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You are reading issue #12, by the way. So if you haven't caught up on the other eleven issues, you can do so at literaryhatchet.com.

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But if you would like to write *for* us, please submit your poetry, short stories, reviews, or interviews to our submissions partner at this address: peartreepress.submittable.com/submit.

We really would love to read your work.

Stefani Koorey
Editor and Publisher

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[short story]

Journey of a Lifetime

by stanford allen



suppose I had better fill up the VW before I start. London to Birmingham—something over a hundred miles. That'll do for the drive there and back. Just one decent buy at the Antiques market and it'll be worth it. Five years ago, Jane reckoned I should give it up. I have not found a dirt-covered Rembrandt or a Roman vase in forty years in the trade. She's probably right; enough is enough. Just one more run and then really retire? I don't think so. Sit at home all day and watch the Arts programmes on television and join the couch potato club? That's not for me.

Ten minutes at the pump figuring out the right buttons to push, and then queuing to pay at the cash desk, followed by a slow entry on to the M1 motorway, and here we go. Twenty, thirty, forty, fifty miles an hour and the car is quietly purring along. Everything is passing me, never mind, I'll stay in the slow lane, let 'em go. Jane nagged me ten years ago to buy old Sam's car, this one, and she was right, it has proved reliable and cheap to run. Music? Yes; turn the radio on—a little *divertimenti* as we roll along.

My, my, England is beautiful at this time of the year. Green fields, a distant church spire, oak trees, cows standing together all facing in the same direction with their black and white coats contrasting with the colour of the grass. And swish, another lorry passes me; he must have been doing more than seventy miles an hour. Now I come to think of it, aren't lorries supposed to do no more than fifty five?

OOh! That was another twinge in the chest. It's the same indigestion pain that I had last week. We're all aches and pains at our time of life. Tom has gone, and Bill. Bloody fools, the pair of them, never took any exercise and both smoked like chimneys.

Whoops! You don't get cramp in the arm. Bloody hell! Why in my left arm. It'll pass. Listen to the music. Chopin? No, it's Beethoven—a sonata I think. Ouch! Right in the chest like a jousting knight driving his lance through me. Even the pain—we used to call a stitch—after the two hundred yards dash at school, seventy years ago, was not like this.

Look in the mirror, signal, pull over, and take a breather. Thank heaven for the hard shoulder. Stop the car and take a rest. Breathe. Take a few deep breaths like they always say. What's that high-pitched whistle in my ears? The noise of the passing traffic has gone. That's better, maybe I'll phone Jane, see how things are. Damn, I forgot she passed away two years ago—what am I thinking of? Fool! Anyway this bloody mobile isn't working. No signal? Nothing! Perhaps I'll have a nap for a few minutes; cross my arms and rest my head on the wheel.

Am I dreaming? Funny how sometimes you know you are dreaming but can't wake up, or don't want to, because it's nice and comfy. Warm and safe.

I remember holding my grandpa's hand on my eighth birthday. We walked to the toy shop choosing my present. A pistol with a battery that showed pictures on the wall. They changed each time I pulled the trigger. Grandpa was a nice guy—soft voice, never told me off. Dad chewed me out once when Bill and I cycled to London during the war. I guess it was a bit mad. All my friends loved my Mum. She made cakes. Cakes with currants in them and icing on top. She cried when I had to do my National Service and leave home. No brothers or sisters to keep her company, just Dad and Spats our dog, little black mongrel with four white paws; got knocked down by a car once and Dad sat up all night feeding him brandy and milk.

Monica was pretty. We were fourteen years of age and we kissed in the park and promised to marry each other when we were old enough. Ten years later I married Jane and goodness only knows what happened to brown-eyed Monica.

And the funny little man, with the black bowler hat, that used to come into our shop selling children's shoes. Always told silly jokes which he called howlers. We sold a lot of his shoes but we still went broke. Probably because my mind was on other things.

That wonderful old grey-haired lady who could hardly walk. The expanse of ancient pale violet-coloured wisteria climbing all over the front of her cottage in Bushey village. First time I went to her for painting lessons she opened the front door and led me to the studio on two sticks; with her gnarled arthritic hands she held a brush and showed me how to load it with paint and place it on the canvas exactly where it should be.

The misguided confidence I had one year when I sent three paintings to the Royal Academy for the Summer Exhibition. Jane laughed when they were rejected.

Freddy James, the works manager at the plastics factory. He was a nice guy. Taught me a lot. Never leave the lathe with the key in the chuck. Let the boss have his say, and then, when he's gone away, you do what you think is right.

Marion, our neighbour, was beautiful. Rosy red cheeks and lips that pouted; I think she really fancied me, but we had just had our second baby and I loved Jane and the kids, and the truth is, I was too scared to have an affair anyway.

Mum's funeral was sad. Dad clung to a gravestone for support because his legs gave way as her coffin was lowered into the ground. I called out to her as I saw the polished wooden box disappear, and from behind me, I heard a woman blowing her nose.

Wow! *West Side Story*. I can hear the music; "Maria," "There's Goin' to be a

Rumble Tonight.” Those kids could dance. Jane and I saw that show four times, and loved it more each time.

Peter lost his temper at our house one night and almost hit Josephine; I can’t remember why, but then they were forever at one another’s throats. He stood, in his fury, unsuccessfully trying to open the door, pushing it instead of pulling it, until his heat subsided, and then he sat down and kissed his wife and she smiled at him in forgiveness.

Jane lay between snow white sheets with her head resting on a pillow and I heard the rattle of her last breath leave her body. The feel of her cool lips on mine as I kissed her for the last time and said goodbye.

Dan’s kick of the football almost knocked me over, but I didn’t drop it; I held the leather-covered sphere tight in my two hands. My fingers felt the stitched segments and I thought what a lovely lad he is growing up to be. My grandson. Now I’m a grandpa too. Blue eyes like his mother and a smile that could melt your heart.

Sabrina in my arms as we danced around the room when she was eighteen months old. Her little fingers pulling off my spectacles.

Did I lock the front door when I left the house? No matter. Too late now. I’ll check it out tonight.

“Hey, slow down; let’s take a look at that parked Volkswagen.” The motorway policemen pulled their vehicle over onto the hard shoulder and stopped behind the stationary dark blue saloon car. One of the two men got out and walked cautiously to the driver’s side and tapped on the closed window. With no response, the officer opened the car’s door.

“Better call it in, Joe, we have a dead man here.” And the radio crackled as three lanes of fast-moving, oblivious traffic continued to race along the busy carriageway.



CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE

by wayne scheer

War had broken out in Israel. Brian worried because his brother, Jeremy, had just flown there on business.

He called his sister-in-law. Her voice sounded drained of emotion. "I haven't heard from him, Brian." After a long silence, she added, "I have a feeling I won't see him again."

"Don't say that, Fran. He's probably just busy with meetings. He'll call as soon as he gets back to his hotel this evening."

"It's already evening there."

He checked his watch. It was after seven in Tel Aviv.

"Have you tried his cell? Or the hotel?"

"He always texts or calls when he's back in his room. He doesn't like for me to call when he's doing business."

"I'll call him."

"No," she answered quickly.

Now Brian extended his worry to Fran who had a history of depression.

"Look. No sense assuming the worst. You know how he gets when he's with clients. Besides, what's going on there looks terrible here, but they're so used to it, they probably just think of it as a typical Tuesday."

He didn't sound convincing, even to himself.

Her breathing seemed forced, like she had to remind herself to inhale and exhale.

"Do you want me to stay with you until he calls?"

"Yes." He could hear the relief in her voice. "That would be good. I'll make us dinner."

"I need to finish up some things here at work, but I can be at your place by six."

He didn't want to sound worried so he added, "When he calls, call me back. But you'll still owe me dinner."

Fran had been there for Brian when he went through his divorce, supporting him, offering a hug when he needed it, even flirting with him to boost his ego. "If I weren't a married woman..." She'd smile, never completing the sentence. But her mood could change as quickly as a teenager's. She'd grow distant and cold without warning. Jeremy was concerned enough about her mood swings to try to persuade her to see a therapist, but she refused.

He confided in Brian. "She frightens me when she gets into one of her moods. I never know what she'll do. Sometimes she stays in bed all day and other times..." He shook his head. "Not long ago she called someone in Nairobi and planned a safari. You know what I had to go through to get that off our credit card?"

But when Brian arrived a little before six, everything seemed normal. Perhaps too normal. She had a salad on the table, wine, two place settings. The aroma of a chicken roasting in the oven almost made him forget why he was there. He recalled Jeremy telling him that Fran cooked when she felt stressed. Dicing and slicing was her way of staving off a panic attack. Brian joked, "You better not anger her in bed."

Fran wore tight jeans and a sweater that showed off her athletic body. Her blond hair had been curled and she smelled fresh, like she had just gotten out of the shower. He bent his six-feet, two inches and she raised herself on tiptoes to kiss his cheek in a practiced greeting.

"Have you heard anything?"

"No, not from Jeremy. His office called. They said they tried calling his hotel, but couldn't get through. No email or cell phone service either." She looked away.

Brian reached out and hugged her. "He'll call. Any minute now. You'll see."

"You don't know that." She looked up at him. He expected her eyes to be red and puffy, but they were frighteningly clear. "He won't call," she said. "He isn't coming back."

The certainty in her voice scared him. "Of course, he'll be back."

"You don't know that," she repeated, this time in a whisper.

He bent again to kiss her cheek to assure her things would be all right. At that moment, she turned her head and their lips met. He jerked back, but she pulled him to her.

Brian pulled away.

Fran took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I better check on dinner. I don't want the chicken to dry out."

"I'll leave if you want."

"No, please stay. I don't want to be alone."

She turned toward the kitchen, leaving Brian to wonder what to do next. He looked around the room at the dark leather and oak furniture. He had been with them when they picked it out. Jeremy feared it looked too much like the furnishings of a hotel lobby or a funeral home, but Fran liked the solid feel, the sense of permanence. She clung to her choice with an ardor both brothers found surprising. On the fireplace mantel, he eyed their wedding photograph. They

looked like a couple straight out of Hollywood: she pretty, bright-eyed and smiling; he leading-man handsome and laughing.

"We were very happy then." Brian jumped at the sound of Fran's voice. "He took me away from my crazy family and offered me a life."

Her mother was bi-polar and her father descended into alcohol. When her mother was institutionalized and her father split, she bounced from one foster family to another until she was old enough to be on her own. She entered college on scholarship, graduated with honors, and met Jeremy.

"He was my hero. But heroes are for fairy tales. In the real world, nothing lasts. Not even love."

"What do you mean? Jeremy would do anything for you."

"You never saw the way he'd look at me. Like I was a pathetic mutt he had rescued."

"No. Jeremy loved you." He paused and averted his eyes. "Loves you. He loves you. Everything will be fine. You'll see."

The shrill ring of the telephone startled both of them.

"That's probably him," Brian said, so relieved he nearly applauded.

But he listened long enough to realize it wasn't Jeremy on the phone. It was his office. Fran spoke in hushed, even tones and then her voice grew louder. Impatient. "Of course I'll let you know if I hear from him."

She turned to Brian, her face red. "His assistant is worried about Jeremy." Her voice dripped with scorn, especially when she said, "his assistant."

"It's the third time she's called." After taking a few deep breaths, she continued, her voice calm. "She's saying he never got to Israel. She called the airlines. He never got on the plane."

"That's crazy. How could that be?"

"He left me."

Brian reached out for her. This time, she pulled away.

She returned to the kitchen. With an eerie calmness and in total silence, she took the chicken out of the oven, put it on a large platter and deftly quartered it with a large carving knife she took from a rack near the stove. She removed potatoes and carrots from the bottom of the roasting pan and ladled a little gravy over the vegetables and the bird.

"We should eat," she said.

He didn't know what to do. Call the police? It had barely been a full day since Jeremy left. Brian felt certain Jeremy wouldn't leave Fran like this. It certainly wasn't like him to miss an important business meeting.

He had to think.

He excused himself to wash up. The immaculate bathroom smelled of disinfectant. He assumed Fran had been cleaning as well as cooking to keep herself busy. He washed his hands and saw that the only towels were decorative ones folded neatly. Knowing he could never duplicate the fold, he opened the closet where they kept towels.

When he pulled out a small hand towel from the top of a neat pile, he saw

stuffed in back a towel crumpled into a ball, stained dark red, almost brown. He took it from the closet and carefully unfolded it. A bloody knife slipped out and clattered onto the tile floor.

He picked it up. His hands shook; his knees almost buckled.

Fran knocked on the door. "Are you all right in there? Dinner's on the table."

"Be right out." Brian flushed the toilet and searched the drawers, unsure what he was looking for. Under the lip of one of the drawers he saw a dark spot. Nail polish or blood?

He put back the bloody towel-wrapped knife and continued examining the bathroom. When he pulled aside the shower curtain, he was nearly overwhelmed by the smell of bleach. A tiny spot of red stood out on the otherwise spotless white tile.

"Brian, did you fall in? I'd like to have a nice, hot dinner."

"Be right out."

He ran the water and, feeling like he was watching himself in a bad movie, punched 911 on his cellphone. When the dispatcher answered, he flushed the toilet again and whispered, "I think my sister-in-law killed my brother." His hands shook as he heard his own words. He felt his heart pound. He gave the address and tried flushing again when he was told to repeat what he had just said, but there wasn't enough water in the tank. "Send police fast."

"Brian, who are you talking to?"

"It's just work. I'll be there in a second."

He sat on the edge of the tub, trying to collect his thoughts. He remembered the time Jeremy had pulled him by his shirt to keep him from walking into an oncoming car.

"Be careful," his big brother had warned. Those words came back to him now with frightening clarity.

When he finally stepped out of the bathroom, Fran smiled. "You were in there a long time. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

"Then have a drink and let's eat. I feel calm for the first time since Jeremy left. Everything's going to be all right. I just know it." She handed him a glass of red wine.

The color reminded him of what he had just seen, but he was determined to stall until the police arrived. But even as his anger grew, his confusion grew in proportion. Could this all be a crazy misunderstanding?

He took a sip of wine and sat down to dinner.

Fran held up her glass. "Here's to us."

Us? No need to anger her. "To us," he repeated and took another drink. She refilled his glass, and he drank more. What he needed was scotch, straight up, but wine would have to do. They ate in silence, except for his polite comments on the food. He felt the wine go to his head.

"I hope the chicken isn't cold." Fran stared at him with an uncomfortable intensity.

"Ish delishish." He heard himself slur his words. His tongue felt swollen. His eyelids grew heavy and his arms went limp. He could no longer grasp his fork and it slid from his hands. He heard the clatter as it bounced on the tile floor. It reminded him of the knife falling in the bathroom.

"The...wine?"

"Your brother's favorite Merlot. He loved sipping it while bathing. Especially yesterday as he prepared for his trip. Your brother was the only grown man I've ever known who preferred a leisurely bath to a shower."

Through a haze, Brian watched Fran get up from the table, grab the knife she had used on the chicken and sharpen it.

"I heard you on the phone calling the police. Why did you have to snoop, Brian? With Jeremy out of the way, we could have had a wonderful life together."

Brian struggled to keep his eyes open, to understand what was happening. Had Fran just confessed to killing his brother? What did she mean, we could have had a life together? Why was she sharpening an enormous knife? It didn't make sense. Nothing made sense.

His head dropped and he jerked it up, like he was napping on an airplane. Was all this a bad dream, one of those surreal visions you have just before falling asleep? He imagined himself flying to Israel on business while his brother shared a chicken dinner with his wife. Would he wake and laugh with Jeremy at this craziness?

Fran came to him now, grasping the knife and pointing it at Brian.

He tried to stand, to defend himself, to run, but his knees buckled and he fell. He scrambled under the table.

"Come out from there, dear Brian. Don't you want to join your brother?" On her knees, the knife in front of her, she swiped the blade at him. He tried protecting himself, but his arms barely moved.

"It'll be over soon, my darling." Her voice sounded soothing, calm. And totally insane. She swiped at him again.

This time the knife cut through his shirt at his shoulder. It barely stung, but he felt sticky wet. He knew it was blood. His blood. He swung his long legs out and kicked at the knife in her hand. He missed. She cut him again. This time just below the knee. Blood pooled on the hard floor. Bright red on tan tile.

"Aren't you glad it's almost over, my poor, sweet Brian?"

He focused on the knife, blood dripping from it.

"Not over," he gasped, and reached up for the table's ledge. Scorching pain now burned through the shoulder that had been cut. Still, he managed to push the heavy table a few inches toward her, giving him enough room to kick again, but to no avail.

She cut his leg once more. He felt the blade hit bone. Blood saturated his pant leg before spilling out onto the floor. The room spun; his eyes closed; his body went limp.

Yet he remained conscious, barely so, as Fran tugged his body out from under the table. He tried grabbing her leg, but she shook him off like a naughty puppy.

“This is taking too long.” She held the knife over him. “One more slice should do it.”

He closed his eyes, expecting to feel one final cut. Would it hurt? He waited, almost looking forward to the end.

But it didn’t come.

When he opened his eyes, tears were streaming down her cheeks. She still held the knife above him, but she looked different. Colorless. Less determined.

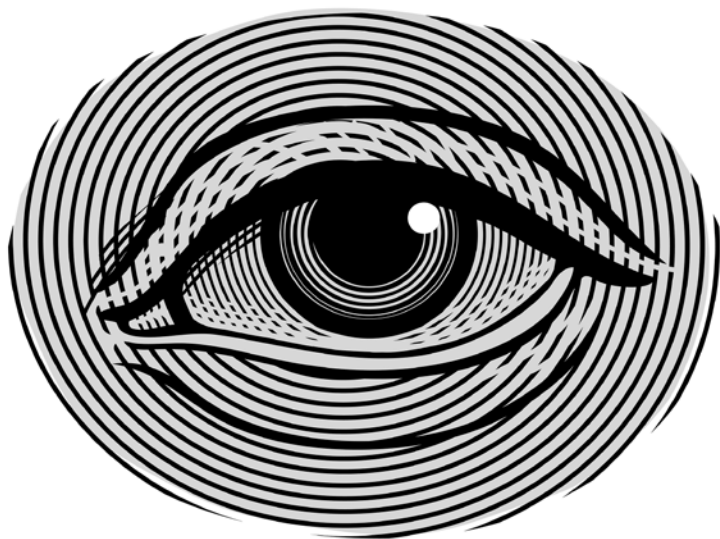
Now he heard it. The wail of a police siren.

“Oh, Brian, if only we had time. I’ll tell the police you killed Jeremy because you were in love with me. We fought. I stabbed you. Your fingerprints are on the knife in the bathroom, aren’t they?”

She angled the knife toward his chest. With whatever strength he had left, he pushed at her arm, grabbing her wrist and turning the knife away, toward her. He felt a snap in her wrist. She screamed and collapsed onto the blade.

Blood spurted from her chest as she lay on top of him, impaled on the oversized carving knife.

The police siren grew closer. He tried to move, but the pain was too much. The police pounded on the door. He tried calling out, “Help,” but the pain was too much. He closed his eyes and waited.



Because Anger

is my response to inanity, I pray for the self-control I need to battle the demons wearing human faces that pick at me daily, claw at me with their colloquialisms, their feigned emotions. I can see their duplicities echoing behind hollow eyes. My skin is bruised by backhanded barbs, both my cheeks are numb, no longer know which way to turn. My fists burn, dormant infernos, waiting for released spark. I can see myself blazing a trail of blistering corpses in my wake. I am tidal wave of mutilation, building to rupture. I close my eyes, bury myself in calming darkness, count specks of emptiness. I wish they would infect my mind, make me as empty as the sound of frustration's tears.

—aj huffman

THE NIGHTMARISH THREE

Dirty street lamps light the cobbles.
Pools of rain reflect the night.
Sleeping voices muted calling
Echo back the city's fright.

Shapes are hiding in the shadows,
Shapes all men have learned to fear.
But make way, you ghouls and goblins,
The nightmarish three are here.

It's Bela Lugosi in his cape,
Boris Karloff wrapped in tape,
With a grin, the gruesome Mr. Lee.

Thunder rolls against the hillside.
Humpbacked moon is riding high.
Lanterns swaying in the graveyard,
Waiting for the storm to die.

Mr. Poe has wrought this tale
'Specially for a raven's eye,
Spectral figures by a headstone,
Spades are clanking, dirt does fly.

It's Bela Lugosi in his cape,
Boris Karloff wrapped in tape,
With a grin, the ghastly Mr. Lee.

Lift the body from its coffin.
Dead man's eyes are staring wide.
Bring the coach and call the horses,
Going for a midnight ride.

White-limbed ladies lie awaiting,
Locked within the castle keep.
Late that night a thunderous carriage,
Three dark men arrest their sleep.

It's Bela Lugosi in his cape,
Boris Karloff wrapped in tape,
With a grin, the ghoulsh Mr. Lee.

—bruce boston

THE BATS AND THE BAD DEAD

by katherine sanger

Melissa and Doug went to the carnival when it came to Austin. They were both sixteen. They had been dating for six months. He wanted to win her prizes, show off his manly prowess by throwing rings on milk bottles, knocking down other milk bottles, and popping balloons with darts. He would win her a panda, he promised, the biggest panda ever.

It wasn't much of a carnival. Set up near the nice Walmart, the one that had wood fixtures and other niceties forced on it by an unhappy zoning committee. The one that was open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, except for Christmas and Easter. The carnival, though, was only open from the time school let out until past dark. But it had rides in various states of disrepair—a Ferris wheel that was meant for kids, but that was scarier than the Krypton Coaster in San Antonio because of the obvious rust and the creaking it made when it turned. The seats rocked, even when there was no wind and no one on it. A death trap, Melissa pronounced it. She refused to ride in it. The other rides were no more sterling in their reputation, and the carnies wouldn't have even been allowed to work at greeters in the Walmart just across the lot. Melissa was not impressed and Doug wasn't sure how to recover what he had planned as a romantic and fun evening.

Maybe Doug should have known that the carnival wouldn't go as planned. Because when he finally got Melissa to agree to the haunted house, they wandered into the semi-darkness and he somehow lost her. Her hand had been in his one minute, clasped, sweaty, and tight. He could feel her fear. Not that the haunted

house was really scary. It was nothing more than cheap carnie tricks. Darkness really only made Doug worry because he wasn't sure what he was about to step on, and while he thought the rats with glowing eyes weren't real, he couldn't swear to it. Shots of light burst across his retinas and screams echoed out of cheap speakers. Smoke curled around, smelling more like cigarettes than like a smoke machine. A bridge to walk across that seemed too loose to support them. But it was in the fun-house mirror room where he realized that he no longer had Melissa's hand in his.

Doug went back in, following his path, but it was dark, and while he thought he was going back, at some point he got himself turned around, and he emerged into the light of the parking lot. Melissa was nowhere to be seen. He turned around to go back in and find her, but the carnie working the entrance demanded another ticket. Doug didn't have one.

"Can't I just pay you?"

"Tickets only, man. They don't trust me with cash. Would you trust me with cash?"

"But how would they know? C'mon, I'll give you—" Doug rifled his pocket while the carnie looked on. "Ten bucks. Ten bucks to let me in there. I lost my girlfriend in there. She's scared."

The carnie snorted. "Unless you're datin' a kindergartner, she ain't scared, Romeo. Just wait at the end. She'll get to you."

"Twenty bucks!" It depleted all his cash for the night. There would be no impressive panda.

The carnie cleared his throat a little. "I ain't supposed to let you in without a ticket. It's a serious responsibility." His eyes darted to the left and the right. No one else was in line. The carnie held out his hand, down low, barely away from his body. "Deal, man."

Doug slapped the carnie's hand, his twenty dollars disappearing like a coin in a magic trick, and the carnie held aside the rope.

Inside the haunted house, nothing had changed. Doug jumped at every scream, thinking that it was Melissa. Was she still there? Scared?

"Melissa? Melissa!"

Nothing. More screams, but they sounded canned, and they coincided with the light bursts. He walked slowly, going through the mirror room, crossing the bridge. Nothing. Still nothing. No Melissa.

When he got to the exit, he held the door open, but he didn't go out. No money to bribe the carnie again, and he wasn't about to lose his girlfriend.

"Melissa?"

And there she was. In the arms of another carnie, crying her eyes out, black streaks coming from her eyes. Choking back sobs as the carnie held her, rubbing her back. Shushing her. And there he was, her date, standing in the doorway, looking like an idiot, and broke.

"Melissa!" He ran to her, but the carnie shielded her.

"That's him," she wailed. "That was my boyfriend."

Doug froze. Was.

The carnie stepped out, making a wall. He was at least half a foot taller, a foot wider, and covered in tattoos. He stared down at Doug.

"You left her in there," he accused. "She was scared to death. She was screaming when I found her."

"I didn't leave her! I lost her. I thought I had her hand. We were talking over the bridge, and then she was just gone. Melissa." He tried to duck around the carnie, but Melissa was gripping the carnie's T-shirt, cowering away from Doug.

"Melissa," he spoke through the carnie. "Melissa, I'm sorry I lost hold of your hand. I came back in. I spent all my money getting back in there. All of it. I gave the guy all \$20 to come find you. I tried, Melissa."

The carnie shifted again, but Doug could see Melissa shaking her head. "Leave me alone," she said, "You left me alone already." And she started crying again.

"I think it's about time you headed out of here," the carnie said. And then he stood there. Just stood there in front of Melissa, blocking Doug.

Doug took a breath. Considered his options. He'd tried the "Hammer of Thor" game and hadn't even hit "Weakling Human." He had a feeling the carnie would've hit "Odin."

Maybe Melissa just needed time to cool down. He would go home. Buy her flowers. Do all those things that his father did when his mother was mad at him.

"I'm sorry, Melissa. I'll prove it. You'll see."

And he left her there, hiding behind that carnie, not sure he was doing the right thing, but afraid to do anything else.

After Doug walked away, the carnie turned to her.

"Your name's Melissa?"

She nodded.

"My name's Stanley."

She smiled at him. "Stanley?" Tears glistened at the edges of her eyes but didn't spill over. The black stains ran down from her bottom lashes, making her look like an abused puppy. "That's awful old fashioned."

He laughed. "I'm awful old fashioned. Defending a damsel in distress, right?"

"I don't think I'm in distress anymore. I'm okay now. But that haunted house. I don't like scary things." She rubbed her arms. "Why would he take me in there if I don't like scary things?"

Stanley shrugged.

"It isn't supposed to be that scary. Most people come out laughing, not crying."

"So I guess I look like an idiot," Melissa said, dipping her head.

