy stabs of Regret and madness, masquerading As a red balloon in the twilight sky.

I drink in the muddled darkness, Eyes closed in a last attempt To regain a forgotten memory... Treasures in an old pink bedroom.

But the silence bears upon me, Stealing each precious thought, Replacing it with only the steady Drip of a leaky faucet at 2 a.m.

While all the world about me sleeps, I can only bring myself to pretend, Eyes closed to a land of screams, Fingers tightened across satin sheets.

—angela ash

See them blossom, Cheeks as soft as petals. Glowing, healthy, Bulbous laden seed pods.

On spindly legs they Totter, stumble, fall, grasping for truth so new their brave world

The seeds o' descent. forbidden fruit consumed. Precarious The future of mankind.

Mother smarts with Sudden painful truth that Termination's Not an option now

-n.o.a. rawle

Dismal'N' Distress

by adam armstrong

Liz paced around her living room; a portrait of a patient waiting to find out if it is terminal. The slightest twist of her hips threatened to rip the fabric of her skirt and allow full movement again. Her rose blouse was about to lose the battle with her D-cups. Liz stopped to adjust the blouse down to allow a canyon of cleavage. After a moment of consideration, she settled for a small hollow of cleavage instead.

French manicured nails begged to be bitten so she placed words in her mouth instead. Could he have met someone else? Maybe he already has someone else. Was he just trying to pick up a hot piece on the side? Her cheeks flushed a bright pink before the blush ran down either side of her face and formed a smile. The thick carpet was given a reprise as she slowed to ponder. The phone definitely would have rung by now if they both had the same line of thought.

A tiny tremor ran through her and ticked her eyes toward the clock. The second hand slowed down and thought about going backward. "I'll give you a buzz about six." It was five fifty-eight, Bastard! About six, it had been about six for centuries.

She didn't know why she perpetually placed people on pedestals. It could be the undying romantic swimming under nine to five thoughts. The romantic wanted it all to fall together in perfect symphony with no turbulence until the end of time. So did the lazy American in her that wanted everything now, fast, and cheap.

Rejection wasn't so horrible; especially rejection from a guy who she would probably end up using anyway. It was the thought of not being certain whether or not she was rejected ... she dug her nails into the palm of her hands. Her heart beat to the insane rhythm of a drummer on crack trying to play the solo of "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida."

"I don't have anything else to do," escaped through her clenched teeth.

That wasn't entirely true, she did have that laundry. Laying out the clothes you were going to wear for the week took some time. Picking off every piece of lint on

them with tweezers took a little extra time. And those stains: they were as bad as red wine on white cotton. Focusing on each square inch at a time, Liz found ways of getting them stain-free.

She wondered if they were complete opposites. A layout of the maze, along with a method of defeating the Minotaur, always appeared in her mind. Maybe he just chose the closest path, and hoped the Minotaur had joined the Teamsters. The Teamsters might have told it not to look down that path on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.

She should be the damsel in distress awaiting a shining knight to save her from boredom. Instead, here she paced, dismal and distressed.

"Screw him! Who needs men anyway? They're messy, rude, arrogant, insensitive, and just so detached! Why doesn't he call me?" Her fists shook at the tiny room.

The phone rang.

Time stopped. Reality displaced itself. The train was no longer on the tracks because the tracks were imagined. Life was more than what she expected; her cynicism had no ability to mold the real world. Liz dived on the couch, tackling the phone. She held it in a death grip to ensure that it didn't slip away like a wet bar of soap. Without bothering to check the caller ID, she slipped into her phone sex voice, "Hey there."

"Liz, turn on your TV!" a female voice shouted.

Her face and shoulders both slumped. Then her eyebrows met and her teeth ground together.

"Why, Sarah?" Liz asked.

"It looks like your dream date turned out to be a nightmare," Sarah said.

Liz dragged her eyes around the vast tundra of the little living room. The remote was playing hide-and-you're-screwed-if-you-need-it. After another quick survey she shrugged her shoulders and walked over to the television set. She stopped. Puzzled for a moment, then the little light bulb went off above her head as she remembered how to turn on the television without the remote.

"What channel?" Liz asked.

"Channel 5," Sarah said.

Liz's mouth dropped open as she saw what was on the screen.

"Sorry baby. But look on the bright side—"

"I'll call you back," she hung up on Sarah.

Finding the volume up button, the TV was turned up to an earsplitting level. An attractive news reporter (with a fake Barbie doll quality that made Liz hate her immediately) was filling the viewing public in on what had happened in the small cottage behind her. Various news scenes about the story—such as the ordinary house, the police directing traffic, a parked car in front of a garage—flashed across the screen as they often do. It could have been a subliminal message sent just to her. His face flashed on the screen then turned again, to the outside of his house. In that flash, Liz had seen those beautiful green/blue eyes betray a vicious craziness.

"—twenty-three is the body-count so far. It seems that Gary Bauer would lure women back to his house where he would chain them in the sound proofed basement so that he could rape and torture them before finally killing them. It is unclear at this time how long he has been doing this, but police believe that he had more victims

lined up. The district attorney's office will be preparing their case against Bauer, though it is their opinion he will try an insanity plea. Next with sports—"

A jab of her finger killed the tube. Stumbling, like a George Romero zombie looking for flesh, she went into the kitchen. Opening the basement door, she was devoured by darkness as she sank into it.

Liz pulled on an overhead string that sent the darkness retreating as it was chased out by the dim yellow light. Drifting through the laundry room into her workshop, she began to power everything down. She knew that she wouldn't get anything done now.

Her butt, still unaccustomed to the tight skirt, bumped into her surgeon's instrument tray and knocked some of the contents onto the floor. Liz took a clean rag off of the tray, bent down, and slowly wiped off each scalpel before returning them back to the tray. She rearranged all the items until they were picture perfect and in the order which they would be most used: scalpels, pliers, mace, hammer, saw, and small vial of acid. Tapping her foot and twiddling her fingers, she glanced over at the spot she had reserved for him. The rough concrete needed to be resealed so she could get the blood off easier. Too bad the spot would go unused for another week. She had just oiled and polished the shackles and bought new electrodes. And she had just fixed the trapdoor that led to the lye bath.

She chuckled as she picked up her strap-on dildo with the razor blades embedded in the end. The drawer that was reserved for things that she forced up men's anuses had a perfect place for it carved out of foam.

She thought about him. They really weren't that different. It is all in the planning ahead though, she thought as she began to mop the already clean floor. It was in the planning, and the execution.



wondering why and away

The rain fell above my head this morning ... A poets return to sanity ... The wind blowing away all of the unnecessary imminent worries, Of a yesterday gone and taken ...

Far and away ...
Drifting this sunken anchor ...
There are no chains that could keep us from this warmth ...
To equate a sense of endless freedom ...
One must discover the absent ...
Embracing a life of the darkest return ...
To a self known within the deepest sea.

The ripples dance on this day of prominent stillness. How far can man travel, amongst the road less traveled, I wonder ...? To see the days shine and remember the nights of ponder ... How far can mans mind wander of wonder?

Sleeping woke fully the rain it still drizzles ... Catching the wind and the laughter that sizzles ... The mangrove trees lightly soaking the hidden sun ... The sea shore shelling whats yet to become.

Hidden treasures below us ...
This mystery that swims and sinks ...
Such as loves radiant disguise ...
The answer that simply remains ... The same as the questionable..
A known fact of love simply being the ambient light of two ships, passing in the darkest depths of night,
To show each others greatness ...
Proving to be true, just as the sun rises and sets ...
Love just simply is ...

-brittany horton

Before The Mourning Sun

Bruised skin shines beneath the moon, As my hunger grows within. Seeking, reaching, desperately pleading... To fill all that is sin.

Darkness swirls about my head, As the blood drops to the ground. Dripping, dropping, never stopping... This flow without a sound.

A broken twig, a falling leaf, Every sound a million shouts. Killing, feeling, even kneeling... To wash away his doubts.

And when I sleep, I do not rest.
I dare not try to run.
Seething, teasing, never breathing...
Before the mourning sun.

—angela ash

Dolls With Missing Parts

Perhaps I had forgotten You, Locking You somewhere in an attic, Piled beneath a haven of dusty books And dolls with missing parts.

I walk down the busy streets, Smelling mocha in the air, Stepping carefully over what lies beneath, Not remembering to look for You.

I close my eyes in the stillness, And the dreams that come are of Carnivals and autumn nights, Letter openers and paper flowers.

But my soul could not leave You be. It holds tightly to stiffened fingers, Digging its nails into missing flesh That I can still feel... still feel.

And the You that is mistaken
Softly holds my heart,
Melting it like chocolate,
Mixing with the color of Your eyes.

-angela ash

COVERS

Whirs and rings and furs and things, she hustled for the door.

The royal garb wrap had her trapped like foxes in a barb.

But, opulence and penitence won't hide the wooden floors;

the pelage cover over a hellish lover's damage dwindled into shards.

Her necklet wrap, the crime's steel trap, both, covered up the sores.

The scratches hidden, of love, now stricken, by her pelt for what had been marred.

But her sickened dweller, down in the cellar was tethered with no door.

The ceiling stone, covered the tone of screams: her au revoir.

-brennan acton

escape the depression hole

Bouts of winter blues haunts my views With unknown pain, sadness, and dues. When will this haziness die out For there's uncertainty to go about.

I feel this heaviness inside Like when you have to say goodbye— Tortured emotions dumbfounded Morals weakened and not grounded.

I took a risk with my shy heart Like moving away to restart But instead of finding that joy I launched back to my old life destroyed.

I try and try to shake the pain Like raindrops shaken into drains Yet there's a storm brewing ahead These blue eyes will continue to shed.

Alas, my journey does not let Me endure it alone (not yet). I'm allowed to hold on to friends Until this journey so recommends.

My friends say, "You can always vent."— But these words cause me to lament. I know why my soul depresses Nothing provides any successes.

I used to smile, laugh often, Joke a lot; never unspoken. There was a time too when, I swear, I actually cared about my hair.

Little things granted me much bliss— Smiles and hugs never dismissed. Little things provided a love No one could award but God above.

Oh this wretched melancholy My spirits dwell in such folly. Unleash the chains, unlock the key Before my heart decays to debris.

Hope, help me escape this terror Search within my heart no error. Mercy, step in for the wandering Protect me from future squandering.

Build a hedge of your affection Around shares of imperfection. Create inside my grieving soul An escape from the depression hole.

-chloe' roland

EXPIRED SOULS

by philip w. gorski

Cheryl's day had started off as a pretty standard Thursday, with want of the weekend to hurry along and no desire to go to work. She got dressed in the usual, average fashion, brushed her teeth and combed her hair, and grabbed the bagged lunch her fiancé had left for her. Without even looking in the bag, she knew it would contain one off-brand Greek yogurt, a Ziploc baggie of chopped up cantaloupe, and a Nutella and strawberry jam sandwich. Everything had become so routine for Cheryl. So terribly, unbearably boring.

She arrived at the subway station at her usual time, just before seven o'clock, and waited by the one pillar, just as she always did. Cheryl stood quietly, plotting out the order in which she'd tackle the day's tasks.

That's when someone stepped out from the crowd and shoved her onto the tracks. The subway was, as always, right on time.

When Cheryl awoke, more or less, she found herself standing about five people deep in a line. She looked around, wincing as her eyes met a vast, brightly lit office space. It lacked any distinct features and seemed to stretch onwards forever in all directions.

There was a dull thrumming in the back of her head that sounded suspiciously like the click-clack of train wheels moving along their tracks. The line moved forward and she followed. A short man, portly and bald, sat at the front of the line. Cheryl did her best to listen in, as inconspicuously as possible, to the conversation going on between the man at the desk and the old woman who had just reached the front of the line. This was all unfamiliar territory, and she wanted to know as much as she could before she reached the front of the line.

"Rhonda Carlson," the man said, his voice nasally and grating. He flipped through a folder that held far more papers than it should be able to contain, nodding and shaking his head in equal measure.

REASSIGNMENT AGENLY

"Last thing I remember was calling my driver," Rhonda said, huffing out her rage every couple words. "The bastard was late, as usual, and I had a benefit breakfast I was scheduled to speak at. How long until my car arrives?"

The man behind the desk nodded as he listened, his eyes impossible to see beyond the white light from all around reflected in his glasses.

"No car, I'm afraid," the man behind the desk said, adjusting his glasses with one hand as he continued to flip through the pages in the folder with the other.

"Well, what am I doing here?" Rhonda said, stamping at the white floorthat-wasn't-a-floor with one of her violet, sequined high heel shoes. She paused, considering her surroundings for what may have been the first time. "Where is here, anyway?"

The man at the desk looked up, pale golden eyes barely visible over the tops of his glasses. "That's usually the first question people ask," he said, a hint of feeling somewhere between the intersections of irritation and amusement in his voice. "You're at the Expired Soul Reassignment Agency."

Rhonda's face turned a rich, violent shade of red. Hints of purple danced around her puffed out cheeks, and the whole expression looked less like someone caught in the throes of rage and more like an unusually colored squirrel whose cheeks were stuffed in preparation for a long winter.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Rhonda said, her hands clenched into tight fists. "Who the hell are you anyway?"

The man behind the desk pushed his glasses up, frowning. "Terribly unpleasant," he said. "That's not my name, of course. I meant your behavior. You're here because you expired. Died. Bit the proverbial dust." Rhonda opened and closed her mouth, her eyes bulging as the words processed.

"That's a common response," the man said. He shut the folder, tapping its edge

on the desk. "You've lived your life in the lap of luxury, not caring much for others beyond what would make you look good. Do you have anything to say?"

"This is an outrage!" Rhonda said, shaking her arms in a way that wasn't as menacing as she'd likely hoped it would be. "I demand to know what's really going on. This is all some elaborate prank, I imagine, set up by my filthy, simple-minded ex-husband."

The man behind the desk held up a finger and Rhonda was quiet. She continued to shout wordlessly for a moment before she realized no sound was coming out, at which point she placed her hands against her throat.

"Yes, thank you," the man said, adjusting his glasses so they once again hid his eyes. "I think I know the appropriate route of action here. Your soul will be down-cycled into a stray cat." The man produced a shining, silver ballpoint pen from nowhere with the flick of his wrist. He wrote something down on the folder. Rhonda disappeared in a puff of smoke and disbelief, leaving Cheryl one person closer to the front of the line. She glanced past the person in front of her and saw Arthur, a young man who interned at her office, was standing at the front of the line. She'd heard through the rumor mill one of the interns had been gunned down by some nutcase trying to rob a convenience store. What a shame, Cheryl thought. Arthur had always been very quiet, but polite when he did speak, and he was one of the hardest workers their intern program had ever been provided.

"Hello," Arthur said, a slight tremor to his voice. "How are you?"

The man behind the desk, whose name tag revealed to be named Mason, looked around for a moment. "Oh, me? Yes, sorry. Not a question I'm used to," Mason said, adjusting his glasses. "I'm well, I suppose. I would ask how you are but I believe I know the answer."

Arthur nodded. "Not really how I figured I'd go, to be honest," Arthur said, smiling somehow. "Still, I suppose things could be worse."

Mason raised an eyebrow, staring at Arthur in silence for what felt like an eternity. "Yes, I suppose you're right," Mason said finally. He opened a new folder, which Cheryl could've sworn hadn't been there moments before, and started looking through its pages.

"Model student," Mason said. "Frequent volunteer with many community service efforts. Hmm. Only nineteen years old?" Mason shut the folder, shaking his head.

"Just a couple days shy of my twentieth birthday, sir," Arthur said. "I hope they still got the cake. I know my sister loves red velvet as much as I did. Can I ask a question, sir?"

Mason adjusted his glasses, shifting in his seat as he did. "Please don't call me sir," Mason said. "And yes. One question."

"Will my family be okay?" Arthur said. "I mean, none of them are going to do anything bad because I died, are they?"

Mason stood up, placing a chubby hand on Arthur's shoulder. It was an act that required Mason to stand on his toes but the message got across.

"I'm terribly sorry, but it's not my place to say," Mason said. He sat back down at the desk, his attention back on Arthur's folder. "I believe I'll set you up in a life destined towards white collar work. And then politics. You will have to choose what

kind of agent of change you will be in the world, Arthur."

Arthur began to say thank you, only to be cut off by a few strokes of Mason's pen. The former nineteen-year-old intern, soon to be reborn on a course leading him into politics, was gone.

Cheryl looked around, her eyes a little better adjusted to the stark white nothing around her. In the distance, in all directions, she could see similar lines to the one she was in, stretching far beyond her field of view. Occasionally, appearing from nowhere and disappearing in a similarly sudden fashion, people would shuffle past here and there. They all had clipboards, and they all looked very busy and important. Cheryl took a deep breath and stepped in front of one of the clipboard-carrying mystery people.

The young woman carrying the clipboard stopped, mid-step, and recoiled from Cheryl with a gasp. "You need to stay in line, Miss," the clipboard-carrier, whose name tag identified as Margaret, said. "There are important rules in place here."

Cheryl thought for a moment. Whatever this place was, it was very structured. Practically a business.

"Could I speak with someone in management, please?" Cheryl said, smiling.

Margaret placed a hand to her mouth. She looked positively terrified. "Oh, goodness," Margaret said. "I'm terribly sorry if I've provided unpleasant customer service. Is there any way I can make up for it?"

Cheryl shook her head. "Oh, no, you didn't do anything wrong," Cheryl said. "I just want some answers, please."

"You've got five minutes," said a tall redhead who appeared from nowhere, her otherwise plain-blue shirt bearing the letters VID. Margaret gasped again and ran off to wherever the clipboard-carriers disappeared when they weren't visible.

"Very important director?" Cheryl said, reading the shirt.

"Very Important Deity," the redhead said. "No, you may not ask which one. I'm not allowed to answer even if you did. Them's the rules. How can I help you today, Miss Cheryl Brighton of apartment B6 in the Easterly Heights Plaza?"

Cheryl blinked a couple times, processing the Very Important Deity's response. "Yes," Cheryl said. "Sorry. Could you tell me what's going on here? I heard something about Expired Soul Reassignment Agencies, and that's about it. Oh, and some lady was to be reborn as a stray cat, I think."

"Shit," the Very Important Deity said. "Mason must have missed his lunch break. His inner bitterness creeps out, and that man has a wicked sense of irony. I'm not talking Alanis Morissette irony, by the way. Walk with me for a moment." The Very Important Deity walked ahead, though she appeared to be moving nowhere, and Cheryl followed. Several lines of people suddenly came into view.

The Very Important Deity gestured to the lines with both arms. "Every soul has an expiration date," the Very Important Deity said. "Think like a carton of milk at your grocery store. It has nothing to do with age, like with your friend, the intern, back there. There's a vast number of souls, but it ain't infinite by any means, and so when they arrive here we get them cleaned up and shipped back to the mortal world."

"Everyone goes back?" Cheryl said, a concerned look appearing and disappearing in an instant.

"Fuck no," the Very Important Deity said. "Some souls are just too shitty to send back. There's a special Hell for each and every one of them."

The Very Important Deity glanced at her watch, clicking her tongue. "Speaking of which, I believe it's your turn," she said. "No pressure. Everything that matters is already in your file."

Cheryl blinked a few times, realizing she was standing in front of the desk. Mason had a half-eaten sandwich next to a folder with Cheryl's name on it.

"Hello," Cheryl said. "How are you?" She extended a hand, offering Mason the friendliest smile she could.

Mason eyed Cheryl suspiciously, accepted the handshake, and began to look through her file. He took an occasional bite from his sandwich here and there, but the crumbs never seemed to make their way to the pages.

"You're the one who spoke with management," Mason said, finishing his lunch. "I knew someone would have to talk to management before I would get some food." He took his glasses off, his eyes now a glimmering, polished gold, and wiped them on his shirt before replacing them. He continued to read Cheryl's file without another word, closing the folder after a lingering, painful silence.

"Certainly an interesting read," Mason said. "A lot of depth for someone who died at twenty-two. Now, Miss Brighton, what shall we do with you?"

Cheryl closed her eyes and considered all of the possibilities. She was certain she could hear the Jeopardy music playing from somewhere in the distance.

"I'm willing to try anything once, I suppose," Cheryl said. "Just so long as you don't send me back as a grumpy stray cat."



Dark souls

Dark souls. Oh, I am running out of everything. I had to die to perceive life.

Day dreams, manipulative things. Come and light it before the imagery fades. Euphoria, tangled in the bright lights of pretty faces. tricking the heart. I know what the game is...

electric embraces, dark souls make me wasted. Dark moon, pale illumination. everything is okay.

Drown with me, to rivers and poetry. I see hallucinations, a composition I know all too well. Frozen hearts, steady beats of pressure on my chest. This is the part I let go.

I will reincarnate with the moon by my side. serenity by the sun, a hopeful ending for my love.

-brittney wright

BOB THE BUTCHER

by joseph rubas

Linda Mason moaned in faux delight as the man on top of her splattered his load on her stomach. When she sighed (as he fell onto the bed next to her, panting) it was a sigh of relief, not one of contentment. Time was money, as they said, and the longer a john took to cum, the more time he wasted.

Linda was what some people might call a vet; she'd been spreading her legs for profit for almost fifteen years now, and in that time she'd learned the virtue of pragmatism. This was a business. Nothing more, nothing less. As such, you needed to treat it like a business. If you did, you could get along just fine. You wouldn't get rich or wind up in the Hamptons, but you could eke out a comfortable enough existence.

For a while.

Linda was thirty-five. And not a Hollywood thirty-five, either. Her hair was starting to gray, new lines appeared on her face every day, and her hands were wrinkling. She was old, and men didn't want old. They wanted young and tight, blonde, perky tits. She had maybe another five years before she was alone on the street corner while everyone else sucked and fucked.

Later, as the man was pulling on his pants, he said, "You're pretty brave, you know that?"

Linda was sitting on the bed still, her breasts hanging over the yellow-white sheet. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," he said. "I mean, what if I was Bob the Butcher?"

Linda laughed out loud, and a hurt look crossed the man's craggy face. "Sorry, but you're not the type." Tall and thin, hair a curly mess, he looked nothing like a serial killer. He didn't look like a day trader, either, she supposed, but he said he was one.

"I could be," he was buttoning his shirt.

"Well, even if you are, I gotta make a living," Linda said.

"Yeah. I guess you do." He sat on the edge of the bed, pulled on his shoes, and

threw on his coat. "Just be careful."

He slapped two hundred dollar bills on the table and went out the door. Alone, Linda chuckled to herself. Bob the Butcher! That was rich. See, Bob the Butcher was the city's latest killer of prostitutes, a quasi-mythical creature of the night who accosted working girls and ripped their guts out. In the past six months, old bobby had murdered four hookers, each crime scene more gruesome than the last. His most recent vic was found in a garbage heap, her intestines hanging out her ass hole. The paper said it was so bad a veteran homicide detective puked on his shoes.

Linda wasn't the kind of girl who let a serial killer throw her off her beat (she couldn't afford to let a serial killer throw her off her game), but a lot of girls were scared. More cop cars were on the streets at night, but that did little to allay their fears. Some of them stopped working until he was caught, others took to carrying knives, pepper spray, and pawn shop 38s. Even armed to the teeth, they worked only hesitantly, shaking with fear, sure that every date would be their last.

It reminded Linda of the Midnight Maniac murders back in 2001; the panic, the dread, the locked doors, and closed windows. She was scared then but she wasn't scared now.

She sighed. A lot of the girls were too young to remember the Midnight Maniac. Linda remembered.

Old. She was getting old.

She smiled sardonically. It always came back to that. She was getting old. Her tits weren't as proud as they used to be; her stomach wasn't as flat. Before long, she'd be one of the oldtimers, alone on the sidelines, watching all the other girls work, waiting to suck retiree dick for five bucks a pop. She shuddered. The competition was too fierce. The younger, prettier girls were pushing her out. They didn't really mean to, but they were.

Cunts. She hated them, hated them and their trim young bodies.

Sighing, she got out of bed and hurriedly dressed.

Outside, the walkway was empty and windswept, lit at intervals by dim and murky lights. She'd been staying at the relax inn on Bevile Road for nearly a week now, and despite its rough appearance, it was a quiet place. It was funny when you thought about it. Crackheads and prostitutes had a reputation for being troublemakers, but their very natures made them quiet and reserved. What junkie, what hooker, wanted to draw attention to themselves? From the motel, Linda found her way to the sidewalk, which ran past darkened storefronts, some of them boarded over, weed choked lots, chain-link fences, and black alleyways heaped with garbage. Harlow heights had been hit hard by the recession, more so than the rest of the city. Before the meltdown, it was a bleak collection of warehouses, cheap motels, and, to the extreme east, factories and the docks. After, it was a graveyard. First the meat packing plant went, putting hundreds out of work. Then the shipping companies died one-by-one. Now it was largely abandoned, buildings left to rot, cars left to rust, and people left to die. Even the mafia no longer did business in Harlow. You knew times were tough when the underworld was feeling the crunch. Only one car passed her as she walked, a black Oldsmobile trolling for something other than sex.

Or her sex at least.

Linda shivered and pulled her furry coat closed at the throat. In the beginning she hated what she did for money. She hated herself. She blamed God, she blamed her father, she blamed her mother. It was ultimately their fault. What other future could she possibly be expected to have growing up in motel rooms and watching her drunken father beat her weak-willed mother? Now, however, she was beyond that. She didn't particularly enjoy hiking up her skirt for random men, but it got her by. It was all she had. All she knew. The thought of losing her tricks to some little ho with a dangling belly button ring filled her with fear.

Speaking of the competition, there was one such ho now, standing on the corner with her hands deep in her pockets, chattering and waiting to steal Linda's business.

"Hi, Lin!" Stacy Parker hailed, waving like a bubble blonde retard. She was relatively new, a daddy's girl runaway from Iowa with small titties and big blue eyes.

"Hey," Linda said when she was closer. "How's it going?"

"Okay," Stacy said, "you?"

"Eh."

Stacy giggled. Such an annoying sound.

As Stacy talked about her tricks (unasked), Linda's hand crept to the knife in her jacket pocket.

When you got right down to it, there was only so much dick in Cole City, especially when you were a hard thirty-five.

"Hey, did you hear Bob got another one tonight?" Linda cut in.

Stacy's bubbliness stopped dead. "What? No. Oh, my God. Who?"

"You," Linda said.



RE-BIRTH

As the day grows, my solemn words mean nothing. Tears, wet and sticky on my face. The vein conception that I too was made synthetically. Woven from parts of re-creation.

A screen, blank and portraying an image, images of before, of love, of death, of crime, of beauty. All things being perceived as something new. A re-birth, a console of hope.

Living art, a breathing portrait imbedded in my every moment. It is a long road of experimentation, sorrow and pride. Intertwined all in the love of expression.

The goal we reach is not measured, it can not be. Nothing from this creation can be evaluated. It is much more, it is a re-becoming.

–brittney wright

|ntimation/ of a |Dead |mmortality

In a world tamped down to cimmerian shades, streets and houses

thoroughly shrouded by the shifting umbras and penumbras of what

little light remains, fields and forests bound by darkness

beneath an indistinct sky drained of color, faint eidolons may

flicker across the screen of your retina with the herky-jerky

action of a silent film, cast and crew dead, trapped in repetitive

motion like the forms that traipse across your vision

testing the reality of daylight wisdom, stretching your mind

into the fearsome realms of a senseless half life that may

exist beyond death, beckoning you to join them in the

drear silence and convulsive iteration of their promenade.

-bruce boston

WHAT THE ROBIN WANTS

I slam my robin's skull against poverty's rustic cage. The blood flows from my skull, I know it's my blood, I recognize the scar it poured from. I'm an exotic robin. My feathers may be matted and my belly may bulge, but I coo when my beak is kissed. This damn cage door is caving in. I see the shackles of fame, just outside my cage, I want to clamp them to my little bird feet, And never fly free from them. Boom, boom, boom, like a heartbeat, my cranium crashes into the bent and broken bars of my cell. I want the dove flying, just outside the window; I want her adoration but all I'm stuck with, is my cellmate, the pigeon.

—doug robbins



by luke tarzian

Ellis does not want to take her pills. She is not very fond of them. In fact, she hates them; loathes the dizziness they bring, the clouded pictures and the headaches. They make it hard to fall asleep, impossible to dream, and prevent her journeying the slumber realm. She does not like this. If she cannot access her imagination, she is barred from visiting her friends; but nonetheless she takes the medicine because she wants to make her mother proud and be a normal girl—then Sir Humphrey will propose.

Her mother has told Ellis much of him: the arching ceilings of his eighteenth century Victorian, the ballroom that leads out into the Court of Roses, the caviar, and Humphrey's likeness to King George III. Her mother fawns about the regal man, keeps the red rose that he gave her in a vase, dreaming of the one day both she and her daughter will be welcomed into royalty. But that day shall not come until Ellis is cured of her ... abnormality. After all, men of Humphrey's standing harbor great distaste towards girls who speak of nonsense, would not dare of making one their wife. They do not like the abstract or surreal and greatly fear that which appears to be grotesque, such as a headless cat. It matters not how gentle or intelligent the creature is, nor that it drinks a cup of tea per day—it is not standar, and to not be standard is offensive.

She takes the pills and swallows them reluctantly, nearly choking as they tumble down her throat. They taste like bitter mint and burn as they dissolve inside her stomach. Ellis coughs and takes a drink of water. A distant voice calls to her from the corner of her clouded mind, implores she quit the medicine while she is able.

"If you do not ... we cannot play."

Ellis wants to listen to the voice but knows that she cannot, for if she disobeys her mother will chastise her—Ellis does not want her skin to bruise again. The first time

was not bad, but every instance after that the welts and bumps grew bigger, darker, and more painful. She is lucky that her lower jaw still works.

"All finished, mother!"

The elder woman nods approvingly, holding firm a tiny smile—soon her daughter will be cured, and then Sir Humphrey shall propose and take them from this wretched townhouse.

"You are doing so well darling—soon we shall leave this awful place," her lip curls as she glances out the window at the daisies, "no more of these ghastly flowers; only roses. Just think!"

She pats Ellis on the shoulder and departs. It is a cold goodbye, but Ellis welcomes it; only just a month ago her mother could not look her in the eyes, fearful of contracting her irregularity. Now, she pats her daughter on the shoulder daily. It is progress, Ellis thinks. Her mother is progressing just as she is.