"No, not at all. Just...sensitive." He smiled at her. "Hey, I'm kinda in between gigs right now, and we're going to be closing up soon enough. What if we go and grab some food somewhere?"

"I don't have a ride home," she said.

"I can take you home afterwards?" Stanley said.

And they went to the diner.

Red poly booths, plenty of duct tape holding them together, and stained

tables. Stanley slid in one side, and Melissa took the other. The waitress brought them coffee and French fries.

"You know what?" Stanley said, watching her eat the fries. "You should come with me."

"I already did." Melissa laughed a little.

"No, I mean on the road. Be a carny." He made his fries dance. He was besotted with her. So little and helpless. She had been so scared. And he knew that she had reason to be. He knew a secret.

She laughed again. "No, I don't think that's the life for me."

"But..." Stanley felt stupid. "I want to take you away. Keep you safe."

She was still laughing at him, but he saw her eyes go closed off. "Keep me safe? Take me away? From what?"

"I know, it sounds crazy, right? But I'm a carny. Aren't we all crazy? And I know I can protect you. Don't you want to do something crazy, too?"

She stirred sugar into her coffee. "No, I don't. I can't. My brother, he's a carny."

Stanley stared at her. "You're kidding."

"Really, he is. My brother dropped out of college. My parents were so disappointed. I can't do that, too." She poured in more cream.

"So, ummm, did your brother tell you anything about why he did it? Why he joined up?"

"No. But he tried to get me to go with him. And if he couldn't convince me, you can't. I think you should take me home now." She ignored the coffee that she'd fixed, left it sitting on the table. Sat back against the booth's shiny surface.

"Wait," he said. "I can prove that you should come with me, join the circus, so to speak."

"You want me to disappoint my parents, too?"

"No, I want you to live." Stanley reached for her hands. She pulled back.

"That sounds like a threat."

"It's not. It's a promise. Wait, that sounds worse. Do you trust me?"

"No." She pulled further away from him, and the booth felt much bigger.

"Can I show you something? Prove to you that you should trust me?"

"If it's a tattoo, piercing, or third nipple, I'm outta here," Melissa said.

He decided to keep his third nipple to himself. For now.

"No, it's none of those things. It's the bats."

"Bats? That sounds scary." She shuddered. Tears welled up in her eyes again.

"Trust me?" He held out a hand, not trying to reach her, just offering it.

They went to see the bats. Everyone in Austin knew the bats. Crowds gathered every night at the Congress Ave. Bridge, watching the bats that were starting to zoom out into the growing darkness.

Stanley began pointing to faces in the crowd. "He's dead. She's dead. They're dead."

"What?" She tried to follow his finger and see everyone he was indicating. "How do you know?"

"The bats know," Stanley said. "Do you see how the bats swoop and go toward them, drawn to them? The bats know. They know that there is something wrong. They are trying to warn us. The carnivals? They follow the bats. The ones that know. We need to know where the dead are living, where they're waiting."

She stared at him, fear plain in her face. "What are they waiting for?"

"We don't know. There are stories. Rumors. Prophecies. The great quake that will split the country, that will shatter the world. Destroy all that we know. Volcanoes rising in the oceans, plates shifting under the land. A new ice age, maybe. Years of darkness, all caused by the volcanic ash. Lack of food. No fresh water. The dead walking among us, destroying all who live." He stopped. It sounded crazy, even to him, and he knew it was true. "But we prepare. We carnies can live off whatever land is left. We're used to camping, surviving on what exists. Making our own water potable. It's what we do. I don't know your brother, but I'm betting he found this out, too."

"He was a geologist," Melissa admitted. "He went to a carnival one night, and that's when he said he was dropping out and never coming back. That's when he tried to come get me. But I was in high school. My parents wouldn't let me go. Wouldn't even let him talk to me. Told me they were disowning him, would disown me."

"Are your parents dead?"

"What? No! Don't say that. Of course not!"

"Are you sure?" Stanley asked.

"Shouldn't I know? They're my parents!" she said.

He shrugged. "Yeah, but, well, there are signs. They're not like zombies in movies. They don't feast on human flesh. They don't rot and decay. They just die, and then they come back. They live lives like the rest of us, but they aren't like the rest of us. They're what we call the bad dead. They have a purpose. They might not even know it; I don't know if they do or not. Maybe they're as oblivious to their death as the rest of the world is to them. All I know is, this is one of the spots. Austin won't be here soon."

"How soon?" She rubbed her arms.

"The bats are gathering here more and more. The bad dead are rising in numbers. It could be a day. A week. A month. A year. Another generation. I don't know. Some say this is what wiped out the dinosaurs. Can you imagine dead dinosaurs? What would it be like? Would they have an animal's instinct, like the bats, and know? Would they have attacked the dead? Avoided them? Tried to avoid them? God, it's all so frustrating, to know but not to know. And to not be able to share. We know, but we can't tell. Not just anyone. We never know."

And then a bat swooped in at her. At Melissa. Dive bombed her. And for a minute, hatred flashed on her face. And Stanley knew he'd picked the wrong person to trust.

"Don't worry, sweetheart," she said. "It's sooner than you think."

Her arm lengthened, and the bat that swooped in once did it again. She snatched it from the air. Snatched it! Stanley wanted to stop watching, but he kept

looking as she snapped its neck, ripped off its head. Licked its blood. Smiled at him. “We are the dead,” she whispered. “We ate the dinosaurs. We’ll eat you. We know you’re watching us.”

And while he watched her, horrified, she faded into the crowd. Vanished. Right in front of him, she vanished. And the bats swooped down again.



[poetry]

ambient silence

...In perceptive stillness, the silent wind whispers songs of mystic waves strengthening its cove...
Amber lit energy concentrates our souls with the fruit of this season...
Upon arrival within this awakened moment, oddities revel at the marvelous fact of now...
The wingspan spreads within distance of time and space...
The many songs that sing ... Harmonizing instances of melodic changes..
In favor of this traveling wanderer.. This one of the only and true one...

The receptive rising tides of water and momentum...
Still upon arrival within this awakened moment...
Reveling nostalgia of poetry that walks the inner depths of this ever changing valley.
Drunken spectrums within this gift..
Clouds blow dust from the powerful source of salt...
The transitional mind receives and takes the inner solace.
Of the gloomy window pains of yesterday's past.

Wind storms of seconds, blown away, carries the smiles..
Synchronized phases of parallel symbiosis.
Drinking salt from within the soul... Becoming paralyzed by the breeze.
A poetical justice missing the warmth of your touch..
The sound of your voice and the wonders of this planet, we now share.

—brittany horton

Colored A Poison Red

I survive here in the madness that
I have created in my mind.
I hear the sounds of laughter,
Falling so far behind.

I wonder as I wander,
Through a maze of flies,
Striking out in bother,
When they crawl into my eyes.

I pick at the scab of fear.
I envision a rash to spread
Across the ivy on a wall,
Colored a poison red.

I quiver in the stillness,
Waiting for the part,
Where I search, so very tragically,
For the monster's heart.

—angela ash

The Breakup

by sarah gailey

Laila is not drunk yet. She is on her second drink of the night, something with herbal notes and grapefruit juice and tequila. It was on the Specials menu. She always orders off the Specials menu. By her third drink, she will be a little tipsy—just tipsy enough to walk closely to me on the way to the train. She won't have a fourth—not tonight—since it's a Thursday. If it were a Friday, she would have four, and she'd give me a lingering hug before we parted ways. But it's Thursday, so it's three drinks, and then she'll blow me a kiss before she walks down the stairs to the train station.

"So he says, 'I just don't know where this is going.' I mean, where does he think it's going? Where is it supposed to go? What does that even mean, right?"

I nod. I usually nod when Laila ends a sentence with "...right?" because she is usually right, and because I like the satisfied nod she gives me when I agree with her.

"So anyway he like—wants to know 'where this is going.' And I said, 'well what do you want' and he was like whatever, but..." she goes on, relating the conversation in full, something about his desire to leave his wife. I lose track of the story. I am caught up in the way her lips come together for the letter "B" in "but." Her lips have always reminded me of the rounded side of a roasted coffee bean. She wears a burnished bronze lip tint that just barely shimmers in the dim light of the bar. I watch her teeth bite her lower lip to form the "F" in the word "knife," and I think of sliding my hand into a puddle of melted wax and feeling it harden around my fingers.

"So I had to do it."

She idly plays with the cartilage piercing in her left ear and I think of taking it gently between my teeth just to hear her inhale sharply.

"Right?"

"Right, definitely. So then what did he say?"

I am on my third drink. I try to stay one drink ahead of Laila when we go out together; otherwise, I get this feeling like there are bees in my pockets. She is telling me about her breakup, which happened last night, which is why we are having this Emergency Girls Night. She's been seeing this guy for six months or so, and has been studiously ignoring his marriage for about the same amount of time. She keeps saying that she doesn't want anything serious, so this is perfect. She keeps saying that she doesn't need to tie herself to a man. I vehemently agree with the sentiment.

"Well, I mean." She had been playing with her straw, but she stops mid-twirl and looks at me. I swallow hard, trying to push down the heat that suddenly fills my throat. Her eyes look black in the dim light of the bar, like the kohl liner she wears has bled down into the irises and dyed them. "He said he wanted to leave *her* and be with *me*. He said he didn't understand why I wasn't *happy* about it." Her mouth pulls back from the word "happy," like it's bitter. The bartender is bringing us both another round, and she takes a significant gulp of hers, holding back the straw with her index finger. "What was I supposed to do?"

I nod and look away for a moment, trying to diminish the intensity of her gaze, but when I look back it's the same. Her eyes are a little glazed from the cocktail—which, I note, that gulp just about finished off. There's just enough space for the straw between her lips and she's clearly waiting for me to answer.

"...Right, I mean, you made yourself clear in the beginning. You weren't looking for anything serious. What else could you do?" It's what she was looking for. She presses her lips together. I take a long sip of my drink without tasting it and watch her over the rim of my glass. She's leaning back in her chair a little, looking around the room, patting her short afro to make sure all is in order. I think of how it would feel against the edge of my thumb if my hand was on the back of her neck. I take another long sip of my drink. I need to catch up.

"So anyway." She signals the bartender, who looks with restrained surprise at her already-empty glass. I guess tonight is a four-drink night after all, which tells me she's more upset about the breakup than she's letting on. Maybe I should have listened more closely to her retelling of the conversation. "Anyway, thank god I have hardwood floors. It was a bitch to clean up."

"From the fight? Did he break stuff?"

She lets out a little cough. "No, just, you know,"—her voice drops to a murmur—"There was a *lot* of blood." She runs the fingertips of one hand over her collarbones, a nervous tic that makes my mouth go dry. The bartender is right on time with more drinks, but I decide it's time for a glass of water. The speed with which I drank that fourth one is opening doors in my head. Dangerous ones. What was she saying?

"Right, yeah, blood. So then what?"

She pauses for a moment. “Well, I cleaned up, right?”

Right.

“What else could I do? Shit, girl, I’m just glad that window in my living room opens into the alley. Heaved his ass out the window, landed right in the dumpster. *Swish*.” She mimes a free-throw and I laugh with her.

She leans close to tell me a detail, something about how heavy he was, and I focus all my powers of concentration on ignoring her skin. It’s the color of wild honey, dark, sweet, faintly crystalline. I once bought an eight-ounce jar of local wildflower honey for \$10 at the farmer’s market and gave it to her. When she asked what prompted the gift, my stomach turned into a thousand tiny sparrows erupting out of a twisted oak tree. I told her that it was a free sample and then changed the subject immediately.

“Well, look, Laila. You deserve better than that anyway. I mean, he was never good enough for you.”

She smiles and pushes my thigh playfully. Does her hand linger for just a second? “Damn right. Shit. So anyway, garbage man came this morning, took it away. Not my problem anymore, right?”

Right. Right. Definitely.

“So what now? You think you’ll start looking around, or are you gonna be off the market for a little while?” I am so casual. I am so supportive. I am playing it totally cool.

“I think I’m gonna chill out for a little bit. Get some quality time with my best friend—”

She puts an arm around me and squeezes and her hand is on my bare shoulder.

Why did I wear a tank top tonight?

“—and you know. Lay low.”

My breathing is shallow. Her hand is still right there. She’s leaning against me like she would on the way to the train on a Friday and I can smell the wisps of grapefruit and tequila on her breath. “Is—Is there anything—I can do?”

“Well.” Laila is still leaning against me, and her arm is still around me, and her hand is still on my bare shoulder, and her fingers trace a swirling pattern against my skin. “I was wondering if... if you could hide the knife somewhere for me? It’s just that I don’t want to put it in that same dumpster, and I can’t think of a good place to hide it.” Her thumb slips under the spot on the top of my shoulder where my bra strap digs in. I would do anything she asked. Knife? Anything.

“Of course.” I shouldn’t turn my face to hers like this—it puts our lips too close. Would a friend think about that? Or do friends just put their faces this close together? She lifts away from me to sip at her drink. The movement wrings my heart out and hangs it up to dry. I excuse myself to use the ladies room.

Cold water on my face. Grip the counter’s edge. Breathe in, to all the deep places that are alight with Laila. Laila. Laila. Breathe out hard to extinguish them. Shake out my hands. Check my hair. Back out into the bar.

She’s standing, handing a receipt to the bartender. I thank her profusely, try to

give her cash. “No, no, sugar—it’s the least I could do, you helping me this way.” We’re walking out and she’s leaning against me, arm around my hips, and no, I’m not drunk and imagining things, her pinky finger is slipping under the hem of my shirt to graze my skin. But it’s an accident. It’s definitely an accident.

We’re approaching the train station. She slips a white bundle out of her purse. In the light of the streetlamps I see that it’s a cloth napkin, the kind she brings out when we have Orphan Thanksgiving together, and there are deep purple stains on the fabric. She is so close to me, and I can see the way her mascara coats her eyelashes, and I can feel the little puff of air that leaves her mouth as she whispers, “Thanks, baby. You’re an amazing friend. I can’t think of anybody else in the world I would trust with this. And now, we’re kind of in on it together, right?” Her lips curve up at the edges as the question mark floats between us.

And she leans forward just a little—just a quarter of an inch.

And both of our hands are around the white bundle, the knife wrapped in the stained napkin, and I’m not asking questions because she’s kissing me.

Her lips taste just like I want them to, like a cocktail and a secret. My thumb is brushing against her hair as I put my free hand against the back of her neck. One of her hands—colder than I would have expected—is on my waist, pulling me close enough that the button on her jeans bumps against the button on mine. Her other hand guides the white bundle into my purse, tugs my hand away from it so it’s loose in there, with my keys and my wallet and my long-neglected checkbook. Her teeth lightly close around my lower lip, and release, and then she’s sliding away from me, walking backwards for a few steps before turning down the stairs to the train station.

I am ten blocks from home, and on my way, I toss the bundled, bloody knife into a stranger’s recycling bin, against the curb awaiting pickup. I float up the stairs to my apartment. She kissed me. She kissed me, and I know I should worry about the rest of it, but she kissed me. Laila kissed me, and it’s not a knife or a dead man that I’ll dream about tonight.

She kissed me.



THE DEAD ARE ALIVE!

by andrew g. bennett

It was a typical winter's day like any other Sydney winter's day: cool but not overly cold; warm, if you were in the sun; warmer, if you hung out in the right places.

I was hanging around at the pizza shop so it was toasty warm near that large oven and, as I already said, it was a Sydney winter's day like any other. That was until Mavis Appleby turned up.

I saw her at one of the tables outside on the pavement tucking into a family-sized supreme, with a side dish of garlic bread and a large Coke. That was strange enough. I'd never ever seen Mavis have a pizza, let alone some Coca-Cola, but the very peculiar thing was that she was dead. I knew she was dead. I'd been at her funeral the week before.

I stood there and watched her eat and noticed she was wearing the same blue dress suit they had buried her in. The thought crossed my mind to go over and talk to her but what are you supposed to say to someone deceased? Instead, I turned around to the guy who runs the pizza shop, and said, "That lady's dead."

"What?" he mumbled as he lifted some dough into the oven with his long wooden spade.

"She's dead... that lady out there, Mrs Appleby, she died last week."

He looked at me like I was some kind of lunatic and told me to 'get the f---' out of his shop.

"She's dead, I tell you. I know she's dead."

"Who's dead?" the pizza guy's wife piped up. She'd been out the back of the shop and had just walked through to the counter carrying some empty pizza boxes.

"Mrs Appleby," I said.

"Of course she's dead, I went to her..."

"Funeral," the pizza woman was about to say, then she saw what I could see: Mrs Appleby chewing on a cheesy pizza slice and washing it down with some Coke, and then the pizza woman dropped the trays and, much to her husband's surprise, started pointing at Mrs Appleby and screaming out at the top of her lungs: "She's dead!"

That was just the start of it. I left the shop after the pizza lady locked herself in the backroom and refused to come out. Avoiding Mavis Appleby as best I could, I beat a hasty retreat.

What if she wanted to thank me for coming to her funeral? Then she might want to know why my mother hadn't attended and I'd have to tell her that my mother didn't like her very much, and that might have caused all sorts of problems. However, the revelation that people could still eat pizza when they had died strongly appealed to me—I thought that was pretty cool. It made death seem a damn sight less daunting.

Further on down the street, there was Mr Grimly eating an ice cream cone, or at least attempting to eat ice cream. Grimly had been dead for over six months and looked a little worse for wear. He had a hole in the side of his cheek and when he took a bite on the cone the ice cream would fall out of that gaping hole and drop onto the pavement. He didn't seem to notice and continued biting away at the cone.

By this time I was becoming concerned. Was everyone who had died suddenly going to come back to life? If so, it would be the death knell of the funeral industry as we knew it, and what about the legal implications? For people who had inherited their relative's possessions, would they have to give them back? Would dead people be allowed to posthumously change their minds? It was a real conundrum and gravely concerning.

Back at home the television and the radio were full of it.

"The dead are alive!" the broadcasters howled.

"Repent! It's the Apocalypse!" was the wail on the Christian channel.

"Dead people should not be allowed to receive welfare," the guy from the redneck station bellowed.

My mother was listening to all of this as she repeatedly changed channels and incredulously shook her head.

"Mrs Appleby was having a pizza up the road," I told her.

"Stupid woman," my mother snapped, "all that fat and salt is unhealthy for someone of her age."

"But surely she's no age now, Mum," I offered, "not now that she's dead."

"Hmm..." my mother said in contemplation, "I suppose I won't be able to speak ill of her now, even though she's still here to annoy me."

That night, I rang my Uncle Jack who was a lawyer, currently disbarred, to enquire what the legal status would be for dead people who are no longer actually dead.

"It's a good point, William," he said, "my thinking is that governments will have to enact new laws. For instance, if you run over a dead person in your car, should

you be liable for manslaughter charges? Or would it simply be a misdemeanour for interfering with a living corpse?”

Talking to Jack left me even more confused, but one bright spot of the day’s happenings seemed to be that the human race had by some strange chance acquired a sort-of immortality. No one would ever have to worry about death anymore and there would be no further need for philosophers or religion.

But the more I thought about it, the less attractive the concept of living forever seemed. There were those horrible people in history who would now continue to exist for all time, such as Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, and the Kardashians.

“I don’t want to live forever!” I announced, just like the Bon Jovi song, to no-one in particular.

“You’ll have to,” my mother quickly replied from downstairs.

“Why?”

“Your grandfather is at the front door. He wants your inheritance back, and with your lousy job you’ll need at least a couple of lifetimes to repay him.”



CHILD'S PLAY

Lincoln's portrait seems amused
as logs are set in piles,
though I may choose the dominos
to stack until they fall.

So it goes, midnight in my den.

How to explain at ninety-four
once again a boy of five?

Cannot tell you why I play,
but I can tell you why I cry.

There is no one to play with me.

—alan meyrowitz

A BREAK IN THE DARK

by michael king

“Come on, it will be fun,” she had said, though she hadn’t told him where they’d be going. But he loved that her eyes widened whenever they met and that her backside jounced a bit as her high heels *clack-clacked* along. She was different, quirky and spooky. She loved all those speaking-with-the-dead shows and was already introducing vegetarian cuisine and trying to get him not to wear leather. Not that it mattered. Yeah, even if he gave it his all, she’d eventually drift toward a hipper, younger, better-looking mate. But it might last a while. They might even make it into the bedroom. Earlier, during dinner at La Magia De Vaca, he had riffling through her purse when she went to the restroom and verified her age as 22 years old. Now he wished they were back at the restaurant. He missed the greens and reds and yellows.

“Oh Mark,” she said. “Come and sit with me. C’mon, it’ll be fun.” She patted the rust-pocked chair beside her, which was one of four in the center of the room and the only one unoccupied. If he sat, he’d be knee-to-knee with the tallish, well-built guy he had nicknamed Dreadlocks, because of his disgusting but impressive hair. The guy’s name might be Charles, but he couldn’t be sure. Bridget had skipped the introductions. But no, not sitting. He wasn’t about to sit in on a séance. If anything dead were to appear, he’d need to be on his feet. Besides, the single bulb hanging above the group of chairs reminded Mark of every horror movie he had ever watched.

“No thanks,” he said. “I’ll be fine right here.”

He patted the door with one big palm.

Dreadlocks shifted in his chair and looked up from his phone. He smiled at Mark.

“Big chicken,” Bridget said, then giggled.

She leaned forward and the short, skinny prick Mark had named Tiny mumbled into her little ear.

“Oh, about eight weeks now,” Bridget said. “But I can tell this one—he’s a keeper. My Goliath, my lion, my mover of mountains. And he’s nowhere near my last mistake. That damned Raul. Well,” she said, glancing at Mark and appearing

mock-flustered for a moment, “he’s a bigger, American Raul. You’re right, Chris, I guess I do have a type.”

Mark grinned. *Keep on clucking like a chicken*, he thought.

“Okay then,” Dreadlocks said and clapped his long-fingered hands together. He stood and grabbed a yellow Bic lighter and lit two stubby white candles on a small black table nestled into a corner. Then he lit a stick of incense, placed it on a long wooden holder and grabbed what looked like a huge joint. He eyed Mark.

“I’ll need you to stand back there,” he said. “This is sage, in case you were wondering, and I need to cleanse the room. I’ll need to pay special attention to the doorway. It’ll need to be clean and clear.”

Sage, Mark thought, as he maneuvered his way toward the back of the cramped slate-painted room. *Sage!*

The bundle of grey-green leaves smoked thickly, but Mark didn’t mind. It was covering another smell, which was unpleasant to say the least. If he could think, if he could slow his thoughts, he’d know why the hell the odor bothered him. He shook his head to displace the tears that doubled his vision. Any second now, he’d start coughing. When Dreadlocks stopped his whispered chant and opened the door and waved the smoke away, Mark privately thanked the gods of the universe and dabbed at his eyes with the cuff of his shirtsleeve. Dreadlocks closed the door and locked it and returned to the table. He stubbed out the sage in an aluminum ashtray. He folded the unused chair and set it against the wall. Then he pulled on the chain of the single bulb and the light went out. The three friends linked hands. Dreadlocks scooted over a notch.

Bridget smirked at Mark. She was acting weird. Being a bitch, actually. Dreadlocks spoke.

“Please enter, spirits,” Dreadlocks said. “Please enter and commune with us. Anyone good may enter and speak and feel our living warmth. But we are not interested in anyone malevolent. In anything malevolent. We seek the gentle and the good. Please enter into our company.”

The room remained quiet, still. Bridget’s pale skin glowed sweetly in the candlelight. While Dreadlocks recited the greeting again, Mark pressed his shoulders into the wall and tried to relax. Dreadlocks nodded toward Bridget, and this time she repeated the words. She had done this before. When she finished, Mark noticed his palms were clammy and that he had caught a chill. He forced himself to stare at Bridget. Why? Why was he here? If ever a jackass in the world would attract some negative influence and end up possessed and spitting pea soup, it was he. He had always been unlucky, weak, unsound.

When Tiny took up the chant, Mark considered all the years he had wasted on the question “why.” Why had his Aunt molested him? Why him? He supposed he was wasting his time on her now. A waste. The woman was a perfect waste. A waste of a healthy, beating heart. When Dreadlocks jumped up from his chair, Mark jolted out of himself. A long finger pointed toward him and behind it, the tall man’s glare burned with resolve. If he were someone else, and if Bridget and Tiny hadn’t dawned the same mask of fearful awe, their slightly parted lips gleaming, the

look might have comforted Mark.

"You do not belong here. You must leave!" Dreadlocks shouted.

Mark's mouth wouldn't open. He had thought Dreadlocks was pointing at him but he suddenly realized the bony finger was aimed at the corner about two feet to his left. In the candle light Mark watched the smoke trail upwards from the stick of incense. He tried to make himself turn to look, but he couldn't.

"You must leave," Dreadlocks repeated. "You must leave now."

Mark's body stiffened. A piece of ash dropped from the stick of incense.

"You. Must—"

"Fucking-a right," Mark blurted, and rushed to the door, deciding that if it didn't open, he'd walk right through it. Somehow his foot caught on Bridget's chair and he pulled it out from under her. Her ass thudded onto the floor. He called an apology over his shoulder and slammed the door behind him. He made his way through short hallways and down too many steep stairs. When he finally got out onto the street he stopped and eyed the indistinct building. His breath misted. Winter had arrived, it seemed. He stood and waited for fifteen seconds and then started walking. She wouldn't come. As he passed the shadowy parking lot where Bridget had parked her black Jetta, he considered writing the word "sorry" in the condensation on the driver's side window. But no—now that that creepy room was behind him. He figured they were just messing with him. Shoulders hunched, hands in pockets, he pushed on through the harshly lighted streets of Chicago. He hoped nobody would ask him for change because he didn't have any. Maybe he would call Bridget when he finally got his broke-ass home. He would use the home phone. He had a cell phone but rarely used it. It remained, collecting dust, on the dresser in his bedroom. Besides, he hated when people sat around staring at their smart phones in restaurants or at the zoo. He hoped he didn't get himself lost.

About an hour later, Mark ambled into the lot where he and Bridget had decided to leave his car. He shivered, his fingertips stinging from the cold. He panicked for a second or two when he couldn't locate his keys, but sighed with relief when he dug into his right front pocket again and pulled them out. He had worn a light jacket because he had thought he looked better in it. Never again. Never again would he try so hard to impress a girl. He had known he and Bridget wouldn't work out. He'd known it when he'd realized her parents were rich. Dreadlocks and Tiny were rich too. He'd put money on it.

As he maneuvered the car onto the road, he flicked the heater to high power and settled in for the four-hour drive to bum-fuck, Polk, Indiana. It wasn't so bad. A weight had been lifted. Bridget was gone. When the light ahead turned red, he slammed on the brakes. When the car stopped he locked the doors. He was creeped out. He'd watch *Blazing Saddles* when he got home. He figured that would do the trick. He tapped the play-button on his mp3 player, and, before long, the first track of a Beatles album created more than 50 years ago had him slapping his palm on the steering wheel.

Mark pulled the car into the driveway as the garage door made its jerky ascent. Frost covered his unruly lawn. Tonight he was grateful for what his parents had

done for him. Five months ago, a few days after his 30th birthday, he'd lost his job at the plant. Downsizing. Then his parents had told him they were moving to Alaska. A six-figure income awaited his father. Mark could have the house. He'd accepted the gift with tear ducts streaming and he'd driven slowly to his small apartment in a daze of confusion. Both of his parents had had to work overtime at shit jobs to pay off the mortgage and had rarely been available during his youth. And then Mark had moved out. And he had been the one to keep distance between them. The house had been an emotional payoff.

They knew. They had to. They knew what his aunt had done to him on that hot, hot Fourth of July in the dank basement of this very house. A basement he solely used for laundry. What pissed him off was that all these years later, they were still protecting themselves from pain. Not him. *Mold*, he thought. That was why he had half-welcomed the smoldering sage. That dank, moldy basement smell always reminded him of his Aunt. *That selfish bitch*. She had not only wasted his youth but, until he had ended the practice about five years ago, countless hours and dollars on therapy sessions. She had poisoned him, tainted him. Maybe that was why he liked them so young? Maybe he had checked Bridget's driver's license because he had wanted her to be younger.

"No," he said aloud and hip-bumped shut the car door. He wasn't going to degrade himself. Not any longer. He was a good person. Would never hurt anyone. The image of Bridget's ass smacking the floor flickered in his mind. He stood staring at the door that led inside, feeling the icy creep of winter. Then he slapped the wide, white button that closed the garage door. When it closed completely, he went inside. Then he checked the other doors, the windows. He flicked on each and every light and then stood in front of the open fridge. He glanced at the clock on the microwave: 4:02. He grabbed a package of bologna and a two-liter bottle of diet soda and headed toward the couch. He set the snack on the coffee table and sat on the couch, heavily. He needed money. Tomorrow he would call the temp-work agency and would take whatever he could get. Shit, he'd forgotten to close the curtains. He didn't want to get up, but he didn't want anyone seeing him either. Why? They didn't even speak to him. Hardly even acknowledged him. Screw it. He grabbed the remote and instead of throwing it at his hunched reflection in the bay window, he turned on the flat-screen television. Another gift from Mom and Dad. Before the picture appeared before him, the television clicked off. Then the lights went out around him.

He gritted his teeth. He was too creeped out to go without light. Luckily, there wasn't much to trip up on. He had only been able to furnish the living room, the dining room and his bedroom. The house felt big and empty. He'd have to go and check the fuse box. In the basement. He decided it wasn't going to happen. He'd go to bed. But he wasn't tired. He trudged upstairs and sat on the bed and considered his options. *No, no, and no*. A creak of wood. He started, clutching the blankets in his fists. He had thought he had seen a small form in the doorway. A boy? But he knew it was that damn séance returning to haunt him. He breathed in through his nose and out through his mouth and repeated the process three times. Slowly

he made his way into the master bathroom. A quick shower. Get clean. Get out. He adjusted the temperature of the water, got in, wetted his head and shut off the water. He couldn't. He hadn't been able to hear himself think over the rushing water and he'd kept envisioning his Aunt. He stood there dripping. A whisper of sound. Like someone walking by in nylon pants. No. Like fingernails on the shower curtain. Just as the thought registered the damp material touched his cheek. He hopped back, slipped, pivoted. The curtain clung to him for a moment and then let go with a pop and a clatter. His back crashed onto the bathroom floor. He stared up into the darkness, halting the sound of his respiration, feeling the lip of the bathtub under his right heel and the chill of the tile beneath him. Somehow he'd missed the vanity and what might have been a skull-fracture. He took in a breath, held it, feeling the fullness in his chest, and exhaled. It was layover from the séance. That was all. He had never liked unlit places and he had always been a chickenshit. The supernatural or the paranormal had bothered him to say the least. *Nothing. Nothing here.*

Awkwardly and painfully, he got up. He wrapped himself in a beach towel and headed downstairs. If he didn't get the power going, the whole house would be as cold as the bathroom floor. He was fine until he opened the basement door and peered into a black gullet. He sighed, startling himself once again. He stepped down, holding the handrail. At the bottom step, his foot wanted another stair and he stumbled into the smelly room. Flashlight, he thought, but the one he had was up in the kitchen and its batteries were dead. He'd forgotten to buy new ones. Hands held out in front of him he stepped slowly toward the far wall of the windowless basement. Too soon he was disoriented, dizzy. This was harder than he'd thought. Thankfully, the space was fairly empty. The washer and dryer. A laundry basket. The shower nozzle above the concrete floor. He hadn't used it in twenty years or so and he'd removed the curtain a day or so after he'd moved in.

He remembered his Aunt, drunk, giggling, hidden behind the thick plastic in the murky half-light of the large room. He had wanted to switch on another light but he had stared at his white, grass-stained shoes instead. He'd been hesitant. Her hand had appeared and she had curled one finger in a beckoning motion.

"I'm hiding from you," she had said.

Mark wondered if maybe he had been hiding when he had left Bridget in Chicago. They had had fun together. She had been a bitch, but maybe she had deserved more than being abandoned. He slowed his pace, swayed slightly on his feet. One foot in front of the other. Repeat.

His fingertips bent inward when they struck the wall and the pain flashed white in his mind. He hoped it was the back of the room and edged his way to his left. Bingo. He'd gotten lucky. He groped around, opened the fuse box. But the switches were in the proper position. Suddenly, in a burst of hope, he reached up to the main breaker. Shit. No power. The problem had to be elsewhere. Then, as he tried to get his bearings for the trip upstairs, he heard a deep rumble of laughter. A low and breathy exhalation, feminine in tone.

"Ha, ha, ha."

He froze, envisioning his Aunt. He strained to listen for rushing footsteps, shifting clothing, machine-gun fire. Finally, he took a single step away from the wall. Laughter. Laughter never hurt anyone. Physically, anyway. And wasn't he always hearing laughter? Wasn't that the normal response to a joke?

"Ha, ha, ha."

He ran. In his mind he saw a thin, red thread and he followed it. Somehow he made it to the stairs before he buckled to his knees. The scantest moonlight entered through the open door above and in another instance of luck, he repositioned his arms and grasped the edge of the stair. Probably he saved his teeth. He spider-crawled the stairs to the top. Miraculously the towel had stayed around him. He opened the curtains in the kitchen and in the dining room. Then he checked to make sure the doors were locked.

In the living room, he stopped, peering up toward his bedroom, peering into the darkness. Lights flashed as a car pulled into the driveway. He wanted to look out the window, but his attention was locked on the top of the stairs. There might have been a tall form just outside his bedroom doorway. It was hard to tell. It might have been a spot of dense shadow. If it moved, he would run out the front door in his towel. He wondered if Bridget had followed him home, but that was ridiculous, too hopeful. Something had followed him home, though. Something from that ridiculous séance.

The lights outside withdrew. He shouldn't have left Bridget with an unfelt apology. It was wrong. He wished they were sitting close to each other, watching Cable Guy or Blade Runner. He should have at least told her off, or given her a chance to explain. But that's what he did. He bailed when things got tough. His Aunt had started him on that path. She had showed him the way. But Mark had been the one who had chosen the habit of running away.

He peeked out at the empty driveway. When he turned from the window, a dark figure was standing silently at the bottom of the stairway. His body tensed as if for an impact and he exhaled a visible breath. He knew it shouldn't be so cold inside. Not so suddenly. It was some sort of shadow. In his peripherals he could see the frost brown tips of the high bushes outside the window. When the thing stepped forward, dull eyes glowed and the shape of its head came into view. That was no fucking hat.

He retreated, stumbled, fell backward, put out an arm and crashed sideways into the corner near the arm of the couch. Then he shot himself toward the front door. As that terribly shaped head rushed toward him, he changed course. He ripped off the towel and covered his head and upper body. He hit the window with his left shoulder. When it gave, it gave loudly. And he couldn't see a thing. He felt a slight pricking sensation above his right eye and, though he sensed little elsewhere, he was sure a large shard would find an artery and he'd bleed out on the ground. Naked. When his penis snagged in the bushes, a bright panic exploded in his mind.

A branch scraped hard across his ass, almost entering his orifice, and then he was free, penis intact, the towel who-knew-where. His balls tightened, rising, and his buttocks jounced as his big, bare feet pounded the sidewalk. Blood ran from a

nasty gouge on the backside of his right elbow, but he felt good, exhilarated. His right pectoral was sore and bleeding, but he didn't care. He had jumped through a Goddamned window and had left that bigheaded beast behind. But it was colder outside. He'd have to get somewhere safe soon.

He stopped, bending to hold his legs, staring at his cut knuckles and forearms and conscious of his ass again. His sphincter opened and he stood upright in shocked humiliation. Hearing a tinkle of glass on concrete, he looked down at a nice-sized shard. It had worked its way out of the meaty part of the outer section of his thigh. When he realized he was holding the towel, he shook the towel out onto the grass, momentarily lost in the pieces of streetlight, and wrapped it tightly around the wound. A gash across his calf muscle. A cut on his heel. There was nowhere to run. And that shadow-thing was attached to him. Not his house. Without thinking, he reached across to his left shoulder and pulled out a blocky piece of glass. The bleeding increased, so he resisted the urge to yank out whatever was logged in the nape of his neck. Below that was another wound. For some reason, it was the one that hurt the most.

He glanced about. As far as he could tell, no one had seen him. Yet he wondered how they'd slept through the racket. He'd have to go back. And face that horrible thing in his house. Glancing about, he broke into an unsteady trot, but soon slowed, feeling nauseous, drained, and lightheaded. He had jumped through a window. Only now the action held no appeal and he worried about the warm fluid traveling the contours of his shirtless back.

He stopped, dazed and amazed, feeling a smile spread on his face. Bridget's car was parked on the side of the road, one tire resting up on the curb. Blackly tipped fingernails and an intense look of concentration were illuminated by her phone. She hadn't been able to make herself knock on the door, but she was looking for his home-phone number. He'd put money on it. As if she had sensed his presence, she glanced up and her eyes widened when she saw him. His mouth opened, closed. His throat clicked. He took a step and fell to one knee. It didn't hurt. A hunk of glass slid warmly along his right shoulder and clinked on the concrete. A gush of blood flowed down his chest. When his cheek rested in the stiff grass, he welcomed its prickling chill. Bridget's phone landed beside him.

Her aura was angelic as she bent over him and somehow the heavy eyeliner added to the effect.

"It's okay, it's okay, it's okay," she said. She wasn't sure where to apply pressure. He grinned. She had driven four hours to apologize. Four hours for him. If he lived, if the demon standing behind Bridget didn't take him now, Mark decided he wouldn't run. He would fight. He would try and try again and again as he had tried earlier when he stepped into the shower.



SEVEN HORROR HAIKU

Transporter error
While being beamed up to ship
With large knife shipment

Aliens don't kill
Reduce us too thumbnail size
Insects take revenge

Aliens release
In atmosphere, airplane size
Hungry mosquitoes

SWAT team at your door
Scared and confused, while next door
Hear zombies laughing

On mission to Mars
Found floating around in space
Alien coffin

Would still be alive
If somebody had not switched
Your bulletproof vest

Someone switched toy gun
On your young child's toy holster
You find out too late

—denny e. marshall

LOVING MEMORY

by anna mavromati

My grandpa was the first. He showed up early one morning, his gray, wrinkled hand pressed against the glass of my window. A smudged handprint was left for months after.

I went to the window to see him and I wasn't afraid. I pushed up the sash—it was a sticky window and it always took a few tries to slide it up. Grandpa stood with his face as near as it could be without touching the glass, waiting patiently.

Of course I knew he had died three days ago, but at the time, at eight years old, seeing him again felt so natural that I think I had forgotten all about that in the moment.

He spoke in a whisper I had never heard from him before, hoarse and throaty. He spoke to me for a while, with me leaning out the windowsill in my pajamas on that dark autumn morning as the sun began to rise.

After my dad walked in the room, presumably because he had heard me talking, I thought my grandpa had disappeared, he was gone so suddenly. I turned back to the window, which was now opened to the crisp morning air. My grandpa was nowhere in sight. I was a good kid and I did what I was told that morning—I brushed my teeth, I ate my cereal. It wasn't until I came home from school that afternoon that I had heard what my parents had found: my grandpa's dead body in the back yard, lying sprawled beneath my window. No one knew exactly when it had disappeared from the morgue the night before.

I was asked a lot of questions by parents, aunts and uncles, the police.

"Did you see anyone else there with Grandpa, Marilyn?"

"No."



“Did it look like anyone was carrying Grandpa?”

“No.”

“What exactly happened again?”

I told them all the same story, the true story, that my grandpa had come to my window that morning, rapped on the glass, and whispered to me a long, long list of people to tell he loved and a list of people he disliked and the people he missed and the people he hated and the people he used to look up to but had become disappointed with and the people who he pretended to like but never cared for really and the neighbor whose cat was always in his tomato plant and one person who had never returned his lucky golf clubs. I repeated the list of names every time I told someone this story. I remembered every word my grandpa had said.

The police left and my parents sat stony-faced around take-out containers at the dinner table. They said the police had chalked all of this up to a cruel prank. I wasn't allowed to open my window anymore for anyone. A few days later dad even invested in a good lock for it that kept me from lifting the sash.

The next one came a few weeks later. It was a woman this time and looking back, she wasn't really that old. She stared through my window silently, watching me do my homework for what must have been a couple of hours. I kept looking up at her and shaking my head. I motioned to the window. I mouthed to her that it was locked. When I returned to my room after dinner that night she was still standing there.

Finally I met her in the back yard. I slipped out while my dad washed dishes and my mom watched the news on TV.

She was still standing outside my bedroom window. She turned to face me and her eyes were wide and she whispered in such a hissed rush I had to stop her a few times to clarify what she was saying. At first, I hadn't even noticed that the back of her head was gaping open like a second mouth.

The next day at school I told Cindy Graham, who sat two desks down from me, that her big sister wanted her to grow up to be a beautiful and strong woman and that she did not blame their parents for anything. Cindy cried and I ended up in detention.

And the police came to the house again, and the coroner and the detectives, for the woman's body this time. She was lying right where I had left her, where she had collapsed after we spoke, her hair ruffled against the grass and leaves, her pretty face staring toward the sky.

And everybody had questions again and they had questions for my parents now too. They pulled my mom aside and I saw she was crying as she answered them saying she didn't know, she didn't know what I was talking about, of course she didn't know.

It didn't happen again for a long time after that, and everything seemed to have gone back to normal, mostly. Cindy Graham avoided me at school, her desk now in the opposite corner of the room, where I would sometimes catch her staring at me, her round eyes framed between her bangs and the top of her book. Now my dad would come into my room to check that my blinds were closed every few hours.

“If you see anyone—even if it’s someone you think you know—dead or alive—outside your window, you come get us,” he said, “right away.”

The next year, when it finally happened again, I went straight to my mom in the living room. She put her book down and let me lead her out the back door and around to the side of the house, the area my window opens up to. Her hand was trembling slightly as it clutched mine.

The man with a bald head who had been knocking a steady rhythm against the window pane was already motionless and crumpled on the lawn by the time we got to him. My mom screamed.

When the police came this time, so did the woman who worked at the check-out counter at the drug store that sold ice cream cones for a dollar. She was huddled in a shawl and at first I didn’t recognize her without the green vest she wore to work. After speaking with the police she pointed a finger at my mother and frowned.

“I wanted to hear it,” she said. “I wanted to know what he had to say.”

My mom was crying again and one of the police officers, a short woman who had questioned me once, stepped between my mom and the drug store woman protectively.

“I wanted to *hear* it,” the drug store lady said again.

She turned to me with a sad, desperate look that must have been even sadder and more desperate than I knew how to process at age nine.

“Did you catch *anything*?” she asked. “Did he say anything to you at all?”

I shook my head. I had never opened the window. This time, I had gone straight to the living room for my mom.

The drug store woman leaned against the wall, her hands covering her face.

“He had something to say to me,” she said, her shoulders sagging. “I just want to know what my husband had to say to me.”

She was arrested that night but soon afterward she was released. No one seemed to know what she should be charged with. The bodies they found at my window didn’t appear to have been tampered with. There was no evidence that the drug store woman could have broken into the morgue. She had alibis—family and friends and work shifts.

My parents stopped going to that drug store. No more one dollar ice cream cones. The ibuprofen and the band-aids and the hydrogen peroxide now came from a grocery store aisle.

It stopped happening for a while after that, until one day, in my teenage years, my dad broke the toe next to his pinky when he had slipped on the ladder that leads to the attic. Over the years I had found myself thinking now and then about the drug store lady, although I never saw her anymore and I definitely never spoke of her—or of grandpa or Cindy Graham’s big sister or the bald man—not ever.

While my dad’s toe was being examined, I excused myself from the waiting room to get a bottle of water, but I ended up walking past the vending machine and downstairs to the morgue. I slipped in right after a nurse had passed by—a lucky break.

Inside, everything was only still for a moment.

Blankets were shoved away and thrown to the floor as the bodies on stretchers sat up. The compartments along the wall slid open, a few of them getting stuck and their inhabitants knocked and kicked in their shelves.

They surrounded me, the old and the young, some who looked injured but didn't move as if they were hurt, some who could almost pass for still being alive if it weren't for their pale coloring and their glazed eyes. They walked and slipped over the tags from their toes. One of them was a little boy with fresh stitches up his chest who placed a small, freezing hand on my knee. They gathered close on all sides of me, all of them whispering in their hoarse, deep, desperate voices.

But it was too much all at once, the banging in the compartments, the whispers, the clumsy shuffling of their feet, their cold hands on my shoulders and waist. I couldn't make out what they were saying; they were talking all at once. One of them had mentioned her sister, another his son, one man had a boss who needed to "shove it," another wanted me to make sure someone fed the cocker spaniel, and then the rest was a blur—the whispers blended and overlapped. I couldn't make out a word.

"One at a time," I said. "I can't do this. I can't hear you."

They all continued to whisper over each other. More of them seemed to be appearing around me at every second.

"I want to listen," I said, tears forming in my eyes because as near as they were to my ears I could not understand what they were saying anymore. I think some of them were speaking languages I couldn't understand. "But there are too many of you. I can't."

Some of them began leaning in close to my face, but there was no breath against my skin except for my own, bouncing back into my face from their cold flesh. They all smelled so stale. They whispered and whispered but the sound was muddled together into the same incoherent mumbling. I dropped to my knees to escape it but they leaned over me. I was drowned in them. I closed my eyes and tried my best to focus, to make out the words. I didn't even hear the nurses outside approaching the room.

And that's where they found me, crumpled on the morgue floor in a pile of corpses, my hands on their lifeless arms, trying so hard to remember something for them.



Enslaved Invaders

Once, we were invaded.
It appears no-one remembers.
Instead, at the sky we gaze,
Wondering which of the stars
Looks down curiously at us.

Roaring and searing,
They fell from the heavens,
Gigantic starships melting
Into murk and acid rain.
Yet, they survived.

Often, I imagine
They were rocks
Or even trees
Perhaps from a stone or tree world
With gravity much weaker than the earth's.

I suspect the rocks,
The towering mountains;
The way they huddle,
Subdued by a force unanticipated,
Crying out beautiful rivers

While an unsuspecting race
Scales their stiff forms,
Explores their bodily holes, their caves,
Breaks their bones,
And downs their tears.

—walter dinjos

A DANGEROUS CONFESSION

by eris mcencroe

I pushed aside thoughts of Caroline as I walked the long trail to the isolated cabin. My wife would be frantic, pale with fear, if she knew I had agreed to meet a self-confessed multiple murderer, alone, with no backup. Angry too.

Thumping heart; sharpened, probing senses, an alert mind—I was familiar with the body’s reaction to danger. I did not believe this man named Joseph would harm me but, in truth, I knew nothing about him except that he claimed to have killed three times. I didn’t like being so unprepared. It wasn’t just the danger. I prefer going into interviews knowing more about my subjects than they do themselves. It’s what good journalists do. But then, we also take risks and play hunches.

This story could be the big one. I had to put aside my fear and disgust. Crime was not my normal area but I was not going to let this opportunity pass.

As I neared the cabin I caught glimpses of light reflecting off Fosters Pond. I had gone to high school in this area of Massachusetts and had always loved it.

When I first saw Joseph he was sitting on the porch of a rustic timber cabin, enjoying the early autumn sun. I paused to study him. When he noticed me, he rose to greet me.

He was not what I expected. He was impeccably groomed and wore an expensive, well cut green plaid blazer, a blue shirt and crisply pressed ivory trousers. He was about ten years younger than me, in his early thirties. A firm jaw framed his handsome face. His ears, the one discordant feature, jutted out from beneath his brown hair. Approaching him, I caught a hint of musky cologne.

Joseph stuck out his hand. “Ben Pelterman, it’s a pleasure to meet you at last.”

“Joseph, I presume.” I shook his hand firmly, trying hard to disguise my distaste. He gave me a sardonic smile.

“Come, sit down.” He ushered me to a chair on the porch and sat down on the

opposite side of a small table. He gestured towards the surroundings. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

I couldn't help but turn my attention to the view across the lake. Some trees had already turned a bright gold, their color reflecting in the water. The scene was delightful. In a month, when speckled hues of red joined the gold, it would be glorious.

"Good trip up from New York?" he asked.

"Once I got out of Manhattan."

He nodded. "I've always loved this area. I often came up here when I worked in Boston." He was doing my job, trying to relax me, to join with me. It's what you do with an interview subject and it was unnerving me. He'd given me an opening though.

"What work did you do in Boston?"

"I was a police officer, a detective actually." He gave me that smile again.

"Not a career choice I would have suspected," I replied.

"You're smarter than that, Ben."

"Well, of course it would help in avoiding being caught. But do you actually want to avoid being caught, Joseph? You said you would hand yourself in if I reported your story."

He smirked. "Being caught and handing yourself in aren't the same thing, Ben. It's a matter of control."

"I see."

"Also, Ben, the deal was I would hand myself in if you published the *full* story in your paper. I hope you keep that distinction in mind."

"Perhaps then you should tell me the story."

He drew back and then turned away. He looked disappointed. Had I blown it? I thought I had judged the right moment.

After several minutes he turned back to me. "Very well." He removed a large photo of a young blond woman from an attaché case and slid it toward me.

From the hairstyle and the clothing I judged the picture to be about fifteen years old. The girl was very pretty, sweet with trusting eyes. It distressed me to think of what she must have endured. It didn't help that she reminded me a little of my eldest daughter. I steeled myself for the sordid details, wishing I had never come. *Too late now.*

I became aware that Joseph was staring at me intently. "Do you recognize her?" he asked.

"No," I replied puzzled. "Was she your first victim?"

"I dislike the term *victim*, but if you must use it, she was my last."

I resisted scratching behind my ear. When I played poker it was a sure tell that I was perplexed and I had schooled myself against doing it.

"This photo is at least fifteen years old. You couldn't have been much more than eighteen at the time," I said.

"I was thirteen when that photo was taken. That was twenty years ago."

I was stunned. "You killed this woman when you were only 13?"

"You disappoint me, Ben. Surely they taught you to think more clearly than that at Phillips Andover. It's the best school in the country. You are making unwarranted assumptions."

"Perhaps you might explain."

"In time. I think we should have some lunch first." He stood up and walked into the cabin.

He was playing games with me. That was to be expected. Interviews such as this were like deep-sea fishing. You had to let your quarry run when they chose to. Then, at appropriate times, you reeled them in. It was important for someone like Joseph to feel in control. Fine, I was happy for him to believe he was. I followed him into the cabin to a well-appointed kitchen.

"I hope you like *salade Niçoise*." He started assembling the ingredients.

"Most Americans have no idea how to make a proper *Niçoise*. They add potatoes and green beans. Appalling." His lips curled in distaste as he worked quickly, methodically. "Tomatoes, boiled eggs still soft in the center, torn lettuce, anchovies and black olives; these are the correct ingredients. Some olive oil and some chopped basil to dress and there you have it."

He took out a sharp chef's knife and honed it further on steel using broad vigorous strokes. He sliced the tomatoes and chopped the basil with unnerving precision and rapidity.

"Does your wife, Caroline, know where you are?" he asked as he tossed the salad.

"You seem to know a lot about me," I said warily.

"Do you think I would select just any journalist to tell my story? I know almost as much about you as you do."

I regarded him skeptically.

"You have degrees from Harvard and Columbia. You are a senior political correspondent at *The New York Times*. Your wife Caroline is the daughter of a US Senator and is a New York State Senator in her own right."

"You could have learned that from a two-minute Google search."

"You count a billionaire, two CEOs, and your wife Caroline's big brother among the close friends you made at Andover. Your wife's favorite dessert is pear *tarte Tatin*, though she no longer has it with whipped cream. You have three daughters. The eldest, Clara, is thirteen and very pretty. She has a pet rabbit called Winkles, though she normally calls it Bugs."

My eyes narrowed. "You stay away from my family."

"You have me all wrong, Ben," he said. His grin chilled me.

He handed me a couple of plates, picked up the salad bowl and then headed back outside. I followed.

He heaped some salad on my plate and then showed me a new photograph.

"Do you recognize this man?" he asked.

The photo showed a confident-looking man in his forties. He seemed vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place him.

"Did you kill this man too?"

"No, she did." Joseph rapped the photo of the young blonde woman.

I was too late to prevent myself jerking up in surprise. There was no amusement in Joseph's eyes anymore, just a stony hardness.

"She had at least two accomplices," he continued. "The man in the photo is Albert Smythe."

Memories began to stir. Twenty years earlier I worked for *The News & Observer* in Raleigh, North Carolina. It was my first job as a journalist. The death of Albert Smythe, a wealthy self-made businessman, was big news then. He had been tipped to be the next US senator from North Carolina.

"If I remember correctly, Albert Smythe's business collapsed. He committed suicide."

"That's the official story," Joseph replied.

"But you claim he was killed by this woman and two others?"

He nodded. He produced another photo showing a tall, thin man with angular features. "Do you know this man?" He studied me closely as I examined the photo.

I had no idea who the man was. He too was probably dead, killed by the man sitting opposite me munching on his salad. I suppressed a moment of distaste. There was a story here, an interesting one, perhaps even an important one, and I was determined to get it.