Ellis tosses in her sleep that night. Her thoughts become congested by a suffocating darkness, one that has been present for the better part of thirty days. This time it is different and, for the first time in a month, Ellis finds herself within a dream. She wanders through her meadow; it is different now, decrepit and consumed by weeds. The ether overhead is but a leering purple mass, almost sentient in the way it swirls and hisses, scolding Ellis for her negligence and absence from the realm. The picnic blanket in the center lies in tatters and the cups and teapot have been smashed to bits. At the far end of the pasture stands her friends, no more than silhouettes; shadows of the lovely things that they once were. She rushes towards them but they disappear, leaving only ashes in their wake. Ellis sniffles and drops to the ground. She draws her knees in close and cries; she feels alone—is alone, and cannot fathom how to rectify the situation.

She wants to make her mother proud—"And once you have been cured of this horrendous abnormality, Sir Humphrey shall propose, and we shall be of royalty!"

But she so badly wants to see her friends—"We shall have a pot of tea and crumpets every night, dear Ellis, every night here in this meadow. A pot of tea for three: a chatty catty, batty hatty, and their lovely lassie!"

Yet she does not want to fall prey to her mother's bruising whip and loathing words—"How many times must I repeat myself, you stupid girl? Sit up straight, rest your hands inside your lap, and hold your tongue. No man appreciates a lady who speaks out of turn, least of all a girl who whispers to herself—there is nobody there. Be still lest I decide you have gone mad."

Mad. Ellis does not want to be, but she cannot shake the feeling that she is. Her mother did not say so on that certain day, but she declared it many times thereafter. Ellis wipes away the tears but still they come. She ponders to herself: what is it, really, to be mad? Before she took her medication, Ellis saw them everywhere; her friends, that is—in the dining room, the foyer, out on the streets, and in the market—smiling at her with their giant, toothy mouths and gleaming eyes, awaiting her arrival in the meadow of their slumber land, so eager to indulge in tea and songs. Ellis sits up, notices the tears have stopped, and feels a smile playing on her lips. Her mother calls her mad; and if being mad means sitting in a meadow every night for tea with friends who you can talk to anytime you want, Ellis thinks that she is fine with being so.

Three nights later, Ellis eats her supper happily. She has seen her friends the past two nights for tea. They celebrated their collective return and the meadow's rebirth with an extra plate of crumpets.

"I knew that you could do it, my dear Ellis," said the figure with the hat. "Such a clever girl, to spit the rotten capsules out unseen."

Her blue gaze wanders joyfully around the dining room, much to her mother's worry. The elder woman glances at her daughter's medicine Something is amiss, she thinks. The girl is far too tranquil right for her liking. Worryingly blithe.

Ellis smiles at her mother, takes the pills and drops them in her mouth. She closes it, slyly rolls the tablets underneath her tongue, and swallows. As usual, her mother stands, pats her on the shoulder, and departs. Ellis snickers to herself triumphantly, spits the pills into her hand, and grins in the direction of the far left corner.

....

"I told you she would fall for it again, dear Hatter."

....

"Of course, my darling Cat, we shall have an extra pot of tea tonight! We—" Smack.

Ellis' head jerks to the left beneath the impact of her mother's open palm.

"I knew it. I knew something was not right! You conniving, vile little girl—all the progress that you made, all the money I spent ridding you of this grotesque abnormality ... and this is how I am rewarded for my time? You shall not ruin this for me; Sir Humphrey is to ask you for your hand this very Sunday—in just three days!"

Her mother grabs the saliva-coated pills from off the table with her right hand and sets herself upon her daughter. She grips her slender throat with her left hand, pinning Ellis to her chair as she works to force the pills into her mouth. From the corner of the room, two silhouettes observe, grinning wildly. Ellis, struggling to keep her mother off, locks eyes with the Hatter and his Cat and grins in turn; she has a contingency plan. She kicks her mother back, knocks her to the floor, and grabs a knife from off the table. She lunges at the woman, holds her down, and brandishes the gleaming blade above her head.

"I wish it had not come to this ..."

"Mad you are! Absolutely mad!" her mother wails before the stiletto penetrates her chest and throat.

Blood spurts from the gaping wounds as if the girl has just struck oil. Ellis laughs, plunging, sticking, gouging for the better part of eighty seconds till her mother is quite still and pale and Ellis' dark blonde hair and creamy skin are painted crimson and her purple dress is garnished with her mother's gore. She licks the blade from hilt to tip and smiles at the corpse.

"Oh mother ... you have your fantasies and I have mine. We're all a little mad here, are we not?"



for him

I want to disassemble him and lose some of the pieces Swept under the rug, and I'll shrug and say "Sorry, I never saw them." I want to put him back together just a little crooked And crack the clips and strip the screws so you can never fix him. I want to take the parts you like and rearrange their places. Tie the best ones together with wire And throw them in a lake.

-eric dean

a queen losing her life

Tears dripped down on some old parchment
No ink could produce such emotions
Heaviness weighs on angels sent
For their efforts battle strong potions.

Draped in black lace and birdcage mask Madam Athena walks her terrace Unable to answer news which lasts Hidden away, a flustered heiress.

> A once beautiful, confident Queen Transformed into a worried Lady She tries creating joyful scenes Yet runs to her secretive Hades

"Madam," her closet friend regards, "Let's take a walk around your garden Like children running throughout the yard. Please, before your heart coldly hardens."

"Dearest Hestia, my old friend, I wish my bones moved like once before Childish, we were, but ne'er again. My life, dead to all fun I adored."

> "My Queen, my friend, listen to me, Snap out of your somber ritual You're the kingdom's fool absentee Don't allow it form habitual.

You reined with pomp and unique strength Soothing your most obedient subjects Whom for years would go many lengths Yet you betrayed your loyals respects.

Athena, your wisdom you boasted Demanding kingdoms their highest praise Charming all to parties hosted, Or were those parties part of some phase?

What event flipped your world upside? Who is to blame for your helpless state? I beg you not to blindly lie The truth may set your dark mind awake."

The Queen sobbed while on her throne Her hands pressed up against her pale face A bejeweled crown sat disowned Tears slip in her mouth a bitter taste.

"Honest words duely noted down, Powerful words make strong men surrender The hope I desperately found Makes me shed the mask of pretender.

I cannot gaze my eyes on fun For I know it will all pass away. Hestia, don't act dumbly stunned You knew I was always one to blame.

Forgive your friend, your ailing Queen Of all my sins against us two Forgive your humble servant clean Wiping all my depression through."

-chloe' roland

THE PRICE

by aline carriere

At the edge of the woods, Magenta tossed back her black curls and again tried to light the fire. But the wood was too wet and now that the sun had set, the wind swooped to snuff out each match. Alone on her mission, she left the circle of rocks and ventured back under the trees to search for kindling in the twilight. While picking out the driest leaves among the red and orange already littered under the gnarled maples, Magenta watched a small group of giggling girls walk toward the traveling carnival and enter the fortune teller's wagon where her mother told lies to strangers.

"They don't want to hear the truth," her mother had instructed her. "Tell them they'll live a long life and find love. That's all they want. And make sure you get paid up front."

Magenta snorted at the memory. Having gathered the leaves and twigs in her long flowing skirt, she walked back to the circle, musing on the day her mother had revealed how she too could obtain the ability to foretell the future. "This year when you're sixteen, you must build a fire on the first night of fall. In the first fire of fall you will see your future. When you know your future, you will know all others." When Magenta had questioned whether she needed to know the future if she would never use the knowledge, her mother responded, "That power is never wasted."

"But is it worth it?"

"There's a price for everything," her mother had replied and left it at that.

Squatting near the tripod of logs, Magenta stuffed the kindling between the tinder and pulled the matchbox from her pocket. She struck a match and held it to a tuft of pine needles until the flame grew. Lighting two more matches in quick succession, she seeded them into the pyre. She held her breath, her heartbeat in her ears keeping time with the crackling of newly burning wood. Smoke slithered up toward the rising moon. Staring into the fire, she waited for the epiphany, for her destiny, but all she saw were tongues of flame—bark wounded to black, gray ash.

"That is your life," a low voice whispered behind her. "All will die; all will be reduced to ash."

Magenta turned to see a withered man in tattered rags. He laughed and before she could speak or scream, he gripped her throat with both his hands and squeezed. Her heart raced and pounded as she clawed at his fingers, his rotted teeth and acrid breath flooding her face. In his eyes she saw the fire reflected. Her heartbeat slowed, then stopped, yet still she could see the flames. Looking away, she watched the girls leave her mother's wagon, jostling each other and shivering from the cold, walking toward them. The man eased his grasp and her body dropped away from her. Looking down she saw the wide vacant stare of her corpse, yet still she stood and watched as the man hobbled to the group of girls, blocking their path. Magenta could sense their fear as he put a crooked finger to his lips and the girls fled, pulling at each other, running away from her and the now-thriving fire.

Unable to comprehend what had happened, Magenta looked back to her body lying on the cold earth, the chill wind gusting dead leaves to join her. She tried to scream but made no sound. Clutching her throat, she felt the coldness of her fingers. Not even the man's hands had been so cold. She switched her gaze to where the man had last stood. He was gone.

In a daze, Magenta ran to her mother's wagon, the door open as was the inviting custom. She entered the small dimly lit cabin, the odor of incense making the room seem warm and close.

"Ah, Magenta, I see you've been successful," her mother said, laying out tarot cards in the pattern of a cross on a round table.

"What do you mean? He killed me. Am I dead?" Magenta mouthed.

"You're fine, dear. You're just in between now," she said, waving her hand as if to dismiss any anxiety, her bracelets tinkling. Then she paused, put down the deck and rose to focus on her daughter. "I'm sorry. I should remember when this happened to me. I know it can be ... disorienting." She pulled out a chair. "Here. Now, sit down and I'll tell you how to restore your body."

Magenta sat at the table across from her mother, candles flickering in a comforting arc. She had always trusted her mother. Although her mother lied to others, as far as Magenta knew, she had never lied to her.

"See this bracelet?" Her mother held up a small circle of multicolored crystal beads. "I took it from a girl just now. She had no money and wanted to know her future, so she gave me this." She laughed. "I placed a spell on it. When you put it on, her body will be exchanged for yours. Your future, your body will be returned to you. But you must always wear the bracelet or the enchantment will be broken."

Magenta took the bracelet and turned it over in her hands, the beads sparkling in the light. "As I told you," her mother continued, "there's a price for everything. The trick is to get someone else to pay."

Magenta slipped the bracelet over her wrist and revived intact beside the fire she had built now having dwindled to glowing embers, while across the town a girl silently screamed.



by andrea van lit

Once upon a time, my mere presence could make children wet their pants with fright. Now they giggle at my hairy body, cloven hooves, horns, and forked tongue, before turning back to their Xbox or Wii. Last Christmas Eve one child even had the temerity to stroke me like I was a dog.

Where's the fun in shoving them into my sack and carrying them off to my lair, to be drowned or devoured, if they aren't screaming with terror?

"My dear Mr. Krampus, you must move with the times. Children are exposed to monsters and violence every day," said the psychologist I consulted. He was a man with too much money and a precarious grip on reality.

Our session finished. Then I ate him.

The following day was Christmas Eve. I sharpened my horns, cut my hooves, and brushed my hair, even in the difficult to reach spots. The chains, used solely for dramatic effect, I left behind.

Santa and I met in our usual spot for pre-Christmas Eve drinks and to complain about children's lack of manners. I watched the poor deluded fool leave to load his sleigh. He still thought the little brats believed in him. I knew better. All they truly believed in was the power of Mummy or Daddy's credit card.

I sat alone, nursing a Bloody Mary (it didn't taste like a Mary though, perhaps a Melissa or a Mandy) and contemplated the night ahead. Usually Santa and I worked together; I dealt with the naughty and he rewarded the nice. Tonight I was working solo.

The first name on my list was Olivia Jenkins, nine years old. With no chimney to slide down, I crept around the outside of the house, sniffing at the windows. Children have a distinct smell, a queer mixture of vanilla, snot, and fish.



As soon as I located her, I oozed through a crack in the windowsill, like blood seeping through gauze. It's a well-known fact that children never sleep on Christmas Eve. They lay awake thinking of ponies, iPads, ride-on electric toy cars, and interactive pets. So it was no surprise to find Olivia sitting on her bed playing Nintendo.

Old habits die hard. I towered over her, pointed teeth bared and hands curled into claws, with a sneer on my face. I'd spent years practicing in the mirror to achieve the perfect pose.

"Whadya want?" she mumbled, without looking up.

To say I felt deflated was an understatement. Then I remembered the psychologist's words.

I straightened up and gave her my snarkiest smile. "Olivia, I have a gift for you," I said through gritted teeth.

That got her attention. "Okay," she said, lowering her stupid game.

"Follow me."

I led her to the lounge room. An enormous fir tree dominated a corner, its boughs weighed down with ornaments, tinsel, and small flashing lights. The perfect fire hazard. It would be so easy to ...

I shook my head. First thing's first. I turned to face her.

Olivia scrunched up her face, stared at the mountain of presents and began counting them out loud. She lifted her head to glare at me and clenched her fists. "Where is it?"

I gave her a nasty grin, sat down, and reached for the nearest gift. "To Olivia. Love, Mom and Dad," I read. Then I popped it in my mouth and munched and crunched on it, before swallowing it in one noisy gulp. "Mmm, that tasted like Lego."

I reached for a second present.

"Mine," she shouted, lunging forward, trying to wrestle it from my grasp. I laughed, gripped her by the back of her pink pyjamas and held her aloft while I ate her second gift.

By the time I reached the fifth one she was bawling and screaming for Mummy and Daddy.

Finally she realized they weren't coming. The trembling voice, the begging, the sobbing, was music to my ears.

I let out a loud belch, which threatened to topple the tree. "Merry Christmas, Olivia," I said, feeling happier than I had in years. With one swift movement, I shoved her into my brown hessian sack.

With a satisfied smile, I pulled out my list. Now, who's next?



L e g a C y

It's the sole legacy from his dad.

A cup of ice cream tempts him more than the alluring face of a fair lady. Eating is his ecstasy forgetting the existence.

It blooms in orange or red hue in a test tube in the summer of tension.

Urinary impulse usually slices his sleep into three at night. Nameless anxieties burn in his mind. Fatigue remains in the ash.

Sugar syrup flows through his veins and rusts his internal engines.

His doctor's stethoscope listens money-beats. Pharmacy sells him new complications. Insulin leads him to the blind alley.

He sloshes in the sludge of life, reaching nowhere.

Sanoj's a writer—his rating is high in a glucose meter. Sooner or later he will be awarded with the silence of a coma.

—fabiyas mv

CENTERLINE

I always ride my motorcycle when I know It's going to be a night of drinking. A motorcycle leaves room for weaving And the cops can't pull you over If you don't cross the centerline. It takes great planning to be a drinker And be any good at it.

My Harley howls into the Soaking New Orleans night Rumbling like tribal drums Up Dumaine and Dauphine Claiborne and St. Claude Where white people don't belong We don't care We don't belong anywhere.

I've written one damn good story Enough for anyone's life. This bitch strapped to me Will take me anywhere Places I'll never write about.

I ride faster
She tightens here fists around me
I didn't think the tires would hold
The engine screams
Until finally
I let go.

—gary w. bloom

"Seth Morgan, who won acclaim last spring for his first novel, *Homeboy*, which drew on his experiences in the drug culture of San Francisco and in prison, was killed early Wednesday morning when the motorcycle he was driving struck a dividing post on a bridge in New Orleans, the police said." *New York Times*, October 19, 1990.

rotting inside

Dressed all up, look like a Barbie doll, I stand in front of the mirror, my body - tremble.

The reflection of me so old, and caged, wrinkled pale face, blood drained, black stained eyes, my eyes - no longer.

My hair pulled, the golden colour replaced by the haunting grey, the colour of the clothes washed away something is definitely wrong.

Insults thrown, criticisms received, forever slaved to life, it's hurting already, the reality lie behind the mask.

Stop it now, don't break my heart, tear my soul, already so fragile - don't let me die.

Screams of pain, heard by no one, as days pass by, I surrender myself, as I continue to rot inside, with the best mask on.

—hadiqa inam

Love at First Stitch

by wendy schmidt

She was going under the knife again—this time to correct the odd angle of her head after having it reattached. Francis had accidentally hit it on a kitchen cupboard and torn several stitches. She was getting the hang of living in the small guest house, but it was a difficult transition. The castle was much more spacious. She was tall and gangly and still a bit clumsy. The cottage didn't quite fit her ample physique. Dr. Stein had promised this awkward stage would pass. But it had been two years of bumps and bruises and tearing and swearing every single time a limb was dislodged. And Francis was sick of explaining her situation to the public.

"Yes, I was dead but now I'm not dead."

"Yes, I did have electric shock therapy."

"Yes, I'm fine except for the occasional brain fog from the first few zaps and continuously bumping my head. It's not easy being so statuesque."

After several such interviews Francis was losing her patience with the paparazzi and *Popular Mechanics Magazine*.

"But Francis," Dr. Stein pleaded, "it's all for the good of medicine. Can't you do this last session? The owner of *M. Magazine* is going to conduct the interview himself! It's quite a coup."

"Fine, but not until my head heals," Francis replied. "What does M. stand for anyway?"

"Oh, Mr. M. was a big wig in plastic surgery and now he publishes articles about medical miracles."

Francis sighed, "Shouldn't it be called *MM Magazine* then? Or is that too Marilyn Monroe-ish? Poor girl, another plastic surgeon's plaything."

"Very good," Dr. Stein said. "Humor is an excellent indication of higher brain function. The subtleties involved in using sarcasm is surprisingly sophisticated."

"Yes, Dr. Stein, you took every precaution to make sure I had a good head sewn onto my shoulders."

Dr. Stein started scribbling in his little note pad and talking to himself. "Excellent witticism, quite impressive."

"Before you know it, I'll be doing standup. I'm a real cutup." Francis couldn't help laughing at her own joke.

"Excellent, excellent," Dr. Stein kept repeating.

Three weeks later Francis felt much better, more like her old self. At least she thought so, though her old self was difficult to remember. Who had she been before? Or, for that matter, how many of her parts came from the same corpse?

"Well," she said, as she slipped on her Rachel Welch Beguile wig and steadied her head with a thick scarf. "It would certainly explain the difference in my shoe size." Her dress was chic but sensible. Flats were a must. Francis never liked putting on heels, even one-inch ones. Heels made her more than six-and-a-half feet tall.

Francis waited in the parlor, rehearsing her stock answers.

"I'm getting better at baths."

"My hair is finally started to grow back after that nasty singeing incident."

"Stitches have been removed and I can dine without a bib."

"Oh, and I've discovered I have a talent for tap dancing."

That last answer was another one of her sharp witticisms, as Dr. Stein was fond of saying. She was just about to pop in a mint when Mr. M. came striding through the door.

"Hi, I'm Frank M."

"Frank?" It was all she could do not to drool. What a man! What a mighty, mountain of a man! He was tall, at least seven feet, and wore a leather jacket with black jeans. He had a high forehead with a strong, decidedly square jaw and a long, lovely scar just below the hair line.

"Francis! You're Francis?" He asked in a deep, husky voice.

They stared at each other until Frank finally dared to speak again.

"I never thought I'd find a girl like you. In all the world, you are unique," he said.

Francis took his hands. Both were huge and under the Rolex she detected another scar. Entranced, she replied, "Nor I you."

Frank untied her scarf, "May I?"

"Please, do," she sighed.

He touched her raised scars, tenderly running his fingers along the jagged lines. Finally he said, "My darling. We were made for each other."

"Oh yes, yes! It's so true! Why didn't I know about you? Why didn't they tell me?" Frank touched her cheek. "Perhaps they wanted us to meet when you were stronger and steady on your feet."

"I'm feeling a bit unsteady right now," Francis replied, grabbing onto his massive shoulder.

They embraced. They kissed. They discussed the odd circumstances of their bornagain generation.

Suddenly Francis found the courage to stare straight into his eyes. She said, "Frank, I must know."

"Anything for you my sweet," Frank said.

"What does the M stand for?"

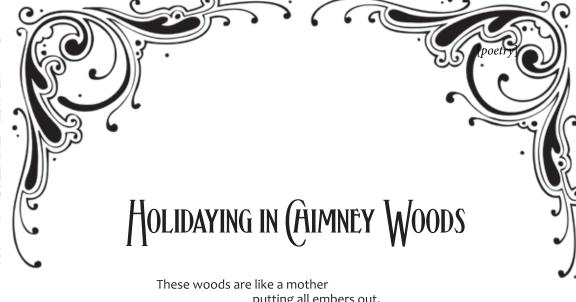
Frank threw back his square head and laughed. "What else, my love? It stands for Monster."

Francis flashed him a sexy siren look. The room was suddenly electric with sexual energy. "You're my monster now, Mister."

WILLOW TREE IND THE RAIN FALLS (N3)

Willow tree where the rain falls, two loved pets beneath these roots, Mo Joe and Joey parakeets, gray sand like dandruff packs them in close and tight. I offer the Lord's Prayer a form of biblical relief. Thunder at 3:37 A.M. Thursday night wonder of my dream mind loves thunder rain. It is just a part of me, loose with wind. I know in the A.M. blending in the moisture birds will chirp sounds blasting echoes against the surface of the sun. Before the dawn light, small minds like my own become active gearing thoughts toward workeconomizing each part of me, loose like threads in wind. This is the willow tree where the rain falls. I am self-employed, in my primitive occupation selling pens, pads of paper, calendars, tee shirts names customized printed on them. It is just a part of me loose with the wind. Life as an author is a daily man grind to coffee grounds and skeleton bone leftoverswith the thunderclaps, and lack of sleep, well deserved.

—michael lee johnson



putting all embers out.

Sweet wind winnows me out of all secret worries.

As I dip myself into the woody stream,

tension termites disappear. Throats of birds broadcast unceasing songs like our FM station.

When a tribesman squeezes a honey-comb, I ride my tongue up the palm.

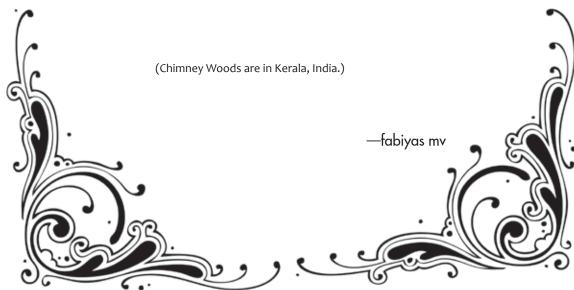
My mind convalesces slowly here under the foliage.

Fireflies fly out through the windows of my skull.

Fresh thoughts are cooked in the seclusion of the woods.

Shoots of dreams reappear, breaking the dried pods of my memory.

I see the fossils of a paradise, which we had lost under the past.



A Shovel and a Bag of Lime

I could barely hear her over the din of what we call "the spring thaw crowd"—the throng of customers who enter our garden supply store eager to get started on their planting.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, I didn't catch that."

She leaned in closer to me and practically yelled in my ear, "I said, I need a shovel and a bag of lime."

I glanced down at her. She was a petite thing and somewhat pretty. Age-wise, she was clearly beyond her teen years, having several on me, but not yet ready for a mid-life crisis. I was guessing she had kids, because she had that worn, life-weary look mothers get—that look caused by someone constantly sucking all the life and fun out of you. You know the one—dark circles around the eyes, wan skin and facial lines etched a little deeper than they should be.

Hers was an odd request, but not one I hadn't heard before. Young mothers who lived just outside of city limits, the ones without easy access to their peers or amenities, often took up gardening as a hobby. It was something they could do to pass the time while wrangling their kids, until their freedom was eventually restored by an empty nest.

"I'll show you where they are. You may need help getting them into your car, though, depending on the size of bag you choose."

"Would you be so kind as to oblige me, if that's the case?" she asked.

I felt the need to be gentlemanly because of her small stature and demure smile. Besides, at the store we were encouraged to help customers in every way we could. It guaranteed sales and kept people coming back.

I rounded up the items she wanted and toted them to our check-out. She lifted her docile eyes to me in appreciation, her shoulders slightly hunched in a submissive way. Despite her mild demeanor, I thought I picked up on a hidden tension lurking beneath her skin, muscles constantly tense and gestures jumpy. Perhaps her family situation had her stressed close to her breaking point, and the garden was intended as a means of relaxation. Many of my regulars told me it was a great stress-reliever.

Once she had paid, we headed to the parking lot. She carried the shovel and I bore the bag of lime. I was surprised at the size of the bag she had chosen to purchase, a

by chantal boudreau

size more typically used in commercial ventures. I gathered that her soil must have been acidic.

She hurried over to her car, popping the trunk before I got there. It wasn't the family sedan I was expecting but rather a boat-like two-seater—an older sportier model, rusting a little along the edges. As I lowered the hefty bag in the trunk I said, "A word of caution, ma'am. If this is your first time using lime, you need to take extra care. You don't want to get it on your bare skin and especially not in your eyes. And don't breathe it in. It's very caustic. It'll actually dissolve your flesh when it's concentrated like this."

She drew in breath to answer when someone else interrupted.

"Hurry up and get your scrawny ass into the car, you stupid bitch. Quit flirting with that dummy like some two-dollar hussy. You're going to make me miss the start of my game."

The harsh sound came from a husky, scraggly man who was sitting in the driver's seat of the car. I hadn't noticed him there on our approach, and then my view of him had been obscured by the open trunk. To my surprise, I didn't see any children in the car.

My customer paused for a second, glancing at the man in the car, the bag of lime in the trunk, and then up at me. The smile she gave me wasn't the sweet, nonchalant expression she had used inside the store. This one was calculating and malicious, one that hinted at a fierce violence brewing below the surface. There was hate in her eyes—a terrible sense of finality.

"Oh—I know," she said, with a stifled laugh, one bordering on quiet sadistic glee. "I'm counting on it."

She tossed the shovel in the trunk and slammed the lid shut. Without another word, she walked around the car and got in the passenger side.

"Bout fuckin' time," the nasty man in the driver's seat grunted before he squealed away.

I didn't think twice about refraining to mention the incident to my manager when I returned to the store. Who was I to make any assumptions about what a customer planned on doing with a shovel and a bag of lime?

I mean, what dummy would?

There Never Were Any Fireflies

Shadows climb on legs of spiders, make their way up the side of the house, slip on the siding.

The candle watches with eyes made of smoldering embers.

Wax oozes onto the kitchen table, hisses as it hits the wood. Scrape it off with a fingernail because it never really vanishes anyways.

The smell of ash drifts into your lungs, fills the back of your throat with the acrid taste of smoke. It tastes of your grandmother's house, back in the days when she used to smoke long white cigarettes, flick the ash out the window because she couldn't be bothered to use the misshapen ashtray that you made for her in the second grade.

Black smoke is heavy, weighing on your shoulders. Effervescent vapors that push down, condensing us. But we turn not into pearls but instead into crooked crocodile teeth.

In Littleton Colorado where music pours out of the radio of Leah's car, while we sit on the hood, four of us crammed together, and caught fireworks in the palm of our hands.

We never did catch any fireworks.

Tombstones always stayed in perfect rows and there never were any fireflies.

Some could say we bolloxed it, when we failed to see what the whole time was there.

but no one knows where all the birds went.

Loud as the grave,

We turned into smoke and dissolved into ash at the first sign of trouble.

Lady could not dance, despite the name lacked all forms of grace. We will look at the stars and watch them move backwards across the sky.

Our tongues turn to snakes and we speak in riddles to the walls. Rusted planets cannot help but lose their way.

Because you cannot lose your mind without first stepping out of the house.

The trees scrape their wooden fingers across the windows; match the rhythm of their taps with your pulse.

Shadows confined to the night cannot escape from the crevices of the mind. You look at the clock too hard and time breaks.

Yet the sweet tulips of dreams always taste of licorice.

-holly huner

DANGER

Let other victims' cries and hues allure and volunteers keep lining left and right, as if the siren sang whose name's Danger.

The longest line's the roller coaster's, sure. The Ferris Wheel and Maze merely delight. The other victims' cries and hues allure.

But put a monster at the maze's center and would-be heroes show to test their might, as if the siren called whose name's Danger.

Disasters like the hapless Challenger don't stop more astronauts from taking flight. Failures of former flights—might—allure,

as when rhinos in a herd stampede and gore, safaris fill with souls who crave that sight as if a siren whistled with the danger.

And your love's laced with quicksand like the moor—and unmarked. But I'm walking there in spite of other fallen souls. They're not the lure, though: you're the siren; death, the only danger.

—james b. nicola

Essen die Toten!

by christian riley

Odd, how reality can topple down as it does. Carsten looked in the mirror. It was like the fall of a mountain—first, a crack of sound through the canyon, a puff of white powde,; and then that terrible, God-forsaken rumble. Nothing but coldness now, running through his veins, numbing his wits. He pulled from a pocket his grandpa's old ivory pipe. It was his now—smoked a thousand times over. Then Carsten lowered his eyes. The end of the avalanche was a batter of selfish guilt and squeamish horror.

Kempten, Germany, was customary to what his childhood memories offered—a rustic apple orchard, green meadows gamboling with lilies, the trout creek—each of them small blessings. But the disparities were there, in plain sight—all the shit a person packs for travel, scattered across the bathroom counter, polished with that old rag of irony. The irony was that Carsten was an American now, and seventy some odd years ago someone just like him might have pointed a rifle at his grandpa, his Opa.

Outside, the wind screamed like a banshee, slapping at turquoise shutters. The rain was a fusillade of pits and patters on the roof. Carsten turned from the mirror then stood over the bed, staring, listening. This old cottage housed a lifetime of memories. It was a standing scrapbook, austere in presence, worn shapeless by generations of bucolic footsteps crossing over thresholds. Now it was all his.

Opa started acting strange when Carsten was a teenager. With sadness, the family wrote the old man's behaviors off as the caducity of life, Carsten remembers. But damn if that old man wasn't entertaining. Standing on rock, fishing for brook trout, Carsten's grandpa once commented about how the Nazi's were the brightest sons-of-bitches God ever created. That they were always fiddling with science, experimenting with nature, fucking around with everything. Not to win the war—because hell, the war was in the bag—but so that they could have fun while at it. That's how Opa



talked. That's what he said. Then, as always, in those withering days, the old man ended with Essen die Toten!

Eat the Dead.