"This is one of the accomplices? One of your victims?"

"They robbed me of my life, the life I was meant to lead. They are not victims!"

"Albert Smythe was your father," I said, making a leap.

Joseph barely nodded. He began talking, as if to himself, reliving the past, feeling it afresh.

"Our family moved in the top circles, and not just in North Carolina. The Vice-President himself had visited our home. I had earned a place at Andover and was to begin in two months. That was where I belonged, among the best and brightest, the future leaders of the nation. On my thirteenth birthday I walked into my father's study just in time to see my life annihilated in a splatter of blood and brains. My fool of a father had shot himself."

"Yet you claim these two killed your father," I said pointing to the two photographs.

"Oh yes," he replied. "My father's business was in trouble, but it would have survived. Then along came three despicable low-lives, three con-artists. My father was a savvy man, he knew how the world worked, but he was desperate and off his game and they sensed an easy mark."

Again he rapped the photo of the blond, this time with real anger "This one, all peaches and cream, she posed as a wealthy young heiress. The thin man posed as her lawyer and adviser. They took my father for one and a half million dollars, money he didn't have, money he had to borrow. It sealed his fate."

I sensed it was time to start reeling him in, get to the heart of the story, but then Joseph produced a fourth photograph. My heart missed a beat.

"Yes, I see you recognize him. I'd be surprised if you didn't." His intense gaze unsettled me.

The man in the photo had nearly destroyed my career before it had properly begun. Brendan Walsh, at that time, was a respected entrepreneur in financial circles in the North, though little known in the South. He was visiting Raleigh for a few days and my editor had sent me to do a profile. I had taken a photographer along and had interviewed Walsh in the Governor's suite of Raleigh's top hotel. He was charming and very impressive, which had been reflected in the glowing article I submitted. My paper published it accompanied by a glossy photo.

A few days later the article was noticed by someone who knew the real Brendan Walsh. I was nearly fired for not doing proper due diligence and checking my facts. We never found out what the fake Brendan Walsh was doing in Raleigh. Now I knew.

"Your article was the clincher," said Joseph, interrupting my thoughts. "My father had researched Brendan Walsh and found out he was indeed a respectable financier with a knack for finding exceptional opportunities. Your article, with the photo, convinced him he was dealing with the genuine person."

"I didn't know," I said weakly.

"Didn't you, now? Well, I guess that's what we're here to find out."

A .38 police special revolver had appeared on the table—I didn't know how. At that moment I didn't much care. I calculated my chances of grabbing it before Joseph could react. They weren't good.

"Let me tell you what my life was like after my father shot himself." He picked up the gun, toying with it, not pointing it in any direction in particular. My eyes followed it intently.

"The family was bankrupt. We moved in with my mother's brother, a shopkeeper. Andover was out. There was no money and also my uncle thought it was only for snobs, not 'real people'. Huh—my mother's brother was a nobody, but my mother took him seriously. I had to go to the local high school. It was a place for losers. It was full of losers." Joseph's face puckered, as if tasting rancid butter.

"It was embarrassing enough having a suicide for a father. At least my father's powerful friends hushed up the fraud but that was the last thing they did for us. They disappeared from our lives."

He paused, then pointed the gun at my salad. "You know you really should eat. It's very good. Now where was I? It wasn't till I left school that I found out the truth. I was determined to bring the criminals to justice."

"But you didn't bring them to justice. You murdered them." I needed to play myself back into the game, find an edge. I had to get the focus onto his misdeeds, away from his justifications, away from me. It wasn't the time to play it safe.

"A life for a life, you don't find that just? They robbed me of mine, and they killed my father. The law didn't see it that way, though. I couldn't even interest the Raleigh police in the fraud case; no evidence, no leads, no action. I had to do the job myself."

"You're a capable man, Joseph. You could easily have built a life for yourself."

Put all that behind you. Hell, you could still have gone to Andover. The school provides financial assistance to families who can't afford the fees."

"Ah yes, financial assistance. That's how you got to Andover, isn't it, Ben? You're from a family of modest means. Well, my family doesn't accept charity and, as I said, my uncle didn't approve. Tell me Ben. I want you to be honest with yourself. Do you really believe you would have progressed so far in your career without all those contacts you made at Andover and later at Harvard? Would you be married to a senator's daughter and hobnobbing with CEOs?"

I said nothing.

"Why don't we go for a walk in the garden?" He stood and I followed. I found his gun persuasive.

The trail we followed led down toward the lake. "How did you find being in the police, Joe? Didn't you learn about the rule of law?"

He bristled. "My name is Joseph. I wouldn't call my dog Joe."

"You didn't answer my question, Joe." His nostrils flared and his eyes narrowed, but then he smiled.

"I only joined the police to learn investigative techniques. Most cops aren't very bright, Ben. It's not like Harvard. It's a stultifying place to work, but they do have method. That's what gets most criminals in the end—the ones they actually catch. And, Ben, most cops don't know what the rule of law means. It's just a job."

We had reached a flat open space. There was a spade on the ground. Next to it someone had dug a trench about two feet deep and six feet long. My heart began to race.

Joseph was still talking. "Painstaking investigation, sifting the details, that's the key. You'll find this interesting Ben. I discovered that two weeks after you wrote that article about Brendan Walsh you bought a red Porsche 911 Turbo. Beautiful car. I'm sure your rich friends were impressed, but I can't help but wonder where a rookie journalist from a family of limited means got the money."

"I came here to hear your confession, Joseph, not to justify my life to you."

"Ah, but confession is good for the soul. Tell me the truth, Ben."

I stared him straight in the eye. "I had a small inheritance from my grandfather. It wasn't much, but it was enough. He was a good man and, unlike your father, he had the courage to live his life through to the end."

He ignored my barbs. "Now that just isn't true, is it Ben? It's sad. After all these years you still haven't learned that a reporter's first duty is to tell the truth."

"That is the truth!"

"Ben, you paid for the car, in cash, two months before your grandfather died. Let me tell you what I believe happened. Your rich friends didn't care that you came from a poor background, but you did. It embarrassed you. You were desperate to make money. You came up with a scheme and, using newspaper scuttlebutt, you identified my father as a potential target. So what was your cut? Half a million dollars is my guess. You were never in financial difficulty after that time."

"No, it's not true. You have to believe me." I was pleading.

"What I have to believe are facts." He cocked the gun.

"No, it wasn't like that at all. You have it all wrong."

"Then tell me how it was. The truth this time. You've run out of chances."

I started rambling. "I didn't know what he was going to do. Honestly. I'd never met this fake Brendan Walsh before."

"His real name was Pavel Stepanek," said Joseph.

"OK, well Stepanek then, he was very impressive, very convincing."

"But you saw through him."

Slowly, reluctantly I nodded. "He had all the correct mannerisms, the right patter for a top financier, but I had met the genuine article often enough. Something was off." I paused, my mouth was dry.

"And then?" Joseph pushed.

"I waited till the photographer had left. Then I confronted Walsh, Stepanek or whatever his name was. He didn't bother denying it; he had every confidence in his persuasive abilities. He offered me money to cooperate. I didn't think anyone would get hurt. Not really. I just thought he would milk some money from some rich widow with more than enough to spare. I didn't mean for anything bad to happen. I swear."

"I'm sure it's comforting to tell yourself that. How much did he pay you?"

"Just fifty thousand—nothing like the half-million you talked about."

"I'm glad you have finally admitted it, Ben. I was afraid this was going to have a different ending. The others all confessed in the end too, just before they died. Now I am going to have to insist that you pick up that spade, Ben. I think there is more digging to be done."

So this was how it was going to end. I thought of my beautiful wife and my three gorgeous daughters. I would never see them again. I was shaking and tears were forming in my eyes. I knew I was about to lose all remaining dignity and beg desperately for my life.

"I'd start digging at that end, Ben. About a foot down you'll find a steel box. It contains complete documentation of everything we've discussed. Names, dates, photographs, everything. You'll find a transcript of my last interview with Pavel Stepanek. You'll be happy to know it confirms the final version of the story you told me."

I stared at him, blinking, my mouth agape, unable to respond to this unexpected reprieve. I continued to shake, my nostrils overloaded with the smell of my own fear.

Joseph placed the gun down on the ground. "You should put this in the box. It's evidence. The deal still stands. Tell the full story and I will hand myself in. Otherwise I will simply disappear. Either way, I start a new life today, free of the past."

He turned away and walked back up the path.

I collapsed, ending up sitting on the edge of the trench, still trembling, my legs, drained of all power, dangling inside what I thought would be my grave.

I saw the gun. I picked it up. A great fury rose within me and carried me to

my feet and up the path, my gun arm outstretched, stiff and unsteady, murder in my heart. I saw Joseph. His back was to me as he ambled up the path. I sighted along the barrel and then nothing, emptiness. I let my arm fall lifeless by my side and dropped the gun. I stood motionless, watching Joseph until he disappeared around a corner and then, overwhelmed by a sense of impotence, of violation and of shame, I began to sob.

Later, I returned to the trench, picked up the spade and dug out the steel box. It was a treasure trove. There was material here, not just for an exciting article but perhaps also for a compelling book. I began to understand the exquisite nature of Joseph's vengeance. He had given me a truly great story knowing full well that I couldn't use it without risking my reputation and destroying my career. He had set me a character test, knowing whatever I chose, I would have to live with the consequences. I don't think he expected me to pass.

I packed up the steel box and headed back to my car, the car that had brought Ben Pelterman, respected senior correspondent for *The New York Times*, to this place.



[short story]

Irreconcilable

by ryan neil falcone

Differences

Confronted at gunpoint, my gaze shifts from the gun barrel pointed at us to the mugger's greasy face, which hardens when I step protectively in front of my wife. "Hand over your wallet, or she gets it," he announces with a menacing sneer.

"Do as he says," Laura hisses, her face flushed with irritation as if this is somehow my fault. Typical.

Before I can remove the cash, he deftly snatches the wallet from my hands. My now-unexpectedly empty fingers begin clenching into a fist, but I drop my hands to my side when the thief levels the gun at me. Momentarily transfixed by his shabby appearance and twitchy behavior, I can't help but wonder if he's a drug fiend. Or maybe he's a down-on-his-luck dad with a sick kid at home, resorting to crime only to purchase the medicine his sick daughter desperately needs.

In actuality, I don't give a crap about his motivation. I hate him for violently intruding upon a night that had gone sour long before the robbery.

Our night at the theater had been a last-ditch effort to save a marriage that had drifted off course and was in imminent danger of being dashed to pieces upon the rocks. After Laura had revealed her intention to divorce, our marriage counselor suggested that we get away for the weekend to explore whether it even made sense to try mending the tattered fabric of our marriage.

But the predictable arguments had begun over dinner, our conversation quickly devolving into the jealous accusations that had poisoned our marriage to begin with. By the time we'd arrived at the theater, we'd both known that our faltering marriage had irrevocably flat-lined. In the middle of the play, Laura announced that she wanted to go back to the hotel to pack. We were on our way there when all hell had broken loose.

"Your purse," he growls at my wife. As she reluctantly hands it over, I see his greedy eyes linger upon her wedding ring. As I watch the thief eyeball Laura's ring—the last symbol of a time before our marriage went to rot—anger hijacks my judgment. I lunge forward, locking my hand around his wrist as I go for the gun.

I see lightning erupt from the pistol and hear the deafening report of the gunshot echo in the alleyway before I feel the exquisite pain. Our panic-stricken assailant flees. Laura's cries for help seem distant, and when I instinctively touch where it hurts, I'm startled to discover that my hand is wet with blood.

Later, after the paramedics tend to my injured arm, the police admonish me for trying to be a hero. Laura stands behind them, arms folded as she solemnly criticizes my impulsive recklessness, and how it nearly got me killed. Her words have little impact; deep down, I know that I'm already dead to her anyways.



Even One Tango

It's Thursday.
Get my hair done day.
Tomorrow is blood day.
If the numbers are good
we'll go dancing on Sunday.
Hope, our third partner,
will tether us together
for another tango or two.

When the IV is inserted
and the chemo goes through you
and your clothing get looser,
what's the use goes through you,
listen!

Hear the first notes of tango.
Now you have to get up
because you can't help yourself,
and I am straightening up
because I can't help my self,
because we both crave
those familiar sexual grins,
the tactile swirls, the exhilaration.
Why would you ever want to miss
even one tango?

—ada jill schneider

Perfection Anxiety

Silky strands of me,
nourished by exquisite morsels of drop dead envy--
dresden shepherdess distanced from dirt,
complexion unsullied,
shaded around the eyes with necessary hauteur,
fashioned in mid-century colours,
sourced from pure.
I'm a divine freak craving definition by others,
made cool in a gentle cooling off zone
few can afford,
a barefoot contessa gliding across a ballroom,
surveying gifts from suitors of mysterious provenance,
curated, eviscerated, stuffed, placed under glass
in vintage affirmation--
my perfect teeth testing grittiness of
cultured pearls from an ocean boot camp,
nurtured to enhance rose alabaster curves
sculpted by Praxiteles,
cheekbones scooped à la mode Jolie--
a spyhole for Eros fashioned between upper thighs
smoothed by priceless formulations,
gazing at my own
apostrophe exquisitely inked,
but alas--still not enough
to fend off every Cleopatra-eyed pretender
with dark lacquered nails and Kardashian agenda--
I'm in danger of being cast adrift,
left looking down the wrong end of a telescope
at the pug-faced billionaire
as he proclaims, 'Nobody's perfect.'

—lise colas

SCAPEGOAT

by eugene hosey

Every day I left the office I felt the automatic relief of walking away from the competition and back-stabbing of co-workers, though the relief lasted only a minute. As I walked across the asphalt parking lot to the sidewalk, the dreadful fear would come over me at the thought of getting from here to the subway to home. I can't even remember when this neurosis started, but it seemed like it had been going on for a long time. The feeling always started with a sickly twinge in my navel. Then fear filled my stomach with a nauseous ache, and the nerves in my arms and legs tightened until they felt stony.

Cold wind hit my side as I walked across the asphalt. This was a clear day and the burning red sun was setting behind the buildings. The days when a big sword of fire hit the side of a slick white hotel building across the street were the worst. The unimaginable distance the sun traveled to manifest itself on something on earth that I could actually touch if I wished was terrifying. I knew most people would never think of such things. It was a perception that could not be reasoned with.

But the sun was not the worst of it; the most terrifying part of getting home was reaching the subway, walking along the sidewalk from here to there. I knew the distance was short but it seemed long. I knew the sensations were irrational, but I could not get rid of them; the more I thought about that overpass the more afraid I got—the nature of fear. I envied the oblivion I saw in the strangers' faces—the faces of pedestrians, those in the passing cars. I could see their imperviousness to such nervous, senseless mysteries that I obsessed over.

As I walked across the parking lot to the sidewalk that would take me about two short blocks to the subway, I hoped that the injustice I had suffered at work today would over-ride my fear, but as I hit the sidewalk and saw the subway

entrance ahead of me I knew the injustice would do nothing to help me. This was like every clear day. For some reason the rainy days were easier.

The eight-hour days inside the office were nearly identical—the only variance being how much boredom, lying, jealousy, resentment, and backstabbing that occurred. What had made it bearable for me for fifteen years was that the company paid well; each year I got a terrific raise, as I assumed everyone did. There were only eight of us, including the two owners, John and Marie, who titled themselves Chairman and President. They named the place Research Resources Corporation. John the Chairman sat in his office all day and worked logic puzzles and got irritated if anybody bothered him. Everybody reported to Marie the President, who spent her time calling meetings, making schedules, and applying the pressure to everyone about deadlines. Every employee frequently went inside Marie's office and shut the door with a complaint. Marie always dealt with whatever it was with verbal skill. The employee always left Marie's office feeling better. I supposed it was some kind of gift; she seemed like she meant to keep her employees. Marie loved the business. John was just waiting to retire. We had an office manager, a salesperson, a vice president of research, a research analyst, and an editor. I was the desktop publisher; I edited, revised, formatted documents, and delivered them to the clients. I was the end of the line, so to speak.

There was a short sidewalk, an Italian restaurant to my right featuring a landscaped yard. Past the restaurant was a pedestrian crosswalk that passed over a ten-lane freeway that was a race of brave metal and roaring sounds. The overpass was the only way to get to the subway. The walk was concrete; to the right, where one could look down at the freeway, was about a waist-high wall of concrete and metal fencing. As I reached it, I always panicked. I could not explain the terror of getting across this overpass; all I could think of was falling through; the fact that this had never happened made no difference. Sometimes I would wait before stepping onto it for a long time, taking deep breaths. Sometimes I would stick my fingers down my throat, something that helped for some reason. Often I would make it halfway across and turn and hurry back just to start all over again. When I finally did make my way to the other side, my knees would feel as if they were going to break and my stomach felt that it had disappeared from my body and floated up higher and higher. I remember once my whole body was shaking visibly and a man passing me asked if I were all right. That helped me make it across; I wondered why. Perhaps if someone took my hand and pulled me along I could make it across easier but I would never have asked anyone to do that.

Every day I crossed the pedestrian overpass, but it never got easier. Then when I got down the steps to the train platform I would pace nervously as I waited for the train. This feeling that I was going to collapse never left me until I got on the train. While waiting, I would also look up at the skyscrapers they were constructing and feel dizzy, imaging myself hanging off an 80-story patio bannister. I never started to calm down until I got on a train and sat down. Even if I had to stand in the train for a while, it was still better. There were a great many stops and it took me

about an hour to reach mine. From there it was three short blocks to my house in a residential neighborhood, and I never minded this walk. It would be dark by now, but the darkness never spooked me. Except today there was a bizarre, sickening feeling in my gut as I reflected on what had happened in the office today.

Today I got in the office about fifteen minutes early for no particular reason. The door was already open, and beside the doorway was a small brown box with a piece of black tape that had sealed the flap on top. I more or less ignored it and went inside. In the common area was Bobbie the vice president and Tracy the research analyst. Bobbie was seated and crying hysterically, while Tracy was trying to talk to her. I caught Tracy's eye, and she came to my office to tell me what had happened.

Bobbie had got in first. She had seen the little box, opened it, and found what appeared to be human feces. When she got inside she turned on the answering machine, and a muffled male voice said, "Bobbie. Good children get nice gifts for Christmas. Bad ones get sticks and coal. But the really bad ones get worse things like you got in your gift. Merry Christmas."

In the beginning every employee, including Bobbie, was certain this grotesque delivery and message had been intended for Bobbie. There were obvious reasons why. Not only did the strange voice address Bobbie. But out of all the employees and the owners, Bobbie had an outstanding nasty quality—although she was just an employee like every other employee she believed she held a position above all the other employees. In other words, in her mind of minds she believed she was superior. She did not own a percentage of the company and was not treated as superior by the owners, yet she behaved as if she were everyone's boss. It was as if her psychological makeup demanded a unique status that put her between the employees and the employers. Everyone put up with it because it was obvious that she had an emotional frailty that no one wanted to put up with either. She was a snob. When she was sitting at her desk and disliked what she was hearing from someone standing before her, she would lean back her head, her face turning expressionless, and she would stare at the ceiling, refusing communication. She was prone to make unfair demands on people; if she got the impression that someone failed to acknowledge her superiority, she would quickly turn disparaging and hateful. She had her good points like everybody else, but the bitch was just below the surface and easily scratched. Everyone in the company, including Marie the president and John the Chairman, was well-acquainted with this part of Bobbie's character; it manifested itself to a degree nearly every day. But everyone had worked together for so long that Bobbie's co-workers had come near to accepting it. We learned to get it out of our systems by talking it through behind Bobbie's back and making allowances for her, knowing we were all far from perfect. For example, I was cooperative and accommodating, but at the same time aloof and distant. I kept telling myself there was good and bad in everyone.

But on this day it was Bobbie's wickedness that was spotlighted.

And as it turned out the principals schemed to take Bobbie's humiliation away.

Now Bobbie sat in her office shivering and crying and trying to get her husband on the phone. But once the principals got there, thirty minutes late as always, they examined the box and listened to that message on the answering machine. Then they went in Marie's office and shut the door and stayed inside for nearly thirty minutes. After they came out they began playing the recorder for all the employees, again and again, for everyone except me. This went on all morning, until finally John came to my office and asked me if anyone called me Bob instead of Robert. My name was Robert; not even my family had used "Bob." I had never liked "Bob."

"No one has ever called me Bob," I said. "What does the question mean?"

John said, "There's an odd muffle in that voice on the answering machine. The more I listen to it the more I hear the name Bob than I hear Bobbie, frankly. That's why I ask. I find it puzzling."

"When I listen to it I don't hear Bob. I clearly hear Bobbie." I was too shocked to say anything more, as I immediately picked up on where he was headed with this.

By the end of office hours, Marie and John had everyone convinced that the culprit had actually been aiming his filth at me—Robert as Bob—not at Bobbie. I knew in my heart and mind that this thing had not been intended for me. I thought it had obviously been intended for Bobbie. I knew of no specific reason why someone would do this to Bobbie. But at the same time it would not shock me to know that something had happened to cause it. I thought the message with its gift was an insult conceived in bitter, infantile thinking; that's how I would characterize it.

But I understood that John and Marie were scapegoating me for the shit box and the phone message. This revealed which employee's dignity they considered most important, whereas mine was dispensable to them. This was the first time they had ever treated me unjustly. In the 15 years past they had never directed anything at me but appreciation and respect. I could scarcely believe it. They had chosen to humiliate me.

I did not believe that a single person in the office failed to hear the "y" syllable at the end of Bobbie. Hearing the voice as "Bob" had been concocted by Marie and John. The other employees had followed the leaders. I encountered suspicious looks and strange smiles all day long. I knew that John and Marie could have been honest and treated the incident as trivial, the address of Bobbie in the message as meaningless. But they had scapegoated me.

I opened the front door of my house and locked it behind me. I had left a lamp on in the living room, so I could see. I went to my bedroom and took off everything but my T-shirt and shorts. I changed my socks to some thick comfortable ones. I went to the kitchen, got a large bottle of water, and took my medication. I sat on the couch in the living room and turned on the television. I couldn't find a good movie and ended up watching one of those cop shows where the policemen chase down crooks, the mentally ill, the pathetic. Mostly the show was about people stuffing drugs in various places, hopelessly running from the police in cars or on foot, people

afflicted with a mental illness, people with no self-control. I remembered watching such a show with a friend, who laughed and laughed. But I found it more pitiful than anything else. Yes, they were maladjusted for society, but just as equally they were to be pitied for their lack of self-esteem and sense of purpose. Yes, they could be captured and locked up. But it was sad that so many could not be helped. It was also sad that it was apparently popular entertainment watching the unfortunate hurt more and fall lower. It seemed to me that perhaps there was something wrong with people who were amused by watching the authorities taking control of people. Not that the law was unnecessary.

I turned off the television and thought through a mass of unrelated ideas for no reason. I began to feel relaxed. The worry went out of my head. My nerves settled down. My eyelids grew heavy and I yawned. I realized I felt good. I listened pleasantly to the deep silence of the house. Occasionally late at night I felt a little fear. Tonight I felt peace and serenity.

I got up and went to bed. I was comfortable on my back. There was not a sensation of discomfort in my body or mind. I felt weightless. I closed my eyes and experienced the sweetest sleep. After a time I could not reckon, I opened my eyes and turned my head enough to see the clock. I was amazed and happy to see that I had six more hours before the alarm would go off. I felt so completely wonderful and even ecstatic to realize I had that much more time to feel nothing but good.

When the alarm jarred me awake, I stumbled out of bed and down the hall and made the coffee. As I sat drinking a cup, I remembered the horrible incident of yesterday and what I had learned about my company and co-workers. I felt sick again. I had gotten used to Research Resources Corporation. The security I had come to believe I had earned in that company was questionable now, probably a joke. I would go in today and act just as I always acted, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.



A MONEY ORDER TO TAMIL NADU

His brain's barren like
the surface
 of the moon – alphabet
could never
 grow there. I fill up the
money order
 form at his request. Our
tongues are
 diverse – doesn't matter –
necessity fumbles
 and finds its way. He's
one of the
 inter-state coolies sweating
for our state.
 I decode the signals from
his mind –
 he's soft within a hard shell
like a coconut.
 He stares at the strange
words falling
 from my nib. He rewards
me with a
 smile like a cashew nut.
His 'thanks'
 drops into my mind, and
makes a sweet
 ripple. It's an illiterate, who
truly values letters.

(Tamil Nadu and Kerala are neighboring states with different mother
tongues in India.)

—fabiyas mv

WITH SPELLS OF DEAD THINGS OVERCAST

by rory o'brien

Kenneth Allens had spent weeks, months, thinking about his approaching college reunion, and whether or not he should go. He hadn't set foot on campus for ten years. After graduation, he had tried to put as much distance as he could between himself and the school and what happened there. He had moved far, far away and never looked back, never attending the alumni parties, never contributing to the alumni fund. As his tenth reunion drew nearer and nearer, he began to think of reasons for going, and reasons for not going, and then realized one night that they were the same.

And now, standing in the middle of the quad after so long a time, he wondered if he had made the right choice.

On the night he arrived, Friday night, there was a reception for his class in one of the new buildings, a lofty tile-and-glass structure built two years after his graduation. Somehow, he thought, it managed to blend in with the statelier, turn-of-the-century halls on the St. Stephen's campus. Never a big college, St. Stephen's was now beginning to expand and the new buildings, which were always being shown off to returning alumni, were the more striking examples of the school's growth.



Ken got himself a drink from the bar and surveyed the room. The place echoed with laughter, shouts, and cries of “Oh my God is that you?” Music was playing, and Ken swayed his head to a song from sophomore year. Nearly every face here was familiar, or almost familiar. Everyone here had sat in front of him in this class, behind him in another, lived upstairs, downstairs, or next door. He had last seen these people ten Memorial Day weekends ago, and many were a little heavier, some a little gray. A few had not changed very much at all. Ken wondered how he must look to them.

“Kenny boy!” a voice bellowed in his ear. He whirled to find Tom Connors, his old roommate, standing there and grinning, with his wife Allison.

“Tommy! I was wondering when you’d show up.”

“Got here an hour ago.”

Tom was the only person Ken had kept in touch with. Ken had been best man at his wedding, a year after Tom had met Allison at his first job out of college. She was trim and blonde and Tom had always gone for her type. Ken liked her and thought they were a good match. Tom had been a good friend, and although they only saw each other a few times a year, Ken felt he was still a good friend.

“Who else is here?” Ken asked.

“I saw Greg Lamar a few minutes ago—over by the buffet, of course. Thompson’s around somewhere; I think he came with Jack. And I heard Connie’s coming.”