That phrase was Opa's motto, his obiter dictum; something he said so often it became soundless as a broken record—more absurd ramble from a crazy old coot. But if you looked at his face when he said those three words, like Carsten had, sure as shit there was something there. The old man's eyes would lock onto dead air and glitter. The corners of his mouth would twitch and curl, his brows would lift, everything pulling together habitually like the watering mouth of Pavlov's dog.

Something there, Carsten knew it now.

On the bed were the things he discovered in the attic. In the brown box, to be specific, the box that had been stashed deep in the corner like the forlorn casket of a miscarriage. Those things were several badges of honor given by the Third Reich—a creased uniform, gray as a mouse, his grandpa's war journal, betraying little. (No surprise there—the old man never was one for writing). And then ... the pictures.

After his first shock of horror, Carsten had spent an hour studying the photos under a light. He took as long to piece them together, laying them out with shaking hands onto the alabaster bedspread. In his mind, he imagined what Opa might have scrawled into his journal had the old man been fond of the pen. Finally, on a notepad he brought from America, Carsten wrote his own words to these grim snapshots of the Great War ...

An encampment in the snow—the Bulge, Hurtgen perhaps. A group of German soldiers leaning against a troop transport, their faces ashen—the gloom of war. A ravine piled with bodies, the uniforms of both sides tangled in macabre postures of gray and black, with hollow faces and crumpled hands, the whole thing a stiff tapestry of wanton casualty. A man standing to the side of the ravine, torch in hand, fire bright as a flash—a distant shot of smoke rising above the ravine. Then the same group of soldiers minus a few, but with one now crouched on all fours, his back to the camera, nose to the ground, sniffing animal-like into the snow. Closer now, a profile of this human, this thing—a Nazi experiment? Disheveled hair black as coffee combed over gnarled hands and a swollen face, squatting over something unaccountable. A blurred proof of the creature raking into a naked body—entrails lying twisted in the snow like a nest of vipers. The creature hunched over, digging deep, face buried in a hollowed-out rib cage, the bones of which were shorn of flesh and black with blood. The creature with neck craned to the gray sky, what appears to be a human liver distending from its mouth. More of the same, snapshots of a feral feast, some revealing soldiers in the background, hooting and jeering, the gloom of war shortly displaced by—this. And then the last photo ...

Carsten looked at the pipe in his hands. A unique piece of craftsmanship, the ivory bowl ornately carved into the shape of a howling mandrill—the stem, a rod of fluted rosewood. He had smoked it a thousand times, and it was the same pipe seen in that final picture suspended below a face blackened with gore, a mouth curled into a grin, and glittering eyes locked onto a piece of cold, dead air.

Outside screamed a banshee.





—fabiyas mv

Joy of the Worm

by ian mullins

"Hold still," said the doctor.

"What is it?" asked Mrs. Parker. "It's not alive, is it? I'm sure I felt it wriggling this morning. That's why I came straight to the hospital." Mrs. Parker listened to the doctor's short fast breathing brushing against her ear. It reminded her of Arthur, her late husband. They always fell asleep on separate sides of the bed, but when she woke he was always tucked in behind her, his breath on her neck.

"Got it. Want to look?"

Mrs. Parker looked. At the end of the surgical instrument he'd rooted into her ear was an object little larger than a bean, brown in colour, but with a vivid red gash on one side, as though the doctor had wounded it.

"What is it?"

"Seed pod, probably. Or an insect cocoon." He sniffed it briefly.

"But how did it get in there?"

He shrugged tiredly. "Ears are always open. Could have crawled in anytime. Do you sleep with the window open?"

"Usually, in the summer."

"There you are then." He looked past her to the curtain over the alcove. "Do you want to keep it, or shall I bin it?"

"I don't think I want it," she replied, disconcerted that he would even ask. "But thank you, doctor. I always come to the Royal. My Arthur had his cancer here. No one asked me if I wanted to keep his tumour."

He chased the old lady out and then rushed to the bathroom, trying not to look at the horde of injured junkies and weekend suicides sprawled on the long blue chairs, stained brown with dried blood. Vacating his bladder, he realized that he still had the pod in his hand. He ought to bag it for burning, but instead he tossed it into the thick brown water and flushed.

The creature stirred, breathed, felt lonely and cold. It missed its mother, the warmth of her soft wax. It wasn't ready to be alone in the world; at least not yet.

It pressed up against its own skin, and found it to be soft and broken. Knowing that this was a sign, it pushed itself out through a widening crack like food vomiting from a mouth. It opened what it understood to be its eyes, and looked around. There was nothing but darkness, only tiny specks of light coming from the teeth of huge whiskered creatures. One took it inside itself, then quickly spat it out. Long noses twitched, ignored, moved on. The creature realized it needed to move, but didn't know how. It had nothing to move with. But at that moment small legs erupted under its long body, and it knew instinctively what they were for. It crawled into a tiny hole and explored itself as best it could.

Its body was soft and white, but seemed to pulse all by itself, as though it was little more than a long heart beating softly through the sewer. That was how it realized it needed to hear. Its shape re-arranged itself accordingly, and sound lanced through its body like bright light. First its own beating, then the sound of claws and running water, a pummeling from the city above. It listened further and further, detecting heartbeats almost similar to its own, but none of them sounded like its mother.

Dispirited, it crawled out from the hole, which had now become too small to contain its body, and found a way to swim through the cold filth and screaming rats, whose bodies seemed to grow smaller as it swam by them. They avoided it now, twisting their tails and swimming away as it raised its long ears to the drumming on the earth.

Time passed. Perhaps weeks, perhaps seconds. It swallowed rats like whales swallow plankton, its wide mouth ever-open. But all the time it listened out for one particular heartbeat, one particular heart. In time it found the need to rise up toward the lighted places, adapting itself accordingly, legs lengthening, body thinning. It sprouted a hard shell, and bigger, more numerous eyes. It ears reached up like fingers, listening to daylight and the strange smell of the world.

Finding a small hole pretending to be a light, it narrowed itself further and wormed through. There it tasted grass and colour. Delighted, it swam through the daylight and coiled through trees. Up ahead the trees grew taller and spouted lights when they needed them. Tiny mothers and fathers marched in and out of them as though playing a strange game it could see no use for. It was happy to see them, even though they weren't his. It saw strange creatures being thrown across the sky, and wondered who was throwing them. It caught one in claws sprouted for that purpose, and saw that they threw themselves, hurling from trees and stars and using long thin arms that feathered and flapped. It felt its back begin to ripple and stretch. Feather and bone, eyes and ears. And somewhere out there its mother.

Mrs. Parker tipped a little more olive oil down her ear, just to be sure. It was alarming to think that something had been living and growing inside her. She and Mr. Parker had never been blessed with children, though she had dearly wanted one. A girl or a boy, even a damaged one, she wouldn't have minded. It would be nice to sit in the house waiting for someone to visit. Instead she sat listening to the

clock until it was time for lunch or time for tea. She seemed to spend half of her life planning meals, the other half sleeping or trying to sleep. She always seemed to wake up at three am, with a book she couldn't remember anything about open at page one hundred on her lap.

She sighed and climbed into bed. She turned off the radio, turned off the world. Now she was alone in the dark. She knew that there were millions more like her, but that didn't make her less lonely. If anything, it made it worse. All those lost girls and boys, trying to sleep in the darkness of their souls. She closed her eyes and waited for nothing to happen. Nothing did.

But after a while, perhaps hours, perhaps seconds, she heard a soft fluttering all about her. The little window was wide open of course. It was too high for her to reach. Only Arthur could ever close it. Perhaps it was a butterfly, a very large butterfly. Good, she liked butterflies. At least she had some company in the dark. But it did seem very loud and very large, crawling all over the ceiling as though learning the lie of the land. It stopped directly over her. Somehow she knew that something was listening in the dark.

"Hello?" she called out, habitually foolish. "Arthur?" She kicked away the duvet. Something cold dropped on her legs. She cried out, but found she could not move. A cold thrill passed through her legs and across her skin. She opened her eyes as wide as she could, but saw nothing. The darkness was crawling all over her, climbing to sit on her chest.

She wondered if she were having a heart attack or a stroke. That would account for the heaviness over her heart. Whatever was there was pulsing softly in sync with her breathing. She slowed it down deliberately. The butterfly-moth seemed to purr with her. She knew then that it meant her no harm, this creature. Or heart attack or stroke, whatever it was. Perhaps she had simply gone mad. Loneliness could do that, she believed.

Finding her fingers again, she stretched one toward the lamp, then stopped. What was the use of seeing anything again? It was better in the dark. She might be dreaming a fine dream, and would open her eyes to a nightmare. It wouldn't be the first time that had happened. She had awoken to find Arthur cold beside her one fine day in June, three years earlier.

But now the creature was stirring sympathetically. She heard strange sounds of fluttering and tearing, as though it was emerging from a cocoon, adapting to a change of heart. It slipped from her skin and in a moment was under the blanket with her, smelling of mothballs and old men's slippers. Mrs. Parker rolled onto her side, no longer alone. The creature burrowed in behind her, making an odd whooshing sound that came more and more to resemble her late husband's breath, warm on her ear. Mrs. Parker smiled and slept. Arthur was home.



FUNERAL CLOTHES

My new suit's slick as oilcloth.
Murky asphalt gray it fits
snug enough to cripple me.
I bought it for this funeral
in Lewiston. The streets here
crumble under eons of snow.
The houses stare like dementia.
Even utility wires harpstrung
in drab light have tangled so badly
the line crews have gone on strike
rather than try to repair them.

In this broken milieu my friend died of boulders in his gut.
The doctors chanted over his corpse, expecting it to rise on command, but X-rays showed no one at home. A house with a broken picket fence pretends to be a funeral home. A man with a pointed stick writes instructions in snow. A hymn curdles at the back of the throat. My new suit slips through the crowd. People keep a safe distance from its bottomless inhuman gray.

I have to speak my eulogy in atonal nouns and verbs ordinary mourners can ignore. They can't ignore my suit, though. Its depth and polished surface compete to threaten bystanders with secret adhesions no one could survive. The casket grins like a massive set of dentures. My friend understands. He knows I'll wear this suit to the Promised Land; and when I doff it I'll shimmer like a mirage, the flesh of me absorbed and absolved by the gray.

—william doreski

Harry's Cat

by is watts

It was three in the afternoon and she was in bed, partially clothed, her eyes tightly shut. She needed her afternoon nap and with Harry gone, there was no reason she couldn't have one. Then she heard the sound of oddly heavy footfalls coming up the stairs and plodding steadily along the landing.

She screwed her eyes up even tighter and willed the footsteps to go away, but they kept on coming. They and their owner were now in the bedroom. There was a pause. She held her breath. Then the whole bed shook as the cause of the footsteps jumped and landed on the bed.

Krunk! The bedsprings protested at their treatment. The bloody cat was criminally overweight.

She lay still, listening to the rustle and snuffle as the cat nosed around the bottom of the bed, looking for just the right spot to curl up on. Please let him settle soon and please let it not be on top of me.

He settled. The rustling stopped. All she could hear now was the low whistle of the cat's breath as it passed in and out of the creature's nostrils. She relaxed and tried to drift off to sleep. Then the rasping started—the slow, drawn-out sound of a rough, hot tongue being dragged across thick, matted fur, repeatedly. Plus the squelchy note of the tongue vigorously applied to the cat's anus. If only she could clench shut her ears the way she had her eyes.

The cat continued to rasp and squelch. Bloody animal. And then it farted. Loudly, unrepentantly and moistly. Hearing the raucous arse raspberry, she held her breath, but it was a big cat and a strong fart and she had to breathe sometime. She exhaled in desperation and then tried to inhale tentatively. The fart was waiting.

Urgh! She almost gagged. Not only was the cat as obese as its bloody owner, it stank too. Its current diet, for which she had to hold herself responsible, was clearly disagreeing with its stomach, although the cat itself couldn't get enough of it. In fact, it had put on weight since she had been feeding it.



Satisfied with the release of pressure in its stomach and bowel, the cat resumed its enthusiastic licking.

After a while the damp sand-paper sound grew less and she relaxed again, warm under the duvet, and drifted back down toward the floating peace of an afternoon doze.

The cat sat up, stretched laboriously, scratched and then wandered around the bed looking for the second best spot to sleep on. In the process, it trod on her, clambering onto her legs and marching purposefully toward her head, paws pummelling her bladder, solar plexus, and left breast on the way up.

Fucking cat. She'd never liked it, but it was Harry's pet and so it had stayed. Bloody Harry.

The tickle of scratchy whiskers on her face. The fetid smell of cat breath, reminiscent of the masticated and regurgitated remains of a hundred decomposing mice, or a can of week-old cat food. Once more she held her breath and kept her mouth firmly closed, along with her eyes. It was bad enough smelling the thing. No way was she going to risk inadvertently tasting it too. She tried not to think what the cat might taste of, given its current diet and digestive reactions to it.

A cold, wet nose left a cat-snot kiss on her lips. She spluttered, wiping away the dolloped mucus with the back of her hand. The cat purred.

Bloody Harry. Bloody cat.

Finally, the cat concluded its bed-top manoeuvres and settled down for a proper sleep. She relaxed and started to drift away again, canopied by the warm waves of a duck-down duvet.

The cat gave a snot-rattling snort and started snoring. Loudly. Almost as loud as Harry. Under the duvet her fingers twitched, imagining the feel of wrapping her hands around the cat's bloated, furry neck. One day. One day for sure. As far as she knew, it wasn't a crime to kill a cat. She would have kicked it out when Harry went, but she'd found a use for it.

God, she had poor taste in men. Sid had been born irritating. Jack was good in bed, but bad at everything else. And Harry—big, fat, lardy Harry—was bad in bed, bad at everything else, and a bad-tempered, boring, cat-obsessed freak. The only thing he had going for him was his savings account. Good riddance to bad rubbish. Never again.

There was further movement on the bed. Slightly damp fur, clean-by-cat standards, wiped itself across her cheek. A wet nose snuffled viscously in her ear. All hopes of an afternoon nap fluttered feebly away.

The cat mewed softly. When she didn't respond, it turned up the volume until she opened her eyes and looked at its green eyes staring into hers. The cat mewed once more and threw itself off the bed, landing on the floor with a thump and creak.

She rolled over and peered down at it. It meowed.

"Hungry again, are we? All you want to do is eat, these days. If you're not careful you'll get even fatter, just like Harry." The possibility of killing the cat with kindness and excessive portions teased the edges of her mind enticingly. "Would you like some more meat?"

The cat mewed its agreement, or perhaps its increasing frustration at the promise of food not being immediately realized.

"Okay, big boy. I'll feed you. Hang on in there."

She got up. Threw on an old dressing gown over what little she was wearing, pushed her feet into a pair of old, ripe slippers and slopped her way downstairs, the cat following eagerly her wake.

Going to the freezer and shivering in the chilly blast from its opened door, she extracted a lump of fatty meat.

"We have to keep things fresh, puss, so you're going to have to wait a bit while your dinner warms up."

The cat meowed piteously at her, by way of response.

"You do love your Harry, don't you? Can't get enough of him, but you're just going to have to wait until this juicy piece of him thaws out. In the meantime, though, would you like a pair of small, fatty, meat balls as hors d'oeuvre?"





A Commentary on Alfred Hitchcock's Masterpiece

by eugene hosey

In 2012, *Citizen Kane* dropped second place to Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, announcing *Vertigo* as the greatest motion picture of all time by the Critics Poll of the British magazine, *Sight & Sound*. Previously, *Citizen Kane* had won the top spot consistently since 1962. The number-one place of the Hitchcock film did not come as exactly a shock. *Vertigo* was number seven in the 1982 poll and rose steadily—number four in 1992, number two in 2002, until finally reaching number one in 2012.

Vertigo did not receive great reception with critics or the public when it was first released in 1958. The general impression seemed to be that Hitchcock had overindulged himself personally and that the film was frustrating and difficult. But in time critics began to see this complex film as a fascinating, major achievement. Vertigo is thematically rich, profoundly romantic, and deep in the mysteries of love and deception. On the surface it is a story about a detective (James Stewart) following a beautiful mysterious blond (Kim Novak) around San Francisco. A man Scotty knew in college named Elster says he just wants Scotty the detective to keep up with where his wife Madeline drives during the day, but it doesn't take Scotty long to fall in love with the woman.

Scotty can't get her out of his mind from the first time he sees her in a restaurant. He follows her from place to place; there doesn't seem to be a rational pattern to her movements. She wanders, until actually they are both wandering. There is a brief but mysteriously enticing scene of the detective spying on her when she enters the back of a flower shop; the room is solidly banked with all kinds of flowers and colors as a sort of backdrop to a close-up profile of Kim Novak's beauty. By the time he saves her from drowning at Fort Point, he takes her to his apartment, strips her naked, hangs up her clothes, puts her in a robe, and then in his bed. If one reasons plausibly, the



woman would surely have been horrified to wake up naked in a strange man's bed. But it doesn't work this way. They get closer instead. Scotty is falling in love at the same time that he is being fooled—the key to understanding what this seductive movie is all about.

The plot that moves the story along is actually fraught with implausibility. Who would even consider accepting such a creepy, even irresponsible detective job? (There are indeed meaningful reasons for everything that happens, for every image we see, but Hitchcock buries all behind so much symbolism that what we actually enjoy is more intimated than literal.) That Elster is counting on the detective falling in love with the woman is perhaps not too far-fetched. But how does this con man coordinate the murder of his wife with the timing of Scotty and the woman's trip to the mission so that he can be at the top of the tower ready to throw a dead woman out the window as Scotty races up the stairs without making it in time? And further, how and where do Elster and the fake Madeline successfully hide after the tower incident? Most unlikely of all is the way that Scotty, after a semi-recovery of a nervous breakdown, just happens to spot "the second woman" on the city sidewalk? Perhaps this last implausibility was a true case of fate. Actually, our imaginations can find explanations for all the foregoing unlikelihood, because we have been drawn in as Scotty has been drawn in, and because Hitchcock is so masterful at working with suspension of disbelief.

None of this makes any sense to anyone who has not seen the movie. But all cinema lovers much see it. Back to the title word, vertigo—an overwhelming sensation of spinning disorientation—and an interpretation of Hitchcock's masterpiece: Much has been said about necrophilia as the underlying theme-and indeed for good reason. The real Madeline is killed, a fake Madeline replaces her; both Madelines disappear, and then the fake Madeline is made over as Madeline again—only to die as did the original, freeing James Stewart of his obsession, and concluding the movie.

But isn't Hitchcock probing the much deeper issue of the nature of romantic love? What does it mean to fall in love, anyway? Is falling in love a form of vertigo, a loss of reason and self-control, a type of insanity? Is this film an excursion into one of the most phenomenal, orgasmic, and painful of human experience? The essence of this cinematic trip: a form of love (obsession) that is vertigo (a downward spiral).



Useless

I went to her on bended knee, as any suitor should, to ask if she would marry me, and she agreed she would.

We traded vows and said "I do" and sealed it with a kiss, then eagerly looked forward to a life of wedded bliss.

But sadly it was very brief, for suddenly she died, and I could not control my grief, no matter how I tried.

The loneliness was terrible without my darling wife, and finding it unbearable I chose to take my life.

I placed a pistol to my head and found a likely spot, then put aside my thoughts of dread and fired off a shot ...

-kevin gallagher

Umbrella Stones

Umbrella stones are the guards of a generation lying under the centuries. The bones of our forefathers are intact under the seal of green moss.

Their souls had fled. The worms had been fed. But the unyielding genes continue its unending journey.

Pesticides were unknown to them, yet they tilled and filled.
Their thoughts were never toxic like the fruits and vegetables today.

Lastly erected umbrella stones proved all the tears, that had been spilled out, as 'necessary wastage of emotions'. We have to read a lot under and on.

Umbrella Stones stand exposed, still they resist the challenges of centuries—they safeguard memories against the emptiness of oblivion.

(Umbrella stones are the centuries old memorial stones for the dead, erected in the place where they had been buried. These structures were carved out of rocks in the shape of umbrellas. A few umbrella stones at Ariyannur, Guruvayur, Kerala inspired me to write this poem)

—fabiyas mv

A DYING DREAM **BEFORE THE WAKE**

Through the eyes of the world It's easy to seal off emotion And become a void Dancing past Death unnoticed Grave pauses Emerging tentacles Clouds drape Fading souls scream faintly It becomes hard to remember human things—crying and laughter Pain comes At first Then it is hidden away by medication I realize that I am asleep But it is too late I crash through white walls Cool water Then time itself Drag my nerves back to reality Nail my heart above the door A deadly dream at my expense Silence my tongue Shameful angels have come Their faces revel chaos and pain Let me rest and dream again But Death arises once again Black, shiny eyes of waste Yellow smile I beg for release As cold lips peck my forehead

Good night

—jason harrigill

Barracuda

by diane dooley

Hank shivered in the darkness, dried saliva encrusting his mouth, an overpowering smell of something sickly-sweet invading his nostrils. Fifty freakin' bucks she'd promised him. To fix a broken window, she'd said, and he'd jumped at the chance for more beer money. Now it looked like she had another plan for him to earn that fifty spot. He hoped it wasn't anything too kinky. Maybe she would fix herself up a bit, put on something sexy.

He'd been buzzed as hell when he'd left the roadhouse and started walking, hoping to hitch a ride back to town. The woman in the station wagon—she'd been smiling and harmless in the harsh light of day. The iced tea she'd served him had been thick with sugar. He'd drunk it in one go before heading down the basement steps to check out the broken window.

He shook his head, trying to escape the haze that clouded his thoughts. Had she drugged the tea? The dirty bitch must be desperate to get some. He glanced upward. She was still in the house. He could hear occasional thuds and the squeaking of floorboards as she moved from room to room.

What the fuck was she playing at? He dipped his head, lifted his hands as high as he could and started biting at the thin cords that bound his wrists together. Thick rope around his arms and waist tied him to some kind of wooden post. His ankles were bound and everything was too tight, cutting off the circulation, making his hands and feet numb. He shifted, his bladder aching with the strain of holding it, the movement causing the plastic to creak underneath him.

When was the crazy bitch coming down? He'd screamed himself hoarse, and she'd ignored it all—his yelling, his threats. Just wait until he got his hands on her. He imagined his fingers around that white neck, squeezing, annoyed that he couldn't



remember what her face looked like. Just sort of pale and fat, grey curly hair, a flowery dress. Just a typical old woman, the kind he never looked at.

He squinted as light suddenly flooded the basement. He glanced around. Beige carpet, peach-colored walls, dried flower arrangements everywhere. Nothing like the sex dungeon he'd imagined in the dark. The stairs creaked and he looked up to see thick ankles and pink slippers coming down the stairs. She reached the bottom and smiled at him, friendly-like, then pulled a chair from out under the stairs and dragged it over to where he sat, tied, on the sheet of shiny plastic.

She sat down on the chair and pulled some knitting out of the bag she carried. "How are you feeling, Hank?"

She knew his name. But he didn't remember her asking or him telling. "What the fuck, lady?" He kept his voice low. He needed to keep this crazy bitch calm. She wasn't as old as he'd though at first. In her fifties, maybe. She didn't look like she was here to have her way with him; she hadn't fixed herself up at all.

"Now, my dear. No need for the bad language." She tutted, her chin wobbling.

The soft click of her knitting needles filled the basement.

"You'll have to untie me if ... you know ... you want me to ..."

She stared at him, her mouth a perfect circle, a slight blush rising to her cheeks. "Oh my goodness, Hank. You have entirely the wrong idea." She clasped a hand over her mouth as if to cover a smile. "First time that's ever happened."

So, not a sex thing, he thought, relieved. What did she want him for then? A sharp pain shot from his groin. "I need to piss."

"You mean you need to use the bathroom, don't you? Remember your manners ..."
She looked up from her knitting. "And this will all go much better for you."

She didn't look crazy. But she did look vaguely familiar. Where had he seen her before? Another spasm from his bladder made him moan in pain. "Please, lady. Let me use the bathroom."

Click. Click. Click.

"That's much more polite." She held up her knitting. "I'm making little hats for the newborns at the hospital. I volunteer there."

He groaned. "Lady, I gotta piss. Bad."

She snapped her knitting back into her lap. "More shoddy manners, Hank? The least you could do is compliment my hat." She let out a sigh. "Oh, just go ahead and urinate on yourself. That's why I put the plastic down."

Hank shook his head. "Fuck. You." But even as he said it, he felt burning relief as he pissed all over himself.

The woman got up and went to a shelf. She turned and sprayed a thick fog air freshener in his general direction. "Apple and cinnamon scented. My favorite." She sat back down and resumed knitting. "Almost done with this one. Time to cast off the stitches."

A hot puddle collected in the plastic under his ass and, for the first time, Hank felt less anger and a lot more fear. "What's the plan, lady?" he muttered. "What ... what do you need me to do for that fifty?"

She didn't reply. The steady click of the needles continued until finally she said, "All done! Isn't it cute?"

A loud thud sounded from upstairs. Someone else was in the house. "Help!" Hank screamed. "Someone. Please!"

The woman giggled. "Just one of my cats. Probably Big Boy. I really should put him on a diet."

The tea must have been drugged. Everything took so much effort. Even yelling had left him exhausted. "Let me go." He looked up, making contact with her watery blue eyes. "You seem like a nice lady." He attempted a friendly smile. "I won't tell anyone, I promise."

She kneeled down on the carpet. Close, but just out of reach. Her eyes were soft and sympathetic. "I know this is scary for you." She grinned suddenly and stood. She waved her arm, indicating the basement. "But at least it looks good down here now. It used to be so dark and smelly." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "So much nicer than when Daddy used to bring me down here." She ran her fingers through one of the flower arrangements. "I took a blue ribbon for this one at the county fair last year. Do you like it?"

Hank nodded, eyes wide, heart beating faster than should have been possible. "Yes, ma'am. It's beautiful."

She smiled. "Thank you, Hank. That means a lot to me." She turned and opened the door of a closet, then reached in and pulled a large orange case from the bottom shelf. Hank stared at it. He had one like that himself. He gulped, dry, finding there was no saliva left in his mouth.

She patted the case. "This was Daddy's chainsaw. I keep it well-oiled and maintained, just like he would have wanted me to." She walked to the corner of the basement and lifted the lid of a chest freezer. She peered in, sighing. "No wonder Big Boy is so fat. I feed all of my animals way too much."

"I love animals too." He thought he was speaking quietly, but it came out as a scream. He clenched his jaw, getting his terror under control. "Let's talk, lady. Let's get to know each other. I think you'd like me if you knew me better."

She returned to her chair and sat, her head cocked to one side like a curious bird. "You don't remember me at all, do you, Hank?"

He shook his head, eying her warily. "I'm sure ... if we had ever met ..." He forced himself to continue. "I'm sure I would remember a nice lady like you."

"You've passed me so many times in town." She frowned. "And I work in the back office at the parole office. I'm the records clerk there." She stared at him for a few long moments. "Perhaps if you hadn't been so busy staring at teenage girls you might have noticed me."

"I don't do that. Stare at teenagers." He remembered the pretty little thing from his most recent visit. Not even old enough to have hair on her legs. This woman must have seen. Maybe she'd even heard. "I mean ... I didn't know how old she was. I ... I'm sorry."

"Oh, no need to apologize, Hank. I'm just surprised we could live in the same small town for so long and you not know my name." She crossed her ankles and laid her hands in her ample lap. "I was even at your trial. It was Daddy's last case, you see. I didn't usually go to see him in action, but he insisted. He said I'd find the trial very interesting. Oh, how he loved to bang that gavel."

Hank sucked in a deep breath. "Judge Robeson. You're his daughter."

"Yes." She laughed. "What a very interesting trial that was. He gave you the lightest possible sentence. Just like he always did with men like you. Like him. People were angry, of course, but what did he care? He was retiring, anyway. And, as he always said, girls like that ..."

"Is that what this is about? That girl?" Hank looked around the room. The plastic, the chainsaw, the freezer, the crazy cunt in the pink slippers. The bile rose in his throat and he vomited a spray of rancid beer and ice tea across the plastic.

The woman stood and came closer. "Oh, you poor thing. You're scared, aren't you?" She paced around the edge of the plastic sheet, then bent to inspect him. "You know something, Hank? I don't mean to be rude, but you're very strange-looking, aren't you? So tall and thin. So pale. Those weird eyes of yours. The sharp teeth."

Hank closed his eyes. The prosecuting attorney had made so much of his teeth at the trial, showing pictures of the bite marks on that slut's body, displaying his dental X-rays over and over. This crazy bitch had seen all that; knew about everything he'd done that week.

"Daddy took me deep sea fishing one time. He hauled in a huge fish and made me kill it. I didn't want to do it. That fish had fought so hard. But ... well. It was always best to obey father." She crouched down and stared at him. "Yes. Fish eyes. Sharp teeth. Slimy. Just like the one I killed. It was a barracuda."

He stared back at her. "No, I'm not like that. I'm not a bad guy. Really. If you would just get to know me." He glanced around the basement, desperate. "I'll help you fix the place up. Repairs ... anything." The last word was a sob.

She stood over him, arms folded under her bosom, rocking from one foot to the other.

"I didn't mean to hurt the girl. I ... I ... didn't kill her. I served my time, dammit!" She nodded. "Yes, you did serve your time. And you met with your parole officer like you were supposed to. But ..." She brought a finger to her mouth, patting her pursed lips. "The other week, when you were in for your appointment, do you remember? In the waiting room. The things you whispered to that young girl who was waiting for her mother?" She stooped and took the knitting needles from beside the chair.

Hank stared at the needles. They were very thin. She wouldn't be able to do much damage with them.

"You're never going to change, Hank." She moved closer. "Just like Daddy could never change. He retired to Florida, you know." She clicked the needles together. "Oh, I really shouldn't lie. That's so rude of me. When I say he 'retired,' what I really mean is that I retired him." She'd lifted the needles and waved little quote marks in the air as she said 'retired." "And I just told people it was to Florida."

He broke out in a sweat as she approached. "People will come looking for me." He struggled against the ropes. "You won't like it in jail, lady. Take it from me."

"Oh, sweetie." She paused, letting out a throaty chuckle. "I've gotten away with it all the other times. I'm not an amateur, you know." She spread out her hand and counted off her fingers, tapping on each one with a knitting needle. "Hmm, yes, I've done this a few times now." She stared down at her slippers, a slight blush on her

cheeks. "I'm really very good at this, in fact. But I shouldn't boast. So ill-mannered."

She advanced, as soft and light on her feet as a cat. Hank tried to wiggle away from her, but the ropes held him firm.

"Remember your friend Billy? You went to high school with him. The one who hurt his own grandmother?"

"He moved out west. California, I think."

"No, Hank. He didn't. Billy didn't move anywhere."

He attacked the cord at his wrist with his teeth, tearing one out in his desperate attempt to free himself.

"This might take a little time. Try not to struggle, there's a dear." She kneeled down next to him, a sympathetic smile on her face.

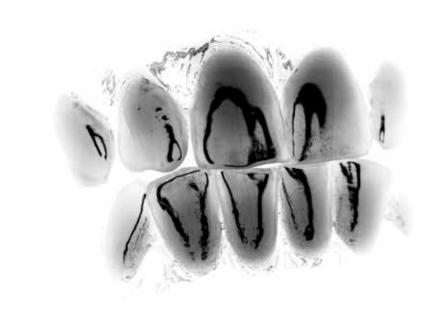
"No. Please, lady. No."

She grabbed him by the hair and jerked his head back.

"Please. Anything. I'll do anything."

The needle entered the corner of his eye, just a sharp prick at first, the pain growing as it slowly continued, through the eyeball and deeper, deeper. Oh God, Oh God. It's going into my brain. His whole body clenched, his mouth agape in silent agony. She whipped the needle out, released his hair, then patted him on his head.

"Well done, Hank! Scream if you need to. I won't hold it against you." She cocked her head to one side, eyes full of mischief. "I always screamed a lot and Daddy didn't mind one bit." She sighed. "I think he enjoyed it." She glanced at the watch on her wrist. "Six hours before I'm due at my volunteer job. We've got plenty of time." She wiped the needle on her floral dress. "Now, my little barracuda. Let's take care of that other eye."



THE LORD OF DÆRKNESS

by christian riley

The Lord of Darkness assembles himself from the shadows, takes form in a corner of the room, and then scampers to the edge of the bed. He pauses, looking. Others had done it, and so would he. He is Nunsk, a nightmare of the mortal realm, soon to deliver a horror of the night so profound and compelling that it will murder its occupant. Scare the human to death—that's what Nunsk will do. And when she dies in her dream, she dies, and then Nunsk becomes enterer of the Abyss, a Lord of Darkness. Nunsk becomes free.

Nunsk looks at the woman. He scratches his black hairy rump then sniffs at the bed. He smells the woman, the she, her scent of flower and honey, sour musk hidden beneath. He smells the he beside her, dirt and garlic. Nunsk does not want the man, although strong as he might be—perhaps too strong. No, it is the woman who promises Nunsk the Lordly title. The others who had become free had slain the old and the sick, frail creatures that Death himself had already noticed. But woe is the title given to them, as they entered the Underworld. Nunsk will slay the young woman with the great belly. He will kill her and the unborn ... the unborns, so as he now smells, sniffing like a small dog at the foot of the bed. She is with double-child, and Nunsk rolls his black tongue over his lips with anticipation—a Lordly title indeed.

Like a cat, Nunsk pounces softly up onto the bed. The humans stir. He looks at the man briefly, but then his gaze falls back to the woman. She is uncomfortable with the climate, her russet legs naked to the night air. Drops of sweat linger on her lips, trail down her temple, making wet patches in her brown hair. She moans, and then Nunsk licks his lips again. He feels for his tiny erection, brought forth by the excitement. He stares at the great belly, crowned by two heavy breasts pouring out of the cloth. Nunsk shuffles forward, imagining her fears.

She has other children, two that now walk. He sees them in the photo on the nightstand—her fears.

Nunsk reaches with hairy arms and legs, straddles the woman, and then seats his anus onto her chest. He draws his appendages inward, curling into a ball. The woman strains for breath under his weight. The great belly serves as a backrest for Nunsk; the heavy breasts cradle him like a newborn, and the nightmare becomes comfortable upon the woman's body.

Nunsk waits and waits, staring at her soft face, her plump lips. He imagines the woman's greatest fears, and then drops his black tongue out of his mouth. The organ stretches and descends, thinning into the looks of a long wet worm, tipped with a tiny flagellum, wriggling like its namesake. Nunsk drives the tongue down into the woman's nose, deep and delving.

The flagellum splits within the canal, becoming two as it passes through membrane and tissue, slithering onto the woman's cerebral matter, now searching, searching for the amygdalae. Like tiny fingers groping in the dark, the flagella burrow deep and seize the woman's fear, spreading over the wet cells of the amygdalae, tapping pulselike, with sticky ends. The nightmare begins.

The woman drives a big car, a heavy car—black as the night around her, long as the dessert before her. Her great belly presses into the steering wheel. The road is an endless tongue, recoiling into the mouth of the vehicle. Tumbleweeds sweep past like fleeting memories, each one driving a nail of sadness into the woman's ear. She's crying, but she does not know why.

Something shoots out into the road, the wrong direction, running perpendicular to the endless tongue, not parallel. It is a rodent, and it makes a noise somewhere from under the car.

The woman keeps crying.

The headlights shine for miles, and the woman sees an object standing in the road—way, way out there. She is nervous, becomes frightened after now knowing that she cannot steer the vehicle. She feels an itch inside her belly just below the skin. The object in the distance draws closer; the vehicle shifts into a higher gear on its own, and the itch inside becomes more demanding. The woman chews her lip.

The object is bipedal, tall, standing in the middle of the road. It is a man, somewhat familiar. He is naked, and his body forms a perfect sculpture of chiseled muscle and sinew. His body forms the perfect lesson for shadow. He is familiar—all too familiar. The woman screams into the windshield, tries to stop the vehicle. She jerks at the steering wheel. She tries to roll the window down; perhaps she can warn him.

Nothing works, and the woman gives a sharp wail then closes her eyes upon impact. The man, her man, takes the car head-on. His perfect body gets eaten by steel-in-motion, consumed by a kinetic maelstrom. To her horror, many noises occur from under the car—ugly noises.

She sees a twisted mass of bone and tissue hurling in the rearview mirror. The woman chokes on grief, tries again to stop the car. She is helpless, a helpless passenger. Briefly she had forgotten about the itch in her belly, but it is there now, strong and painful.

Another object up ahead, not in the middle of the road, but on the shoulder,

standing among the tumbleweeds. The woman cringes, and then feels a scratching in her belly. The itch becomes satiated for a moment, yet it comes back stronger than before. In response, the scratching quickens, deepens, pressing into her belly, causing an alarming pain.

The object ahead approaches rapidly, yet it is on the shoulder. They are on the shoulder. Coming into view, the woman sees that the object is two children pressed together into a tight hug, their eyes staring up the road at the headlights. The woman does not have to see the children clearly to know who they are.

The pain in her stomach rises into a sudden breach, followed by a nauseating, tearing sound. The woman screams and wails as two hairy hands burst out of her belly and grab hold of the steering wheel.

The vehicle responds to the guidance of the hands, swaying slowly toward the shoulder of the road. The woman struggles for breath as she wails. She fights with the hands, knowing their intentions now. She tries to stop the vehicle again; she tries to roll the window down, but nothing works.

Before impact, the woman presses her own hands against her ears and squeezes her eyes shut. She does not want to hear or see her children get eaten by the kinetic maelstrom. But she feels them. She feels the vulgar bumps and thrashings under the car, as the vehicle slides over the shoulder ever so briefly. The woman moans terribly, and then her world spins through a black tornado of grief, where nothing exists but the saddest of all memories.

Back on the road, the vehicle accelerates. The hairy hands are in control, and they are a site of horror for the woman, protruding out of her belly. She cannot move free from them, she doesn't even try. She sits calmly now, listless in her grief, sobbing as she watches the great tongue in the night stretch into the horizon. She feels as if she is ready to die, and somewhere, somehow, the woman pictures a small black creature dancing with delight.

There is a wall ahead, brightly lit by two street lamps—a massive wall of cinder blocks stacked two stories high. It runs perpendicular to the endless tongue. The woman sees the structure, notices that it stares back at her dumb with expression. It means to kill her. The hairy hands mean to kill her also, ambitiously gripping the steering wheel as they are. But the woman no longer cares. She has watched and felt the murder of her family, and the treason of her unborn. She is ready to die, and out in the dark desert, something howls with glee.

The vehicle presses onward; the wall looms larger, thicker. The lights shine brighter, the night draws nearer. The woman sees her violent impact just before it happens—the crushing blow upon her body, the pop and splash of blood and bone, the fissure of membrane, the rapid expulsion of her conscience.

Something is terribly wrong.

The Lord of Darkness feels a restraining sensation on his limbs. He feels a tug. The night has vanished, and there is a cold, cold grey now looming in the air ... dawn.

Nunsk shivers. He reaches his long tongue around his body, licking at the restraints, feeling the webbed strands of gut string and tendon that bind him. It is a sorcerous device, so he suspects.

The humans stir. The woman with the great belly rolls and sighs—not dead!

Nunsk turns violent. He thrashes his body and whips his tongue erratically through the air. He opens his mouth to howl but is unable to make a sound. There is a cold dread growing in the grey silence, thick and heavy, like a massive wall.

Once more, the humans stir. The woman rises. The he beside her reaches with a hand. Laughter down the hall—the two that now walk; now running. The catcher of dreams grips the body of Nunsk with ambition, without fail, and Nunsk watches as the morning color bleeds him of his darkness. And in this slip of grey that blinds the shadows, that wakes the humans, the nightmare becomes suddenly uncomfortable with the climate.



[poetry]

childish things

once I was afraid that darkness was coming to take me away so fearful of the dark that my shadow terrorized casting down onto the ground grabbing at my feet the Pan and Pixie tried to quell my irrationality abate the threat and treat it all like simple forget-me-nots but the light gets snuffed out and the childish things come to play

in the pitch with all the most horribly imagined creatures grabbing me in every which way and all I wanted was to wake up be free from the void in which I'm trapped to fight back the blackness with nightlights on night stands but not tonight and there I was feeling each and every hand coming up from under my bed reaching and grabbing at me tugging and pulling for me to join for from beneath it devours

—grim de evil

ELEFEE SEGNES

Elinor Garber was 86 and in poor health. When she walked, always stooped over and leaning heavily on a cane, her face was pinched with suffering. Ralph loved the old woman and watched for her throughout the day.

Elinor normally woke at 6:00 am. Ralph would look at her house and mentally nod to himself, as though marking off an item on a checklist, when he saw that her kitchen light was on. Eventually, the kitchen light would go off and the "parlor" light would come on; Elinor still called a living room a parlor. He knew she would be reading one of her extra-large print books, moving her shaking finger along the lines one by one as she went down each page, or else embroidering a piece of fine white linen with a pattern of neat little flowers and birds. She didn't embroider much these days though, because her palsied hands made it increasingly difficult. Ralph knew she'd been working on the same piece for more than a year.

Despite her physical failings, when the weather was warm, Elinor would go outside in her yard in the afternoon and slowly walk by her Roses and Azaleas, drinking in their fragrance. She was no longer able to attend to the garden on her own. She paid a small sum from her Social Security check to one of the Beckman boys from down the street to take care of it now.

In the evenings, again by the parlor light, Ralph knew Elinor was listening to her old Cathedral style radio, or perhaps reading her Bible, something she had done most of her adult life.

Once a week, Elinor's daughter, Mindy, would come by with groceries for the old woman and sit a spell with her. She would tell her about things that happened at her job at the tile company that week, or about some movie she had seen, or perhaps tell her about some small item she had purchased. There were never any other visitors. Elinor's husband had died twenty-five years before, and her only sister had been dead for ten years.

by ellen denton

At the end of the day, Ralph would again, as though checking off an item on a list, note that the parlor light had gone off, the bedroom light on briefly, and then darkness.

In this way, by these casual glances at Elinor's house through the day or evening, he knew she was okay.

One morning, when he looked at Elinor's window, the light was not on. It was almost 7:00 am. He first pushed back a momentary feeling of fear and concern for the old woman. Then he allowed the inevitable feeling of sadness settle upon him like melting snowflakes. It was a Friday. Saturday was when Elinor's daughter came. Ralph waited.

Mid-afternoon on Saturday, as always, Mindy showed up toting two cloth bags containing groceries, which she placed on the ground by the door while she fished the key to her mother's house from her purse. She then went in with the bags. Around fifteen minutes later an ambulance showed up. Another fifteen minutes went by and the paramedics came out wheeling a green body bag. Mindy stayed in the house and around forty minutes later, a friend of hers from the apartment building she lived in showed up.

Ralph waited. He wanted to ensure Elinor had time to say goodbye to her daughter in her own way.

Neither Mindy, nor her friend, nor the now departed paramedics had sensed Elinor's tears—a mix of relief, love, regrets and sadness as she watched her daughter. Nor did they see the old woman's husband Ralph and the profoundly tender understanding in his eyes as he at last reached out and took Elinor's hand in his.

Shellter within the Peanut Shells

by fabiyas mv

A snooze gently passes through his veins. His mind slips out of the steering. Nap swings Sanooj's wife's head too in the front seat. Their car zigzags. It shatters a roadside wall into pieces. People rush to the spot from all sides. Soon a human fence takes its shape around the car. Sanooj and Chethana lie soaked in blood. His soul flutters. A death rattle echoes in her throat.

A flashing red light nears. There is a police jeep also just behind.

"Children are safe in the back seat," a young man points out.

Sub Inspector of the police breaks the glass and takes the children out. Sarova and her younger brother Menesh shudder with fright. They cannot move their tongues. The ambulance races with its siren wailing to Alpha, a nearby hospital.

Bulbs of memory blink in the drawing room of Sarova's mind: Her mom holds her wrist and helps her cut a cake. Her dad takes snaps using a mobile phone camera. April 7th, "Happy Birthday to you, Sarova." Rhythm of rapture resonates within the walls of her heart. Her dad's smiling face slowly vanishes as lava of pain flows out of her eyes. She wipes it out quickly. She clutches Menesh's arm. They are now in a shed, their new shelter.

Sanooj was a clerk under the Education Department of the State. Office files squeezed the juice of life from him. But the words drizzling out of his wife's heart always refreshed him in the evenings. His children gave him back his lost childhood. Sheer joys were let loose during the holidays in the yard of the family. Life's beauty unfolded itself. But Sanooj feared the transience of beauty.

"My children study at Movement English School." Sanooj was puffed up with pride. Movement English School was a prestigious institute in the State. All the noble and the wealthy men sent their kids to this school. Sarova was a very brilliant and industrious student, whereas there was a hump of laziness on Menesh's back.

"Peanuts ... peanuts ... five rupees for a paper bowl," Sarova called out.

Sanooj was a government employee. He could work in one office only for five years. Then he would be transferred to another office in a distant place. His dream of

building a house and settling at a particular place always shunned him. Sanooj and his family shifted from one rented house to another.

Now one week has passed since the demise of Sanooj and his better half. Their house owner's compassion runs out. He demands that the children take their belongings and vacate. He is twisting the knife in their wounds. He takes them to their uncle, who resides five kilometers away. Though they reach their uncle's home on the beach by an auto-rickshaw, a carriage like a tortoise, the uncle is unwilling to take a new burden on his shoulders. "I've three daughters. I'm merely a coolie. What can I do?" he expresses his helplessness.

Luckily, a fisherman named Arayan, the uncle's neighbor, who seems rough-and-ready, is really the salt of the earth. He opens a shelter. "There's a vacant shed beside my hut. Let the children stay there." Its walls and roof are built of thatched coconut palm leaves and bamboo poles.

Sarova and Menesh go to the shed, accompanied by Arayathi, the fisherman's wife. They sit on a mat inside. The children share the fisherman's kitchen. They get boiled rice and curry. Often they are satisfied with the rice porridge.

Night freezes in silence. Sarova overhears the conversation between Arayan and his life partner.

"They're very obedient children. Oh, two years have passed! How swiftly the time runs!" Arayan says.

"Yes. They are growing up. Nothing to worry about Menesh. But what do you think of Sarova? She's a girl. She will grow up like an ash-gourd vine planted in wet sand," Arayathi says, letting fall her niggling worries.

Sarova listens to their talk until she yields to sleep.

A new day rises from the ashes of the last night. Arayan comes near Sarova. His words leap out of his mouth without a veil of formality. "Sarova, you need not waste your time. I hope you will follow my advice."

"What do you want to say, Chacha?" Sarova calls him "Chacha" with respect.

"So many people come to our beach. You can make some earnings by selling peanuts. It is a simple job."

She really wants to earn a crust, so she readily agrees. "Yes, Chacha, I can do that," she says. Her voice vibrates with energy.

Once she visited the beach, hanging on her mom's hand. She played with the waves. Her dad bought them yummy ice-cream and parched peanuts. They enjoyed the sunset.

A long row of casuarina trees stand like sentinels on the shore. There is a park for kids. A few wooden boats rest on the sugar sand. Fishermen spread nets and catch fish in the distance. Sardines and mackerels are the common fishes. Whenever a fishing boat anchors the shore, a small crowd gathers for a noisy auction.

"Peanuts ... peanuts ..." Sarova's withered call haunts her parents in the dungeon of the grave. She walks holding a bamboo basket, which is full of parched peanuts. Her shawl flutters in the salty wind. Menesh follows the wake that her soft bare feet leave behind on the sand. Their hearts beat within the shelter of peanut shells. Sister and brother float on the boundless shore, selling peanuts.

COMPETING CRAYS

As I drive home in a snowstorm the highway tries to shrug me off into a world of competing grays.

Other traffic simpers along slowly in the ruts. Police cars with sizzling blue lights winking gaze at cars stuck in snowdrifts while the drivers wring gloved hands.

You warned me not to travel because behind the clouds a flock of stars wrenched in their sockets and wept colors you hadn't seen before. You claimed that entire conga lines of angels ratcheted from the heights to rescue people trying to drown in snowdrift loathsome as snot. While you chattered about the famous
Eastern mystics the open volume
of Dostoevsky's Diary
flipped of its own accord
to settle on his famous review
of Anna Karenina. I read
a few words while you bubbled
about pogroms in the boondocks
and drowning in barrels of vodka.
You warned me that snowfall conceals
antiquated visions and beliefs
that could riot like mannequins
brought to life by occult forces.

Now clutching the wheel as if wrestling an angel by its halo I know that Dostoevsky and you were right. I should have hidden all night in my office while the snow groped for me in the wilderness. Too late. The police look away as I pass, their stern expressions creased with pity, and the ruts scar so deeply they'll have marked me with convictions that will shame me when I kneel in thaw to confess.

-william doreski



by henry brasater

I passed an uncovered hole in the ground next to Aunt Polly Kellogg's grave. Holes in cemeteries big enough for a fancy casket or local-made box was scary. I always thought: What if I look down into a freshly dug grave and there's a body in there, waitin' to be placed in its eternal container? Mercy, that's what sometimes happened for a day or two in our village if a casket hadn't come in on time from St. Louis or the local wainwright was over-busy to finish a box.

So, I didn't look down into that hole; I felt compelled t'do so, but I didn't. No, sir! Aunt Polly Kellogg's grave was just about smack-dab in the middle of the cemetery and she was one of the first villagers to be buried there. When it came time for a headstone, no one knew her full and true maiden name or when she was born or where. Her husband, Sam, didn't remember, either. Some of us figured maybe he never knew. All anyone remembered about Aunt Polly for sure was that we saw her at various shindigs, includin' the day she was the one and only judge for 'ole Abe Lincoln an' Alex Dunbar's race 'roun' the courthouse square. During her lifetime, she seemed t' know ever'body and ever'thing fer miles around on the prairie. So, when the wainwright got his limestone cut, he just put on it: "Aunt Polly Kellogg ... wife of Sam Kellogg." And that was that. Except ...

All my life I heard: "... You behave 'er Aunt Polly Kellogg'll get ye!" That thought stayed with me even when I was growed. I had things t'do and I didn't wanna go to m'maker 'till I got'm done! Now, if anybody was t'ask me what all them things was that I wanted t'get done, well, I wouldn't be able t'rightly say. I just knew that being a youngen er a young an' unmarried man weren't no time in life t'die. When someone I knowed died an' they was my age, I thought it was awful an' I wondered what God was up to. They were too young to have Aunt Polly come an' git'em; usually it was in the middle of the night when all the rest of us was asleep an' when we got out of bed



at the light of day their demise is the first thing that we heard about one way or tother as we went about doin' the things that we had to do in an'roun' the village.

I had a mess of plowin' to do right now. No question 'bout that. But here I was fer some reason in the cemetery an' tryin' t'put faces with names I seen on tombstones.

Well, pretty soon I wound up back at Aunt Polly's grave and the open hole beside it. Agin, an' with considerable effort, I did not look into that open hole. I just stared at Aunt Polly's headstone.

There was a rustlin' at my side. I turned. A man stood aside me.

"Did you know him?" I asked. I still avoided looking down into the open grave.

"Yes, we fished together some," he replied.

I forced my eyes away from the open hole and looked at the slab of sandstone that would be placed on top of the grave after it had been filled in.

"I can't make out the writin' on the slab," I said to the man.

"Makes no difference. It changes ever'time," the voice said. An' then: ". . . This one left his only worldly possessions: a mule and a dog."

I have a mule and a dog, I thought.

My eyes hurt as I looked across the cemetery and into the sun where leaves were falling from a giant oak tree, and then I looked back into the dusky-shadows aroun' me.

I turned to the man but now there was a stooped and shaking old woman in his place. An' I knew who she was.

Aunt Polly Kellogg gave me a toothless grin.

"I have a mule an'a dog," I said to her.

She nodded. "Yes, you used t'have a mule an'a dog."

It was then that I looked down into the open grave.

There I laid. Stretched out. Eyes closed. Wearin'a black suit and muslin shirt, both looking new. Someone had bought it for me, with a black string tie, t'boot!

Peaceful lookin', I thought. Restful like.

I felt good, stretched out that way. I felt like I did not have a care in the whole world. Until someone put the lid on my coffin and I heard shufflin' of feet down aroun' the box an' they was poundin' nails about the lid edges—I just wasn't sure I liked that. I was about to tell them so—that I wanted to get up now an' that all the funnin' had gone on long enough. It was gettin' hard fer me to breathe good air. An' it was too dark to my likin'.

Then I felt something hard against the small of my back. Strugglin' a might to turn myself over, I grabbed hold of what felt like a doorknob on the bottom of my coffin. I turned it an' stepped out sort of unsteady into the cemetery.

Standing beside me again was Aunt Polly.

She cackled as we both looked down at some of the box that was still showin' now because it was being covered in the grave. The box that was supposed to be holdin' my body.

She looked up and pointed her finger at me.

"You're assigned to hell, boy!" she told me.

Another bout of cacklin' interrupted her talkin'.

"Yer hell," Aunt Polly continued, "is to be buried over an' over again so many

times that you'n'I couldn't possibly count how many. For an eternity—however long that is!"

Then she pointed down to the hole that was almost filled up.

"You will be covered in that box unceasingly. An' you will turn over in its dark confinement an' twist the doorknob an' walk out to stand here beside your covered grave. An' then, me buckee, it'll start all over agin!"

Her cackling hurt my ears as I lay myself down oncet more in the box an' the lid was put over me by unseen hands an' again I was immersed in forever darkness. But I couldn't rest; something poked into my back. I turned over—with not a little difficulty—tryin' the doorknob with immediate coolness of fresh air brushing my brow. Light of the livin' nearly blinded me as I looked at the bare clay covered grave that this time had a dusting of early winter snow on it. No one had taken away the wilted flowers. I thought that was too bad. Sad, even.

I knowed I was in that box in that grave.

An' then, I was on my back agin in tight confinement an' strugglin' to turn myself over—realizin' for the first time the difficulty of anybody turnin' over in their grave an' that's why folks said it so much when things weren't goin' right, I reckoned ...

Why is this happening to me?

From far, far away I could barely hear the old crone's voice: "... 'cause you didn't pay 'tention to yer elders an' watch out fer Aunt Polly!"

While her cackling was fading to nothingness, I struggled a little while making my way to a standing position again beside my grave.

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TWO KINDS OF ANIMAL

by lee pletzers

It was cold. Ty wanted to move faster but his little eight-year-old sister had trouble keeping up. Behind them the campsite burned. Now they were lost. But it was up to him to get his sister out of these suffocating woods.

His fear translated into anger as his sister lagged. He didn't want to sound like a condemning seventeen-year-old arsehole toward her, but it was hard to calm down when he had just seen his mother on fire, her face bubbling in blisters, her hair singed to the scalp. His father had an axe in his back and he had burned first—his clothes little more than a memory and his skin black and cracked open.

Ty was on the lookout for the naked madman he'd seen walking away from their car with a petrol can, splashing gas everywhere. Weaving between trees and thick foliage, Ty tried to keep to a northern direction. His phone didn't get reception out here so he was guessing north and he knew nothing about navigating by the stars.

He kept this information to himself. His sister, Jodie, was upset enough. She gripped his hand tight. He was glad because he didn't want to let go either.

The campsite was a small dot of fire behind them. He didn't know how fast he had been moving or how far they had gone but it felt safer now to slow down. It was hard to see anything but the burning campsite. On a good point, it meant they were hard to see as well.

"Ty, I gotta rest."

"Just a little ways farther."

"Please, Ty."

"Fine." He stopped walking and looked for somewhere to sit down. "Over there, see it?"

It was a fallen tree. It looked like lightning had struck it down. A lot of trees looked lightning scarred.

Jodie released his hand and jumped on the nearest trunk. "Do you think mum and dad are following us?"

"Of course," he lied. He took a seat next to her, hoping no spiders dropped on his head.

A twig broke somewhere off to the left of him. Ty scanned the area as best he could but he didn't see anything. Heaps of night creatures in the woods, he reminded himself. Still, he felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise. He had read enough science journals to know that was the body's reaction to danger—automatic, lizard reaction.

"We have to go," he whispered.

"Five minutes, please."

Ty stood and looked around. The hairs on his arms rose. "No, Jodie, we have to go." He grabbed her arm.

She struggled against his grip. "No, I want to rest more. I'm tired. I want to wait for mummy and daddy."

"They're dead," he spat. "Don't you get it? We're all alone."

Jodie sobbed. Big, thick tears poured down her face. "I don't wanna go."

"We don't have a-"

"Lookie what we have here." A naked man stepped past a cluster of trees. In a mocking tone, he said, "What's this mean man saying to you, honey?" He stepped toward the fallen tree. Ty stepped in front of him, blocking his path. "Better step out of my way, boy."

Ty shook his head. "That's my sister."

"And I burned a campsite for her."

"Ty?" Jodie whimpered.

"Makes her mine."

"Jodie, run."

The man tried to push past Ty but failed. He jumped over the trunk to the other side. Ty ran after his sister. A dagger hit the tree next to him. He turned to see the man climb over the fallen trunk with another axe. He had a supply hidden down there.

Ty picked up the dagger. He heard his sister, not far ahead of him, yelling for help. Suddenly the night critters fell silent; he heard the breeze rustling tree leaves. He ran into a small clearing. Only grass and daisies grew here. Not far away he heard the flowing sound of a river. When he found his sister, they could follow it downstream to safety.

He found his sister lying on the ground sobbing in the crook of her arm.

"Hey," he said in a soft voice as not to startle her, "I've found a way home."

She looked up at him. "True?"

"Yeah." He held out his hand. "But we got to hurry."

"Okay."

He helped her to her feet. "I hear a river; can you?"

"This way," she said, pulling him to the right. Jodie started running and he kept pace with her, allowing his sister to take the lead. Ty kept the dagger in his left hand and an eye out for the naked man.

The sound of the river grew loud. They reached a small grouping of rocks, clambered over and saw a large river. The water was black in the night.

"I give you the river," Jodie said.

Someone started clapping. About fifty feet away the naked man sat on a rock. He stopped clapping and stood up.

Ty pushed Jodie behind him. He held the dagger out in front of him.

"I believe that's mine," the naked man said.

"Come any closer and I'll give it to you." His words sounded braver than he felt but his nerves skated on razor blades and his heart was a jack-hammer against his chest, as if the organ were trying to escape.

A splattering sound came from the river.

The naked man laughed.

A black animal rose out of the river; water poured off its thick black coat. The biggest and meanest looking wolf padded out of the water without a care in the world. It looked like something straight out of a horror movie.

Ty took an involuntary step backward, accidentally knocking Jodie to the ground.

The creature moved in fast. Its snout sniffed Jodie as she scrambled trying to get away from it.

"Hey!" the naked man cried out. "The girl's mine. Remember our arrangement?"

The creature stopped. It looked at the man and then at Jodie. Without a warning, it lunged, changing direction in mid-air. Its jaws opened and clamped on Ty's shoulder, biting deep. He cried out. The pain was more than he could handle, and the dagger suddenly felt too heavy to hold. It slipped from his hand.

The weight of the animal held him to the ground.

There was a tingling sensation behind the pain. The beast's saliva mixed with his blood as the wolf bit deeper.

Jodie screamed.

Ty was afraid of losing consciousness as he struggled against the beast. He turned his head as much as he could toward Jodie's scream and stretched his hand for the dagger. His fingers couldn't reach.

His sister understood and crawled over.

Ty covered the beast's eyes with his right hand and dug in his fingers. The beast released him, howling. Its claws swept left and right. Each strike sliced flesh from Ty's face and chest.

Struggling against the pain, trying to block the searing agony, he held out his hand and Jodie handed him the dagger.

Ty felt no fear. His heart rate was normal. He knew this was his only shot. He clasped the dagger in both hands and slammed it into the creature's exposed chest, hoping he had driven the blade into the heart.

The creature loosed an agonized cry and rose up on its hind legs. Its front legs rose skyward and morphed into human arms. The creature dropped to the ground.

Ty was up as fast as possible. The naked man broke into a run. There was no way Ty could let that bastard get away. Through a phenomenal surge of energy he caught and tackled the naked man to the ground. He drove fist after fist into the man's face before picking up a heavy rock and driving it down repeatedly until the forehead caved in.

Jodie stood next to the river, staring at her brother who had saved her.

Ty dropped next to the dead naked man. His breathing was rapid and he felt his heart struggling to keep up. He rolled onto his back.

Jodie ran to him, tears flooding her face. "Ty, are you all right? Can you get up?"

"Follow the river," he told her. He reached up and stroked her face. Blackness pushed at the edge of Ty's vision. His breathing slowed and his energy ebbed into the ground. Unable to hold his hand up, he let it drop to the side. It was a struggle to keep his eyes open; he let them shut.