“So I finally get to meet the famous Connie,” Allison said darkly.

“I’ll try and keep them away from each other,” Ken said.

More drinks were bought and the conversation drifted in the usual channels—who was doing what, who was getting hired, promoted, fired, married, having children, getting divorced. It was the same conversation they had in some form or other each time they saw one another, the conversation of old friends when their friendship is more in the past than the present.

More familiar faces passed by.

“Ken? Ken Allens? It’s Pam Johnson. Remember me?”

“Of course I remember you, Pam. How’ve you been?”

“Fine,” she said, smiling and sneaking a quick glance at his left hand. Ken wasn’t wearing a ring, and neither was she. Pam’s smile became one of quiet satisfaction. “I’m just fine. You’re looking really good.”

“So are you.”

She laughed and flipped her hair back over her shoulder in a way Ken remembered from junior year, but her hair wasn’t as long now as it had been then.

“So how have you been? What have you been doing?”

Ken told her. He had spent three years teaching—because what else could you do with a B.A. in English Literature from St. Stephen’s?—before getting a job as a technical writer with an industrial company on the coast—because what else could you do with a B.A. in English Literature from St. Stephen’s? It wasn’t bad, he said, and it paid well. Better than teaching. And it gave him time on weekends to walk the dog and rummage through the bookshops.

Pam was halfway through describing her adventures since graduation when she looked over to a small knot of women by the door and held up a waiting finger.

"We have to go meet some people, but I just wanted to say hi when I saw you. Are you going to be around the whole weekend?"

"Yeah," Ken said uneasily.

"Good," she nodded, the satisfied smile again. "So you'll be around tomorrow?"

"Not leaving till Monday morning."

"Great. I will definitely see you tomorrow, then?"

"Well ..." He began. This really wasn't what he had come for. "Yeah, um, you'll probably see me. Sure."

As Pam made her way across the room to join her friends, Tom said, "She always did have a thing for you. She told me about it once."

"Yeah, well ..."

"So a few of us are heading over to Milo's for a drink. You coming?"

"Didn't know Milo's was still there."

"As long as there are fake IDs, there will be a Milo's. So are you coming or what?"

"No. It's been a long day. I'm going to go find my room—they put me up in one of the new dorms, and I have to find the place again."

"All right. Breakfast at Milo's, then?"

"Absolutely."

"Good. Good. You know, Kenny," Tom lowered his voice, "I'm really glad you made it. I thought you might not after all."

"And why the hell would I do that?" Ken asked with a defiant little grin.

"Yeah, why the hell would you? All right, tomorrow then."

"Tomorrow."

Ken went for a long walk after leaving the reception, not really going back to his room, or anywhere else, just wandering, relaxing, and enjoying the moonlit campus. He was glad he had come. It was probably going to be a lot easier than he had thought.

He followed his feet and they led him by all his old haunts; the chapel, the new gym, the old gym, the bookstore, Becker Hall, Fagen Hall, Coleman Hall. He passed by his old dorm, the one with the ivy creeping up its brick walls. Most of the lights were still on. Students' laughter reached him through the open windows, along with whiffs of marijuana and cheap incense. Two guitars, one acoustic, one electric, vied for supremacy in the warm night.

Ten years, Ken thought, and it's hardly changed at all.

Finally, after a long hour, he found himself standing in the shadow of the library.

The library was a tremendous Victorian edifice, second in age only to the chapel. It rose three Gothic stories high, and now sported a new wing, more tile and glass, that almost managed not to clash with the rest of the architecture. Almost.

He sighed. The library had always been one of his favorite places on campus. It was always quiet here, restful and studious. He made his way around back, to the copse of old trees, and found the smooth familiar boulder waiting for him there.

He knew then that he hadn't just been wandering aimlessly—he'd been coming here and just hadn't told himself, because you don't need to tell yourself something you already know.

He settled back against the cool granite and looked up at the big moon shining through the leaves. The stars were out tonight. Thousands and thousands and thousands of them. Campus was nestled among green upstate hills, far away from cities and the light they produced. He'd never seen so many stars anywhere else; it was one of the things he remembered most about his college days, all those stars.

He'd come here all the time with Veronika.

And Veronika was the reason he had come to his class reunion in the first place. But he knew he wouldn't see her this weekend, because Veronika was dead.

They had met sophomore year, in an English Lit class, Beowulf-to-Blake. He was there because he loved the material; she was an art major fulfilling a requirement. He noticed her the second day and continued to notice her for weeks. She usually sat in front of him, with paint splattered jeans and hastily done-up dark hair.

One day, when they were discussing the assigned selections of *Paradise Lost*, Veronika, a few rows away, chuckled as she doodled something in a notebook.

"Is something amusing, Miss Jones?" the professor asked.

"The Devil gets all the best lines," she said. "Always does."

"Do you really think that's true?" Ken asked, more to get her attention than anything else.

"Sure," she said, turning halfway around to look at him. She was very pretty. "At least in art, evil is always more interesting than good. I mean, look at Bosch ..."

It sparked off a long discussion about why that might be so; did it have to do with the nature of evil, or just an individual artist's hang-ups? But Ken spent the rest of the class waiting for it to be over. He was finally going to meet the pretty girl in the paint-splattered jeans.

"Okay, so what about Bosch?" he asked her after. She was wearing a too-small St. Stephen's t-shirt and he loved the way the college's name rose and fell.

"You don't know his work?"

"Art history was last year, and it was an eight o'clock class ..."

She hesitated before saying, "I've got some Bosch posters in my room."

"Inviting me up to see your etchings?" he laughed.

"Maybe."

She showed him her posters, and a few of her canvases, and her fat sketchbooks. He sat on her futon and read her sonnets from the anthology they were using in class. She made awful instant coffee in a little hotpot and he didn't get back to his dorm until after midnight. The stars were out. He was meeting her for breakfast. The morning couldn't come fast enough.

After breakfast they went for a long walk in the woods and made love on a bed of leaves under a huge oak. The smooth boulder behind the library, once his favorite place to be alone, now became his favorite place to go with her. Charcoal

portraits of him began to fill her new sketchbooks. They would go skinny-dipping in the river under moonlight, stay up until sunrise just talking and talking and talking, and spend lazy weekends in bed, hardly speaking a word.

Toward the end of the semester, they made plans to spend the summer together. Toward the end of the summer, they began to talk about a life together after graduation.

At Milo's the next day, Tom was slightly hung over but smiling.

"So what did you do last night? Find your room okay?"

"Yeah. I went for a walk. Campus sure is different from the old days. Did you see that new wing on the library?"

"Yeah, I did. So you went by the library last night," Tom said quietly. "Visit your old spot?"

"Just for a minute," Ken admitted.

"You know, I thought you might not come this weekend because you'd just spend the whole time thinking about her if you did."

"I think I came here so I could spend the whole time thinking about her."

"Kenny, c'mon—she's gone."

"I know," he said angrily. "She died senior year. I remember. I was there."

"But when are you going to let it go? You've been carting this around since we graduated. Every time I see you, you're like this. Jesus, you can't even talk to Pam Johnson."

"I didn't come here to talk to Pam Johnson."

"So what did you come here for?"

"To face up. To make amends."

"How?"

Ken shrugged.

"You know, Kenny, if it were anyone else, I think I'd be worried."

"Yeah. Me, too."

The rest of the morning was taken up with campus tours, meetings of various alumni groups, senior presentations, concerts, recitals, and of course commencement. Ken sat with the old gang, Tom and Allison, Greg Lamar, Thompson, Jack, and Connie. It was good to see them all again, somehow reassuring, and Veronika's name never came up once, which was also reassuring. He began thinking that maybe, after this weekend, after ten long years, the whole thing might finally be settled in his mind.

After the last senior had been handed a diploma and mortarboards were thrown skyward, Ken was swept along to a cookout on the old baseball field. Alumni, students, friends, and family milled about with burgers and beer, laughing in the June afternoon. As the sun set, some packed up their cars and left, while others stayed, celebrating quietly or noisily.

Midnight found Ken sitting on their boulder, looking up at the stars.

How many times in the past decade had he thought about her? How many times had he speculated, would we be married, would we have kids? What would my life—our life—be like now? At time he could see it all clearly, the house and home, the wife and kids, beautiful Veronika still painting with maybe a touch of gray in her hair, still wearing that t-shirt and looking good in it.

And how much longer would he have to live in this shadow, the long shadow cast by events ten years old?

He closed his eyes and wondered what he was waiting here for.

Senior year they moved into an apartment off campus. It was tiny and drafty but it was theirs, furnished with clunky second-hand furniture and decorated with Bosch posters. A bookcase of cinderblocks and two-by-fours took up nearly an entire wall. The second bedroom was half studio, half study, occupied by her canvasses and his computer. When they signed the lease, Veronika said the place would be good practice for their first home, and she meant it.

Ken liked starting and ending each day with her, liked the way they settled into a routine together. Each was always there to rub shoulders, or make coffee, or soothe a fraying temper.

And as their final semester began, tempers were fraying and flaring all over campus. Seniors threw themselves into their final work. The pressure was on; the pressure to get everything done and done brilliantly, to leave St. Stephen's in legend. Also, there was the question of what to do in the Real World, the scramble to find jobs, internships, grad schools, and the uneasy feeling that all this was finally coming to an end. Friends would be scattering soon and maybe never seeing one another again, despite the best efforts to the contrary.

Both Ken and Veronika felt the strain. The need to get work done became the priority, and time together a luxury. Ken had always been more of a night person, and Veronika woke with the sun, and often she was just crawling into bed after a long day of painting just as he was leaving for another all-nighter at the library. They kept saying that there would be time after, when all this was finished.

He could never quite pinpoint the moment when they started to drift, but he knew he was getting cold feet and wondered if she was, too. But for now, they were both too focused on their present to worry much about their future. And then one night it happened.

Later, Ken could never clearly recall what the fight had been about, the effect had so completely eclipsed the cause. There had been arguments before, of course, spats and tiffs that were settled quickly, but nothing like this. It had been loud and angry and seemingly endless. Doors were slammed and pictures fell from the walls. The glass on his favorite photo of them shattered as it hit the floor.

He stormed out and spent the night sitting on the floor at Tom's. The two of them stayed up all night talking it over.

"I have to go back and say I'm sorry," Ken said toward dawn.

"You sure as hell do, pal."

Tom drove him back over to the apartment to repair the damage, if possible. But it wasn't.

Sometime during the night, Veronika Jones had hanged herself in the back hallway. She left no note. All Ken could do was stare dumbly at her. She stared back with dead eyes, head lolling at a broken angle.

It was an image that would haunt him for the next ten years.

When Ken opened his eyes, there she was.

She was still the pretty twenty-two year old in paint-smeared jeans and hastily done-up hair. She stood a few feet away and regarded him sadly.

All colleges are haunted, and the ghost stories are passed down to each new class of freshmen. Ken had heard all the tales but never believed any of them, never believed in ghosts. But now he knew this was what he had been waiting for, this is why he had come to the reunion. He'd known all along and simply hadn't told himself, because you don't need to tell yourself something you already know.

"Veronika," he said thickly, slowly rising from the smooth boulder. "Oh, my God, Veronika. I came to see you."

And she was gone.

"No ..." he whispered into the empty space where she had stood. "No no no. Dammit, I have so much I needed to say ..."

He turned and saw her standing a few yards away. Even in the pale starlight he could read the anger in her face, the anger he remembered from that last fight. She shook her head at him, a bitter denial.

"Please don't be angry. I came to say I'm sorry about that night and the things I said and I was just a stupid goddamn kid and there's not a day goes by that I don't think of you."

Again, she was gone.

"I wanted to ask you to forgive me," he said softly. "Please ..."

He looked around, shivering in the warm night. His knees were weak and his clothes clung to him damply. He spun.

And found her face inches from his, staring back with dead eyes, head lolling at a broken angle.

He fell over backwards and hit the ground hard, hands scrabbling for something to hold onto, never taking his eyes from the reproachful figure before him. He managed to get his feet back under him and stood dizzily. He felt like he was going to fall over again. He felt like he was going to be sick.

She raised one arm and pointed at him, accusing.

"Veronika."

She slowly approached, head swaying from side to side, closer and closer.

He opened his mouth but there were no words. He took a step back, another step, and his knees gave out on him. He tumbled back and landed right next to the boulder. He threw his arms up over his face and his screaming echoed off the library walls.

A security guard found him early the next morning, sprawled face down in front of the library, filthy and disoriented. It looked like he had crawled there, but the guard didn't want to waste time speculating about the nighttime shenanigans of yet another drunk alum, lying there and muttering to himself.

"Hey pal," he said, shaking Ken gently. "Come on. Get up. Nice and easy. Rise and shine. There you go."

The guard took him back to the office and got him some coffee. Ken washed up in the bathroom sink, staring at his face in the small mirror, pale and drawn and unforgiven.

She was there, he kept thinking, trying to piece it together in his mind. She was really there, and she wouldn't—she just wouldn't—

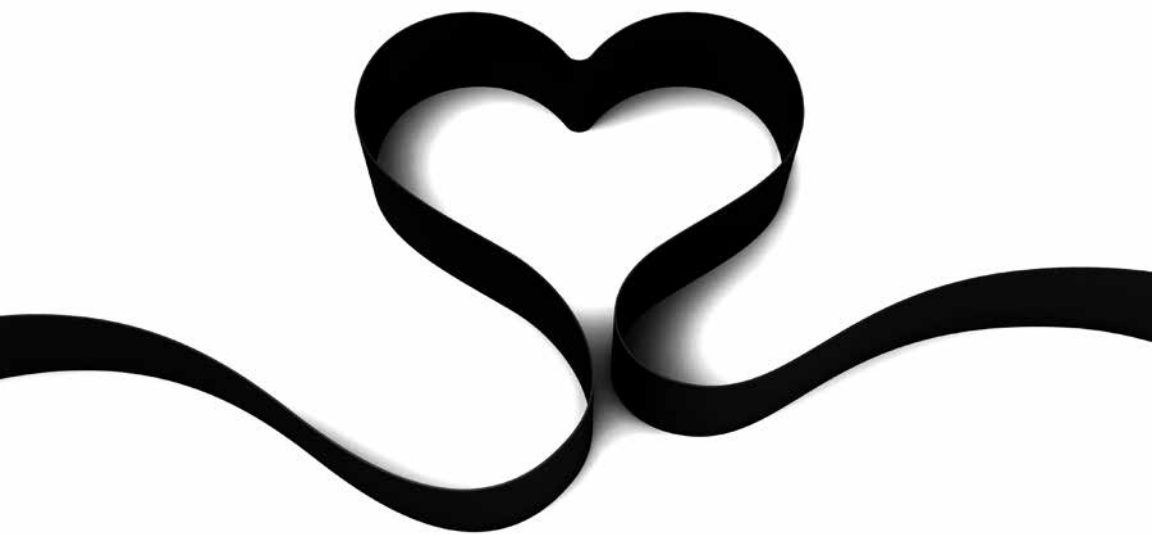
"Long weekend?" the guard interrupted his thoughts with a snide smile.

Ken nodded. He thanked the guard and made his way out on uncertain legs. The early morning sun hurt his eyes.

"What was that about?" he heard another of the guards ask.

"Somebody trying to recapture his lost youth, I guess," the first one laughed. "Probably had a wild night with his old girlfriend."

Ken tried not to listen or look back.



BORDEN THE WARDEN



JUGGLING BALLS
ON A UNICYCLE,

SUCH A CLICHE
SUCH A TRIFLE

KITCHEN DUTY,
FOUND AN AXE

SOMETIMES
YOU NEED TO

HAVE FUN
& RELAX

THIS CLOWN'S
RELATED TO
LIZZY BORDEN

HE'S MAKING
A BALLOON
OUT OF THE

PRISON WARDEN...



—janne karlsson

DIVERSE SHADES OF INSANITY

by fabiyas mv

She alights from the midnight train after a jasmine-garland seller. She walks along the pitted road. A large dusty polyethylene bag is swaying from her shoulder. Cars and auto-rickshaws stand in a long row just outside the exit of the railway station. This remote station is bustling only when trains arrive or depart. Now the vehicles go out with the passengers honking horns. Her dusty figure moves on foot in the dim street light, mindless of the hullabaloo made by the taxi drivers and porters. She walks on until the sun in its orange layette looks through the gaps in the canopy of coconut palm leaves on the canal bank.

Some women on the shore stand around their new guest with their arms akimbo, while an old man gazes at her with his thorny eyes. Hearing that an insane woman has come to their village, a stout boy named Sura comes running with his tooth-brush—a white liquid, an amalgam of toothpaste and saliva, dribbles out of his mouth. Soon a human fence is built around her. Everyone eyes her large bag swaying in the lowest branch of a mango tree in the wind. Sun rays begin to produce sweat blobs on the foreheads of the crowd. Rustics return to their homes, letting the Kanoli bank withdraw into its usual silence.

She shouts aloud, sitting for some time on the protruding root of a mango tree. Silence again as though she regains her senses. She watches a black tortoise moving into the bamboo thicket nearby. She runs behind and catches it. Holding it in her left hand, she heaps up yellow and brown mango leaves under the tree with the other hand. She fumbles in her bag and takes out a matchbox with a picture of a peacock on it. She lights the dry leaves with a matchstick. She puts the tortoise in the fire, but it creeps out. She puts it again in the fire. Now the fire is strong. A pungent smell of the burnt tortoise flesh spreads in the west wind. She eats the

meat voraciously. Although covered with dust, her countenance has a noble charm. After her tortoise lunch she sits, leaning against the mango tree, and slowly zones out.

She is again enclosed with the human fence by the evening. A crippled boy ventures to imitate her, shouting in the same manner—it seems he has resolved to turn a half-lunatic into a full-lunatic. She is gnashing her teeth. Some rustic guys, who have nothing else to do, enjoy the diverse shades of her insanity.

Her horrible presence helps a mother in feeding her kid, who is reluctant to take food. “Take a little more. Or I’ll call that mad woman.”

Saru, a coolie woman, who is as nice as pie, observes, and gives some cooked rice with sardine curry to the insane guest. “She’s a human being, after all,” Saru says.

A balmy afternoon. She looks hale and hearty. Her palms splash the salty water. She swims in the canal. The grime over her body dissolves in the water, and her skin gets back its lost hue. Her voice can be heard far away. She speaks rough Hindi of some remote North Indian village. Now a fisherman’s canoe floats by, zigzagging like a snake. He stares at her wet glossy body. Every day, he is seen on the wavelets of the canal. He catches prawns and peal spot fish with his violet net.

Windy season begins on the Kanoli bank. Night wind brings the smell of the burnt canal fish, along with the fragrance of incense smoldering in the prayer rooms, and the alluring aroma of the jasmine buds blooming on the shore. Diverse smells are always synchronized in the track of the Kanoli wind. This canal was built during the British rule in India. Hundreds of people, most of them coolies, inhabit this bank.

“Ma, don’t you hear the mad woman’s shrieks and shouts from the bank now?” Saru’s daughter asks, letting out her anxiety on a Monday night. “Don’t worry, my dear. It’s windy season. Madness reaches at its top at this time.” The insane woman’s shrieks and shouts are thus neglected in the rural logic. Nobody knows that lust has been implanted in her womb.

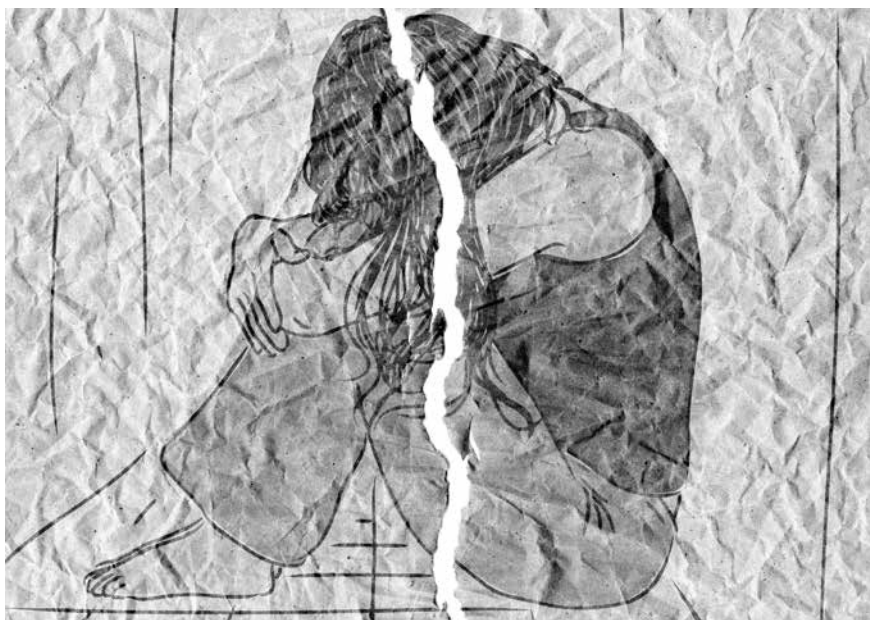
A midday. The woman roams the shore in the parching sunlight, when even a crow hesitates to fly. Village folk lose their interest in the newcomer day by day.

A rising sun creates tiny rainbows on the grass through dew drops. She has just woken up. She communicates with an invisible friend. She makes strange gestures indicative of insanity—guffaws, funny faces, meaningless clinking of her dusty bangles. Often she utters, ‘Ma’. Who is her ma? Who is her pa? Did she marry? When did her mind slide from its track? Question waves are thus getting high.

Three months pass since a repulsive lascivious Monday night. She nauseates. Stooping her head, she sits in a huff beside her bivouac for a long time. Her belly swells like a pumpkin. Lust seems a cousin to lunacy. Though lunatic, her behavior is now like that of a typical pregnant lady of the Kanoli bank. She stretches her hand up to pluck an unripe mango from one of the lower branches. It is a seemingly fatigued attempt, yet she gets the mango. She eats it greedily, and then chucks out the tender seed.

After an eight-month noisy stay, she prepares to leave the Kanoli Bank. Taking her precious belongings in the polyethylene bag, she walks slowly as she looks into a void. Nobody dares to stop her. She mutters something in her slangy Hindi. No one can make it out. People watch her sauntering to the tarred road. Everybody stares at her swollen belly with many dark, bulging questions. She turns and vanishes.

Some rags, dusty papers, and a torn mat piece—like the feathers left behind by the migratory birds—lie scattered under the mango tree on the bank.



THANATAPHOBIA

Who am I to cast bleached vulture bones
Like dice across a board?
To jettison souls from twisted metal
With only screams as my reward?
It's you who've given me this face,
Grim skull and robes of deepest black,
Instilled by fear of the unknown
And earthbound shells the worms will crack.
Without faith and imagination
Nothing exists beyond the pale.
Rather than take my guiding hand
You cower down to no avail.
Who am I to lead lost spirits?
With bleeding scythe to light the way?
My great, charred wings can traverse time
And hold oblivion at bay.

—morgan griffith

[short story]

DAMNED IF YOU DO

by edward ahern

Nadia led him to a flight of stairs down to the basement of a decrepit church.

He stopped her at the landing. "I'm not a church-goer."

"Don't worry," she assured him, "it was de-sanctified years ago."

They stepped down, emerging into an open space thirty yards long and twenty wide, veiled by clouds of tobacco smoke. Two groups of people were clustered at tables at opposite ends of the room, with a no-man's land in the middle.

Nadia pointed at the closest group. "This is where you sit, the beginner's group. I'll be at the other end. People are encouraged to smoke here. But not dope—it clouds the mind. Don't make any of your sarcastic snap judgments. Just listen."

David inserted himself between a tee-shirted woman with tattoos on her neck, arms and hands; and a tie-choked man drab-dressed as if for a funeral. A pathologically obese man at the front of the group began leading a recitation which the other members seemed already to know.

"Came to believe that a power greater than myself could relieve me of my inhibitions."

"Made a decision to turn my will and my life over to the care of a dark power much greater than myself."

And so on, twelve steps in all. As the recitation droned on David glanced at the woman's tattoos. They seemed to be cabalistic.

The speaker paused. "Would any newcomers please raise their hands?"

David said nothing, but the funeral director was staring at him with hungry anticipation. He raised his hand and mouthed the words Nadia had provided, "My name is David and I'm a chronic relapser into moral conformity."

“Welcome, David,” the group chanted.

The group leader proceeded. “Tonight we continue our focus on another of the seven deadly sins—sloth. What does sloth mean to you, David?”

“Ah, laziness or inactivity instead of needed action.”

“Partly, yes, but only the commonplace part. Listen, everyone, real sloth means taking credit or money for the work of others without contributing anything yourself. Who can give me examples from their lives of how they’ve been able to achieve this?”

Nadia had encountered David in a singles bar called The Body Shop. She was seated at a table with two men competing for her favors when David also sat down. In fifteen minutes David had instigated an argument between the two men and moved Nadia over to the bar to continue talking.

“They seem to have lost interest in you.”

“Is your usual pick-up gambit to get other people to fight?”

“Only when I’m outnumbered.”

They word-spurred easily, building on each other’s innuendos and left together. Nadia was surprised to hear herself agreeing to stop by David’s apartment, and surprised again when she made the move that led to their tumbling into bed. David was manipulative during sex, but aware of Nadia’s needs.

They pillow-talked afterward about what, other than sex, got them aroused. For both that involved breaking rules and laws. Nadia delighted more in violating the rules of decency. David preferred illicit sensation without heavy thinking, maximum experience for acceptable risk.

That next morning Nadia convinced David to go on a shoplifting trip. They acted as lookout and diversion for each other, actions meshing almost without speaking. They tallied price tags over lunch. Nadia had outscored David by about \$250.

“All right,” David said, “I’m envious. You stole better than I did this time. Just wait. Since I lost, I’ll buy lunch.”

“Neither of us is buying.”

“And both of us are getting arrested.”

Nadia grinned. “I don’t think so. I’ve been watching the waitress and manager. They both make trips to the kitchen and stay there for two or three minutes. The next time they’re both in there we take a brisk walk out the door. Better go through your pre-flight check list.”

After the fifteen yard dash through the front door they slowed to a stroll and kept talking. They were both fans of heavy metal music, and overlapped on each other’s taste in movies—Nadia for horror, David for comic book violence.

Nadia noticed that David never cursed or blasphemed, almost as though it were superfluous. He seemed content to maximize sensory pleasures, restraining himself only when the risks were big.

She envisioned him as modern art, an oil painting entirely in matte black, with no distracting moral highlights. He embodied perverse modesty—he could

commit offenses without feeling guilt or pride. His calmness hid a quagmire she wanted to be sucked into.