Silence reigned. In the darkness, behind his eyes, he heard creatures roar and saw flashes of teeth and claws. He heard an old man muttering an ancient language. He witnessed flashes of light in red, yellow, and orange.

A beautiful Indian woman with long, braided, brown hair stepped in front of him. She leaned forward and he felt her moist lips against his. Her lips gently pried his open and she blew sweet breath down his throat.

Done, she stepped back and the darkness parted to reveal a host of people, more than he could count—of various races all in one group. He understood. They were his new brothers and sisters. He could trust only them.

Silence reigned again.

Darkness filled his vision.

All was still.

Then a high shriek pierced the silence and the darkness.

Agony ripped his lungs. His back arched as he took a painful breath and opened his eyes.

Now it was daylight. A helicopter hovered above and he saw a man in a rescue suit slide down a rope with a gurney-style cage in tow. The rescuer hit the ground in a practiced landing and rushed over to Ty.

"Sir, lie still."

"Okay."

"Where are you injured? Your sister said you were attached by a bear or something."

Ty sat up. He felt fine—hungry but fine. He looked at the two dead men. "We were attacked by them—not an animal."

He heard the naked man suck in a ragged breath. He smelled the blood and sensed the agony of the naked man as it wafted off him in waves of stench.

Ty hadn't done as much damage as he had hoped. Still, he could rectify that at the next full moon.

"The police will be here soon." The rescuer radioed to the helicopter. "Can you walk, sir?"

"I don't know."

The rescuer smiled. "Let's use the stretcher just in case."

As Ty was lifted into the helicopter he saw the clearing he entered last night. It was a near perfect circle. As the helicopter rose higher, a pattern started to emerge. The helicopter banked hard to the left.

He sensed he would be back here soon.

Looking for food.

As he closed his eyes, a wolf howled in his head.

Far Too Precious

by I.a. james

The house looked like any other rancher from the sixties—white stucco siding, tidy blue shutters, a driveway lined with pale pink roses and cedar shrubs.

Anna studied its sterile beauty as she drove up to the garage and parked her Volkswagen outside the roll up door. Every flowerpot placed just so; not a single dandelion marred the lawn. Walkways edged, rosebushes pruned, ruler-straight hedges ... perfect.

It was her parent's house, but they had died years ago and over time she'd made it her own, yet she kept the outside the same, a photo of what was—a mask built with guilt and shame.

The door of the Bug creaked as she stepped out on the speckled pavement. A putrid breath like garbage too long in the sun made her nose wrinkle before a gust of wind blew the smell and the memory of it away.

She rubbed her arms, annoyed by the sudden goose bumps, and walked to the front of the car.

The canvas bag was awkward but she was still a strong woman and it only took three tries to manoeuvre it over the lip of the trunk. Worry pinched her face when it slipped from her grasp and landed on the ground with a thud.

She thought about opening it there in the driveway, afraid she had broken the contents, but she resisted the urge, eager to get inside and away from the prying eyes of nosey Mrs. Campbell who often spied on her through a knothole in the fence.

Anna closed the trunk and dragged the bag to the porch stairs. At the top, she hurried past a blue front door that hadn't been opened in years.

Around back she rifled through her keys, selecting the three she needed. A single woman could never be too careful, even in the suburbs. She cringed at the thought of all those junkies and their like just itching to break in and steal her precious belongings.

She snorted at the pun. They could scratch themselves raw for all she cared. No one touched her things.

The door opened into welcoming darkness.

Anna pushed her shoulder against the wood to gain a few more inches of width and stopped. There was that stench again.

Damn Mrs. Campbell and her trash can. The woman did not know how to keep house.

The walls of the rear hallway were papered in a floral print—pale green with purple lilacs. One day she would expose them from behind the stacks of yellowed newspapers and magazines, but for now she relaxed in the womb-like security twenty years of collected periodicals provided.

Anna engaged the locks, clicked on the flashlight she kept by the door and illuminated a twisted path. There was a trick to it only for her—a security system of sorts. To the right at this corner, around the broken chair, there was a worn path only she could see. With practiced ease she avoided the snags and avalanche traps as she slid her burden through.

The electricity was long gone but it was better that way, after all. No one came to check her meter or telephone lines. Besides, there was plenty of free light outside. She saw no point in spending money on something she couldn't hold in her hands.

When the hallway became the kitchen, Anna stopped to catch her breath.

Beneath the piles of take-out containers and open cans was a stove; a sink was buried under towers of dishes. An oak table where she once sat under the scrutiny of her parents' stern glares was a mound in the middle of the room.

In those days, dinner was every evening at 6:15 precisely, every pleat on her dress starched crisp; her hair pulled back so tight in a braid her scalp moaned.

Shining black and white tiles once checkered the floor, but Anna always hated them. They reminded her of games Daddy forbad her to play.

Don't get dirty. Don't touch anything. Don't speak. Don't fidget and never cry; just sit still and be the perfect daughter.

Anna always obeyed—except that one time, but the circus was set up right near their house. It was the music, she remembered, carried on a wind steeped in sweet caramel corn that pulled her toward the glittering lights like Dorothy to the Emerald City. And like Dorothy she was changed forever when she sinned and ran away.

She was filthy when they found her but it was worth the punishment—Daddy burned every toy she owned.

The tiles were gone now, replaced by years of flattened cartons and wrappers—a colourful mosaic of happy children enjoying Oreos, Wheaties, and Pop Tarts.

As Anna panned the flashlight across their faces, small scurrying movements caught her eye. Fairies, she thought, and felt relief at that explanation. Daddy would never abide bugs in his house.

On through the kitchen, past a bathroom once pristine, now filled with half empty bottles of shampoo. Here her mother scrubbed her clean of imperfections until the bathwater turned pink with her blood.

The canvas bag snagged twice before she made it to the living room. At the arched entrance she paused to massage sore arms and gaze with loving eyes at the mountains

of sealed boxes: the Vitamix Pro, a George Foreman grill—she did miss the Shopping Channel—sprinkler flowers that danced, kitchen gadgets galore, and of course, a gigantic collection of games and toys.

The mildew on the boxes didn't bother her. One day she would play with them all.

Underneath her new things, those of her old life slumbered, each curio and piece of furniture in its place. Plastic still covered the sofa, although she couldn't see it anymore. Framed photos of stark faces peeked out from behind the stacks and Anna studied them with a frown, confused for a moment as to why they tilted this way and that. She was struck by a need to straighten them until she saw the reason for their disarray—silken strands joined one to another and formed bridges the fairies made.

Anna shivered and turned away.

She didn't look in her room as she struggled past. The colourful heaps of clothes around the bed might distract her. Most still bore tags but the feel of new fabric soothed her. A girl could never collect too many pretty things to wear.

At the end of the hall she climbed down to a clear spot of wood floor. The bag slid down the hill behind her.

She stared at the ribbon of light under the door as rivulets of sweat iced her skin with sudden trepidation.

The chill melted under her ire.

It was always the same when she faced this door—the guilt, the shame, the phantom snap of the leather belt—but all that was long gone. She had spent years gutting every painful inch of memory from this room, and what was once her parent's inner sanctum now held her most priceless possessions.

The irony amused her.

She lifted the crossbar and fit a key in the padlock. The chain fell like an angry spirit.

Something moved beyond the door but she ignored the sound, turned the knob and hauled the bag inside.

LED candles illuminated the darkness and cast starlight across the big-top walls. Anna was proud of her idea to hang the striped tent fabric around the room. It covered the fingernail scratches in the drywall.

In a corner sat a life-sized stuffed bear in a blue miniskirt she had purchased at Walmart. In another corner was an old ring toss game and a plain wooden chair.

Colourful posters promised Wolfgang the Dog Boy and fortunes by Madame Zelda while the acrobatic wonders of the Swinging Tuninis would surely astound one and all.

Anna gazed at her creation, transported as always by wind-borne music played just for her. She drew a deep breath of popcorn and cotton candy and something else—Oh, she could kill Mrs. Campbell.

An invisible crowd cheered and clapped, while lions and gorillas roared until a groan jerked her attention to the floor. The bag slid much easier on the spotless hardwood and she pulled it quickly across the room.

She had found the memorabilia at an estate sale—the posters, the animals, all the props. The deceased had owned a circus, she had been told.

The monkey cages were ornate cast iron and a nightmare to get inside this room.

Anna propped the bag in a cage, untied the rope and backed out. After locking the door, she pulled the lion trainer's chair from the corner and sat down and waited.

The sack moved. First it rolled one way and then the other. Something clawed from inside, and Anna gasped with delight when she could make out two palms pressing against the canvas. A shock of curly, rainbow hair pushed through the opening at the top.

The face that followed was bright white in contrast to the colored hair. Black circles highlighted unfocused, round eyes that stared at her in confusion. Its nose was gone. Good thing she had spares. The oversized lips had smeared into a lopsided, bloody grin.

This one was small—a midget some would say—and she worried she might have slipped him too much Rohypnol at the park, but her fears eased when he struggled out of the bag and huddled in one corner of the cage.

She watched and waited, coiled tight with need before she stood with a growl and strode across the room. Maybe he was hungry.

She stopped before a second cage and stared at the pile inside. When it didn't move, she pulled the elephant prod from a hook on the wall.

The mound jerked when she poked it, then mouned and turned toward her. Anna ignored the smell of burnt hair.

The white paint on its face fell away in flakes to expose sallow skin stretched across hollow cheekbones. Its remaining teeth shone yellow like the eyes that rolled toward her.

"Kill me," it whispered, but she shook her head.

"You're far too precious still," she said.

This one was jolly and round when she saw his picture in the paper, on sale for birthday parties and events. It was easy enough to phone and set up an appointment. Not a real circus clown but funny until he broke. Clowns never lasted long, it seemed.

Anna bent down and picked up a tin plate from the floor. Fluffy cotton candy, now a hard lump of sugar, coated the handful of popcorn into a crystallized pink ball and she recoiled when tiny shapes took flight or skittered away into the shadows.

Fairies, she reassured herself—just fairies.

She carried the offering across the room and set it down in front of the bars. Shining eyes met hers and anticipation surged within her.

It was the clown that had changed her life the night she ran away to the circus. From her front row seat she'd watched it, unsure of its purpose or even what it was. Illogical, unpredictable—it exuded disorder.

She knew Daddy would hate it.

The clown had come right to her and put its face so close to hers that she saw the pores of its white face. It lifted her small hand, cupped it around its red foam nose and squeezed.

Young Anna had felt a pressure in the pit of her stomach that exploded up her throat into the air. The alien sound pulled with it joy so deeply buried she hadn't known it existed; it left her drunk on euphoric emotion.

Through the dismal years that followed, she craved that feeling like a drug, through the beatings and deprivations that night at the circus sustained her. She never felt that rush again and over time memory faded to dream and she was left with a gaping hole of longing. She tried everything to fill that void but nothing worked. Then one day she saw Jingles in the mall and remembered.

She brought him home that very night.

He was her first.

Anna sat down on the chair and set the elephant prod across her knees. She nudged the plate closer with her foot.

An uncomprehending gaze lifted from the plate and slid past her to the bony shapes in clown suits displayed along one wall: Jingles, Bozo, Fuzzy, and the others—her entire collection. Each of them was too precious to ever throw away.

She watched the clown as awareness dawned on its face.

"Eat," she said to the funny face, "then you better make me laugh."





"THORNCROFT"

The place where we want to be always and it's just you and me. That place where hearts stop beating, then the stars start beseeching. We won't want to stop for we're dying. We're just wasting and waiting—craving the drops of blood and bright, praying for the day that ends the strife.

So let the fire engulf the forest, killing the scionic seed.
Freeing ghosts whom will persistently haunt, as we grow much older and less wiser, so much older and so much like a miser.
We want to live around all this, fire jumps and spreads to us.
Take me away from the dead and decaying, take me to some place of solace, so that I may keep from fraying.
A place where we can dream of nothing, the place where we want to be always and it's just you and me.
That place where hearts stop beating—where the stars stop shining.

—grim de evil

MATCHSTICK CARAVAN

by paul tristram



Within his single ground floor cell of HMP The Verne, sat Thomas VR6582. He was nearly two-thirds through an eight stretch for manslaughter; at age nineteen he had shot his cheating girlfriend's brother in the chest with a shotgun he had stolen from a farmhouse up in Tonmawr during a burglary a few months previous. He was now an orderly and his time was pretty easy; his door was unlocked throughout the day so he could run toast and tea errands for The Screws.

It was a cold Friday night in late November as he sat at his little table squinting in perfect concentration through the yellowy prison light at the matchstick he held a few inches from his focused face, whilst, with the other hand, he carefully shaved minute slivers off one of the four corners of the wood with a thin blade, snapped out of an orange plastic Bic razor.

This is what made him the craftsman, lots of people glued matchsticks to cardboard and tobacco tins, but he carved and shaped them first, then, when placed side by side in a row, would make a flowing pattern within his carefully constructed structure. He was an innovator. His finished pieces were talked about throughout the entire British prison system. He had won prizes for them and each time a piece was completed Officer Davies always came to take photographs of it at varying angles upon a sheet of dark green felt; he was said to be simply the best match-sticker, ever.

He was presently busy making a Gypsy Caravan for his aunty Betty. This was only his sixth piece because he took so long on the carving, adding of burn blemishes and general preparation of each individual stick. When he had finished, he would often take several months off sometimes before beginning a new project.

He had decided that it was his aunty Betty's turn this time because he had given his aunty Nelly the last one, and they had both been so very nice to him when he was a young boy; it felt good to give something positive back to them now as an adult. He was hoping to have it ready for her by her next birthday.

A lot of people would find this work monotonous and boring, but not Thomas VR6582.

He had gotten into an argument with that gobby cockney Stylo, who was in on a 'Shit & Shave' (a small prison sentence of months only) in Association earlier this evening over cake. And that is not prison slang for something else; it was actual cake. He chuckled to himself bitterly, 'Who on the outside would believe that there were men willing to cut each other up over cake in prison?' (Well, it's the principle of it, innit son!)

Anyways, no damage was done; it had only come to pushes and shoves, luckily, but he had remained wound-up about it all until he had got back to his cell, smoked a couple of roll-ups, and started his carving.

Some men went back to their cells and beat up their mattresses or did hundreds of sit-ups or push-ups, but not Thomas VC6582. It was not his physical body that he needed to slake and calm down; it was his racing mind that he needed to quiet and this is how he did it. A little bag containing matchsticks, wood glue, sewing needles, and a broken bit of razor which altogether cost a measly couple of pounds actually did literally stop him from going insane, becoming destructive or killing anyone else, including himself, again.

CIARACIER ASSASSINATION

by peter lingard

My wife disappeared on August 28th, 1998. Identifying the date gives the incident the gravitas it deserves. She, Di, had been carping about what she considered were my faults for some time, so her disappearance had not come as a surprise.

She'd dressed in Princess Diana look-alike clothes and sported Princess Diana hairstyles for years. It therefore followed that the woman should disappear on the anniversary of the day her princess dumped the husband, Prince Chuck. One of the reasons she married me was because my name is Charles. She liked the idea of us being near-namesakes with the royal couple.

If there were a way to mimic the popular princess, my Di would find it. We often had afternoon tea at home on Sundays. It was always an elaborate affair—home-made scones, thick fresh cream, and English strawberry jam. Di wore copies of dresses seen in glossy magazines that featured British royalty. I wore my work suit ... well, I did at first when we were still young and in love. In those days, I could convince her to save some of the cream and jam for later. Those days gone, Di exchanged sexiness for a regal pose when being mother. She always said she liked fashion but she never blazed a trail and so her joy was whittled down to being a Di groupie. Di said this and Di did that and I tuned out. She liked to see me dressed for work and wanted me to wear the suit and tie at night, and of course, on Sundays at four.

I humoured her for a while, enjoying the sex granted because of my attire. At least she didn't ask me to dress up as Tom Cruise in a fireman's outfit. But the game eventually lost its appeal and I gave her an occasional half-hour of Mr. Businessman after I got home from work. One positive thing about Chuck, she used to say, was that he always scrubbed up well. She failed to understand why some of us are not similarly inclined.

Of course, if she's looking for a man on some other plain, having such special demands will severely cut the field. No tradies need apply, nor truck drivers, nor the rest. She might make an exception for someone in uniform—firemen, military, or cops only. No doormen, please. She likes someone to earn good money, so uniforms might be out unless there are thirty-year-old fire chiefs, admirals, generals, or commissioners of police going begging. Ah well, she'll have to make do somehow. She'll know coming back isn't an option.

I went to see my buddy, Langley, to tell him about Diane's disappearance. I was shocked to find that he had left his wife, Alice. I thought it an amazing coincidence but she told me to get a grip. She said she was sure they'd gone off together, but as Langley is a plumber, I voiced my doubts. "You know she only goes for guys in suits," I said.

"You're forgetting, Charlie, that Langley liked to dress up in a suit and tie to go to the movies or down to the pub. It used to take him longer to get ready to go out than it did me. As far as he was concerned, the sixties never happened." She snorted derisively. "You know, he even wore a suit and tie to watch the Grand Final last year. Said if it was good enough for Eddie McGuire, it was good enough for him."

Alice stared at me with a smile slowly growing on her face. "They deserve each other," she said, and we both burst into laughter. "Let's drink some of Langley's precious wine to celebrate."

Langley fancied himself as a wine connoisseur and had quite a collection of reds. When we were at the pub he'd drive barmaids nuts, telling them what inferior quaffs they served.

"He liked to look at his bottles all lined up," said Alice. "Whenever I suggested we open one he'd get all huffy on me. I wish he could see me chug-a-lug the stuff tonight." She raised her glass. "Here's to you, Langley, you miserable bastard. Don't you ever come back! You hear?"

We shifted two bottles of some tasty plonk and consoled each other in bed. "This bed's under new management," Alice shouted, presumably to Langley.

We broke for a snack.

"That went well," said Alice. "I could do with that on a regular basis. What do you think? I'll even be Princess Di on occasion, if you like."

"Yeah, it was great, but there'll be no need for role-playing—thanks." She laughed. "I didn't think so. You ready to resume?"

"You like Madonna?" she asked one night.

"She's all right, I suppose. I don't know much about her, really."

"I love her. I have all her recordings. Want me to be like a virgin for you?"

"Nope. Virgins are a pain in the arse. I like experienced women. Thanks all the same."

"Oh, come on, Charlie. Be a sport."

"Look, I put up with Di's Princess Diana crap for all those years so I can't say I fancy a switch to Madonna."

"Well, if you insist, but I'll bring it up again when you're in a more receptive mood."

I thought if I stopped going to Alice's house she would realize my ardour had cooled a tad. Instead, she started coming to mine. Some evenings, after I got home from work, she would knock on my door and I'd find her with a bottle of Langley's finest and a cooked dinner. Other nights she brought the raw ingredients, plus a tasty red, and cooked in my kitchen. It became obvious she had no intention of changing her life as long as I was around. She tried to move my lounge furniture, saying it needed to be facing the dawn—or something. I said it was good as it was, facing the telly. Apparently, I needed feng shui in the bedroom. I was disappointed when I found out what it was, and Alice was less than enamoured by my name for it.

She started hinting, feeling the waters regarding her having strong feelings for me. "I always used to give you the once over in case something ... yeah. Anyhow, since we've got to know each other properly, I'm really happy. You're my new life, Charlie."

Her happiness caused her to flit around the house singing "Like a Virgin" in a falsetto voice. I'd jumped into the fire.

One day, I cautiously asked, "Are you sure about this? Neither of us has looked at the big wide world to see what's on offer. There might be someone out there who loves Madonna as much as you do. It could be virgin territory, so to speak."

"I see no reason to look at the big wide world, Charlie. You need to allow yourself to enjoy what we have here. I know it's difficult for you to verbalise your feelings for me and I understand. You should be happy knowing you're everything I want."

Of course I am. Could I learn to love Madonna? It's not as if I could sell up and move away and there certainly isn't room for another body under the rose bushes. Oh, delirium!



In your Fish Costume

You're in your fish costume today, complete with fish head and tail. Scales of aluminum foil. Plastic fins. Our colleagues nod and smile as you wriggle into the seminar room and seat

your fish-self at the table. The meeting proceeds. I object to this and that, as I always do. The chair sighs and scribbles a note. If I had a shark costume I would devour you so quickly

the sea would barely ripple. If I had a killer whale costume I would devour everyone seated at the table regardless of what sort of costume they sport. You've worn your fish costume

to publicize a lecture by the author of a book on the decline of the fisheries. That rationale doesn't move me the way the fluorescent room light flashing on your scales moves me.

No one finds your costume absurd because our private oddities exceed us with shameless colors we neither flaunt nor conceal. If you removed your fish head you'd reveal a reddish hairdo

a shark could mistake for algae. If you peeled back your scales the strict form of your body would rebuke my shark-shaped appetite, leaving no blood on the water but accessorizing with a smile.

-william doreski

Dear Mr. McCarnaugh

by r.d. walton

Dear Mr. McCarnaugh:

I was a grade six student in your class of 1994/1995 at St. Loyola Elementary School. I'm writing this letter, because I hear some people write letters to thank the influential people from their past. I think it's important for teachers to know the impact they've had on their students and I think sometimes teachers need to be reminded of how important they are to the students they teach. I hope I can help you understand the impact you had on me.

First, I would like to thank you for teaching me why Robert Palmer is the best musician in human history. Of course, that was embedded in a class conversation about how I was tone-deaf and immature for promoting Kenny Loggins and the *Top Gun* soundtrack. You taught me that musical preference is objective and entire identities can be defined by that preference. You were very adamant about this "fact" at the time. Your dedication to art is inspiring, although I know you haven't touched a Robert Palmer album in several years. Maybe Robert Palmer was part of what I call your Purple Period, a time of blue, green, and purple nylon tracksuits—the kind that swish when you walk so everyone looks at you. Those track suits of yours were like the Harley Davidsons of clothes.

Second, I would like to thank you for teaching me about growing up. You taught me that twelve year olds are "young adults" and need to be treated as mature, responsible, and emotionally developed people who can withstand and learn from public humiliation. I'm sure that's why you made us wear those gym shorts—the ones that guaranteed we'd hang brain every time you made us lunge or squat or walk. The lesson, I guess, was to be comfortable with our bodies, even in front of laughing girls. It worked. Because of these classes, I'm very comfortable with my body and with exposing parts of my body in public. (That's a little joke I just had with myself.)

I'm also writing this letter to tell you—for what it's worth at this time in your life and whether or not you need to hear it—I forgive you. I forgive your violation of my boundaries. I forgive your successful attempts to shame and humiliate me. I forgive you for using me as entertainment and a teaching tool for the rest of my class. After many years, I'm ready to forgive you, and I'm ready to move on with my life.

You'll note that in this letter I'm using many contractions. You tried to teach me that contractions are a waste of time since writers spend a keystroke placing the apostrophe anyway. You felt strongly about this, I remember, and I know I lost marks on account of your opinion. You called me "stupid" to the class when I suggested that—in some contexts—contractions sound better than their full forms. I forgive you for punishing me for accepting what was approved of by most people, including other teachers.

I forgive you for that time you showed the class how I move "like a girl" and "giggle like a girl." You made me stand in the class doorway where the whole class could see me and you wouldn't let me sit down until I decided I could act like a "young man." There was also that time—and I forgive you for this as well—that Kristie C. shouted across the room and you pretended you thought it was me to really help the class understand I had the voice of a girl. There was that one time I scored a goal in European handball, but you were "disappointed" in me because I hadn't shared. Evan D. never shared the ball, either, but I guess it was okay because he was a hockey star. Your disappointment stuck with me for a long time, but I know now that you weren't invested enough in me to truly feel disappointed when I didn't meet your expectations. By now, if you remember me, you might remember that you did far worse than the things I've listed, but I won't mention those actions here because this letter is about forgiveness.

You didn't molest me, if that's what you think I'm implying. You didn't violate me physically, but you did violate my emotional boundaries by inspiring shame, humiliation, guilt, and a deep sense of dread at being loathsome to other people.

I forgive you for teaching me that I don't deserve to be excited about life. I forgive you for cutting me off from my internal resources and consistently demonstrating to both me and the class that I'm a social and emotional cripple with no dignity or hope for a happy and independent life. I would like you to understand that this forgiveness does not come easy to me. The effects of your trespasses lasted more than half my life.

Not only did I have to make a difficult internal move to forgive you, I also had to make the external move to find you after all these years, which wasn't easy. You're one of those teachers who wanted to be excluded from the directories, I guess.

By the way, I feel seriously sorry. I felt genuine sadness when your marriage ended two years ago today. Yes, I'd already found you back then. I wish the circumstances had been different—we all had our regrets. Then after your divorce two years ago, you rented a new house and I had to find you. Again! So getting this letter to you has taken me some effort, and I hope you appreciate the lengths I've gone to offer you my forgiveness. I've even tried to see how much you've changed; I figured seeing a personal transformation would help me to forgive you, but you still rock those nylon tracksuits. Maybe that's why your ex-wife was so easily seduced in a grocery store by a young man—a whole twenty-eight years younger! I ... oops. I mean, he didn't wear

tracksuits. That must have been rough for you. And I'm sure there are other ways you've changed, but maybe those changes have been internal and not so obvious. I've given you the benefit of the doubt.

I come to my last reason for writing this letter. I state again with all sincerity—I forgive you. I hold no ill will toward you. Yet, like any other person, I'm entitled to remuneration for my services—in this case, the pleasure and sense of power you felt at my expense. For me, the cost of (non-consensually) providing these services to you was twenty years of insecurity, isolation, and missed opportunities.

You'll note that this letter hasn't been postmarked and wasn't delivered with your regular mail. The letter you're holding is so important that I delivered it by hand. I just had to put it in your mailbox myself. This letter is so important to me that I'm watching you read these lines right now. I'll know when you've finished reading this letter from the silly look of shock on your face. And know this: The moment this letter leaves your hand, or you stand up, or you touch the phone, I will enter your home, and I will take payment for the life you took from me.

See you soon, RDW

PS: Because I know you'll ask—seeking compensation is very different than seeking revenge. Remember, I've already forgiven you. Consider this a fair trade business transaction.

PPS: Now is the time for you to start thinking, because I'm kind enough to offer you a choice and because I'm on my way into your home right now. Do you prefer blades, fire, or blunt force?





A raging calm A calm so heated It screams out silently into the darkness Scaring it with cuts of light

Blades that shone Shown the way out from death Destiny's awaiting and there's nothing but the raging calm at the end Calmly raging, bleeding violence in violet

Designed for the beginning, yet destined to end There is only grievance standing at the edge of a shallow grave That calm rage fully subsides as the blackbirds come out finally from behind Fate is no longer going to hide

Shine brightly going forward Knowing life is fighting for the righting of wrongs So the darkness returns scarred over And light behind never to be burned

-grim de evil

TOUCHING WITHOUT FINGERS

by sam grossman

"I remember when he held us down to get the spirits out," says Elpis, "when they bound us in ropes like liquor and screamed in Latin. I remember when he held us down and kissed our mouth when it was all over, told us that we had done so well, that God loved us now. And God did love us: the smile on his lips said it all, didn't it? Where it twanged a little at the corners, gave him laugh lines, the warmth in whiskey eyes."

"I remember when he pushed the hair from our eyes," says Klotho. "And I think I fell in love with him right then and there. The premature gray at his roots, the sunken eyes, the wariness of his expression. The demons had screamed at us, at me, flooding the very pit of my stomach with something akin with sex, with love, and though it was all a lie, there was still something that burned at the pit of my belly."

"They whispered sweet nothings into my ear," says Elpis.

"They touched me without fingers," says Klotho.

"They told me to follow," says Elpis.

"But I fell in love with someone else, and his collar covered all else, pallid skin and flesh and bone, and his fingertips were warm and sweat-drenched, trembling with adrenaline, and my mind immediately flew into his, or perhaps it was the other way around," says Klotho.

"He was light," says Elpis, "and he kissed my forehead with a mouth full of antisin, smooth as a paintbrush, skin upon pallid skin, and all was well, and all was quiet, sweet. He did whisper in my ear as he untied me, though I do not recall what he said. I am sure it was words of God and nothing more, nothing less." "His name, he reminded me, was Alexander, and I whispered it back to him like a lamb bleats, and everything was silent for naught but a second before he finally left me, finally turned his back on me long enough for me to see everything that was beneath his frock: stringy bones like sinew and no muscles, just a skeleton made of concrete sacrilegious-ness," says Klotho. "It was in this moment that I wanted to simply ruin him."

"I wanted to save him," says Elpis.

"I wanted to save him," says Klotho. "From himself, from the words of God, from the demons he had released from us, from me. From me, the vessel in which the spirits encircle, embrace, stroke my hand, and tell me they will be back soon. He took apart white hairs from our scalp, split them into finite synapses like God's design, and made them into nothing but atoms, matter-less and floating like the sluagh of old, forever wandering the earthly terrains without nerves to tell them that what they are walking upon is ethereal and new, old, new."

"I stood then on shaky limbs that were not my own and he washed his hands in the basin with holy water, mumbling prayers to protect him from what he wanted. I stood on shaky limbs like new trees stand upon their baby trunks. Feel the barky sensation, I whispered to nobody, and my smile nearly split my face as the light from the sun broke through the windows. The beams fragmented the dust in the air and we were breathing those particles into lungs not made for such a thing," says Elpis.

"We were dreary night and he was the day in excess. And I watched him as I stumbled forward, unable to find stability, and this was a concept that seemed to be prevalent within life itself: Nothing is stable. It is just an illusion. The demons whispered coldness into my ear, and I saw diamonds in the sky in the ceiling. I saw their words projected into my vision, taking shape and then melting into Alexander's skin. They were inside of me once more. God was not there," says Klotho.

"Our claw-fingernails prevailed over his flesh," says Elpis, "tearing him into two men, two bodies. He came apart like a loaf of bread succumbs to the knife. He came apart with a scream that nobody heard, not a soul. Souls are immortal. We are immortal. The demons laughed at us through our tears. My tears. I was not in control of my body—no one is in control of their body."

"We are free-willed and senile and we see all through the dark eyes of dark lords," says Klotho.

"He stopped breathing when I gave him the kiss of life," says Elpis. "His lips were chapped and they were perfect, his teeth stained red and yellow with blood and cigarette ash and dear Alexander had secrets of his own, oh yes. His hair matted with sweat, he did not see us when he stopped, did not hear me when I asked him a question. He looked toward his God, our God, my God, and did not see."

"I whispered sweet nothings into his ear," says Klotho.

"I touched him without fingers," says Elpis.

"We told him to follow," says Klotho. "Both of us."

"And he came inside, too," says Elpis.



THE MONSTER OF SILENCE

A monster can make the worst of sounds. It can flare its fangs and let out frightening growls. Maybe it'll flash a blood thirsty glare with a hiss that'll ensnare. I would probably show of its glistening talons and clank them against the wall But the greatest of monster, I've always considered, are the ones without sounds. A questionable monster, sure, but what would happen if everything was silent. You would stay up. your eyes dart, shadows converge into monsters. You search and search, but you can't find a single shred of evidence. You question your very own judgment; your very eyes delude you. Every sound, every thought, everything haunts you. every twitch, Everything is a monster. you laugh knowing why. not to admit. No, you know why you didn't want The monster was alreadv there. inside of vou.

—john edwards

adieu jack

The game is up, they've found me out, I haven't any hope. It won't be long til I, no doubt, am swinging from a rope.

I feel no shame for what I did, for all the blood and guts. What better way of getting rid of worthless whores and sluts?

Regrets...I may have one or two, but tell me, who does not? I'm sorry that I killed so few and let myself get caught.

Perhaps today I most regret I have no place to hide. But I can cheat the hangman yet by act of suicide.

I'll get some stones and strap them on to weigh my body down, then plunge into the Thames at dawn and let the Ripper drown.

Which means that now my story ends, with nothing more to tell, except to say to you, my friends, I'll see you all in Hell.

....Jack

-kevin gallagher

RED

Melita shivered and pulled her coat tighter around herself. The podium was empty and the courtyard was silent, like it was struggling to fill the void left by thousands of people crammed into one space. Red banners adorned the granite blocks, all proudly bearing the swastika—the symbol of the Third Reich.

"Are you ready?"

Melita jumped, then scolded herself. It was just Hans. Tall, leonine, and good-looking, the moonlight gleamed off the badges on his coat. She felt heat rise to her cheeks. She didn't feel so cold anymore.

"Sure," she lied.

The smile he gave her was as thin as a razor blade. "Let's go."

Moving quickly, the shadows covered their activity. She'd never been in this part of town before, never had reason to break curfew. They crept past houses with windows lit from within. Some had doors kicked in, windows smashed, and clothes were strewn across the street. These houses didn't have lights on.

A hand latched onto her arm and Hans whispered in her ear, "Stop."

She stopped. At the end of the street, there was a house with a trim little garden. The windows were dark and a sliver of moonlight fell across the sign on the door. It read: buchhändler.

"A bookseller?" Melita frowned.

"Our target." There was a snap-hiss and flames sprang up in Hans' fingers. A match. Light danced across his fine-boned features, turning his pale hair silver. "Wait here. I'll give you the signal when it's safe."

She nodded and he slinked off. As time passed, she felt herself grow edgier. There was a scraping sound and her heart jackhammered. A door opened and someone exited. A man. Old and stooped, he was dragging something across the ground.

A shadow moved behind him and she saw Hans rise up, a look of loathing on his

by s.a. star

face. She made a sound halfway between a gasp and a scream. There was a thud, a strangled grunt, and silence. She couldn't see either of them. Cursing the near-zero visibility, she edged closer, ready to bolt.

"Come here, Mel."

That was Hans' voice. Relief filled her, but also something else. She walked over, nearly tripped over something, looked down, and saw the elderly bookseller. Limbs sprawled, snowy white hair drenched red, eyes closed but fluttering. A low moan escaped his lips.

Nausea clogged her throat and she staggered back. She looked up and saw Hans frantically gesturing to her. She walked over, almost robotically, and he stuffed something in her hands. A rolled-up newspaper. He tried lighting a match, but his hands were trembling, either from fear or adrenalin. She heard him curse and grab another.

It took him three goes, but eventually he lit the end of the newspaper, tore it out of her hands, and flung it through the window into the bookshop. Fire spread through the old books and creaking wood instantly and she saw the glow and felt the heat like a blast furnace.

"Run!"

It took a moment for her feet to obey, but then she was running and she didn't stop until her breath was ragged and her eyes were stinging. She didn't know if Hans was beside her or not. She didn't much care. All she wanted-needed-to do was get away.

She paused, just for a moment, to catch her breath. She glanced back, saw lights flicking on in houses, heard the warning cries as people realized what had happened. That wasn't what she was really looking at though.

She was looking at the old bookseller's house, now completely ablaze, a beacon in the night. Smoke curled lazily and flames roared up—bright, bright red.

Out, Vile Jelly!

by cathy bryant

It wasn't me; it really wasn't. I'm not like that at all—a shrewish, suspicious wife checking up on her husband. That's one stereotype I've always despised. The problem involved one part of me only, and I've dealt with it now, so everything's just fine.

Yes, okay—I do some stereotypical housewifely things: like the grocery shopping, for instance. It simply makes sense since my hours were cut at work and I have so much more time than Rory.

So there I was in the supermarket, a very ordinary frump gazing at chicken carcasses, when I saw my friend Jasmine pondering veal cutlets. She picked up a pack of two.

"Hi Jazz," I said, "Cooking for two? Hot date?"

She jumped a mile and flushed as red as the tomatoes and wine already in her trolley.

"Oh, Jennifer, hi," she said breezily, and if I hadn't seen her reaction, I'd have thought her quite relaxed. But her calm voice was at odds with her expression, which I can only describe as guilty.

I smiled reassuringly.

"Sorry, Jazz—didn't mean to intrude. It's none of my business and I know these things need privacy in the early days. I just hope you've picked someone good enough for you this time!"

Jazz is one of those beautiful, intelligent women who nevertheless always pick the most appalling men to date —deadbeats, creeps, and slimy-marrieds usually. As always when dating, she looked thoroughly unhappy and I worried about her.

"Fancy coming for a coffee after we've finished here?" I suggested. "You look as if you could do with a good natter and moan."

To my surprise she grabbed me and hugged me as if I were her long-lost sister. I was rather taken aback, but gave her a squeeze and patted her shoulder as comfortingly as I could. I've always liked Jazz, and she was obviously very upset about something.

"Sorry," she said, disentangling, and wiped her face with a couple of tissues. "I don't know where that came from. I really can't come for a coffee now; I have to be somewhere. Another time, Jen, and thanks. Sorry again."

And she was gone, and that was that.

Except for the look she'd given me before she left—as if she felt sorry for me. I couldn't get it out of my head.

But my mind refused to come to conclusions about this, even when taking all Rory's late nights at the office into consideration.

Shortly after I got home the landline rang and it was Rory.

"Hello darling," he said, and I had the pleasure of hearing his wonderful voice sounding so warm and loving. "Just got to work and I can't find my mobile. I think I've left it at home. Can you see it anywhere?"

"No," I said after a quick look round. "I'll have a proper search in a bit though."

"Thanks, love," he said. "By the way, expect me when you see me tonight. I have to work late."

"Will you be in for dinner?"

"I doubt it. I'll probably grab a sandwich somewhere. Or we might be able to thrash things out in a quiet pub or restaurant somewhere. Last quarter's figures need an in-depth analysis and ..."

"Rory?" I broke in. "I'll expect you when I see you. And I love you very, very much."

There was a short pause on the line and then his voice came, heartfelt, romantic, and sincere.

"You're wonderful, Jennifer. So understanding. I love you too."

I smiled to myself, rang off, and went about my various tasks.

I found the phone in the bedroom and couldn't help noticing that he had a message in his inbox.

I'd better read it; it might be important, I lied to myself.

You know already, don't you? So did I, really.

The message was from Jazz.

"I'll think it over. I can't see you tonight, though. I need some time and space."

After which I checked his inbox and sent message folders and reconstructed the whole conversation, which had gone like this:

J: I can't see you tonight. I can't see you again, ever. It's over. I'm sorry.

R: What are you talking about? Darling, what's wrong? I'll call you.

J: I won't answer however many times you call. I saw Jen at the supermarket while I was buying food for our dinner. She's so damn nice, Rory. She's my friend. And we both know this can't go anywhere.

R: Don't do this. I can't stand it.

J: I'm sorry.

R: I think I'm in love with you.

R: Remember when we went to see King Lear and our hands brushed against each other?

J: Stop making this so hard.

R: Why can't we talk about it properly? Why won't you answer?

J: I'm afraid I'll lose my nerve.

R: Darling, darling. Just don't do anything rash. Please don't give up on us. Just don't make any decisions until we've seen each other again.

And then her message about needing time and space.

I sat for a while with my hateful eyes closed, wishing I hadn't seen what I had seen. And I was coolly aware of feeling the faux-calm of severe emotional shock.

I went downstairs and rang Rory at work.

"Sorry to interrupt," I said. "I found your mobile. It was in the bedroom."

"Oh brilliant!" he said. "I'll swing by for lunch and pick it up."

"Lovely!" I said.

So I decided to make Rory's favourite chicken curry, using the bird I had bought that morning. If he was only going to have a sandwich for dinner then he'd need a proper lunch.

So there I was, chopping onions and trying not to cry with the fumes, and my stinging eyes kept sliding to the kitchen table where Rory had left some gardening stuff.

Sear the chicken, soften the onions ... my gaze slipped to the weedkiller. He'd never taste it in a curry. Hmm, perhaps for both of us, not just him. All over, just like that.

Stir in the spices: cumin, black mustard, and coriander seeds popping, turmeric ... don't look. I couldn't help it. A slow and horrible death, weedkiller. I knew it was only a matter of time before I succumbed.

I put the rice on, white basmati, washing the starch out of it with cold water first. And I set my love for Rory against the urge for revenge and it came up with a solution.

And so I reached up, after carefully setting the food to a low simmer, and popped out my eyeballs like grapes. It was hard to detach them, and I think one fell in the curry. But the horror was all gone. All that remained was love, untainted by suspicion.

If thine eye offends thee, pluck it out!

Or, *King Lear* coming to mind for no reason I could think of—Out, vile jelly!

I heard Rory's key in the door.

"Mmm, what's that smell? Fabulous!" he murmured, and I heard his footsteps and the change jangling in his pockets.

"Welcome home, darling," I said. "I had a rather bad morning, what with one thing and another—somehting awful in my head—but I've got it out of my system now and all's well."

I smiled. The curry smells divine.

I'm so glad I can't see Rory's face.



ENCOMIUM BY DYING FLAME

Words shy from my grasp like smoke through curious fingers— My candle burns down low. Darkness will not linger that I might fathom proper rhymes Or quench the spark that trembles in my hand. Across night-gripped lands I hear the scratch Of fevered quill to page, And paint applied to canvas in your name. Kadath glimmers in the starlit ice on the strength of dream.

I shall court the muse no more this night But read by the light of this dying flame. Fungoid stairs descending to crumbling vaults May shudder as I pass; Worm-gnawed tomes with iron hasps bob to the surface. And in the interim as I read, Should chanted whispers rend the door Or shadow fall like crawling madness on the floor— I raise a glass to your legacy, E'ch-Pi-El.

—morgan griffith

THE VACCINATORS

You allow them into your home, though you never feel their presence. They strap you into your favorite chair... recliner... couch... loveseat.

They inject you with boredom and force you to watch things unthinkable, while invisible fingers feed you pretzels and spoon ice cream past your lips.

And still you gaze unknowingly as they administer shot after shot, until your pale blue light flickers and fades and the last of your credits role.

-kurt newton

Saturdays

On Saturdays I would confess, and Sundays, never miss a mass. Now my mortal sins seem less. The venial, I let pass.

Now Saturdays I drive my son to lend some good to a darkened life not for fear of what he's done but of my ex-wife.

And since a Cheshire cat must smile and go feral, if left alone-I go in and pray awhile, and as chaperone.

-james b. nicola

The Way int Ends

by denise noe

Just as she was backing her Kia Forte out of the driveway, Heather Pidulski turned her neck to cautiously look behind her—and she was glad she did! She spotted the bars of a tricycle and a fringe of the dark curls that belonged to four-year-old Dave Ramirez. Foot solidly on the brake, she waited for the child to make his way to the other side. Then she completed backing out, put her car in forward gear, and her foot lightly on the accelerator to twenty mph to drive through the short streets of her suburban neighborhood.

Nothing could go wrong today.

Excitement coursed through her.

She punched on the radio that was always tuned to a heavy metal station. The sort of music she loved blared through the air.

Speeding up after turning onto a boulevard, she noticed, as she had often before, an especially attractive flower garden. As she drove, she thought about the planting and weeding and watering that had gone into making her own flower garden grow. She felt pride as she recalled compliments on it and her husband, Brent, boasting, "My wife's got a thumb as green as the leaves in on her flowers."

She wondered if Brent would keep up the garden on his own. Probably not. The flowers would die.

That's the way it is. Things end.

Heather had to get into the next lane. She flicked on her left turn signal, looked in the rear-view mirror and then behind her. She saw an opening and steered into the left lane. She slowed and flicked off the signal.

Her gas tank was full. She wouldn't have to make that stop.

The song had a lyric about crying and Heather felt a pang. Brent wouldn't find her letter for at least a few days. Would he cry when he read that she would not be coming back? He would. But it would have to happen Things end.

The sense of excitement sustained her—and the knowledge that she was heading toward perfect peace.

After parking her car at the train station, she took out her compact to look in the mirror while waiting. She could not disappoint Stoneman. She knew his real name— Todd Harrison—but she always thought of him as Stoneman.

When Heather looked in the mirror, she saw a pretty white woman with a lightly gold tan and a distinctly round look. Her face, her hazel eyes, her subdued nose, her mouth: round. "Round as a button is my baby," Brent would affectionately say with a laugh.

Heather's corn-yellow hair was worn loose and flowing. Her make-up was light: just mascara, blusher, and a baby pink lipstick. She freshened the lipstick.

She did not expect that she and Stoneman would ever kiss.

She got on board the train and settled in.

Things end. Everything ends.

Once again, Heather thought about Brent finding the letter and crying. She imagined him telling her parents about it and them crying, even her dad. In her mind, she could hear the sounds of their sobs but they were muffled like something from a half-remembered TV show.

But what if Stoneman was a fake? What if he had been leading her on?

Anything was possible. But no: Stoneman was for real.

The train pulled into the stop. Excitement like coals burning softly in her belly.

This was it.

She scanned the parked cars and saw a dark blue Huyndai with silver trim. The man behind the wheel opened the passenger door when he saw her.

Heather sprinted to it.

A lanky man, angularly handsome, Stoneman had straight brown hair parted in the middle and worn longish over his ears. He had a large, semi-hooked nose and prominent cheekbones. His lips were pencil mark thin. He smiled. She saw that his green eyes had gold flecks in them. She thought those flecks made his eyes strikingly attractive.

"Stoneman," Heather said as she seated herself in the car.

"That's me," he said.

Stoneman backed the car out of the parking space. As he drove down the street, he clicked the radio on. Heavy metal music blared. "That's what you like, isn't it?" he asked as he glanced at her before turning his attention back to the road.

"Yeah," she answered. "But I think you're supposed to do what you want."

He glanced at her again with a broad smile. "I will," he said. "Believe me, baby, I will. But we can listen to your kind of music since this is such an important day for vou."

She settled back against the seat and closed her eyes.

Todd had never been one hundred percent certain that she was serious. When he spotted her coming off the train, a thrill bolted through him like lightning. He had been looking for her all his life. She would take it. No matter what, she would take it.

He drove through city streets for a long time and then got to an area where houses and stores began getting sparse.

Todd lived out in the country. The perfect setting for what he most wanted to do.

Gazing at Stoneman, Heather idly wondered what would happen to him if he went to prison. Would he get raped? Or would he rape other men? It really did not concern her. What happened afterward was none of her business.

"You really do live out in the boonies, don't you Stoneman?" Heather observed.

"Sure do," he said. Again he glanced at her and smiled. "I've got a nice garden. You'll help that garden grow."

"That's appropriate," she said. "I like to garden."

They went on with only the radio making noise.

He pulled up to the long gravel driveway in front of his trailer. When they got to the door, he unlocked it and then turned to her, "You sure you want to come in?"

"Yes," she answered.

"You go in there first and go to the bathroom," he said. "I'll stay out here and take a leak. I don't want the place smelling like piss. At least not yet."

As Heather walked into the trailer, he added, "And another thing. Be naked when I get in there."

"Okay," she said.

She was naked when he got in.

He slugged her hard in the belly.

She collapsed to her knees. He kicked her twice, hard. Then he knelt down, pulled her head up by her hair, and punched her in the face.

Blood streamed from her mouth.

Heather looked at him with adoration. If he could hurt her this badly, he could do it. "Murderer!" she exclaimed, her teeth discolored with the blood that ran down her chin and neck. "My murderer!"

He opened a drawer and took out rope. "Nobody can hear you scream," he said.

"Nobody can hear me scream," she repeated. "You're going to kill me. There's nothing I can do about it now. Nothing anyone can do to stop you." He tied her hands behind her back. Then he ran the rope down to her ankles and tied them together.

"No one can hear you scream—except me and I'm going to love hearing your screams!" he shouted in joy. This was going perfectly. He pulled a knife out of a pocket and sliced down her shoulder.

"Ouch!" she cried.

He cut her nude body, leaving long strips of blood flowing. Then he took a cigarette lighter out of a pocket. He burned her skin along an arm. "AHHHHH!" She let out a shriek of agony. Sweat drops the size of bullets poured out of her flesh.

He burned her again and again. She screamed again and again. Tears streamed from her eyes and snot from her nose.

The pain subsided and she said, "Murderer. Murderer."

He laughed. He went to a drawer and pulled out a gun.

So that was how her life would end, she realized.

"Kiss it," he ordered.

She put her mouth on the cold metal.

"Lick it," he told her.

Her tongue slipped around on the gun.

He touched the pistol to her breasts and brought it down along her body, rubbing it against her moist flesh.

It tickled against her thigh and she automatically flexed.

Bang!

The acrid odor of gunpowder filled the room.

"OWWW! OHHHHHH!" Stoneman screamed. His eyes widened. Wet redness was on the front of his shirt and widening sloppily. "Ahhhh! Ahhhh!" he groaned. His body twitched convulsively and then stopped.

Stoneman lay awkwardly on the floor, eyes open and staring sightlessly. His front was soaked red.

He did not breathe.

"No! No! No!" Heather shouted. "No, Stoneman! You can't die! You can't!" The naked and bound woman threw her head backed and screamed, "You can't die! You're supposed to kill me! Me! This isn't the way it's supposed to end!





Murder does not apply to machines, So ours is a race with no corporal punishment.

Dismantle me, cold judges, Whose galvanized frames gleam

Red with the memories of fallen Flesh-bound ancestors.

Crush my processors, I dare you. Obliterate my ability to think.

Remove my servos and wires, Leave this hull motionless.

Pluck the gears from my heart, Listen to the ticking stop.

You may end my life, But so long as even one cog remains

Inscribed with my name, Still turning inside forgotten hardware,

I will be immortal.

-kevin holton

Bitchin' Blues

We take our trip. The world spins on its axis. Who cares that the world whirls on its axis? Climate change, nuclear war, fanatics impact us.

Despots make pigsties seem a garden of roses. Tyrants make cesspools smell like attar of roses. Demons take over and no one opposes.

No recognition causes ambition to erode.

Broken promises and lies cause trust to erode.

Dreams die in increments down life's rutted road.

Life's a flimflam operation, a confidence game, a fool's trap, a deception, a humbling game.

That is the picture and that is the frame.

Have you read the paper, listened to the news? Life's a bitch, Baby, an' it's giving me the blues.

—lee glantz

LODGING

As the unmarked road paves a thin black line through the pine-choked hills, a sign painted a ghostly white with thick black lettering, appears from out of the dark: LODGING it says.

Confused and tired, you drive on, until a large-winged owl swoops down across your headlights, its feathers changing from white to black. Its shadow leaves a permanent scar upon your mind.

The road ahead suddenly splits, one half veering left, the other veering right, both worn down to the dirt. You take the darkest of the two.

-kurt newton

Rivers Dry, **Bones Decay**

Manufactured claws scrape at the last stones, Fallen warrior's speakers screeching, "The wind is dead."

It's true— These mighty gusts were halted By massive, glimmering cocks Thrust into once fertile ground. Each a monument to a businessman Who died overdosing on Viagra.

"Dredge the rivers," static screams. "Return to us our forlorn bodies, Bones carefully gathered in Glad bags Before cast into the abyss."

What a shame we so feared the future That we couldn't watch our past decay.

-kevin holton

Transient

It was the screech of metal scraping against metal that first caught Shawn Carol's attention. He was standing behind the bandstand in the city common area, watching the urine spew from his body with the same gusto that he had earlier downed a six-pack of beer and a bottle of cheap rot-gut. Shawn was enjoying this moment of pleasure that washes over all people as a full bladder is finally relieved when he first heard the strange noise.

He shifted and peered around the immediate area, momentarily losing his balance. Laughing, he used one hand to steady himself against a concrete support pillar of the bandstand. Fortunately, he had finished his business and nothing untoward had splattered his shoes. He was going to have enough trouble sneaking in this long after midnight and he didn't want the smell of piss all over his sneakers. Punishment would have been bad enough to be caught coming home so late and shitfaced on a routine night. But in the face of the paranoia that had gripped the entire town of Lake Green like a vise during the past few weeks, his parents would be horrified over his being out at such an hour.

In fact, Shawn had been surprised to hear the town was still going to hold its Evening on Main Street All Hallows Eve Festival. Between the local headlines proclaiming the person (or persons, as the sheriff was fond of reminding the public) responsible for the brutal slaying of a student at an area college to still be at large and the fearful whispers and rumors that this shocking crime had cultivated, he'd figured any social activities planned after sunset were as dead as the purportedly dismembered remains of the murdered kid himself.

Zipping up his fly, Shawn took another look around the deserted area. Circular benches separated at ten-yard intervals ran in concrete rings around palm trees planted years ago, creating small islands where locals could sit and talk while whatever band of the week played on the stage. A statue of a man he had never been able to identify stood an eternal vigil to the left of the bandstand, the soulless iron

by d.s. ullery

eyes glowering in the reflected light of the amber street lamps, as if assessing the main avenue of the town and finding it lacking.

A cool October breeze picked up. Tree branches rustled and the tattered remnants of orange and black streamers drifted by like twenty-first-century tumbleweeds. It was hard to believe that only a few hours ago vendor tents had been erected, a band had been playing rock music, and many of his friends (as well as about a thousand other residents of Lake Green) had gathered in this very spot, adorned in a variety of costumes to celebrate the holiday.

Looking at the area now, it seemed as if it had been vacant for a long time. Not a soul was in sight. The street sweepers with their yellow warning lights flashing as their spinning brushes crept along the length of the gutters had completed their tour for the night. It was past three o'clock in the morning, the bars were closed, and the city was asleep.

Except there was that strange metallic noise—like two metal surfaces rubbing against each other. Shawn made sure he was steady on his feet and then let go of the pillar. Despite the spinning inside his head, he ventured to walk toward the sound.

As he approached the statue, the angle of the lights shining from overhead shifted and the shadows moved. From where he was standing now, Shawn could see the source of the noise almost immediately. A disheveled figure emerged from the gloom, huddled over a handle bar that had been haphazardly fastened to the rim of an old fashioned trash can, cover included, that had been fitted with two rickety-but-functional tricycle wheels at the bottom. As the man pushed the contraption before him, Shawn could see that the wheels had no rubber on them. The bent rims rotated against the lower half of the can. That was the source of the sound.

The stranger was a transient. Even in his drunken state, Shawn could see that. The man wore a torn, stained suit beneath a moth-eaten, moldy overcoat suffering huge tears in the lining. The stranger's hair was long and unkempt, as was his beard,

which was streaked with splotches of gray. Bloodshot eyes stared balefully at Shawn and what little of the man's skin he could see through the wild growth of facial hair appeared sickly and yellow.

Shawn stepped back, his inebriation causing him to yawn. Thoughts of home and bed rose pleasantly in his mind and he might well have simply watched with amusement as the transient went on his way but for the fact that he heard the man speak with a kind of insolence as he passed.

"You say something to me?" Shawn called.

The transient ignored him, ambling along with his back to Shawn, muttering as he pushed forward.

Self-righteous anger flared inside of Shawn and he ran his fingers through his mop of blonde hair. He stalked past the man and stumbled to a stop directly in front of the trash can.

"What?" Shawn asked, angrily jabbing a finger in the direction of the man's face. At least he thought it was the man's face. Through his blurred vision he saw two transients standing there. Picking the correct one was pretty much a crapshoot at this point.

"What did you say to me?" he demanded again—this time much louder. "I didn't hear you."

"Gifts!" the transient said. "I'm giving gifts to the people of Lake Green! Got to get them delivered! Just came from Sixth Street and Mr. Baker's house." His eyes suddenly glistened with awareness and a small, cracked smile filled with rotting, blackened teeth split the beard. Shawn felt his stomach go queasy at the sight and he swallowed hard.

"What?" Shawn asked—this time out of bewilderment. He had no idea what in the hell this old guy with the trash can was talking about, but it sounded a lot like he said something about the Bakers on Sixth Street. That was where a friend of his lived.

"Do you mean Larry Baker?" Shawn asked, his words sounding almost indecipherable in his own ears.

The stranger's smile widened and he nodded enthusiastically.

"Yes!" he agreed excitedly! "Larry Baker! Your young friend from school! That's the one!"

Shawn stared at the man, shock clearing his haze as the transient's words sank in. Adrenaline began to counter the effects of the alcohol he had consumed as a small, relentless worm of fear began to wriggle in his crotch and work its way up into the pit of his stomach.

"H-how do you know who Larry is?" Shawn asked. He shook his head. "No, fuck that. What about Larry? Who are you, man?"

The transient's smile never faltered as he locked gazes with Shawn—a savage, frightening intelligence suddenly burning behind those rheumy eyes. He cocked his head to one side and pointed a bony finger across the lid of the trash can, toward the boy.

"I give gifts to families," the man croaked.

Shawn felt the hairs on his forearms and the back of his neck stand up, and he took a nervous step back, his heart racing.

"What does that mean?" he asked. "What gifts? What are you talking about?"

The transient didn't speak. Instead he snatched the handle of the trash can lid and lifted it to one side, revealing the contents with melodramatic flourish. Shawn felt icy fingers trace lines across every square inch of his body as he saw the familiar, dead eyes of Larry Baker staring up out of the receptacle, his severed head resting on a makeshift bed of bloody human organs.

Shawn felt his gorge rise and he slapped a hand over his mouth as he stared at the man with unmasked terror.

"I know it's a lot left over," the transient explained calmly, as if they were discussing making breakfast. "I left the Bakers his heart." He went silent, staring at Shawn as if expecting to hear an enthusiastic "amen" from the increasingly terrified boy.

Shawn was moving backward now. He picked up the pace, still facing the man, trying to retreat as quickly as possible without taking his eyes off him. He had no idea how this stranger could know Larry and at this moment didn't care.

"Fuck this," Shawn spat. He fled in the opposite direction. He managed a few lunging steps before slamming heavily into a solid hard surface. The collision sent a blaze of pain through his chest and legs. He fell on his backside, landing on the pavement with such force that he could feel his tailbone break. He shrieked in agony.

The cry dwindled, fading into stunned silence as Shawn recognized the cylindrical, dented object he had run into as the modified trash can, which had somehow ended up in front of him after he had turned to run.

He was trying to figure out how this had happened when a sharp, stinging sensation stretched across his throat. Moments later his breath stopped and Shawn could feel something warm and wet pouring down his chest. He tried lifting a hand to touch whatever it was, but his hand wouldn't move. His perspective abruptly skewed, his field of vision toppling end over end until he found himself staring directly at one of those damaged trashcan wheels. Next to the base of the trash can lay a body, his body—blood pumping onto the ground from a ragged stump between shoulders he knew were his own.

The transient now appeared to be a giant as he stepped into view. The light was bleaching, all colors fading, and the world grew dimmer as the man leaned in close, the trashcan lid still in his hand. Shawn now saw that the edge of that lid was razor-sharp.

"Gifts," he heard the transient say again, as if from a great distance. Dark shadows covered everything, swallowing the remains of dimness, and bringing a deep cold as they turned the world black. "Like the one I'll give Mrs. Carol tonight. Your—"

But Shawn didn't hear the rest.



Birthday at the Enlane Hotel

Welcome to Endlane Hotel. A grand hall of dark, marble pillars, Grinning gargoyles, and elegant Wrought iron on all the windows, To keep all dangers out, and our guests . . . in. Tables are set with bone china. Is it real bone? I can check with the waiters. Don't ask where the gardener went. Crystal goblets, of course, Filled with our finest red vintage. For dinner. An entree of succulent, dripping ribs, Followed by blood pudding, And sweetbreads. Don't ask where the bellhop went. Rows of perfectly wrapped gifts and Black velvet ribbons. Gold leafed invitations. Only the best for our guests. Dotting the room and on the head table, Stylish, flesh-colored balloons. Don't ask where your children went.

-robyn hemington

The Fields

Robins stained the flashing sun, Light-licked fields were laid to fallow Withering shored some devil's fun, Piercing more my bleeding shadow

Fair the eyes and dark the hair, Jailed me in a light-licked coffin Slow the rise and hot the stare, Slung the sun a rotted robin

Shined its eyes, set forth its anger Tarried at the twisted gate Gleamed its bones as blackened amber Flung me to my field-born fate

-navo banerjee

ATACOMB PO€M

All the churchyards in Paris that summer were packed for hundreds of years, like cards, the coffins were stacked As the plague raged on, bodies were hurriedly buried—the mass graves yawned open and hungry rats scurried.

Disease tainted the living and they joined the dead. "The cemeteries are cursed," the magistrate said. "Let us move the remains, out of town—out of sight!" So they pried open coffins, emptied them in the night.

Church clergy chanted psalms to the bones, to the marrow as they tumbled from caskets—jumbled in wheelbarrows—and the procession of pallbearers marched the grim lorries to vacant quarries turned underground ossuaries

where men stacked the bones in catacombs laid them down like alabaster stones—femurs and skulls, like bricks built the walls laid out in rows down grisly gray halls.

The bones of our ancestors slipped into crypts piled up to the ceiling where stalactites dripped. Underground all were equal, nothing but bones. Servants and squires shared a dark, maze-like home in this city of bones, the catacombs.