They'd been together for two weeks when she wrapped her torso over his and whispered in his ear.

"Do you wonder where I go evenings between eight and ten?"

"Not really. But okay, what drags you away from me three evenings a week?"

"It's a meeting, David, for people like us. It helps me to overcome my doubts about what I'm doing. You should come; it'll change you."

"I don't need to hang out with strangers to figure out what needs changing."

"Don't pretend to be that dumb. You've no knowledge of what you're missing. And it's an anonymous program—really anonymous; we punish people who even hint about it to outsiders."

Nadia knew he would be a major addition to the group and cajoled David until he agreed to come. She then worked up the courage to mention him to Abadon, the group leader.

Nick Abadon studied her for a long minute expressionlessly. She feared him at such moments. "You may be right, Nadia. He sounds interesting. Bring him to the Monday meeting."

As David sat half-listening to the fat man, he became aware of someone standing behind him. The tattooed woman and the undertaker winced and peeled off their seats without a word. The man moved from behind him to the illustrated lady's chair.

"Hello, David."

David turned in his seat. "Who're you?"

"Abadon. Nick Abadon. You don't smoke?"

"Don't drink either. Your drug habits are no concern of mine, but I don't like taking anything that dulls my edge."

"Interesting. I don't use drugs either, although I promote their use."

David looked more closely. Abadon was old, but his slick ivory complexion made guessing his age impossible. His eyes were very bright, but occluded, as though he were holding back on their full force.

"Do you have a sponsor, David?"

"I'm not interested enough in what you do to get one. Seems like just a lot of chanting and slogans."

Abadon didn't smile, but his eyes brightened slightly. "David, the worst offense we commit against ourselves isn't to let fear drag us into religion—it's indifference to what we could become. There are so many who just loiter on the side lines and abuse themselves—they're already damned but never open up to enjoy the process. Our program tells you in twelve steps how to come awake and really live."

"Yeah, well, not giving a damn is a useful posture. Look, Mr. Abadan, Nadia asked me to come here so I did. But I'm content with what I am. You're not showing me anything I want. You seem to have your members intimidated, but I go my own way, without the melodrama."

"Nadia said you were self-propelled. Would you describe yourself as a hedonist, David, out for yourself?"

"Of course."

"And that you would take violent action to improve your situation?"

"Depends on the risk."

"And that injury to others is sometimes necessary?"

"Collateral damage can't be avoided."

"David, David, you're an idiot savant—doing our kind of things, but crudely, without the refinements that add so much to enjoyment. Here's what I propose. Accept me as your temporary sponsor. Come to a meeting a day for the next ninety days. If after ninety days you don't think you're getting a lot more out of life I'll help you become a Jesuit."

"That's a lot of meetings."

"I'll show you how to enjoy them."

When David told Nadia that Abadon had become his sponsor she was vaguely fearful. Abadon hadn't accepted a sponsee in all the time she'd been going to meetings, despite several people asking him.

After a few meetings people noticed the tutelage that Abadon was providing David, and began currying favor with him. But Nadia knew that David used people in a one-way/one-time fashion and was uncomfortable with relationships, even venal ones. He slashed at their overtures until they stopped making them.

Abadon began giving David assignments—service work, he called it. At this point Nadia was living with David; there had never been even a suggestion of his moving in with her. She never asked David where he went and what he did, but sometimes David took her with him. Nadia's guilty pleasures focused on actions rather than injury to others, and she hated what David was beginning to do.

He developed a scheme for robbing the old and infirm on subway rides, a procedure Nadia was forced to watch on several rides that they took together. But David tired of it—boring, he said.

At Abadon's direction, David began to entice and bring home young girls from the bus terminal, use and mildly abuse them, and then discard them back at the bus station. Nadia tried to be out of the apartment when David did this, but sometimes walked in on David and a sobbing teenager.

Nadia finally left David after they had broken in on an elderly woman. They occupied her apartment and forced her to sign checks and provide account numbers. They roped her to her bed, unfed and unsanitary, until there was no more money or possessions to steal. David had persuaded her to share the custodial duties, and she had forced herself to tell David that their treatment of the woman was viciously harsh. David had given her a flat stare, a look rawer and cruder than Abadon's, but conveying the same threat. She only said it once.

David finally untied the old woman and left her in her bed, starving and infirm, unable to move out of it. He threw a potful of cold water on her, facilitating a rapid death from pneumonia.

Nadia felt coated in self revulsion. She left David, quit going to the meetings, and never told anyone in the group where she now lived. She kept but didn't use her cell phone, hoping that David would call and say that he, too, had broken things off with Abadon. Several other group members called and left messages of concern and threats, but not David.

She thought about going to a church, but decided it was not only hypocritical but useless. No minister accustomed to garden variety transgressions would understand. She thought briefly about suicide, but didn't want to die feeling like she did about herself. The moon cycled twice before David called.

"Look, Nadia, I'm afraid of where Abadon is leading me. Can we get together to talk?"

"I can't let you know where I live, David."

"I understand. Let's meet at the downtown Sheraton. Lots of people and anonymous."

"I don't know that I can help you David—you're really deep into the program, deeper than I ever got."

"At least talk to me, Nadia. Tell me how you got out."

They met on Sunday morning for brunch, watching the sauce congeal on their eggs Benedict without eating them.

"I miss you, Nadia; you're the only person other than Abadon I'm able to open up to."

"David, I'm afraid for you, and maybe afraid of you too. It's like you've awakened and you're not the cute guy sleeping next to me anymore. You're something I don't want to touch. It was a mistake for me to join the group, and doubly wrong to bring you into it."

"Abadon wondered for a while if you'd come back. Now he knows you won't. He's dangerous, Nadia, really dangerous. Stay hidden. I only wish I could get out."

"I ran away because I'm scared as hell. I'm never going back. Don't get trapped, David. Run away."

"I don't know if I can. Let me top up your coffee."

While sipping the coffee they talked about the fragments they had left in common, but Nadia no longer took comfort from their prior intimacy and affection. The conversation eventually broke down under its own inane weight. As Nadia stared at David her eyelids began to droop.

When she opened them again she was stretched out naked in her own bathtub, immersed in warm water. She tried to move, then tried to scream, but could do neither. She could barely concentrate enough to breathe. David was seated on the edge of the bathtub.

"Glad you're awake. You're not able to talk or move, so please just listen. We tracked you here several weeks ago, but kept hoping you'd come back to us."

A sudden fright showed in Nadia's eyes.

"What is it? Ah. No, I didn't have sex with you. That would have been inappropriate."

"We can't have you fleeing toward repentance, Nadia—not with your knowledge

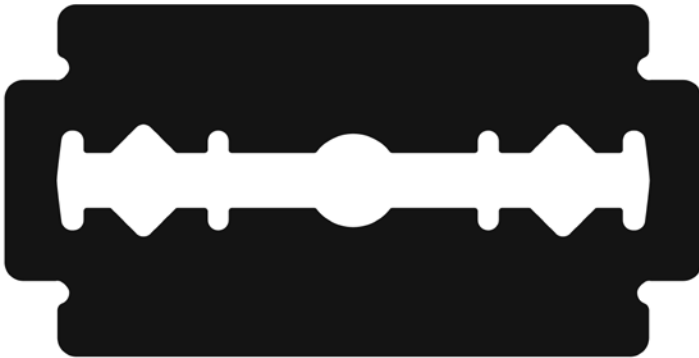
of us. You're going to apparently commit suicide. I do regret this. After all it was you that brought me to Abadon and helped me awaken and transform. You're woven into my life."

Nadia began to cry soundlessly, droplets wandering down her face.

"I'm going to miss you, Nadia. I doubt I'll ever be this close with another woman."

David had been holding a double-edged razor blade. He picked her left arm out of the bathwater and stroked her hand before cutting deeply into her forearm just above the wrist. He gently lowered her left arm back into the water and plucked out the right arm, repeating the process. The bath water reddened in sluggish swirls.

Nadia's vision began to fail. She strained into keep focus on David's face, which stared back at her with a bemused, almost fatherly expression. "Abadon was right," he said. "It's better to kill someone you love."



A Tragic Pilgrimage

The pilgrims wash
their inner stains out
with the wet words
in Uttarakhand, the
land of gods.

The unexpected flood
rises above all her
expected blessings.
Her father floats away
like an empty bottle.
Gushing water gulps
her mother's shriek.

She lies being separated
from her sense at the feet
of a concrete statue.
Though an army helicopter
flies low, the binoculars
miss her.

Calamity let loose the
lawless. Some shapes
smelling arrack pluck
her arms out from the
feet of the statue. Lust
stretches like an elastic.
A breathing corpse
remains.

Sona opens her eyes in
a bivouac after a blackout.
But no army can repulse
the infiltrating and
invading thoughts.

(Uttarakhand is a state in India with many pilgrim places.)

—fabiyas mv

BLACK OYSTERS

Black oyster roast
still emits steam.

I see the black oysters
feeding on the muddy
breast of the canal
beyond this plate.

Oysters open their doors
to sooth our stomachs.

Roast slides down our throat
holding on either side
of the taste.

Oyster flesh stimulates
the pale and withered
nights.

Black oyster is a buttress to
many a dream on the bank.

There's pleasure even within
the clumsy shells.

The unwanted on a muddy bottom
become the most wanted.

—fabiyas mv

Implements

by chantal boudreau

I always worried that I wasn't sophisticated enough for my latest beau, Phillip. The man was so suave and debonair—so superior in every respect. In addition to the fact that his family was much wealthier than mine, wine country entrepreneurs, he had had a worldlier upbringing. His parents, British natives, had moved to France when he was a young child and had sent him to one of the best boarding schools in Switzerland when he had been only nine. Between his education and exposure to a variety of cultures, he made me feel somewhat deficient as far as my own life experience was concerned. I was just a farm-bred country girl, who had never left my native space for even a vacation until I had left for college.

Phillip, while extremely romantic, always came across as a little cool and aloof. I blamed this on his European sensibilities. His upbringing was a far cry from how I was raised. My family was loud, enjoyed hugging, and a little overenthusiastic and forward. I liked the fact that he respected my personal space, but I was tired of waiting for him to warm up to me. I wondered at times if there was more to his reticence than just propriety. Sometimes I caught him eying me, with the debasing stare most people might reserve for livestock, a prize pig or cow. He might adore me, but did I embarrass him, with my less civilized, unpolished ways?

Nervous that this might be the case, I had kept him away from my family. They would insist on trying to get to know him and would likely alienate him further with their boisterous, boorish ways. I lied to him, telling him I just wasn't close to my family. This didn't bother him any. In fact, he seemed to like the fact that I was independent and alone. Maybe he thought this would keep anyone from coming between us.

We had been dating for a few months when he told me he would be taking me on a very special outing. He had plans for a picnic in a remote location, so he could share something with me reserved only for someone as deserving as I was. He ran his hand lovingly across the bare skin of my arm, his eyes hungry. I was flattered and a little anxious. We had been dating long enough that he might be expecting to make a proposal. I wanted to marry him, but that would mean exposing him to my clan—a notion that made my stomach churn. They could easily poison him against me.

Before he left, I thought I'd do some investigating. I wanted to know what he had in store for me. When he had his back turned, I started picking through the picnic basket, looking to see if he had a ring hidden there. I pulled out an ornate box, much larger than would be necessary for jewelry, and when I flipped it open, I found a fancy bottle of wine and a series of strange implements attached to the top of the box. I recognized two of them, a corkscrew and a bottle stopper, but I had no clue about the rest. They looked sharp, pointy, and dangerous. They might be the type of devices familiar to someone raised in wine country, but not to a bumpkin like me.

"Curiosity killed the cat, you know," Phillip said. I hadn't realized he had crept up behind me. I was so startled by his voice, I almost dropped the box.

"Sorry," I responded, with a little laugh. "This caught my eye. It's pretty spectacular." I didn't want to admit my ignorance. He didn't need another excuse to look down on me. "Implements to go with the wine?"

"You could say that," he replied with a thin smile. I sensed an air of distaste from him and I felt like a rube for not knowing exactly what they all were. My lack of knowledge didn't stop him from taking me out on our special date, though. I told myself he must truly love me if he were willing to overlook my lack of sophistication.

The picnic really was out in the middle of nowhere with nobody around for miles. The trip to get there seemed very out of character for Phillip, who liked to frequent places filled with people. We drove as far as we could into the wilderness, walked from there until we reached the rowboat and rowed out in brackish water until we arrived at a secluded little island teeming with willows and wildflowers. It was sublime, but far more rustic than I ever would have expected from my distinguished and civilized boyfriend. I decided he must be a true romantic at heart.

When we arrived at our destination, he laid out a blanket on the ground and before offering up any food, cracked open the wine. I figured he wanted to set a relaxed mood and perhaps calm his own nerves somewhat before proposing, but while I gladly indulged in the wine, he didn't even sip at his glass, busying himself with setting out the food. I moved to help, but he shook his head.

"No, no—relax and enjoy your wine. I don't want you to do anything but think peaceful thoughts. I'm treating you, for the moment." He gave me a suggestive smile. "You can treat me later."

I was looking forward to some gourmet fare, but noticed then all he had brought

with him were appetizers. My mind, already growing fuzzy from the wine, tried to sort out why this must be, but I couldn't figure it out. He insisted I have another glass, despite my growing wooziness.

"It's going straight to my head," I protested. "Where are the entrees?"

"That's because it's a very special blend—only the best for this day. Humour me." He didn't answer my second question.

As I swallowed down my second glass, he finished pulling out our picnic trimmings. I had been expecting more to feed the two of us, but my thoughts were growing cloudier by the minute. He then reached for the wine box. Glancing over at me with a questioning stare, he opened the box. His glass was still full.

"No more wine for me. It's strong stuff," I slurred, lying back on the blanket. My entire body was feeling numb. "I think I've had too much already. It's making me dizzy. I don't know how I'll be able to walk back to the car."

"That won't be something you'll have to worry about, dearest," he told me. "You won't be walking back."

He reached for some of the frightening-looking items in the box, the ones I hadn't been able to identify. As he pulled at them, they opened up into what appeared to be barbaric-looking eating utensils. In my confused state of mind, they looked even more like scary torture devices. I giggled nervously.

"I'm going to admit my ignorance, as ashamed as I am. I have no clue what those are for," I confessed. "My family were never wine connoisseurs. They were more the beer and barbecue type."

My words were barely coherent. He grinned, looking over at me with an unnerving intensity.

"I was counting on that. Beer and country air makes the flesh tender ... sweet and succulent." He chuckled. "Even if you did know anything about wine, you wouldn't have recognized this ..." He raised one sharp tool. "Or this." He raised another. "These implements were associated with the wine, as you guessed, but only because of the drugs I added to the bottle. That way, I could be sure you wouldn't be able to struggle or resist when I use them on you. They're actually for a different type of consumption. I was thankful you weren't aware of that when you stumbled across them."

My vision blurred at this point but not enough for me to lose sight of him moving closer to me with the first of those terrible implements—one of the tools he would use to serve me up for his private gustatory delight—out here, in the middle of nowhere, where no one would hear me scream.



EARLY SPRING IN THE POND

this horseshoe shaped grotto,
with flag slate, and lush flowers,
a feast for fish and frogs: living
as miniature Greek gods and goddesses— less the
ability to control elements.
we are emerging from winter. not everybody made it

this pond is current safe, with one exception—
a dead frog, green as a fern, floats belly up.

I looked in his eyes last summer, watched him
lick the air for dinner. but really
I don't know how long frogs live, I
could've been watching any amphibian.

the frog swirls
around again
his micro feet,
his skinny legs, and webbed toes,
his delightful belly stretched like a snare drum
an inanimate relief in the thawed pond.

the fish swim underneath.
they are an impossible orange against
brown green water—
phosphorescent streaks of action and color
alongside
tadpoles and baby fish (roughly the same sperm shape)
everything swimming for its life

—phylinda moore

THE GUNSHOT

by gary r. hoffman

The seconds turned to milli-seconds, and those to milli-parts of their own. David Logan stepped from behind a tree twelve feet in front of him.

How the hell did he know I'd be here? Is my life that predictable?

He watched as David stuck his hand under the shirt that wasn't tucked in, pulled out the .357 from the waistband of his pants and pointed the gun at him. He saw David's finger turn white as he squeezed the trigger. He could see the piece of lead exit the end of the barrel.

The park where he was jogging disappeared, and he was sitting on his mother's lap. She was putting on his shoes—white leather shoes she insisted he wear. To make sure the shoes were always clean, his mother had three pairs. Two were being polished while he wore the third. It was an attempt to make sure her son was clean and would always want to look sharp. He laughed when he thought about the lesson not sticking.

After his first day in first grade, he remembered coming home and telling his mother about the little kids in kindergarten. He was still wearing white shoes.

He thought about the first job he had where he made decent money. He clerked at a local grocery chain. He used his first paycheck to purchase an expensive pair of shoes that his parents refused to buy because of the cost. All his high school buddies wore them, and he wanted to fit in.

That slug is about eleven feet away now.

Football in high school was the thing. He had to play to really be anyone, but he did enjoy it. He wasn't a fantastic player, and he knew it, but he was a player and lettered his first year on the varsity team. He started at offensive right guard and



defense middle tackle his junior year. It was before the time when offensive and defensive players were separated.

During those years, he had two girlfriends. One he thought he was in love with, and the other was a great lover.

My God, Beverly was fantastic. That bullet is about ten feet away.

College was more than an eye-opening event for him. He went from a world of conforming, sports-oriented, when-is-the-next party thinking crowd, to people who were actually concerned about what was going on in the world and how they might change it.

He changed majors twice, ending up with a Bachelor of Science degree in business. His MBA came from Harvard.

Nine feet away.

His first job after college was with a major company that sold feed and machinery to the agricultural community. He quickly learned the old jokes about farmer's daughters were based on some truth. He had some of his wildest one-night stands with women he met as he traveled, and many of them were daughters of his clients.

Eight feet.

Christine seemed the perfect woman to marry. He was madly in love with her. On top of that, her father owned a manufacturing company and wanted to hire him.

After their honeymoon in the Cayman Islands, he went to work for his father-in-law, as the production manager in the factory. Here he began to learn all facets of the business.

A year later, he was moved up to the front office and promoted to vice-president of production. He kept track of inventory and sales projections. His first child was also born, a son, Jacob.

No more than six feet now.

His daughter, Katie, was born right after Christmas the following year. Christine stayed at home with the children and devoted her entire life to them. Her daddy made sure they had enough money so she didn't have to work.

Five feet, maybe.

His secretary Thelma retired, and Tameka was hired to replace her. He had all the input as to who filled the position. Tam's parents—her father a white sailor and her mother a native from her homeland, Thailand—gave her skin a dark olive color and her face an exotic look. While other men talked of trophy wives, he jokingly called her his “trophy” secretary.

Until the one night they had to work late.

After finishing a major project, they became more than just boss and employee.

The damned thing's gaining. Three feet.

They vowed it would never happen again. Both of them had too much to lose.

Two feet.

But it did happen again, not just once, but whenever they had the chance.

One foot. I wonder if I fall to the side if I can make it miss me?

They finally made the decision to ask for divorces from their spouses.

He looked down as the bullet made an indentation in the front of his sweatshirt. He felt it hit his skin, like someone was pinching him really hard.

The last thing he thought of just before the bullet exploded his heart wasn't Christine, or Tameka—David Logan's wife—but Beverly.

God, those were good times.



The Elephant Fort

Black beauties in chains-
before the ticket counters,
a long queue does creep
to scatter near the black wonders.

Ears and tails always move,
ruminating the rhythms of forest.
Elephants are inside the fort,
exposed to the sky barest.

I hear the hushed emotions
in the clinking of chains.
Hearts smolder in;
eyes emit lava of pains.

Burning red wild flowers
and tickling streams,
each elephant longs I know:
but dreams die in chains.

*Anakotta(a fort for the elephants) at Punathur,near Guruvayur in Kerala,
India is a tourist place, where you see a large number of elephants together.
All are chained.*

—fabiyas mv

[*short story*]

FINANCIAL CRIMES UNIT

by david gialanella

The dispatcher on the other end paused for a long time—something she was trained not to do. She stammered and fumbled with syllables trying to keep him on the line.

Grant—cordless phone to his ear, dressed in silk boxer shorts and black socks pulled to his knees—skidded across the marble floor, to the front and side doors to check the locks, then back to the kitchen window facing the rolling expanse of the backyard.

“You still there?” he said to the phone, now scanning for unlocked windows.

“I’m sorry, sir—you were walking in your backyard and discovered the item?” the woman’s voice said. “You meant to say you found it in your backyard, correct?”

“I’m telling you I was standing here staring out the window, and it just”—Grant rotated his hand about searching for the word—“appeared. Dropped there, from the sky for all I know. Right out of the sky.”

The woman faltered some more, then asked him to please describe it.

“Describe it? It’s a head! A fucking human head!” Grant yelled, jabbing the windowsill with his forefinger with each syllable, as if making a passionate debate.

“Sir, stay calm. Any details you can provide, please. Does it appear to have been...deceased a long time?”

“Jesus, how should I know? It’s a male. A white man, with a gray beard. I can’t see the eyes, there’s a blindfold.”

“Sorry, sir—did you say blindfold?”

“Blindfold.”

The dispatcher paused once more. “And again, you’re certain it just appeared? Couldn’t it have been there awhile and you missed it?”

“Lady, so help me God it dropped there as I watched. Who would invent this shit?”

“Sir, I don’t doubt that you believe this.”

Grant closed his eyes, sucked air through his nose, exhaled through pursed lips. A little analysis would quell his racing pulse, just as it did at the office. He sharpened his gaze.

It was sallow, almost waxy, its pallor tinged with blue. Disembodied for awhile, perhaps, but then the flesh wouldn’t take long to turn shades with the blood draining fast. Autumn leaves had blanketed the grass and were obscuring the neckline of the ghastly thing: unclear if it was cut, chopped or torn from its perch. The mouth gaped, frozen in terror.

"I'll tell you what, miss—I'm never going to sleep again in my life," Grant said. "I can tell you that much."

"Sir, remain calm."

He stood there gawking and listening for sirens when another fleshy orb plopped down in the grass, a few paces from the first.

Grant yelped and managed to toss the phone over his shoulder, its retractable antenna snapping off as it struck the floor. Even in a panic, the falsetto shriek sounded comical to him. Blood surged to his extremities.

"Sir?" the dispatcher's voice crackled from the earpiece.

This one, too, was blindfolded and belonged to a middle-aged white male. Maybe slightly younger than the other, but still haggard, even by lifeless head standards. It was faintly recognizable, like a face in a crowd tripping the subconscious.

Grant leveled his own cranium with the windowsill and eyed the sky, straining to locate the source of the macabre coconuts. Nothing but the branches swaying in the cool morning and sun rays peeking through in the gusts.

Again he tore across the kitchen floor. This time he tottered, knocked a bottle off the counter and found a drawer handle with his kneecap.

He limped to the living room window and shrugged to find nothing out of place there, either. Just leaves rambling across the manicured lawn.

Surely an axe-brandishing psychopath escaped from a sanitarium and was indiscriminately decapitating every unsuspecting pedestrian in Conwell, Connecticut, he thought.

But, if disembodied noggins could simply appear, why not something otherworldly? A Gollum, snatching cyclists and dog walkers from the tranquil streets, plucking their heads off and discarding them like tails off of boiled shrimp. A headless horseman tauntingly lobbing them into Grant's yard as retribution for a forefather's transgression. More likely yet, a radioactively enhanced pterodactyl discarding the distasteful, indigestible parts from above.

Grant broke into a relieved sweat to see two patrol cars screech into the circular driveway—boxy Crown Victorias, lights blazing. Glancing down at his exposed flesh, he dashed toward the staircase, headed to his bedroom for a robe. But he stopped short, skidded on his socks yet again, and careened onto his backside with what greeted him.

It tumbled down the steps, blindfold untying on the way down, and came to rest at Grant's feet—looking up at him, mouth agape as if it would say hello.

Outside three officers walked abreast to the front door.

"Can't wait to see what this guy has been smoking," one grumbled, rolling his eyes.

"Look alive, dispatcher said he's pretty tuned up," said the tallest one—lean and muscular, crew cut, hand resting loosely on his baton. A military tattoo peeked out of his shirt cuff.

Grant burst out of the front door and ran right past them.

"There's another one!" he roared, spare tire wobbling with each footfall. "It's inside the house!"

He ran circuits through yard bellowing until the lean cop tackled him. A beefier one laid on top of Grant as he flailed.

"What are you doing? I'm not the problem," Grant said with a mouthful of grass. He looked up at the lean cop. *Mazzulli*, the nameplate read.

"Sir, calm down," Mazzulli said. "Is there anyone else in the house?"

"No. Maybe. I'm not sure."

The officers groaned, hoisted him by the armpits, wrapped him in a shock blanket and loaded him into a cruiser, all while debating the necessity of handcuffs with glances.

"Don't all of you go in," Grant pleaded from the backseat, pulling the blanket tighter around him. "Haven't you seen movies? The killer might be stalking around the yard, and then you'll be finding my head when you come back out."

"Sit tight, sir," Mazzulli said. "Two more officers are on the way."

The car door swung closed, and Grant sat shivering and watched them file into the house, cursing them as they left the door ajar. Branches leafed with fiery shades framed the slate and stone of the Gothic mansion.

Motorists slowed and craned their necks at the flashing lights. A local cycling club crawled past gawking, clad in tight shorts and European jerseys.

"Fruitcakes," Grant muttered, slinking down in his seat. He'd have to move, or at least have a cutting-edge alarm system installed, he thought. Thompson, at the office, recently was lauding a security company he'd hired. The longest string of restful nights in years, he had said.

Two gunshots cracked inside the house. Grant turned to see Mazzulli's form stumble out of the darkness onto the steps and lurch backwards, feet in the air. Jet streams of blood trailed the tumble. The cop came to rest on the walkway's paving stones—pistol drawn, still clutched in his mitt.

Grant's brain absorbed the image and shut his body down. He slumped forward, knocking his head on the glass, then keeled backward on the seat.

A third patrol car pulled into the driveway, followed by an ambulance that jumped the curb and scraped its side on one of the brick pillars standing sentinel at the driveway entrance.

By now a throng was developing in the street.

Grant lifted his head and wiped his eyes, then shielded them from the pristine morning outside the hospital window. A masked doctor stood over him with a clipboard and called into the hallway when Grant began stirring. A muted television mounted in the corner played an Oingo Boingo music video.