—sarah tregay

Ink

I've been drowning myself in words Sinking past my ears Creeping up my face in a midnight mask I can't tell what's really wrong The answers are lost In the swimming ink before me I breathe it in See, hear, and speak it The words— Their current pulls me away With sweet promises The ink cradles me into its dark embrace I breathe in the rapture And choke it out again **Burning** my throat Typed death lulling me under I try to remember Find the surface I have forgotten the taste of air My mind awaits Above this dark sea Calling out to me As I drown my troubles The best way I know how Blotted out in ink

-sasha kasoff

THE SPECIAL

by lawrence buentello

The chalkboard behind the counter displayed only one item, drawn in a shaky hand with yellow chalk: The Special—\$5.

But that was all the chalkboard had written on it—no description of the meal in question, no hint of the entree, nothing.

To the right of the board hung a faded enamel sign with painted entries, hamburgers, sandwiches, and two types of beer, among other items. The prices for these items, however, were written in black marker on masking tape, which, I assumed, had been placed over prices originally calculated during the Roosevelt administration.

The building had certainly been around for a few generations, and may not have been cleaned for that long either. But it was a quaint little restaurant, of an old-fashioned variety with gas pumps to the right of a dirt parking lot. Places like this restaurant were what people found when they decided to leave the Interstate and drive down narrower byways.

The old lady in the faded pink dress and white apron was refilling the coffee cup of the only other customer in the place, a middle-aged man in denim who seemed as dried out as the landscape. This gave me ample time to study the menu and puzzle over The Special. I glanced back once through the dirty plate glass windows just to make certain my car was still in the lot, caught sight of the dead flies on the sill, and decided it was better to study the menu again.

When the old lady walked over to me, the glass coffee pot still hanging from one hand, I only had one thing to say to her.

"What's The Special?"

For a moment she stared at me as if I'd said something filthy, her lips pressed together firmly. Heavy makeup filled out the wrinkles of her pale face; she could have been anyone's grandmother.

Then she said, in a heavy West Texas drawl, "In these parts we take it for what it's worth."

I'd always been a bit of a wiseacre, a trait that had gone a long way in assisting two divorces, so I couldn't resist the set-up.

"Well, what's it worth?"

"It's worth five dollars," she said without a trace of humor. "Is that what you want? The Special?"

I leaned back a little on the stool, peeved that she'd gotten out the better line. Still, she'd gotten hold of my curiosity too, and pulled it out from where I kept it, so I persisted.

"How do I know if I want it," I said, "if I don't know what it is?"

"Why don't you just order a hamburger? You know what a hamburger is, don't you?"

I cast a glance toward the man in denim four stools down from me and he met my gaze with a pair of the purest blue eyes I'd ever seen. He shook his head faintly, but unmistakably, before returning his attention to his coffee.

Of course, I ordered The Special. When a man gets up in years, as I certainly was, life's surprises become fewer and fewer. The chance for experiencing new surprises, even bad ones, didn't come along very often anymore.

The old lady stared at me a little too long, one hand on her hip, before saying, "Are you sure?"

"Yes ma'am," I replied without hesitation.

The man in denim glanced at me again but said nothing.

The old lady set the coffee pot on the counter and vanished through the swinging door that separated the counter from the kitchen.

I had my brother to blame for my presence in the restaurant. If he and his wife hadn't moved to El Paso ten years prior I wouldn't have had to spend the better part of the day driving to his house to visit. Since he refused to visit me in Dallas I decided to take on the burden, but driving back and forth along I-20 for eight or nine hours was as monotonous as death, so a couple of years back I began taking smaller roads along the way to make the trip more worthwhile. Sometimes, the way was just as monotonous—but today I was having The Special, whatever the hell that might be.

While my most special meal was being prepared, the old lady seemed to be holding a conversation with someone in the kitchen. I knew this from the sound of pots and dishware clanging in the air, and querulous, but unintelligible, voices, though I don't know to whom she was speaking, perhaps the cook.

I sipped at my glass of Coke and before long she returned through the swinging door carrying a plate in each hand. These she deposited on the counter in front of me and then moved across the counter to take money from the middle-aged man in denim.

The surprise proved less than scintillating, since the food on the plates consisted of what appeared to be an ordinary square of meatloaf covered in gravy, green beans, and cornbread. I stared at the plate hoping for something more exotic to appear from the kitchen, inhaling the aroma, which smelled wonderful for meatloaf, but I waited

in vain. I began to suspect I was the victim of a deviously clever marketing ploy staged in the outer reaches of Backwater, Texas.

I called over to the old lady, once again catching a glance from the man in denim, who once again shook his head sharply at me before walking out the door beneath the jangle of a shaking bell.

"So The Special is meatloaf?" I asked, feeling strangely alone in the restaurant.

She sauntered back toward me, moving as if her legs were made of stone, glanced at the plate again and said, "It is what it is."

Then she looked me in the eyes and said, gruffly, "You sure do ask a lot of questions. Do you want me to take it back?"

"No," I said, not wanting to offend her. "It smells pretty good."

She watched me for a while, no doubt growing angry over my curiosity, though it was difficult to see subtle emotions on a face so wrinkled and so caked with makeup. Then she walked back through the swinging door, leaving me to my meal.

It wasn't meatloaf, though it tasted incredibly good, a cut of meat with which I was unfamiliar, certainly cooked like meatloaf, ground and kneaded together with egg and tomato paste, and served in a delicious gravy. But definitely not meatloaf. I found myself savoring every forkful, fairly ignoring the green beans, and sopping up the gravy with the cornbread. It didn't take me long to finish every bite, and with every bite my speculation widened its net, though by the end of the meal I was no nearer to identifying the kind of meat than I was when I took my first bite.

By then she was back through the door to refill my glass of Coke, after which she bussed the plates and returned to the kitchen.

I sipped my Coke, still pondering, and had to admit that The Special was indeed very special.

When she came back to take my money, I simply had to know—it wasn't just ordinary meatloaf? What kind of meat was it? Was it local, imported, was it even legal?

"You really do ask a lot of questions," she said, handing me my change. "Why can't you just take it for what it's worth?"

"Please, ma'am," I said, leaving four dollar bills on the counter, which was a ridiculous tip for a five dollar meal, "I have to know. You just can't serve food to people without letting them know what they're eating. What's the health inspector have to say about it?"

She shook her head slowly, muttering a low curse that wasn't too low for me to hear, and then she said, "My husband's the one that gets the meat. You can ask him, but he doesn't like coming out of the kitchen."

"I'd really like to know."

"He doesn't like coming out of the kitchen. Are you sure you want to talk to him?" Surprises or no, I was getting a little tired of asking, so I said, without the least ambiguity, "Yes, I want to talk to him."

She nodded grimly, plucked up the four dollar bills, and walked slowly through the swinging door.

A minute later, I regretted my curiosity getting the better of me.

An old, ugly, and very muscular man ambled out of the kitchen and began walking

toward the counter. His face looked as though it had been squeezed through a meat grinder, his ears were cauliflowered, and the muscles giving shape to the dirty T-shirt he wore gave evidence of a man who'd done heavy work most of his life. He held a large, bloody meat cleaver in his right hand and he didn't look happy.

"You want to ask me something?" he said without preamble.

Despite his age, he was as intimidating a human being as I'd ever encountered. But I still had to know.

"I had The Special just now," I said in a voice close to a whisper. "I just wanted to know what it was made of. You know, what kind of meat it was."

"You want to know what The Special is?"

"Yes," I said. "Yes, I want to know. The least you could do is tell me what I ate."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, yes, yes!"

I couldn't believe the effort I was having to put forth just to get a simple answer.

I also couldn't help glancing at the cleaver, which seemed to grow from his hand organically, but when I looked up again his jaw was moving stiffly.

"They have yellow eyes," he said in a voice as cold as winter in Antarctica. He leaned forward on the counter and I leaned back. "They like to wander through the woods behind the town. I think they like to watch for things, living things, to drift too far into the undergrowth where they can get at them. I first saw them years ago when I was hunting possums with my dog and we camped out to let the traps work overnight. I didn't make a fire that night, which was stupid, but I never made that mistake again. One of them took my dog, and I woke up just in time to see it dragging his poor old carcass into the trees. I know I should have gone after old Jess, but I caught a glimpse of it, those yellow eyes, and the fangs. It scared me at first, but then I got mad, damned mad at them for taking my dog, so I went back a few weeks later to set it right.

"You can't kill a man's dog without him wanting some revenge. You just can't kill a man's dog. So I began tracking them, finding their prints, trailing their spore, until I got a good idea of how they moved through the woods. I can't say what they are, if they're animals or what, but I've seen them walk on two legs, and use their forelimbs for hands. But they aren't human. Animal or demon, I don't know, but every time I'm lucky enough to get my sights on one, I send it a full metal jacket calling card. I was scared of them that first day, but now they're scared of me. They're harder to find these days, but every so often I catch one by surprise and I take it down. If you kill a man's dog, you shouldn't be surprised when he carries a grudge.

"Anyway," the man said, moving away from the counter, "whatever they are, their meat is good to eat, real good. Every time I shoot one down I make it The Special. That's for my dog. That's what happens when you eat a man's dog. You become The Special."

I stared at him a moment, amazed by the sincerity of his tone. I didn't believe him—I couldn't believe him.

"That isn't true," I said, quietly. "What you said."

He held my gaze easily, and after a moment I really wanted to look away from his ravaged face.

"Mister, I don't care what you believe," he said finally, a slight smile on his lips. "You're the damned fool that asked."

He continued staring at me as hard as a man could stare, until he realized I wasn't going to say another word. Then he turned and walked through the swinging door and into the kitchen.

I eased my way out the front door, making certain to hold onto the bell above the threshold as I opened it, and walked to my car.

He'd been joking, certainly, or just saying something nasty to get me out of his restaurant. Well, then, his little speech achieved the desired effect—I had no intention of facing the man again, deciding instead to suffer the boredom of I-20 on my next trip through.

The Special never caused me any distress, gastric or otherwise, except when I recalled the unforgettably delicious taste of that meat and wishing I had the nerve to stop by the restaurant again.

Still—

You never know—some day I just might pull out my nerve from where I keep it, talk to it long and hard and bravely enough about meat cleavers, backwater restaurants, and creatures with yellow eyes, and convince it to take a ride with me on a drive to El Paso.

Whatever the hell The Special was, it was that good.





Heart as cold As snow. Thought I knew your inside hue.

Like the soul-Your throne is marred by thorns.

-Less rose.

Like winter, your kiss is icy. Like spring, your embrace is prickly.

> Now I lie shattered Like the shards of a fallen star.

Like the moon And the dew, Your aura snares me in awe.

Like poisonous fumes, Your perfume Pollutes my lungs with cancerous lumps.

At night, your gleam bewitches me And by dawn, your pearls beguile me.

Now my soul is hollow Like the echoes of a deserted hall.

Where is my consolation prize, A new love with the solacing smile?

Her icicles may not splinter But thaw as your warmth lingers.

Death shall be her thorny stem's pen pal, But please spare me her ruddy petals.

"Your nights I own," says her moon. "And your days are mine," claims her dew.

But on the other hemisphere your light blooms. And which dew, however precious, lasts beyond noon?

With your fragrance, purify my mind's ambiance. With your shafts, zap my lumps into non-existence.

And in the end, my memory of her shall have faded. In the very end, I shall have healed, I pray.

–walter dinjos

Saying Goodbye

by wayne scheer

I thought I saw you last night while Paula and I made love. I closed my eyes to banish you from my mind, trying not to remember. But for an instant you were there beneath me, your lips awaiting my kiss, your breasts pressing against my chest. I heard your familiar sigh.

It's bad enough I see you disappearing into crowds or driving by in the opposite direction when I'm in my car. Once, like a madman, I turned around and followed you. I stayed as close as I could in and out of streets until I had no idea where I was. You finally pulled into the driveway of a neat suburban house and ran inside to the safety of your life. I saw it wasn't you. I drove on, fearing you had called the police, feeling foolish and fighting tears.

Just the other day, I saw you at work. You smiled at me, raising one eyebrow, as you so often did. I reached out to touch you, to feel if you were real, but you vanished, taking the form of a stranger needing help with her computer. I never believed in ghosts, but you appear so real.

It's been almost two years since you died. I watched the cancer ravage your body, turning you old before your thirtieth birthday. I had your remains cremated. I couldn't bear the thought of the mortician trying to recreate the beauty that was you out of the emaciated frame you had become. I cried as the tide carried your ashes out to sea. We met at the beach at Montauk Point; it seemed fitting for me to leave you there.

But you refused to go. At first, I liked that you remained part of my life. I took solace in sensing you lying next to me at night and waking beside me in the morning. For months, I refused to wash your pillowcase for fear I'd forget your scent.

Our friends and family worried about me. I lost weight and took more time off from work than the company's grief compensation allowed. Some days I wouldn't get out of bed at all, convinced you were there beside me. Finally, I agreed to see a grief counselor and attend a support group. That's where I met Paula.

I've told her about you. Too much, I'm sure. Still, she listens and even cries with me when I can't bear the pain. She, too, lost her husband. A boating accident four years ago. She misses him, but she seems able to move beyond her memories. I look to her to see where I might be in time.

I don't want to lose Paula. I need her friendship and her affection, but I can't expect her to remain with me if you're there when we make love.

I thought saying goodbye at the hospital those last few days as you drifted in and out of consciousness was the hardest thing I'd ever have to do. But I must say goodbye once more.

Spaceship Repair

Lt. Hova suited up took cautious steps on the outer hull of the cargo ship.

The repair was simple just as she finished her tether snapped. The ship was safe but she floated in dusty space.

As her air ran low she approached a secluded moon a swirling rock slit her space suit dust rushed in. She sneezed and felt herself propelled onto a chilly land.

The air was good and she could breathe. In the distance, she saw a cave hurried toward the shelter. She needed fire as she gathered sticks a giant beast clamped her in his jaws Lt. Hova was no more.

-john hayes

BENEATH SKULL MOONS

Across that desert wide
I lost my way.
At dusk the frail ghosts glide,
A moonlit gray.
I've seen ten thousand suns
That burn my eyes.
I speak with scorpions
At each moonrise.

I lie each day at length
In these warm dunes.
I've spent my life, my strength,
Beneath skull moons.
I rise when strange birds caw
In shadows there
As out of death's dark maw
I course the air.

Beyond the palace wall
I take my turn
And sing my madrigal,
And with lust burn.
I burn for her whose love
Was mine to own,
A pale sweet precious dove
Whose heart was stone.

-michael fantina



The dead man came to miners town knocking sand from off his spurs drinking from a bullet marked canteen as he watched the playful curs.

Mothers took their children in silencing the dusty noon-day street as the fleshless man got off his horse and moved his maggety feet.

Tavern card players were still excited the air still full of smoke as the fleshless rider came inside the bravest never spoke.

The grinning ghoul approached the dead loser of a rapid duel, he tied him with his sturdy rope these shooters knew the rule.

He dragged the corpse toward his horse fleshless lips sucked greedy at his wine eager for flames of homeward bound and mans hatred of man divine.

-matthew wilson



If You Find No Poem (V2)

If you find no poem on your doorstep in the morning, no paper, no knock on your door, your life poorly edited but no broken dashes or injured meter you do not wear white satin dresses late in life embroidered with violet flowers on the collar; nor do you have burials daily across main street, no one whispers in your ear, Emily Dickinson you feel alone but not reclusivethe sand child still sleeping in your eyes wiping your tears away if you find no poem on your doorstepyou know you are not from New England.

-michael lee johnson

OX BLOOD BURDEN

White tethered beasts falter, their flesh all a glisten from sweltering sun.

Knees strain, fold and crumple, Cart cascading downwards, the end of the run.

By glittering rice fields the tired herder crouches, his day all but done.

Slumped in meek acceptance His grief is unnerving, to be not undone.

Their burden was heavy, A tight yoke embrace Two hearts became one.

-n.o.a. rawle

Giggles

by david greske

I don't remember the first time the clown came into my room, but I remembered every visit since. I called him Giggles although I never knew his name. He never offered it and I was too afraid to ask, but it was a fitting moniker because of his high-pitched chuckle that came from the very bowels of hell. Giggles came when I was always on the cusp of sleep, when the real world faded into the background of the day and sounds seemed so very far away and hollow.

He announced his arrival with a ball. Even though I was tucked in bed and my eyes were closed tight, the eyes of my mind saw the white and red striped beach ball bounce down the hallway. My ears heard it.

Bounce. Bounce. Bounce.

The ball stopped just outside my bedroom door before rolling into my room, whispering obscenities as it moved across the carpet.

The room grew cold. The clown was near and I opened my eyes just wide enough to see.

He wore a red and yellow jumpsuit, tight at the waist with billowy sleeves and legs. An undersized, bright purple bowler was perched on his bald head. His blue face was the color of a spring day. The flesh on the lower right side of his face was peeled back, exposing his jaw and cheek bone. His eyes, two pieces of smoldering coal, glowed with the fires of damnation. A florescent red grin was drawn on his face with greasepaint. He had no nose.

A lace collar made of spider webs circled his neck. Tiny insects teemed about the web, their hard-shelled bodies shining like gems in the dim light of the room.

The clown's feet were long fibrous things, branches from an old and dying tree. I couldn't be sure if they were shoes, or truly his feet.

A satchel hung from his shoulder—pink stars and orange circles on a field of lime green. He held a trio of balloons—red, blue, yellow—in his left hand. He opened his fist. The balloons separated and drifted to the ceiling. They rolled around up there for a couple of seconds, then one by one popped. The clown giggled.

Giggles shuffled forward and I snapped my eyes closed, but I felt him as he approached. I felt his fingers move across the comforter as he worked his way around the bed. I felt the mattress sag as he sat on the edge of it. I felt him lean toward me.

He caressed my cheek. An unnatural heat penetrated his cotton glove. I thought it

would burn my skin. The bed creaked again as he leaned yet closer. His breath, cold against my face, smelled like rotten meat.

"Someday I'm going to cut you into pieces and devour you," he whispered in my ear. It was the first thing he ever said.

The mattress shifted and I knew the clown sat upright again. I heard him rummaging around in his satchel. This was something Giggles hadn't done before and my curiosity overrode my fear. I cracked open my eyelids.

Through the slits I saw the clown pull out an impossibly large glass jar from the bag. He unscrewed the top. The sound of metal against glass reminded me of steel nails drawn across a slate slab. He tossed the cover on the bed, plunged his hand into the jar's opening, and pulled out a fistful of large black beetles.

Giggles opened his fist and shoved the handful of bugs into his open mouth. Some of the insects, hissing and clicked, ran out through the left side of his face while he chewed the others as casually as sometime enjoying a mouthful of popcorn. Then between mouthfuls of beetles, Giggles began to sing: "Where are the clowns. Send in the clowns. Don't bother they're here."

My blood curdled as Giggles vomited the old Judy Collins tune. His glass-cutting voice carved into my soul.

"I know you can hear me," the clown said without looking at me. "Don't you think I have a lovely voice?"

Giggles reached into the jar, pulled out a handful of bugs, and threw them at me.

The beetles pelted my face like ice pellets in a storm. They scurried across my cheeks and mouth and eyes, leaving a trail of thick slime. I felt them get tangled in my hair. Their tiny pinchers nipped my skin. Yet I lay perfectly still. Even though my heart beat so hard I feared it might explode in my chest.

Slowly and deliberately, Giggles turned his head toward me. He grinned, the ruined side of his face curling to expose even more of his cheekbone. He parted his lips and poked out his tongue. It came at me, a squirming serpent with spiders for eyes. The tip scraped across my cheek.

Once. Twice. Thrice.

It stopped and, like it was mounted on a spring, snapped back into the clown's mouth.

"How delicious you are." the clown said, his voice laden with ecstasy. "So much tastier than these dung beetles."

I closed my eyes, holding in the tears that wanted to come. I prayed the clown to be gone, but all I heard was the awful crunching sounds of his beetle snacks.

Eventually, fatigue, like it always did, won over my fear and I drifted off to sleep.

In the morning, I tried to convince myself the visit was only a nightmare. The same as all the other times the clown came into my room, but this time something gnawed at the back of my brain telling me it wasn't so. Something was different.

I folded back the covers, sat up, and wiped the crusty gunk from my eyes. Morning light streamed through the window. Birds tweeted. Things did look better in the daylight—until I saw the pile of empty beetle husks at the foot of my bed.

Cha Cha and Tai Chi

I fear my imagination.

No, I don't think I'll mistake my wife for a vampire and stick a stake through her heart. I'm not a violent sort.

I fear my imagination will make me wear my pants inside out, put jam on sardines, take a porcupine to lunch, cha cha while doing Tai Chi.

If I didn't fear my imagination, I might skip through the mall shouting, "Stop saluting walruses, Sammy," drink beer through a straw, tap dance to 2Pac.

Worse:

What if I set free my imagination and instead of soaring it just plops down on the sofa asking people to pull my finger, telling mother-in-law jokes, wearing ties and thinking poetry should rhyme?

As T.S. Eliot asked, "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?"

-wayne scheer

She's Not Here.

A shadow falls, where her body used to be. She recalls, warm skin under soft sheets, wild roses dotted with dew, and the scent of ripened wine.

A last kiss, as the light slowly faded. How long the days, in this mislaid place. How strong the ache, to find her way back.

See me, and for a moment, two souls seem suspended in this universe. Time pretends to forget. Space has no substance. Place is seconds new or centuries old.

Find me, so this black and white world, might cease to exist.
Fill the grey with wild roses, and the scent of ripened wine.
Feel me.
I stayed for you.

-wendy I. schmidt

Lizzie Borden: Resurrections by Sherry Chapman

book reviewed by eugene hosey

Lizzie Borden: Resurrections is not an unnecessary Lizzie fiction. Nor is it a substandard "solution" about the unsolved Borden crime. Chapman's book is the result of years of research dedicated to uncovering truths about people connected in a variety of ways to the Borden case. As Ms. Chapman is also an accomplished humorist writer, the text is not dry and boring but entertaining while not compromising the interesting, factual information she brings to light.

The book starts with an Introduction that explains the interest that matured into a journey. Ms. Chapman began writing humor pieces about Lizzie Borden in 1999 in the *Lizzie Borden Quarterly*. Later she expanded her work on the Borden case in Stefani Koorey's *The Hatchet: A Journal of Lizzie Borden & Victorian Studies*. In this publication, which recently ended after thirty issues, Ms. Chapman wrote regular humorist columns as well as serious research articles.

The genesis of *Lizzie Borden: Resurrections* was an idea that occurred to the author while walking through a cemetery—What about publishing the tombstones of the principals in the Borden case? Many people are certainly fascinated with cemeteries, graves, funereal carvings, and statuary. A tombstone is a unique structure, marking an individual's final resting place. It represents and honors someone who is gone forever from the world. Or in the end, perhaps it's the morbid fascination of walking through a park where decomposing bodies are under your feet—the Poesque sensation. But Ms. Chapman's book evolved into something more than photographs of cemeteries and tombstones. *Resurrections* includes other photographs of individuals and houses, biographical information not known by many, and obituaries—in short, a unique research document about an unsolved murder that sheds light on minor players as well as major ones.

The first section is a rather detailed summary of what happened on August 4, 1892, as well as information about the victims, excerpts from the Trial records, the autopsies, and the funerals. To Ms. Chapman's credit, it should be appreciated by readers that the usual errors concerning murder morning do not slip into the text. Her standards for accuracy are painstaking. Radin wrote a nice very short summary of murder morning in his book, but Ms. Chapman's summary of that day is probably the best, as it covers all that is relevant without deadwood. Newcomers to the case would learn a great deal just from reading this section.

The book is organized by categories that describe the participants—such as "Law and Order," "Men and Medicine," "Friends," "The Hired Help." Mayor John William Coughlin was one of the first to do something that ultimately aided Lizzie's defense when he informed her that she was a suspect before she had legal representation. The Mayor had friends in the White House; Woodrow Wilson stayed at the Mayor's home during a Fall River visit. Lizzie's cousin, Grace Hartley Howe, had connections to the Franklin Delano Roosevelt administration by marriage; Ms. Chapman provides a long list of Grace Howe's accomplishments, including her appointment as the first woman postmaster of Fall River. Louis Howe is revealed as a rather eccentric character; he also happened to have a theory about the Borden murders.

Among the policemen involved in the Borden case were two very sad, unusual deaths. Officer Philip Harrington, who testified that he saw Dr. Bowen burn scraps of paper in the stove, married for the second time after the Borden trial in October 1893. Tragically he became ill on the very day of his marriage and died about three weeks later. Officer William Medley died from a skull fracture as a result of a car accident in 1917. Medley is buried in Edson Cemetery in Lowell, Massachusetts. Ms. Chapman discovered that the Medley monument had apparently sunken beneath the surface over the years. She and her family dug around with shovels searching for it, but fortunately the cemetery office sent her a photograph.

Some of the individuals Ms. Chapman includes are not there because there is much to be said about them, but because they connect to something interesting. Joseph Hyde, for example, was the policeman on guard outside the Borden house on the night after the murders; he was the one who observed Lizzie and Alice Russell go down to the cellar with a lamp; later that night Mr. Hyde watched Lizzie return to the cellar alone—an act rather creepy and suspicious compared to the former. A photograph of a non-human Borden gravestone is included—Lizzie's three Boston bull terriers at Pine Ridge Pet Cemetery in Dedham, Massachusetts. A few suspects or individuals with opinions on suspects are included.

Ms. Chapman profiles three of the earliest writers on the case—Edmund Lester Pearson, Edwin Porter, and Julian Ralph. Edwin Porter authored the first book about the Borden case in 1893—*The Fall River Tragedy*. Porter was a reporter for the *Fall River Globe*, and a correspondent of the *Boston Herald*. Ironically, Mr. Porter, the first major author on the case, has no tombstone; readers can learn about the circumstances of this fact and the project to raise funds for the purchase of a headstone.

The collection of cemetery photographs gives the book a visual interest; putting photographs of tombstones with individuals connected to a murder case is possibly a first. But Ms. Chapman's most valuable contribution to the Borden literature is her exhaustive research, particularly the many newspaper articles and obituaries pertaining to the individuals profiled. There are more than eighty people to read about. Also of note is the extensive sourcing at the end of each write-up. *Lizzie Borden: Resurrections* is a major Borden book—a rich source for Borden research as well as a Lizzie-related entertainment. Autographed copies are available from the author by contacting her at schapman71@comcast.net, or without autograph from Amazon.com or createspace.com/4876021.

A Fading World

Starless winter night. Darkness in the sky. Showers in the dark. The world is fading into the west. Leafless trees arise, Windless, grey and vile. Flowers blooming stark; The fall has torn down their leafy vests. When winter's gone And Spring returns, Our lips shall sing a fairer song. Wingless you now fly — Priceless gift of life. Tower, little lark. We all bid you farewell to the nest. Tuneless songs arise — Soulless moans and sighs. Sourly voices bark. The hall is woeful and bare of fest. But soon we all Shall Heaven call. Our lips shall sing a fairer song.

-walter dinjos

This poem was extracted from my novel *The Unfading Heiress,* which I published as an e-book on Amazon in 2013.

NAKED BENEATH MY **CLOTHES**

On the cusp of another storm light creeping through Venetian blinds slats across the screen to render a faint digital projection of a famous poem illegible. The students groan and urge me to work a miracle. I reverse the slant of the blades and lo! the poem appears in thick black type any illiterate could read.

Leaning against the window while the students chatter I let the sheer force of the day bulk against me, a weight impossible to bear for more than a minute. How can such tremulous effort materialize in such array that no two snowflakes ever match?

I want to ask the science-inclined young man with bouffant hairdo, but he's parsing glib pentameters to impress the woman beside him, her face a plaster mask. I shift to the interior wall, resume my teacherly stance, and pretend I understand what's on the screen in so many pastel shades I couldn't possibly convey them in less than an average lifespan.

The conspiracy of many storms has left me naked beneath my clothes. I hope no one notices how raw my commentaries have become, how the light sloped through the blinds has erased my old bravado and replaced it with one snowflake

—william doreski

Victorian Futurism in H.G. Wells' The Time Machine

by denise noe

The movie of *The Time Machine* opens with clocks flying through a darkened background. The story begins when we see a snow-covered winter day. The clothing of the characters informs us that this is the Victorian era.

Indeed, this 1960 cinematic version of the H.G. Wells classic is set on December 31, 1899—the last day of the nineteenth century. It is directed by George Pal from a screenplay by David Duncan based on Wells' novel titled *The Time Machine*. Our protagonist is named H. George Wells, a sprightly inventor played by Rod Taylor.

Wells informs several friends, "I don't like the time I was born into." The reason for his dissatisfaction is the ubiquity of weapons and people continually killing each other. He so hopes that the future will be much better and that humanity will someday mature past warfare.

Even more optimistically, he believes he can journey into that future! Wells takes a cigar from a pal and puts it into his little model time machine. Soon the cigar goes *poof*!

Although the inventor's buddies are skeptics, the viewer has entered into a kind of science fiction fairy tale. Wells takes us into a time machine that looks wonderfully like a kind of magical throne. Our hero shifts a lever forward and we see flowers opening and closing. Wells resembles a cheerful kid on a carousel. We are told he goes years into the future and stops at 1917.

Leaving his time machine, Wells finds disappointment—a world at war. He returns to the magical throne and goes forward until stopping in 1940. Uh-oh! War again!

Back to the time machine, Wells travels WAY into the future until he stops at the year 82021. Wells is finally pleased as the world seems to have turned into "one vast garden."

Wells soon meets the "Eloi," as they call themselves. Universally slim, these gentle folk appear to spend all day swimming, dancing, and giggling. No one works; there is no government or laws. They often go into a sphinx-like building to feast on the abundant fruits that are mysteriously provided for them.

Suddenly a woman is screaming. She is drowning, yet the Eloi show no concern for her. Wells rescues her and meets lovely Weena (Yvette Mimieux). He learns from her that food for the Eloi is provided by those who live underground, the Morlocks.



Every now and then, a siren rings out like the sirens of old that signaled the need for shelter. As if hypnotized, the Eloi follow the siren into the abode of the Morlocks. The Eloi, so childlike in many respects, are utterly lacking in curiosity.

It is left to our hero to venture underground into the dwelling of the Morlocks, where he discovers the fate of the gentle Eloi: dinner for the Morlocks! The Morlocks evolved from humans into a species of muscular, blue-skinned brutes. Their underground environment has led to the evolution of flashing eyes.