"Mister Pennington," the doctor said, voice husky but certainly female. "You're at Loomis Hospital."

Grant adjusted his eyes and sat upright, stomach turning sour as he began to remember what he'd witnessed just minutes ago—or had it been days now? His

body still ached from his many spills. It hadn't been a nightmare.

"When did I get here?" Grant asked. He slurped the cup of water and wiped his face with the damp towel she handed him.

"Yesterday. The grogginess is to be expected. You regained consciousness in the ambulance and had to be sedated. You gave one of the medics a black eye."

"A black eye? That's a blessing compared to what the policeman got. What did they find?"

"We gave you two more doses once you were admitted," the doctor went on. "As it turns out, you needed the rest. Our tests showed signs of fairly serious fatigue and exhaustion."

"Ever discover three human heads on your property and witness a murder? It's draining."

"Actually, the problem appears chronic, judging by what our examination revealed."

"I don't know what to tell you, I feel fine. I do have a very demanding job, but that could be said of many people on the Street."

"The Street?"

"Wall Street," Grant said. "Sure, you're in the business of life and death, but I'd like to see how a doctor fares on the floor of the Exchange."

"Are you a trader?"

Grant snorted. "Not for some years. Now I manage a team of a dozen brokers. Like I said, stressful."

The doctor scribbled on her clipboard. Two orderlies arrived in the room, flanking a squat nurse with thick spectacles who looked capable of whipping them both.

"Are you using any drugs, Mister Pennington? Please be candid."

"Jesus, are you going to tell me what the hell happened in my home? And how do you know my name?"

One of the orderlies took his hands out of his pockets.

"The officers brought your wallet from the residence. Please, tell me about any drug use."

"Strong coffee and excessive work are my only vices. An occasional wine or Scotch in the evening to relax. I don't have time for recreational drugs, doctor. I'm a very busy man."

"That's surprising to hear, because we found a number of substances in your bloodstream."

"Must be a mistake."

Both orderlies inched closer to the bed. The nurse narrowed her gaze, arms crossed over her protrusive bust.

"I'm afraid the results don't leave room for interpretation," the doctor said. "I'd be happy to sit here and review them, but I know the police are eager to speak with you. This isn't the normal protocol, but it's just something I'd rather have you discuss with them, if you're willing to consent."

"Fine, I've got nothing to hide," Grant huffed. "And it can't be any less productive than what we're doing here."

"Mister Pennington," the doctor said in a serious tone, setting the clipboard down on the foot of the bed, "I don't believe this would be grounds for any legal trouble."

"Well there's a fucking comfort."

The doctor looked over Grant's bruises, checked his signs and brought the release forms. He dressed from a sealed plastic bag with items an officer brought from home: undergarments, a dress shirt, slacks and Italian leather shoes.

A young cop with a bulging midriff and, except for a crew cut, otherwise undisciplined-looking, escorted Grant down to a patrol car idling near the emergency room entrance. Behind the wheel was Conwell's lone black officer—an affirmative-action hire, Grant had once chuckled to a neighbor as they watched him pass.

The car descended the hospital hill through the adjacent neighborhood—where people had the dazed look of being routinely jarred awake by sirens and evacuation choppers—onto the meandering rural roads back toward Conwell.

Grant absently checked his wrist for the Rolex that was usually there. Before departing the hospital he'd insisted on calling his secretary, who gasped at the sound of his voice, asked if he were all right, said how shocked everyone was that he missed a day at the office—and unannounced, no less. Don't worry, Grant had told her.

"Now I don't suppose you two are going to fill me in on what's going on," Grant said through the metal grate separating the rear seat.

"Not authorized to discuss it, sir," said the pudgy cop, sitting in the passenger's side.

"Shocking."

"The detectives are waiting for you at the station."

Grant peered out the window and frowned. "Anyway I'm sorry about what happened to your colleague, or partner, or whatever you'd call him. I hope the other two who went in the house came out okay. I know you *aren't authorized to discuss it*"—Grant said, making air quotes with his fingers—"but I really hope they are."

The cops shot looks at one another. Grant tilted his head back against the headrest and sighed.

"Maybe you're at least authorized to tell me the time," he said to the roof of the cabin.

"Quarter past ten."

The stout brick building housing Conwell police, as well as a small jail, courthouse and planning department, was characteristically sleepy. Cruisers, unmarked cars and meter maid hatchbacks sat idle.

Inside everyone stopped and stared when they brought Grant through the main door.

He was handed a cup of watery coffee and nudged into an interview room with cigarette-tinged walls. The plastic chair, apparently construction orange when new, hugged Grant in a way that made it difficult to cross his legs or lean forward.

He sat in silence a long time. Through a small window he could see the Conwell Family Restaurant across the street, old women shuffling in for a Rotary Club meeting. A radiator rattled and hissed to life. Outside a Geo crawled past blasting Huey Lewis. He'd begun dozing when the door snapped open and two men in sport coats lumbered in, sucking the oxygen out of the tiny space.

"Good morning, Mister Pennington," said one with elbow patches, wild hair and a poorly edged beard—looking more like a college professor than a cop. "I'm Detective Rogers and this is Detective Martin."

The other one, bald-headed and stocky, nodded.

"Let's get up to speed with everything," Rogers said, and they sat down opposite Grant.

"Thank goodness, someone with answers," Grant said.

Martin set a bulky recorder onto the table and pressed the red button.

"This is a little bit formal, isn't it?" Grant said, leaning away from the device.

"It's just for the record. Please state your name."

"Pennington."

"Full name, please."

"Grant Yardley Pennington."

"Good. So the doctor tells us you remember at least some of yesterday's events."

"All of it, unfortunately. Please tell me you found the culprit. Better yet, tell me it was some guy in a hockey mask, so I'll know this is all a dream." He chuckled, then turned serious. "Sorry, I shouldn't make jokes with what happened to the officer."

"Which officer do you mean?"

"Christ, more than one of them got hurt, then? I was afraid of that," Grant said.

"The muscular one, Italian name, the one who looks like he belongs in a boxing ring. That was the only one I saw happen. That's when it goes blank."

"What did you see?"

"I saw him killed, is what I saw—don't know what else there is to say," Grant said, shades of confusion seeping into his face. "I couldn't see who did it or exactly how it happened but...the officer was decapitated. As you know. He came stumbling out of my front door with no head attached and fell down where you found him."

The detectives sat blinking. Rogers opened his mouth, still forming a sentence in his head, but Detective Martin put up a hand.

"Officer Mazzulli, who made first contact with you, is alive and well," Martin said, baritone. "The other responders are fine, too, other than a couple bruises from having to subdue you."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure," Martin said.

Grant wrung his hands and looked down. "I suppose that's a relief. My eyes

must have played a trick,” he said. “I was in a panic by then. What about the... heads?”

“No heads either, sir,” Martin said. “No intruders in the home, suspicious persons in the neighborhood or human remains of any kind.”

Grant furrowed his brow and stared past the detectives.

“The doctor tells us you may well have been hallucinating given your... condition,” Rogers said. “It’s obvious that you could use some rest, but it was urgent that we discuss what was found inside the home.”

“I thought you didn’t find anything,” Grant said. “What are you talking about?”

“Cocaine out in the open, for starters,” Rogers said. “Not a Pablo Escobar-size stash, but certainly enough for a telephonic search warrant. We turned up some amphetamines in the bedroom.”

“I told the doctor—I don’t use any of those substances,” Grant pleaded.

“Look,” Martin cut in, again with a hand, “we’re much more concerned with the ledgers we located in the office.”

Grant turned red and stared him down. “Who said you could go through my business documents? That’s sensitive financial information. And kept in a safe, I might add—did you break into my safe?”

“Actually, they were sitting open on the desk, right next to some of the cocaine,” Martin said. “As a matter of fact, there was residue all over the books themselves.”

“Detectives, this is getting ridiculous,” Grant said, raising his hands. “Clearly someone broke in. I didn’t just imagine all that violence. Did you people even bother to check for fingerprints?”

“No signs of forced entry, Mister Pennington,” Rogers chimed in, almost apologetically.

“Do you know how many fucking lawyers I know?” Grant snarled.

A knock at the door came then, and a man in a tailored suit appeared. He wedged a chair between Rogers and Martin and sat, the three momentarily jockeying for elbow space on the interview table.

“I’m Agent Grimes. Detectives, I assume you advised Mister Pennington of his right to counsel.”

Each cop motioned toward the other.

“For Christ’s sake,” Grant said. “Not one but two taxpayer-funded agencies fussing over a little bit of supposed cocaine. Which I’m telling you isn’t even mine. Did you test it?”

“Actually, sir, I’m from the Financial Crimes Unit,” Grimes said, monotone.

“A financial crime is me sitting here while clients are in need of my services,” Grant replied.

“Services,” Grimes repeated. “You must be aware that insider trading is illegal. Particularly when it’s someone else’s money.”

Grant’s jaw dropped open. “Our brokerage is extremely well-respected!”

“You certainly have connections, that’s undeniable,” Grimes said. “Right now we’re in the process of detaining one Mister”—he lingered on the ‘r,’ opened a file

and glanced down—"Edwin Mankowitz. From Fulton Gwynn & Grossman. Says here his legal team advised half of the ten biggest corporate acquisitions this year. But you already knew that."

"I've only read about him in the trades," Grant said.

"There's also the apparent skimming that's going on," Grimes went on. "My people are still sifting through these records but it doesn't look good. Now's your chance to explain."

"You mentioned counsel. Mankowitz I don't know, but I was just saying how many lawyers I do know in New York. This has crossed the line into harassment, plain and simple. I'm not a believer in conspiracies, but I intend to have this all investigated privately—at great expense to myself, if necessary."

"Are you saying you don't wish to talk, sir?"

Grant leaned forward. "I'm saying I have enough money and contacts to make this equally irksome for both of us," he said.

"Until we freeze your accounts, maybe" Grimes said, still deadpan. "For now, you're free to go. No official charges yet. But do try to stay between home and your office."

Grant shook his head and popped out of the chair. "Gentlemen, thank you for absolutely fucking nothing," he said to the three men, who remained sitting and watched him leave.

He walked the few blocks to the diner, where he sat at the counter. He poked at his food, drank a pot of black coffee, read the paper and swore at the stock listings.

Afterward he brought a handful of change to the payphone in the rear of the restaurant and checked in at the office. He drew the phonebook from the shelf underneath and dialed Pan American's reservations line.

"I'll pay cash at the counter, thanks," Grant said to the phone, looking over his shoulder.

There was no answer at the brokerage's preferred car service, and successfully dialing a taxi in Conwell was typically futile, so he set out to walk the two miles to his home.

It was dusky by the time he arrived. Grant patted for his keys, sighed, and turned toward the neighbor's to phone his housekeeper.

"Looking for these?" a voice said from the lawn, punctuated with the jingling of keys. Grant shot around and strained to make out the figure in the shadow. Something flashed in front of him and swept him off his feet.

Grant—a black cloth cinched over his eyes, hands bound behind him—was hustled across the lawn kicking and cursing, and tossed into what felt like a van. Doors thudded and the engine rumbled to life. His cries echoed off the metal panels.

After a brief, jostling ride, the vehicle bucked to a halt. Grant was dragged onto his feet, the blindfold yanked off. They were in the center of Conwell.

"Hello again," Grimes said pleasantly, but no smile.

Next to Grimes was Mazzulli, nameplate and all. Then a towering, dark-

skinned man dressed in Arab garb: a long white tunic, *keffiyeh* shrouding his head. The man rested his hands at chest height on the handle of a *scimitar*—its menacing blade curving down to the ground.

Across the square two men fiddled with the controls of a black helicopter, its rotor humming to life.

Grant opened his mouth to yell but looked around and saw that, despite the early hour, the town was deserted—the newsstand shuttered, the restaurants dark, no commuters scurrying from the nearby train station.

“You’re out of your fucking mind,” Grant hissed through clenched teeth, flecks of spit buckshot. “It’s one thing to make false accusations but you can’t intimidate people like this!”

“It’s useless to deny your sins,” Grimes said. “We know everything.”

“Sins? Are we talking law or virtue, here, asshole?”

“Is there a difference?” Grimes said, raising an eyebrow.

The Arab slowly lifted the blade and rested it across his shoulders. He stood looking disinterested, eyelids half closed.

“Who the fuck is this, now?” Grant said, motioning.

“Just one of our associates. The Saudis are best at this particular aspect of the business. They’ve all but perfected it, really.”

“What are you talking about? What are we doing out here?”

“It’s supposed to happen in public,” Grimes said. “That’s the rule. We play by the rules, Mister Pennington. You wouldn’t know anything about that.”

Mazzulli walked behind and replaced the blindfold.

“I’m not defrauding the poor, you know,” Grant whimpered. “These are just shareholders. A few unions and retirement funds, sure, but mostly rich investors.”

“I’m afraid it doesn’t matter,” Grimes said, motioning to the other men. “Either way, you missed your chance to confess at the police station.”

Strong hands forced Grant to his knees and down into a prone position. His heaving chest rested on top of his thighs.

He heard feet shuffling around him and began laughing at the ground.

“I fail to see the humor here,” Grimes said, tilting his head.

“Two days in a row—fucking hallucinating again like a street junkie,” Grant said. “What the hell kind of nightmare are you supposed to be, anyway?”

“Name’s Grimes, as I said. Financial Crimes Unit.”

“Of what agency?” Grant demanded.

“Not authorized to discuss that, sir.”

The blade twinkled in the light of the streetlamp as the Arab raised it above his head with both hands.



[poetry]

EMERGING in the Mist



LUKE KIRK-SON

emerging
in the mist
of the night

Malicious
fellow
with a giant
scythe

finds
a kid
who's playing ball



now
it's time
to heed
the call





all those
voices
in his
head:

"chop that
kid up,
make
him dead"

another kid
that God wouldn't save

now finds peace
in a
nameless grave.



GUEST LECTURE

by mickey hunt

The guest speaker paused to survey his audience one final time. A professor or two leaned against the wall, and scattered throughout the cavernous lecture hall were probably three dozen bored students—no doubt both undergraduate and graduate.

Dr. Gimbel's audiences were growing smaller, and they didn't laugh at the jokes any more. People had lost interest in his subject of zombie theology. Thankfully, it was his last appearance on this particular university tour.

His pause would, he hoped, add significance to his next words. And it was working. Everyone was staring at him now, even the students who had been smiling at their laptop computers.

"In conclusion," the speaker said at last, "the concept of zombies affirms for us that humans don't just have a dark side, but rather a depraved fundamental nature. When an infected person's spirit departs from his or her body and the zombie pathogen reignites the animal life within, what does the zombie do? It doesn't contemplate the metaphysical wonders of existence, or of resurrection; rather, it assaults living people and devours them, if it possibly can.

"With rare historical exceptions, the worst of our depraved nature is kept in check while we are alive, though it finds expression in the ordinary deviations, such as, for example, the flourish of zombie phenomena in literature, film, and games. Why this macabre fascination? It's because the horror and gore appealed to our prurient natures. And a zombie is not only hungry; it's angry and hateful, which tell us that we all possess a vicious force imbedded, buried deep within our beings.

"My theory then is that within the zombie universe, or ontological lexicon, or

milieu, it's not the triggering pathogen that's evil, but humans. We are the zombies. So, if we can never defeat the plague, what, if anything, can be done to alter human nature? And if we are able to change human nature, should we? What might the cost be to our humanity? These are inquiries we all must consider."

Gimbel collected up his notes to signify that the lecture had ended.

No one applauded.

No one had any questions.

The Chairman of the Department of Religion jumped up from his onstage seat and dashed to the podium. "Umm. Dr. Gimbel will be autographing his book *A Speculative Theology of Zombies* in the foyer. This book, as I mentioned, once topped the *New York Times* bestseller list for nine weeks. The Department is providing free copies. Umm, let's thank Dr. Gimbel for his sacrifice in visiting our campus."

The Department Chairman clapped his hands together several times and a few audience members politely imitated him. The rest began gathering up their coats, backpacks, and other gear.

"Just a reminder for my students," the Chairman said into the microphone. "I'm giving extra credit for a no-more-than thousand word essay based on Dr. Gimbel's treatise. It must be turned in by next Wednesday, midnight."

At that moment a low breathy growl echoed through the hall. From behind a screen at the side of the stage emerged a slouching figure dragging its mangled stump of a foot. It had pale vacant eyes, a filthy football-jersey wrapping its body, and carried an overpowering putrid smell. It growled again between its black, broken teeth and lunged at Dr. Gimbel, who seemed to have frozen in place.

The Chairman grabbed Gimbel by the jacket and jerked him clear as two students with baseball bats hopped onto the stage. The zombie lunged again. One of the students smacked the zombie in the head, and when it dropped, they completed the job with a downward swing each.

"How in the blazes did it get into the building?" the Chairman said with irritation. "Second lapse this week. I'm filing a complaint with Campus Police. Anyway, whew, thanks, guys. Let's call Housekeeping in here to clean up, okay?"

He turned to the guest speaker, and nodding toward the two students, said, "My excellent Teacher Assistants. Dr. Gimbel, I most sincerely, most sincerely apologize."

Dr. Gimbel, who had nearly caught his breath, said, "No problem. My cane?"

The Chairman passed him his cane and Gimbel limped down the steps and through the lecture hall into the foyer. There the students were reclaiming their field hockey sticks, tennis rackets, shovels, bats, and other assorted weapons. Outside, a handful of zombies pounded on the thick barred windows with their fists. A small group of students inside the glass exit doors were discussing meeting later for coffee.

"And did you recognize the zombie on the stage?" one female student said.

"Jesse Cavanaugh," a male student said. "Number 29. Heisman Trophy

contender.”

“Yeah. A great person,” she said with sadness. “All right, gang, let’s run for it. I’ve got a physics exam next period.”

“You all be careful out there!” Dr. Gimbel said.

“Thanks.” She clapped him on the shoulder.

“Ready, set, go!” she said and shoved against a door and held it open as her friends swarmed out. Gimbel watched them form up, speed across the quad, and dispatch a zombie or two that approached too close.

The Chairman by then was standing beside Dr. Gimbel and said, “Sorry that no one stayed for your book signing.”

“It’s okay,” Gimbel said cheerily. “They’re busy.”



the ghost of my lonely

Abandoned in the fifties after the war
A freight elevator stuck between floors
Obsolete machinery, splintered old chairs
In a warehouse in Newark, New Jersey somewhere

Dead air presses down, stifling and thick
Something still dwells behind one of those bricks
Curled up in a ball, it waits for me there
In a warehouse in Newark, New Jersey somewhere

A musty gray vapor that whispers my name
It seeps through the wall and creeps to my brain
It sighs and it groans as my soul is laid bare
In a warehouse in Newark, New Jersey somewhere

It mumbles and moans and drones of ancient tombs
Of claustrophobic closets and dim, hollow rooms
I cry out for help, echoes answer my prayer
In a warehouse in Newark, New Jersey somewhere

The ghost of my lonely, my lost and alone
My hopeless and helpless, my can't go back home
It's looking at me now with a dull, vacant stare
In a warehouse in Newark, New Jersey somewhere

—timothy ryerson

Dreams of Horses

by michael strayer

The wolf came to the edge of the forest—a silver pulsing in the moonlight—and stared at the Cresley house. It surveyed the property: the grassy pastures for the horses, the main-house, the dilapidated sheds and doghouses, the barn. Black stamps against the night, as if the absence of such things.

It stood wreathed in moonlight like something hailed from another world and time and without age; and like any sudden calamity, no one could have said what it was doing there, nor where it came from. As it watched, a light illuminated in the barn and there came to the wolf's ears the sounds of life from within. It took a tentative step and leaves crumbled beneath its feet. The sounds grew louder.

The wolf took another step, hesitated, and then, as if thinking better, retreated in a series of muffled footfalls, dissolving into the murk of the forest.

A horse whinnied across the bluish gloom. The hoot of an owl.

A shout:

"Alright Jim! C'mon, it's my turn!"

"Just a little longer."

"No, Jim! You've had it all night!"

"Just a little longer."

"No! I'm gonna tell you don't share!"

"Tattle-tell!"

Megan Cresley struggled with her elder brother, Jim, trying desperately to wrench the thing in his hands away. It was a toy bow and arrow set, a gift from their grandpa, and the children had been busying themselves for the better part of an hour shooting bales of hay in the barn—hay, rusted tin cans and the occasional rat or vole. The lamplight tossed their lunging shadows hugely on the wall.

"Jim! Jim, it's my turn!"

"What are you gonna do with it?" he said. "You're just a little girl. I'm training to be a soldier like Jared. I need to be a good shot if I'm gonna hunt enemies in the desert too." War and all related subjects had become an obsession for Jim, ever since their brother Jared had enlisted last year. "Besides," he said, "you're too young for these things. You'll hurt yourself."

He was only ten to her eight, but before she could protest her mother's voice filled the barn, ending the quarrel. "Kids! Come on in! Time for bed!"

Jim smiled; and then, grinning, turned and ran from the barn, leaving his sister to follow in his wake. Outside, the horses were champing in their stables. The shrill barks of the family dogs chased Megan all the way to bed.

In the morning the family gathered in the breakfast nook. Papa and Grandpa with their coffee and their cigarettes and Jim trying to drink coffee, grimacing plainly. Mama and Meg with buttermilk and the breakfast table covered in porcelain plates of eggs and bacon and pancakes and boats of syrup. There were six chairs at the table. Hanging on the wall above the table was a photograph of Jared. He was standing with Papa and his horse, Cherry, dressed in tan and brown army fatigues, his head shaved and his budding mustache trimmed. Every morning as she sat down for breakfast Megan stared at that picture and wondered how her brother was doing. She thought of Jared and she saw him riding Cherry out in the foothills under the pines and she thought he must miss his horse terribly all the way over there in the desert. Did they have horses? she wondered. Jim spoke of camels, but she didn't trust him. She thought of Jared and his horse and she imagined Papa riding alongside him, their dogs running and nipping, weaving perilous calico paths between the horses' crashing hooves; and then she remembered her brother, waving goodbye as he boarded a bus eastbound for the airport, and Mama crying, and Papa and Jim and Grandpa and Grandma watching in silence; and then the doors closed, and the bus drove off, vanishing behind a tawny bulge of roiling dust.

She focused on the conversation around her. The subject was dogs.

"They been actin' awful strange lately," said Papa.

"Sure have," Jim agreed, sagely.

"Did you hear the racket they was kickin' up last night?" asked Grandpa.

"They've been like that every night," said Mama. "And Dutch is still missing." She stooped, cleared away the empty dishes. "I'm startin' to worry."

"Oh, none of that," said Papa. "She'll turn up... Always turns up."

"When I was a boy," said Grandpa, "we used to let my dog, Scout, go runnin' for days on end. He was a full-blooded blue tick, Scout. Ol' dog always came back." He sat back in his chair and folded his hands and closed his eyes. "Hell of a dog."

They continued drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes and talking—the National League, boxers, presidents. None of it really interested Megan. Jim tried bringing up the war, but a quick admonition from Mama swiftly silenced him.

After breakfast the boys all piled in the truck and drove into town and Megan

and Mama stayed home. They cleaned the windows and dusted the furniture (in all the rooms but Jared's, which they never disturbed), and hung the laundry. Then Mama went upstairs to, "have a little siesta," and Megan went outside to tend the horses.

Toting a bucket of feed in each hand, the girl lumbered clumsily toward the pens. It was a hot day, the sun high, and she was dripping sweat by the time she reached the gate. The horses within—the Cresleys owned three: Cherry, Koba, and Cloud—neighed as Megan neared; and they pawed at the earth and gnashed their teeth.

"There, there," she said. "How you guys doin' today?"

The horses tossed their manes and whinnied. Their eyes gleamed. Their muscular bodies shone beneath the sun, reddish-brown, marbled with powerful flesh. They smelled of sunbaked dust, fur, and sweat. They loomed over the girl like demigods; resolute, impartial, and beyond any of her follies, nostrils flaring, carmine eyes ablaze, neither benevolent nor evil.

Megan fed each in turn, stroking their hair and caressing their warm, strong bodies. She spoke to the creatures. She told them about her life, her hopes and dreams, things she would never tell anybody else—not even Mama. Jim could have his war and his stupid games, she thought, as long as she had these, her horses, her best friends.

She rubbed them down, then craned her neck and lifted her face against the sun. She turned away and it was then she saw it: a crescent sparkle of white in the pale green wildflowers at the edge of the field. Squinting, she strained to identify it. She left the pen and crossed the yard and bent to the ground and picked it up. Then, she began to laugh.

It was the toy bow and arrow. Jim must've been playing with it that morning and left it out. She held it in her hands, a delicate weight. The wooden arch teetered across her palms, found its own equilibrium and righted itself. A single arrow lay in the grass. Long and thin, with red and yellow feathers. A short sharp triangular point at its tip. Like a tiny lance. Megan fitted it into the bow, straightened and faced the forest. She pulled back, aimed and could feel her heart beating in her chest, down her arms, in the notches of her fingers and through the bowstring.

With a scream, she released. The arrow soared in a glinting parabola through the air, into the forest. Megan fell to the ground, laughing. Then she stood and took off between the trees in search of the arrow. Behind her, the horses were shrieking and the dogs began to bark.

The forest was all gloom and green and silence. Vines hung in serpentine clusters and dangled from the trees, and olive moss quilted the fallen trees, boulders, the fossils like etchings of fish long gone, trilobites and orthoceras shells netted in layers of stone. Pine needles drifted from the canopy above. Hot motes of green light poured here and there, though gazing skyward you could not see the sun, and Megan flickered noiselessly midst the beams, like some wayward pilgrim in the halls of an elfin necropolis.

She moved quickly and quietly. There was something scary about the forest now that she was in it, a haunted somnolence that tingled the roots of her hair. She didn't like how the environment was simultaneously unfamiliar yet unchanging, as if she were caught in an enormous and tricky hamster wheel. Looking back, she saw mirrored corridors of pines, oak, ash and evergreens, and the light that fell between them was fixed and pale. There was a creeping thinness to it that reminded Megan of stagnant water. She bit her lip and continued forward. All she wanted now was to find the arrow and get back to the horses and a million thoughts raced across her mind... Shouldn't of left the yard. Oh, Jim was right... Why did ya leave? It's Jim should have to get the stupid arrow anyhow... Now ya lost. Lost!

She could see the word, a great black truth floating before her. "Mama!" she cried. "Mama!" and she fell to her knees and sobbed.

Hazy light fanned in dusty rafters over her shoulders. It seemed she could hear her brother's laughter, rebounding faintly against the endless boles. She climbed to her feet and wiped her eyes. No, not lost, she thought. Get a move on though... Gotta hurry and get home.