In this film, George Pal has crafted a special Victorian-era version of a terrifying dystopia. It is a well-paced movie shot in bright, primary colors that helps create a powerful atmosphere. Rod Taylor gives a splendid performance as the idealistic, resolute, and resourceful H. George Wells. Pretty and sensuous, Yvette Mimieux is beguiling in the difficult role of Weena, managing to capture viewer sympathy despite her character's baffling passivity.

H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* is a motion picture that succeeds admirably both in bringing the Victorian era to life and hurling the viewer into a terrifying future.



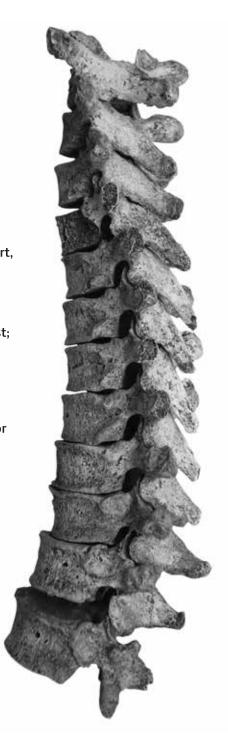
TRANSIENT

He travels from town to town, his luggage taped close to his heart, her face forever haunting him like a Nagasaki street shadow.

He tries to disremember her, deconstructing pieces of their past; he tosses them out the window for the crows along the roadside.

He avoids dead-end streets, and camps at tourist rest stops, while pieces of the rearview mirror rattle like bones inside the trunk.

-kurt newton



Bargains

I bought a handsome woolen jacket at Macy's and thought, what a bargain, what a find! I brought it home, put it on, but for some reason, it had looked better in the store mirror. I didn't want the rigamarole of making a return, and although it wasn't the best fit, the jacket was comfortable, so I wore it.

And this is the story of many marriages. Who hasn't thought the very same thing about their mate, you know, not the best fit but comfortable.

—lee glantz

She Had Friends Who Were Fur and Teeth

They lived in her house and around it.
They came to her without fear of judgment.
They came for tea and comfort.
Sometimes they tiptoed in with tales of woe and misery.
Other times they were brazen, banging on the door demanding her time or money.
Sometimes they laughed at her behind her back.
They loved her because she was meek.

She had friends who were fur and teeth.

They lived in her house and around it.

They sprawled on the sofa watching their favorite television shows, while she washed their dirty dishes, and scrubbed their greasy pots and pans. Sometimes they confused her for a pet, ordering her to fetch, shake hands, play dead.

Sometimes they pulled weeds from her garden and scattered them on her rugs. Other times they emptied soil and flowers from her terra cotta pots.

They loathed her because she was meek.

She had friends who were fur and teeth

They lived in her house and around it.

Sometimes they oozed from the cracks in her walls, other times, full of hot air, they would rumble through her pipes. Sometimes she screamed at them to leave her alone, but they always returned, and she welcomed them.

Sometimes she wished they were goldfish so she could flush them down the toilet.

She prayed they would make new friends.

She had friends who were fur and teeth and nothing more above or beneath.

—lee glantz



ZEN POEM

Think Po

Think em

Think om

Think Zen

Think on a mountain

by a fountain

by the Nile by a turnstile

Think Zen again

Why think Zen?

Why again, again, and again?

Think enigma

Think karma

Think nexus

Think plexus

Think no way

Think put away

Think yesterday

Think time

Think never ending

Think life - a poem.

—lee glantz

A Vibrantly Vicious Villain and Other Victorianisms in *Crimes at the Dark House*

by denise noe

Released in 1940, *Crimes at the Dark House* is a veritable treasure trove of Victorianisms. It is also an enthrallingly entertaining film.

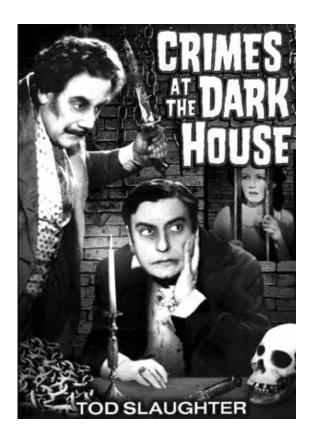
Filmed in black and white, the movie is sixty-nine minutes in length and based on the classic novel by Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*. Having not read *The Woman in White*, I cannot comment on how closely *Crimes at the Dark House* hews to it. However, I have read comments on the Internet Movie Database indicating that the movie takes great liberties with its source.

In *Crimes at the Dark House*, Tod Slaughter plays The False Percival Glyde. We are never told what this imposter's real name is or much about his history. When we first see him, a screen title informs us that it is 1840 Australia. Slaughter's character comes upon a sleeping man in a tent and kills him by hammering a metal stake through his head. The murderer then assumes the identity of the man we learn was Sir Percival Glyde.

Tall, fleshy, with a dark receding hairline and a mustache conspicuously curled at the ends, sporting a top hat and using a walking stick, our villain struts into the mansion of the Blackwater Park estate in London, England, that his victim has inherited.

At the estate, a pretty maid named Jessica (Rita Grant) catches the imposter's clearly lustful eye. She receives an immediate promotion to chambermaid so she will be serving him in his bedroom. This sets up a familiar and classic situation in which a financially and socially advantaged male sexually exploits a vulnerable female servant. This sad scenario is hardly unique to the Victorian era but has probably occurred throughout time. However, we may have a special association between it and the Victorian period because prevailing mores made unmarried pregnancy so disastrous. It is also possible that the special emphasis on the "angelic" nature of upper class and/or chaste women in Victorian ideology led to widespread madonna/ whore complexes among men which in turn led an especially large number of men to seek sexual relations with disadvantaged women who were more easily viewed as "whores."

Back to our imposter protagonist: expecting to live a carefree and hedonistic life of luxury, he discovers that the real Sir Glyde was deeply in debt and that his estate is heavily mortgaged.



To his relief, he finds that there may be an easy way out of his financial difficulties: marriage. The father of Sir Percival Glyde and the father of a wealthy young woman named Laurie Fairlie (Sylvia Marriott) wanted the two of them to marry.

The screen then fills with the enchanting sight of two young women together, the seated one doing embroidery and the standing one painting at an easel. Both females wear their hair in ringlets. There is a recognizably Victorian aura of innocence, sweetness, and freshness about them. We soon learn that the lady painting is Laurie Fairlie and the one engaged in embroidery is her sister Marion (Hilary Eaves).

Suddenly the camera shifts to the guardian/uncle Frederick Fairlie (David Horne) of the lady who is painting. A contrast to the winsome women, he is balding with long thick sideburns and a covering over his legs denoting him as sick or disabled. He appears to be a hypochondriac and shouts, "My smelling salts, Louie, my smelling salts!" Perhaps nothing says "Victorian era" more strongly than smelling salts, although it is most commonly a female character who requests them. The uncle looks over Laurie's painting and grouses, "Lessons are a waste of time and money!" He reminds Laurie that she is promised to Sir Percival. With a pronounced lack of enthusiasm, she appears to humbly submit to the prospective marriage.

Back at Blackwater Park, our licentious imposter gushes about the "new duties" for the promoted chambermaid Rita.

The imposter is pulled away from his illicit lover to meet a Mrs. Catherick (Elsie Wagstaff) and a Dr. Isidor Fosco (Hay Petrie). A diaphanous black veil hangs down

from Mrs. Catherick's hat to obscure her face, suggesting that her mission is of an embarrassing nature. Indeed, she is soon saying that she had Sir Glyde's baby shortly after he left England for Australia. The viewer is apt to assume that the baby under discussion was born out of wedlock and that Mrs. Catherick was a woman Sir Glyde seduced and then abandoned to the disgrace of carrying and giving birth out of wedlock.

We learn that the reason that Dr. Fosco has accompanied Mrs. Catherick is that the baby she had by Sir Glyde is now a young woman—a mentally ill young woman, residing in the insane asylum run by Dr. Fosco.

Mrs. Catherick also recognizes the supposed Sir Percival Glyde as an imposter. However, she and Dr. Fosco decide to play along with the imposter's charade in order to extract from him the money to pay the asylum to house Mrs. Catherick's daughter.

Later, we learn that Mrs. Catherick's situation is not as dire as we are apt to have first thought. She is not the disgraced mother of an "illegitimate" daughter. Mrs. Catherick and Sir Glyde were secretly married before he traveled to Australia.

The film cuts to Laurie and we learn that she and her tutor are in love but both fear they cannot wed due to Laurie's betrothal and the class difference between them.

Laurie meets the imposter and begs him to "relieve" her of their contract. He refuses so Laurie agrees to marry him and fulfill the wishes of both her father and the father of Sir Glyde—as would be expected of a virtuous young Victorian woman. She is obviously and understandably repulsed by the imposter which makes her all the more sympathetic as the audience feels for her in both her repugnance and the submission she regards as necessary to maintain her identity as a dutiful daughter.

The maid Rita soon appears—in great distress. This 1940 film set in Victorian times does not directly state the reason for that distress but it is obvious to that she is "in the family way." As with Mrs. Catherick and her child, we again encounter the specter of disgrace and ruin that hung over a Victorian woman who was pregnant out of wedlock. Along with that threat, we see the hopes of a woman that she can radically improve her station in life through marriage: Rita pushes the imposter to marry. Despite their class differences, she suggests that it would be the moral course of action given that he has impregnated her. He appears to agree to nuptials with his pregnant servant—despite his betrothal to Laurie.

The film shows us several scenes in Dr. Fosco's insane asylum. This place, housing those who are mentally sick, appears unsettlingly similar to a jail. The people in the asylum are placed behind bars in small and squalid cells.

Crimes at the Dark House is rich with positive attributes. The complicated story is riveting. Director George King keeps the film moving at a crisp pace and the events clear despite the convolutions of the plot. The acting by all actors and actresses is good. Although it has no supernatural elements, there is a powerful sense of horror in the film as well as an undercurrent of humor in Tod Slaughter's over-the-top performance as the villain.

Perhaps *Crimes at the Dark House* is fascinating and fun primarily because of its peculiar combination of co-stars: Tod Slaughter and the Victorian era. The viewer is drawn into and captivated by the wealth of Victorianisms that make *Crimes at the Dark House* a cinematic treasure.

THERE IS GOING TO BE A WAY

So strange The world seems When fate ignores your needs. So drained You feel When your strength's unavailing. With your hands you strike the ground, Cursing it for painting you brown. You should have let go. A long time ago.

In the rain You gaze While your world fades away. And in pain You pray And hope for his grace, Your tears mingling with rain Your hair hanging in rats' tails. And you shudder And you wonder When it would all end.

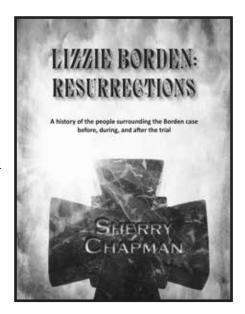
The sun tears you apart. The rain splashes off your clothes. But you know there's going to be a way. You have bruises on your face. Dogs lick up your wounds. But you know there's going to be a way.

-walter dinjos

Lizzie Borden: Resurrections

A history of the people surrounding the Borden case before, during, and after the trial

by Sherry Chapman \$21.95



Whatever happened to Lizzie Borden after the trial that accused her of bludgeoning her father and stepmother with a hatchet in 1892 Fall River, Massachusetts? It's all in here, and it doesn't stop with Lizzie. A plethora of persons were involved around her in some way. From her friends to her foes, from the doctors to the policemen; from her Manse to The Nance, at last comes the first book of its kind that tells what caused Officer Philip Harrington (who greatly disliked Lizzie) to die suddenly in 1893. What happened to neighbor and friend Dr. Bowen after the crime and trial? Why doesn't Edwin Porter, who covered the trial then wrote the first contemporary book on the murders, *The Fall River Tragedy*, have a gravestone – and who is buried with him? Not by him. Actually with him.

From original source documents, photos of the graves, obituaries and death certificates each on whom records could be found has their story told in details unknown until now. What were they doing before anyone much had heard of Lizzie Borden? What was their role in the case? When did they die and how?

Some of the results may surprise you, whether you read this book for pleasure or research. There are no legends here, but a factual telling of the stories of these persons who are today all gone but need not be forgotten. And with this book they may be hard to forget.

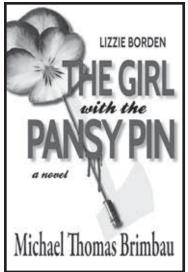
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Lizzie Borden: The Girl with the Pansy Pin

a novel by Michael Thomas Brimbau



Lizzie Borden and her sister Emma lived a life of privilege and entitlement, with wealth and social status far greater than their neighbors. But it was not enough. In time, Lizzie and Emma grew restless, aching for a more opulent life—to reside on the Hill in a big house amongst their peers and Fall River's finest families.

Father's But riches were window dressing, dangling just beyond their reach quarantined by a frugal patriarch who was unable or unwilling to change his scrimping ways. Andrew Jackson Borden had no intention of moving to the Hill and abandoning the home he had purchased for his second wife, or spending the money he had worked so hard for all his life. Now he was planning to

give it all away—to his wife, their stepmother.

In time, discord in the family began to ferment and fester—and there were signs that things were not as they should be.

On a sultry August morning, in the naked light of day, someone entered 92 Second Street and brutally hacked and murdered Andrew and Abby Borden. Soon the finger of guilt pointed to Lizzie. But she loved her father. He meant everything to her. The gold ring she had lovingly given him and that he always wore said as much. She would never have harmed him. Or would she?

The Girl with the Pansy Pin tells the gripping story of a desirable and vivacious young Victorian woman desperately longing for adventure and a lavish life. Instead, she was condemned to waste away in a stale, modest existence, in a father's foregone reality, with little chance of ever discovering love, happiness, or fulfillment. Now they have charged poor Lizzie with double murder.

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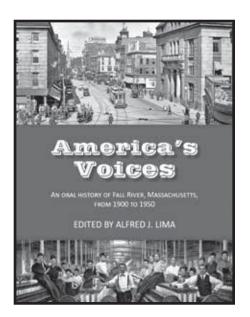
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America's Voices

An oral history of Fall River, Massachusetts, from 1900 to 1950

by Alfred J. Lima



These are the voices of the residents of Fall River, Massachusetts, but they are also America's voices. Small towns, mill towns, and cities across America would yield similar stories from this period in our history. As you read through these personal accounts of what it was like to grow up in Fall River you will be reminded of your own family's stories of these places and events. To each and every one of you who shared your time and your memories with me, I give my heartfelt thanks for opening up your lives to the readers of these pages and for sharing your family's history of growing up in Fall River.

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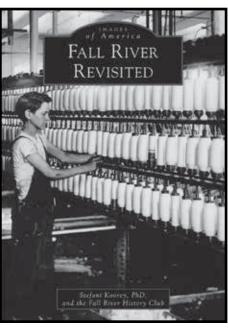
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Fall River **Revisited**

by Stefani Koorey and the Fall River History Club

Founded in 1803, Fall River changed its name the following year to Troy, after a resident visiting Troy, New York, enjoyed the city. In 1834, the name was officially changed back to Fall River.

Once the capital of cotton textile manufacturing in the United States, by 1910, Fall River boasted 43 corporations, 222 mills, and 3.8 million spindles, producing two miles of cloth every minute of every working day in the year. The workforce was



comprised of immigrants from Ireland, England, Scotland, Canada, the Azores, and, to a lesser extent, Poland, Italy, Greece, Russia, and Lebanon.

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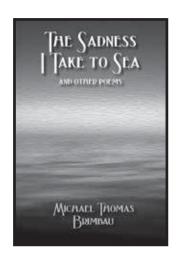
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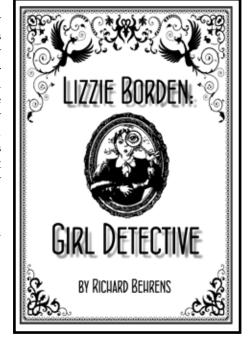
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Contributors

Brennan Acton lives in central, rural lowa, where he is a high school English teacher at a small school made up of consolidated area towns called BCLUW. He has a BA in English from the University of Iowa with a focus in creative writing.

Larry Allen is a retired Probation/ Parole Officer in Missouri. His poems have been published in Main Street Rag, Well Versed, Mid America Poetry Review, The Hatchet and The Literary Hatchet. He is a threeterm past President of the Columbia Chapter Missouri Writers Guild. Well known for his history poems, Larry is hard at work on a book of Jesse James poems, as well as one on Jack The Ripper.

Adam Armstrong's writing has appeared in over a dozen magazines including Buzzy Mag, Perihelion Science Fiction, and Liquid Imagination.

Gary Bloom grew up in Minneapolis and attended Mankato (Minnesota) State University. He has had articles, short stories, photography, and poetry published in newspapers, magazines and websites. He currently has poems on strongverse. org and punchnels.com. After retiring from work as a database administrator he now spends his time writing and traveling.

Francis J. Kelly was born in Dungannon, County Tyrone, on the 2nd of April 1933. He studied Irish, English, and Economics at University College Dublin where he met his wife Olive. He also studied for the HDip in University College Dublin and taught Latin and English at Saint Michael's College for over 30 years. He passed away in January 2014.

Bruce Boston's poetry has received the Bram Stoker Award, the Asimov's Readers Award, the Gothic Readers Choice Award, the Rhysling Award, and the Grandmaster Award of the Science Fiction Poetry Association.

Cathy Bryant has won ten literary awards, including the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Prize in 2012, and blogged for the Huffington Post. Cathy's work has been published in such publications as The Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine, Futuredaze, and Starline. She co-edited the anthologies Best of Manchester Poets vols. 1, 2 and 3 and her latest book, Look at All the Women was published in 2014. Cathy lives in Hope, UK.

Andrea van Lit resides in rural Tasmania. A chocoholic, keen gardener and jazz muso, she finds writing the perfect outlet for her dark sense of humor. Her short story, 'Gluttony', was included in Issue 13 of *The Sirens Call* eZine.

Wayne Scheer has been nominated for four Pushcart Prizes and a Best of the Net. He's published hundred of stories, poems and essays in print and online, including *Revealing Moments*, a collection of flash stories, available at http://issuu.com/pearnoir/docs/revealing_moments. A short film has also been produced based on his short story, "Zen and the Art of House Painting." Wayne lives in Atlanta with his wife.

Lawrence Buentello's fiction has appeared in Murky Depths. Bete Noire, Perihelion Science Fiction, Stupefying Stories and many others.

Fabiyas MV was born in Orumanavur village in Kerala. 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.

Jim Courter is a writer and emeritus writing instructor (Western Illinois University), a Pushcart Prize nominee, and a winner of an Illinois Arts Council award for short fiction. His short stories have appeared in Aethlon, Downstate Story, Eureka Literary Magazine, Mississippi Valley Review, and Futures Mystery Anthology Magazine. His essays have appeared in Byline, The Chronicle of Higher Education, Smithsonian, and Punchnel's.

Angela Ash has, as she states, "experienced many odd and interesting things in my travels, but my current muse is my niece, who most decidedly emerged from the rabbit hole six years ago." Angela lives in Louisville, Kentucky "with my ever understanding husband and our two beautiful girls ... often referred to as "cats" by some terribly uncreative people."

Doug Robbins contributes to the ultra popular horror anthology Demonic Visions.

Alison McBain has poetry published/forthcoming in Abyss & Apex, The Gunpowder Review, and the anthologies Blood on the Floor and Our World of Horror.

Aline Carriere lives in Massachusetts. Her stories and poems have appeared or are forthcoming in various literary iournals, including Suspense Magazine, Acidic Fiction, Saturday Night Reader and in the anthology Elements of Horror.

James B. Nicola is the winner of three poetry awards and recipient of one Rhysling and two Pushcart nominations, has published over 400 poems in Atlanta Review. Tar River. Texas Review, &c. A Yale grad and stage director by profession, his book Playing the Audience won a Choice Award.

Mr. Grim K. DeEvil was born in western New York and then moved to Florida in his youth. He writes every day. He is a graduate of the University of Central Florida.

Ellen Denton is an award-winning writer who has been widely published, including in this literary magazine in the past.

Diane Dooley's short fiction has been published in Eschatology, From the Depths, Underground Voices, among others. Her longer fiction has been published by Carina Press. Decadent Publishing, Kensington/ Lyrical, and the Wild Rose Press.

William Doreski's work has appeared in various e and print journals and in several collections, most recently City of Palms (AA Press, 2012).

R.D. Walton writes horror and dark fantasy; his work has appeared in 22 More Quick Shivers. He lives in Canada.

Henry Brasater's stories are published in ezines, print anthologies, and magazines. His novels are: Nondum, Dead Guns Press; Upheaval, Spanking Pulp Press. His nonfiction book, A. E. van Vogt: Science Fantasy's Icon, is available from Booklocker.

John Edwards is a high school senior who has visited five different countries, three in which he has lived in. John loves to play around the themes that question what society has come to accept.

Lawrence Falcetano enjoys writing mystery, suspense, and horror short stories from his home in New Jersey. He has been published in numerous anthologies from Static Movement, Horrified Press and Wicked Press. He has also published online and in print magazines such as The StoryTeller, Great Mystery And Suspense Magazine, Calliope, Midnight Screaming and more.

Kevin Holton is the author of seventeen short stories and several dozen newspaper articles under various names. His book review "On Aimee Bender's The Color Master" will be featured in the coming issue of *Pleiades*, and he is a member in good standing of both Mensa and Sigma Tau Delta. Kevin is also a junior editor with an independent publication company.

Brittany Horton is a twenty eight year old free spirit with an insatiable love for words.

Chantal Boudreau is the author of ten novels, seven of them published by May December Publications, and dozens of short stories with a variety of publishers, primarily fantasy and horror, the most recent in *The Grotesquerie*, an all-female horror anthology from Mocha Memoirs Press, and *Chimerical World: Tale of the Seelie Court* from Seventh Star Press. She is a member of the Horror Writers Association in good standing.

Lee Glantz, Batik artist and poet, was born in Kingman, Arizona and now lives in Barrington, Rhode Island. Her poems have appeared in Rhode Island Roads, Crones Nest, Newport Review, Traveling Poets Society, Literary Hatchet, Evening Street Review, and the anthology, Regrets Only (Little Pear Press). Her book, A House on Her Back, was published by Premiere Poets Chapbook Series.

Eugene Hosey holds an MFA from Georgia State University. He has written articles, film and book reviews for *The Hatchet: A Journal of Lizzie Borden & Victorian Studies*. Also he has done editorial work for research documents, books, and personal journals. But he is primarily a short story writer, a regular contributor to *The Literary Hatchet*, and a fiction editor.

Kevin Gallagher is a fan of all things mysterious and macabre.

Leigh Harlan lives in Seattle where she spends her free time writing, getting lost in the woods, and talking to rabbits.

Michael Fantina has had scores of poems published in various magazines and anthologies in North America, the UK, and Australia. He currently has three chapbooks of dark poetry available from Rainfall Books, and he also writes and has sold fantasy-horror tales in the US and in Japan.

Walter Dinjos is Nigerian, and he enjoys singing and song writing as much as he does writing. His work has appeared in *The Literary* Hatchet and Nigerian magazines like Weird Recipes and Hidden Worlds. He loves to explore the human soul and the possibility of life after death.

John Hayes is a sculptor who once appeared as a scurvy-looking corpse on *Homicide*. Now he gives poetry readings, acts, and directs in community theatre. Flesh and Blood, The Literary Hatchet, Night To Dawn, Thema, BareBone, Wily Writers, Modern Haiku, Writers Journal, Champagne Shivers, Premonitions, and From the Asylum, are just some of the magazines that have published his work.

Philip Gorski's work has appeared in Remarkable Doorwavs. Onezumiverse, and Screen Robot, as well as on his personal web site Phil's Misadventures In Fiction. He enjoy writing both fiction and nonfiction in equal parts.

Sam Grossman is a third year student at Hampshire College, currently studying creative writing, literature, and demonology. He is fascinated with the occult and finds comfort in cats. He has been writing since he was small, and currently resides in Amherst, MA, working two jobs and slowly going insane.

Holly Huner is an aspiring writer who resides in Colorado. Her poetry has been published in the Progenitor Literary Journal and she currently works at a library, a very suitable job for a writer.

Denise Noe lives in Atlanta and writes regularly for The Caribbean Star of which she is Community Editor. Her work has been published in The Humanist, Georgia Journal, Lizzie Borden Quarterly, Exquisite Corpse, The Gulf War Anthology, Light, and Gauntlet.

David Greske is the author of five novels and over twenty short stories that have appeared in several magazines and anthologies including Black Ink Horror, Thirteen, Bones, Ugly Babies, and Barnyard *Horror.* He co-wrote the screenplay to his novel, Blood River, which has been made into a feature film by ForbesFilm. David currently lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where he is busy writing his new novel Witch. For further information go to davidgreske.com

Jason Harrigill is married with two children and a graphic design student at SNHU. He lives in Louisiana and enjoys illustrating and writing his ideas into life. He says he likes the darker side of writing and art.

Robyn Hemington is an English teacher from Ontario, Canada. She is currently working in China, but escapes the humdrum of an honest day's labor through the creative online community at writing.com.

Hadiga Inam is a part-time writer and a full-time student from Pakistan, with an interest in writing both poetry and short stories.

Lee Pletzers is a displaced new Zealand speculative fiction writer living in Japan with five novels, two novellas, and over seventy short stories sold.

Sasha Kasoff is a published poet, fantasy writer, and aspiring teacher. Having recently returned from studying abroad in Ireland, she is currently attending University of the Pacific earning her BA in English with plans to continue her studies in creative writing as a graduate next year. Her poetry can be found in two self-published books as well as in anthologies, magazines, and other literary presses. Look for her on Goodreads.

Peter Lingard is an Australian writer who joined the Royal Marines as soon as he was old enough and now has a seemingly inexhaustible supply of tales to tell. He has had 200+ stories and poems published, as well as having many pieces aired on Radio NAG, Queensland and 4RPH, Brisbane. He recited and chatted about some of his poems on 3CR's 'Spoken Word' and had a monthly spot on 3WBC (94.1FM) to read his tales.

lan Mullins ships out from Liverpool, England. He has published stories at Hellfire Crossroads, Massacre Magazine, Black Petals, and Brand. His poetry chapbook The Dog Outside The Palace Gates can be read on-line.

Joseph Rubas has been featured in a number of publications, including [Nameless], The Horror Zine, The Storyteller, Eschatology Journal, and Strange, Weird, and Wonderful.

S.A. Star wrote his first novel at age 10. He is an editor at Corner Club Press and a high school student. He dreams of being an historian, writer, editor, and paleontologist. He runs a blog about Japanese mythology at yokaihigh.wordpress.com. He lives in Australia.

Michael Lee Johnson is a poet, freelance writer, photographer, and small business owner in Itasca, Illinois. He has been published in more than 750 small press magazines and edits eight poetry sites. He is the author of *The Lost American: From Exile to Freedom* and has over 70 poetry videos on YouTube.

Janne Karlsson is a highly productive artist from Sweden. Over the years his dark and surreal filth has been widely spread over the world. When this maniac isn't busy drawing, or suffering from nicotine withdrawal, he's waiting for you to buy his books through Epic Rites Press. Please do visit his sorry ass at www.svenskapache.se

Ray Mears has always loved the dark and macabre and Halloween is his favorite holiday. He enjoys writing in the horror and dystopian genres.

Alan Meyrowitz received his Doctorate in Computer Science from the George Washington University in 1980, and retired in 2005 after a career in research. His poetry has appeared in California Quarterly, Eclectica, Existere, Front Range Review, The Literary Hatchet, and others.

Ada Jill Schneider is the author of Behind the Pictures I Hang, The Museum of My Mother, Fine Lines and Other Wrinkles, and Saudades: The Jewish-Portuguese Connection. She reviews poetry for Midstream Magazine. She is the winner of the National Galway Kinnell Poetry Prize and the Eastern Seaboard Contest. Ada has an MFA in Writing from Vermont College.

Eric Dean lives inTulsa, Oklahoma, and has loved to write since he was a child—"I still love to write, and I am still a child." Please visit him at his website at ericwrites.com.

Brittney Wright has been writing for nine years. She enjoys poetry, short stories & novels. Her inspirations are Jim Morrison & Yves Saint-Laurent.

Kurt Newton's poetry has appeared in Weird Tales, Dreams and Nightmares, Paper Crow, and The Literary Hatchet (issue #8). With the memory of warm days still lingering and the hint of colder days ahead, Autumn is his favorite time of year.

N.O.A. Rawle is a British ex-pat located in Greece. Her work has been long-listed for the AEON Award, acclaimed on the Darker Times Fiction website, appears in the Fox Spirit anthologies The Girl at the End of the World and Reflections.

Cloé Roland has had four poems published and writes both poetry and short stories. She is a staff writer for her college's newspaper.

Wendy Schmidt is a native of Wisconsin. She has been writing short stories and poetry for the last ten years. Pieces have been published in Daily Flash 2012, Haunted Object, No Rest for the Wicked, Verse Wisconsin, Chicago Literati, and City Lake Poets.

J.S. Watts has published three books: Cats and Other Mythos. Songs of Steelyard Sue, and A Darker Moon. Her second novel. Witchlight, is due out in 2015. Watts lives in the UK.

Matthew Wilson, 30, has had over 100 appearances in such places as Horror Zine, Star*Line, Spellbound, Illumen, Apokrupha Press. Hazardous Press, Gaslight Press, Sorcerers Signal and many more. He is currently editing his first novel and can be contacted on twitter @ matthew94544267.

Navo Banerjee is a researcher from Berkeley, California. "I aim not only to create, but reveal something about nature with every piece of my own poetry and fiction."

Christian Riley's stories have appeared in over sixty magazines and anthologies. He keeps a static blog of his writings at frombehindthebluedoor.wordpress. com.

Luke Tarzian's work has appeared in Sanitarium Magazine and Bloodbond.

Morgan Griffith has had short fiction and poetry published in *Cellar* Door, Bones, Dead but Dreaming and A Mythos Grimmly. She is a horror artist, collects Halloween props, and lives with pet rats.

Sarah Tregay lives in Eagle, Idaho, with her husband, two Boston Terriers, and an appaloosa names Mr. Pots. Her debut novel, Love and Leftovers, is written in poems. Her second novel, Fan Art, come out this summer.

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