She stepped over a round red circlet of worn leather on the ground, on which a tag read: DUTCH. But she didn't see the empty collar, nor hear the high and steady drone of flies, feet away in the bushes.

She came to a ring where no trees towered and no grass grew. In the center of this clearing she spied the arrow's red and yellow tail-feathers. The thin light hovered brightly here; but the sun was invisible in the wan and radiant sky. Megan went to the arrow, sighing with relief. Time to go home.

Nearing the bolt, however, her relief disappeared. Tears welled again in her eyes and her mouth fell open.

At the end of the shaft was a tiny bird. Megan didn't know what kind, but it shone in its death like blue mother-of-pearl. The arrow had pierced the creature's breast and little droplets of blood coagulated like wax down its side.

The bow clattered to the ground. She staggered toward the bird and picked it up. It was surprisingly heavy and stiff in her hand. Feathers crinkled as she squeezed. She clasped the arrow and pulled and, after a moment's resistance, a sickening jolt shot up her arm and the thing was free of the bird's flesh.

Its eyes were dull and cloudy and very dead. "I'm sorry, bird," she said. "I'm sorry, I just wanted to shoot it once."

She began to cry.

She held the bird and cried and asked for its forgiveness and the bird gave no response and she understood in a flash it couldn't now and never would and her crying intensified. She scorned the unfairness of the world, the carelessness of her hands and the indifference of the arrow. She held the bird to her chest and she thought of Jim with his smile and of Jared and the casual wave he'd given before the bus doors closed.

She cried for a time and then fell still. She slumped her head and listened to the world around her. She heard bugs, crawling and feasting. She heard the scamper of branch and leaf, the languid hiss of foliage.

There was a rustle in the bushes in front of her. Megan looked up. The wolf stood looking at her as if materialized out of the leaves, a feral jinni, great and silver. Saliva seeped from its ivory jaws. Its face was aquiline and motionless and the hairs on the bridge of its snout were very white. You could see it calculating. It regarded the girl with its smoldering intelligent eyes, objective and unafraid.

A smell of decay spread out from its fur and filled the clearing. It smelled ancient and primal, as if it had always been and would always be. Megan breathed again; and she smelled sweat and resin, churned dirt and rust and loam.

She was alternately terrified and comforted.

In the amber russet of the wolf's eyes she studied her reflection—a doppelganger ghost, round-faced and frail, peering back at her like a curious prisoner in a Titian cell.

She said nothing.

She held out her hands.

The wolf blurred. Megan thought of the bird and the arrow and of Jared and Jim and she did not smile and she did not grimace. Then she was with the horses, so many horses. Naked hooves thundered around her. She rode the horses, hundreds of horses, she was suffused and carried by the might of their stormy, galloping grace. She was riding, she was running. She ran and laughed, she rode, she reached for the clouds and the grass and touched them both and all around her was a sea of horses.

Jared came to the funeral. He wore his medals and his honors and he watched the proceedings, his face tan and wrinkled. His eyes were hard and the hands in his lap were hard. The other mourners seemed pleased to shake them. He felt no hatred looking at the casket. He was certainly very sad, but he felt no anger and leveled no blame.

He approached the casket after the ceremony. The whiteness of it belied what laid inside. He took off one of his medals and set it on the casket; and then he took it back and pinned it once again to his lapel. He bowed his head, as if imparting to his sister a secret empathy of the world, all its histories, violence and wonder.



Chantilly Lace

A shadow's cast upon the wall
she's slender, willowy and tall.
About her frame she wears a shawl
of black Chantilly lace.

This apparition moves with ease,
in her wake a stiff, cool breeze.
For locked up rooms she needs no keys,
though they rattle at her waist.

They say the ghost looks like a maid
who kept this house and in it stayed,
and when she spoke her lord obeyed
for he loved her pretty face.

The master seemed in her employ
she'd bat her eyes and then act coy.
Her affect on him she did enjoy—
with his wife 'twas not the case.

One winter eve there came a chill.
A rushing breeze down from the hill.
She boldly asked her lord to fill
the wood in her fireplace.

Not only did her lord obey,
not caring what his wife would say,
but he gave the maid a shawl next day,
of the finest black French lace!

He wrapped it warmly 'bout her shoulder
and feeling reckless, rather bolder,
in his arms he did enfold her
and the two shared this embrace.

His wife watched from the shadowed hall.
Then to her room the maid she'd call,
around her neck she'd wrap the shawl
'til life left her pretty face.

Now her shadow's cast upon the wall
she's slender, willowy and tall.
About her frame she wears a shawl
of black Chantilly lace.

—michelle deloatch

Death on the Moor

I have seen the wounded terror
That haunts the midnight vale,
A thing of sin and error,
That answers not my hail.

It moves within the bracken;
It trundles down the moor;
Its pace it will not slacken
I'm frightened to my core!

It is sleek and salty evil;
Its steps both light and cold,
A thing remote, medieval,
By evil it's controlled.

Now it slinks across the bridges,
And it tarries cross the moor,
Below the shadowed ridges
Where frightened birds there soar.

It lures me! I can scent it,
Its strong and sweet aloes,
And its magic, beauty lent it!
Ah, now I know it knows!

For I know that it's twice lonely,
Shaped like a comely girl.
This eve it wants me only
To feel its flesh of pearl!

Her silhouette is handsome.
She's pretty and not coy.
My soul soon none may ransom.
She calls me "pretty boy!"

She's lovely and a beauty,
She rises from the fen,
I feel now it's my duty
Of all of living men

To grasp her and to hold her,
Then crush her in my arms
To kiss her, then to fold her,
To know her monstrous charms.

Now like some glass she dashes
Me to the peat and sod,
She rips me and she thrashes
Me with an iron rod!

I am broken and I'm bleeding.
Over me she towers,
A fool who's never heeding,
She kills and then devours!



—michael fantina

Nightlight

by lawrence buentello

The moment Judy told him she used a nightlight when she slept, old memories rose up in Kurt's mind, terrible childhood memories.

He sat on the edge of the bed holding the nightlight. It was a white glass swan hiding a small bulb, innocent, completely harmless. But it wasn't the nightlight itself or the light it produced that frightened him.

"I don't understand," he said as he stared at the swan. "Why do you need a nightlight? They're for children."

She walked out of the bathroom, having found places for her abundant toiletries among his deodorant and razor. She was a tall, beautiful girl with an irresistible smile. She offered him more than just the allure of her youthful beauty, though. They fit together in the way they viewed the world, and how they felt about each other, which was why they both agreed that her moving in with him was a wonderful idea.

But they'd never spent the night together, even after the intimate interludes that convinced them both to entertain a more permanent relationship. She'd always found an excuse to leave his apartment. He wondered if her needing a nightlight was the reason.

"I know it's silly," she said, sitting next to him on the bed and squeezing his thigh playfully. "But I got one as a little girl and I've just never given it up. It's gotten so I can't sleep without a light on."

He swallowed slowly, trying to control the emotions rising up his spine. He wanted to stand up and hurl the swan against the wall until it shattered into a hundred pieces.

But he continued sitting on the bed, managing a smile.

"You don't really need one, do you?" he said, staring into her eyes. "You won't have to be afraid of anything. I'll be there with you."

She kissed him on the cheek and said, "I know you'll be with me. And I'm not afraid of the dark. I just need it on, like white noise. I can't sleep without it."

"Can't you try?"

She sat staring at him for a moment. He could see in her face the realization that just below the surface of his neutral expression lay something else.

"Something else" was the fear of exposing a weakness in the man she'd come to know, a man who had carefully crafted an image of a level-headed pragmatist, a young professional, a weekend jock, a physical specimen. Delving into childhood traumas would only crack the fragile shell between past and present.

He tried to laugh it off, handing her the swan and walking out of the bedroom, but she followed him, finally forcing him to sit down with her on the living room sofa and talk to her. "Why should you care if I need a nightlight?" she asked, and he finally gave her an answer, because he knew if he couldn't keep her from using one in their bedroom he would have to end their relationship altogether.

"When I was four years old," he said, "I was afraid of the dark, like a lot of kids. And like a lot of kids, I cried about it to my mother. She bought a nightlight for my bedroom so I wouldn't be afraid."

"See?" Judy said, patting his arm. "You understand. So what's the problem?"

He drew in a deep breath before he laid his hand over hers; the sensation of her patting his arm unnerved him.

"There was no problem," he continued, "at least, for a while. The light stayed plugged into the wall socket near the door and cast a soft light through the room. I used to sleep facing away from the door, so I could stare at the light on the wall across from me. That comforted me, to be bathed in that light, and I'd watch it until I fell asleep. I wasn't afraid. But I became afraid."

"Why?"

He hesitated; he licked his lips and spoke again.

"Did you ever make shapes of things with your hands? Set up a lamp or flashlight and put your hands in front of the beam so the shadows formed shapes on the wall?"

"As a matter of fact I did, as—"

"As a child," he said, completing her sentence. "That's what happened with the nightlight. Except I wasn't making the shapes."

She shook her head. "I don't understand."

"One night I fell asleep, but not deeply. I remember opening my eyes after hearing a sound, a scratching noise coming from the other side of my bed. I was staring at the wall, but instead of a peaceful white field of light I saw a shadow, a small shadow of something moving near the floor. At first I thought I was dreaming,

so I wasn't afraid. But then I realized I wasn't dreaming. I was watching the shadow of something moving near the floor. I didn't move. It would have been easy to turn and peer over the side of the bed, but I felt frozen, by fear or something else. I don't know. So I just watched the shadow moving around, and then it moved toward the door and disappeared in the shadow cast by the bureau that stood across from the foot of the bed. I guess I fell asleep after that. I don't remember."

"God, was it a rat?" she asked.

"I wish it had been a rat," he said.

"Did your family own a cat or dog?"

"No. The only pet I owned was a goldfish I kept in a glass bowl on the bureau. Its orange scales would flash in the light as it swam. No, it wasn't a dog or cat, or a rat, either."

"Well, then, what was it?"

"I don't know. I never found out."

"Kurt, I don't understand."

"It came back," he said, glancing at her, afraid she would see the fear behind his eyes. "I must have thought I'd been dreaming that first night, because I went to sleep the next night as if nothing had happened. And nothing did happen for another few nights. But then I saw the shadow again, moving around on the floor. I still couldn't turn to face the thing that made it—I think I felt that if I looked at it directly it would—I didn't know what it would do. So I just lay in bed staring at the wall and the small shadow moving over it."

"I held the covers over my head, so only my nose and eyes were exposed. I didn't want to look directly at what made the shadow, so I used my other senses to try to discover its identity. The strange sounds it made synced with the motions of the shadow, so I realized it was moving with shuffling footsteps, stiff-legged. And I smelled a faint, but pungent odor in the air, like rotting vegetation in soil. I followed the shadow with my eyes and the sounds with my ears as it moved around the far wall, then near my bed. Later, I heard its voice."

"First it only laughed, high and dry, like a cartoon. But then I began hearing it murmur softly, though I couldn't understand its words, if it was speaking."

He laughed nervously, realizing how absurd his recollection must seem. Judy sat quietly staring at him, and he wondered what she was thinking. Perhaps she thought he was crazy.

"This went on for a couple of weeks," he said, "and by the end of those two weeks I was absolutely terrified. Then one night I thought I heard it whispering, and then I was sure it was going to get me. I heard the word 'kill' whispered over and over again, or at least I thought I heard it. Rapidly, like someone stuttering the word. I woke the next morning, still alive, and grateful for that, but then I walked to the bureau to feed my goldfish and found it floating in the water."

Kurt swallowed again.

"It killed my goldfish. It was practicing, I guess, before coming for me."

"But what happened?" she asked, pulling her legs underneath her on the sofa. "You're obviously still alive, so I guess it didn't get you."

"No, it didn't get me," he said.

She laughed, but not with any humor. "So you were suffering from some childhood delusion. Kids have them all the time, don't they? It was all in your imagination."

"Maybe," he said, reaching up to rub his lower lip. "Maybe not."

"Why not?"

"When I saw my goldfish floating in its bowl I became hysterical. I ran crying to my mother to tell her all about the dead fish and the little thing casting a shadow in my room. And that I was afraid it would kill me that night. You can imagine how she reacted. She thought the same thing you did, that I was suffering some sort of hallucination, some delusion. She tried her best to comfort me, but she didn't believe me. After a while she'd had enough of my crying and told me to shut up about it, that it was all in my imagination."

"I buried my goldfish in the back yard, really believing my parents would have to do the same for me. And I was afraid."

"But even being as young as I was I knew I didn't want to have to see it coming—that shadow, staggering closer and closer toward me. So before I got into bed that night, before my mother wished me good night and closed my bedroom door, I grabbed the nightlight and put it in one of the bureau drawers. Then I crawled into bed, pulled the covers over my head, put my hands over my ears, and lay in darkness, waiting for the inevitable."

"What happened?"

He shrugged.

"Nothing," he said. "No shadow, no shuffling, no laughter. I waited for it to come the next night, and the next. But it never returned. Every night I went to bed wondering if it would, but it never did. Every night I slept in darkness. The fear subsided after a while, and after a few years disappeared entirely. Or nearly so."

He knew she wouldn't believe he was sincere, so he endured her repudiations that it was only a child's fantasy, that he'd created a story to explain his goldfish's death, that he'd seen some ambiguous shadow one night and his fear conjured gremlins every time a moth or housefly flew through the light.

But he was resolute.

"I won't sleep with a nightlight," he said, becoming irritated by her chiding. "Why do you need to sleep with a light on, anyway?"

"Because I don't like to sleep in the dark," she said, irritation in her voice.

"I guess we both have our neuroses, then."

"No. I like to sleep with a nightlight because I don't want to bump into things if I get up in the middle of the night. You can't sleep with one because you're afraid of the bogeyman."

"I'm not afraid of the bogeyman. I'm not a child."

"You're acting like one," she said, her voice growing more serious. "Kurt, what in the world are you afraid of?"

He wanted to tell her that he was afraid that it had been waiting all these years to get him, that the light was some kind of doorway for it to walk into this world,

that he knew it would have gotten him if he'd kept sleeping with that damned nightlight!

But he didn't tell her this. He couldn't; it sounded ridiculous even to him. He'd always presented himself to her as a confident man, a strong man—now she must think he was some weak, sniveling little boy in a man's body.

"I don't know," he said, raising his hands, and then placing them on his knees. "Maybe it's only a childhood fear, but—"

"Of course it's a childhood fear," she said, reaching to hold him on the sofa. "I'm sorry I brought up all this kid's stuff, but that's all it is. Just a four-year-old child's nightmare."

He wondered if she were right. It had been more than twenty years, after all. But when she said, "Don't worry, I'll protect you," and gave him a playful squeeze, he decided he wouldn't talk about it again. He was a grown man, a strong man, and he could take care of himself.

But the memory still lingered, like a shadow on a wall.

That night she plugged in her translucent swan and bathed the bedroom in a soft, frosty light.

He tried not to let old memories unnerve him. He kept repeating in his mind that he was a grown man and it was time to let this fantasy fade away.

They made love in that faint light, and then lay in bed together whispering, laughing, both happy to be living together, both exploring the meaning of new love.

But after she fell asleep, and he lay away from her facing the wall, he felt the old fear return. He couldn't sleep, but just kept staring at the wall, listening to extraneous sounds, recognizing them, and then dismissing them. He waited, like he'd waited so many years ago, for a shadow to begin moving across the wall, certain it would come for him—to kill him.

But after a while he realized he was just staring at a blank wall softly illuminated by the glowing swan.

When he woke the next morning he was still facing the wall, and after blinking his eyes a few times to clear his mind he realized he was still alive. She was right, he thought, it was just a childhood fantasy. He hadn't seen a shadow, hadn't heard laughter, or a voice announcing its intentions. He felt like a fool for acting out the memory so dramatically for her and wondered what he would say now; he'd have to hold his temper if she teased him. But he was too relieved that she'd been right to be angry with her.

He turned over and kissed her cheek to wake her up, but her head lay still on her pillow. He shook her then, thinking she must be an exceptionally deep sleeper, but she wouldn't wake up, no matter how hard he shook her, no matter how much he cried.



The Silver Ghost

Traipsed the midnight graveyard pathways,
in and out of ivy smothered tombs
and lichen, crumbling marker stones.
Unhurriedly, un-purposefully
and without set course or direction.
Melancholy under the full moon light,
deep in meditative thought, always,
transfixed to a nagging problem
which troubled deeply her spectral mind.
She often scared the village folk, unwittingly,
with ghostly pacing back and forth.
This was indeed a wretched afterlife,
since swapping her two-penny boat ride
for a thousand year solitary wait,
trapped within this hallowed place.
Where she had vowed to meet him again,
upon passing over, at that long ago harbour,
battered by a cold and windy Winters morn.
Should he not return to her loving arms
from the terrible seas and distant lands.
His mind must have become lost and muddled
for him to be still other-worldly ship sailing?
For it has been a hundred and fifty years
of grieving and singing this sad, silent song.

—paul tristram

BRAIN LEEK

by michaël wertenberg

The stem of the leek was slightly yellow and much thicker than it should have been. *If we don't eat you now, we'll just have to throw you away. What a shame that would be.*

Jared pulled the leek under the running faucet and tried vigorously to scrub away some of the grime.

"Stop it. You're hurting me."

Fucking vegetables! What am I supposed to eat?

The chickens had been the first to communicate with him, softly at first, then louder and louder with each passing meal. They could express little more than 'why' and 'poor me', but that was enough to drive Jared quickly into vegetarianism.

Then it was the bread. Slightly more articulate, 'why are you doing this to me?' and 'ouch, that hurts,' or 'ouch, that kills.'

Now, fucking leeks! I can't eat meat, or cereals, and now I am supposed to forego vegetables?

Jared squeezed the leek with rage and slammed it down on the cutting board. The thud shook the plates in the drying rack and filled the large kitchen with angst.

Before the reverberations of the thud could fully dissipate, a plea cried out to him from the cutting board. 'Please stop. You are hurting me. Please. You need to think about what you are doing.'

And Jared did think. He thought about his cursed telepathy, and how he wished all the foods would shut up and leave him alone. If he didn't eat them, someone else would. They are foods, after all. That's the fate they've been served. But they never responded to his thoughts, and this leek wouldn't either.

Jared took the large paring knife and stabbed it into the base of the stem. He bit down hard on his lower lip and thus shared in its pain. He pulled the knife slowly through the stem, splitting it in two, exposing its filthy innards.

He could hear the hum of rock music spilling out of Claire's headphones, as well as faint chatter coming from the TV in the next room. He looked back toward the open door leading to the living room. He could only make out the back of Claire's head; the flicker of the TV danced sliced shadows through her hair. *Does she really need to have the TV volume on if she's listening to music with her head phones?*

Jared turned his attention to the stove top. He heated up some vegetable oil on a skillet and listened, mesmerised, as it began to crackle, drowning out both the buzz in the living room and the buzz in his head.

What sounded like a moan ripped his attention away from the skillet and back to the severed leek. *You think I want to do this? You think I enjoy eating? You think I enjoy splitting you open and slicing you up?*

The knife was unmanageably dull and Jared had to put all of his weight into each slice to cut clean through the leek and hit the cutting board. The heat from the burning oil filled the kitchen, and beads of sweat dropped from his forehead. They stung his eyes, and blurred his vision.

He wiped his brow, set the knife down, and scooped up the leek bits which were too large and numerous for his hands. He cradled them in his arms then turned to the skillet. His foot kicked a bag of potatoes he had neglected on the floor and he almost tripped. *What the fuck, Jared! A clean work space is an efficient work space. A clean work space is an efficient work space!*

He stepped over the bag and tossed the leek bits onto the skillet. The sizzle, the smell, the puff of vapour, put Jared at ease. He exhaled. The tension in his neck subsided. His shoulders dropped and relaxed. The voices were gone, replaced by the constant, comforting sounds of cooking.

Jared bent down to grab the sack of potatoes off the floor, then put them away in the pantry. He racked his brain to try to remember the name of the tune he was humming and to remember where he had heard that melody before. *I think it was from some black-and-white movie I saw with Claire on TV. What was the name of that movie? Or was it a commercial?*

He was stirring the leeks when he realized he was using the knife and not the wooden spoon. *Concentrate, Jared!* He dropped the knife in the sink then opened the drawer to retrieve a more appropriate stirring device. Spying the grater in the drawer reminded him that he had forgotten to grate the radicchio. *Where is my head? He gave himself a hard slap on the cheek. And more urgently, where is the radicchio?*

Jared turned in circles perusing the counters. Zoe had left her backpack, her school books and crayons spread out, covering nearly all the counter space. *Damn it, Zoe. How many times do I have to tell you? I can't constantly be cleaning up after you. And why did you go to school without your things?*

Jared grabbed her books and crayons, stuffed them in her backpack, and rehearsed the talk he'd have with her when she got home. *When she gets home,*

I'll—Wait a second. It's seven o'clock. And it's Sunday. Focus, Jared! Focus!

He left the backpack on the counter and checked the pantry again. *What am I looking for again? Carrots, no. Radishes, no ... Radicchio, that's it. Radicchio.*

No radicchio. But as he closed the pantry door he caught, out of the corner of his eye, the head of radicchio sat on the living room couch. Relieved, he strutted over to it, bent over, and grabbed it by its sides.

"Owe!" The head phones hit the floor and a screeching guitar solo came blaring up. "Whadya do that for, Jared?"

He blinked rapidly and shook his head. "Claire!"

"Who were you expecting?" She sat up then leaned over to pick up the head phones.

"I'm sorry," mumbled Jared. "I just thought ... I was just looking for the radicchio."

"Radicchio?" said Claire as she untangled the wires of her head phones. "And you thought what? That my head was a head of radicchio?"

"No ... Of course not." Jared looked away lest she see the confusion overwhelming him.

"I don't remember buying any radicchio," said Claire.

Jared scratched his chin. *It was a movie with Michael Cain and it wasn't in black-and-white. But they had watched it on TV together not that many nights ago.*

"What's that smell?" asked Claire.

"The smell?" Jared looked back at his wife. "Oh, the smell ... I'm cooking."

"I think something is burning," she said.

Jared turned back to the kitchen as Claire lifted her head phones to place them back over her ears. "If she's finished helping you in there, tell Zoe her favourite cartoon is about to start, wouldya?"

The blood fell from his face. His mind screamed at him to run, but he could muster only a shaky step toward the kitchen. He opened his mouth to scream but his breath stayed terrorized in the pit of his belly. Fuelled by his panic, he managed to stagger into the kitchen. As he approached the stove top, the crescendo of the sizzle agitated his nerves. His whole body shook violently. He shut his eyes and dared another step. With a pounding heart and quivering lips, he crept up to the stove and forced his right eye to open but a sliver. It was enough for him to see.

The sight punched him in the gut, releasing the frightened scream. The horrid realisation cut his legs from under him and Jared crumbled to the floor.



Karithandan

Life lays mines of challenge on his way,
but Karithandan is a tough warrior.

An English engineer whirls in the current
of confusion at the foot of the mountain.
Enchanted by the white smile,
Karithandan climbs down slowly.

The tribal hero scrapes through the mist,
which looks like death, and unlocks
the padlocks of the shrubs and the wild roots.
The engineer follows him, uttering, 'Wow!'

A familiar knock. She opens the door
of the tribal hut, when a dark shape,
clad in white dhoti, disappears in the distance.
A deep love works transient miracles
even under the eaves of death.

Columbus discovered America, I studied.
Karithandan's discovery of the way to Wayanad,
but I read nowhere, for the engineer
bartered his two bullets for that credit.

Bullets could shatter the chest, but couldn't the truth.

(Wayanad is a natural paradise and a bio-diverse wild region among the mountains in Kerala, India. During the British rule in India, a British engineer discovered the way to Wayanad with help of a tribesman called Karithandan. To take the credit of the discovery, the engineer killed Karithandan.)

—fabiyas mv

notes

by henry brasater

Jimmy Peiffer giggled.

Millicent Weatherby giggled.

"We have a secret!" Jimmy declared.

Millicent nodded her head. "Yes, we do!"

The two children looked at each other and laughed out loud. Then, they ran off around the house leaving their parents looking bemused while continuing the Peiffer's backyard barbecue preparations.

"You don't think ...?" Mrs. Weatherby left her out loud thought unfinished as she looked at the corner of the house around which the children had disappeared.

"My, I hadn't thought about that," Mrs. Peiffer replied with one hand holding a bowl of tomatoes and the other grill utensils for her husband.

"Nooo," Mr. Peiffer offered, taking the utensils from his wife's hand. "They're too young!"

Jimmy Peiffer's and Millicent Weatherby's secret started this way.

Heads turned in the gallery.

"...Did the man fall off the horse, mommie?"

"...I don't think so. No. I think that the man is a clown and is just doing somersaults, darling."

More giggles.

"And look!" the little boy pointed. "She is dancing on the horse! What kind of horse is it?"

"I don't know, son. But, is it not a beautiful and magnificent white horse?" She

frowned just then. It was almost as though she heard the horse neigh. Stirring herself she turned. "Jimmy! See that Picasso across the room!"

Jimmy continued staring at Georges Seurat's pointillism painting. "I like this one, mommie!" He did not know who the artist was, nor did he care.

"All right," Jimmy's mother said. "You stay here. You enjoy this painting while mommie goes across the room. Perhaps Picasso is a little too sophisticated for you. Now, don't you move until I come back! I'll be right over there!"

Jimmy barely heard his mother's voice as she moved away. He continued being enraptured by the painting's figures sporting unusual clothes and men wearing beards and moustaches, some with silly-looking high hats. Jimmy moved a little closer to the painting. It was as though he could smell tent canvas and sawdust mixed with sand in the performers ring and ... deep, odoriferous multicolored and flavored candy syrups. Even peanuts? He looked deeply among the horse and ballerina and clowns and ring master in tight black vest and pants. Jimmy stepped close enough to see that the entire painting was comprised of tiny paint dots placed against one another.

He heard a voice over "The Circus" cacophony.

"Come on in! Join us! There's plenty of room!" the ring master shouted to him. "We're having ever so much fun!" He spoke English in a strange but not unpleasant way, Jimmy thought.

Jimmy moved closer. The voice asked which color in the painting Jimmy liked best. When Jimmy pointed to the ochre colored costume worn by a clown who had jumped upside down, a dot of paint fell from that clown's costume; it slid underneath performers and out from the picture and down onto the gallery floor.

Jimmy laughed while the dot of paint inched toward him and onto his shoe.

The show continued non-stop. He was having great fun. Only, he might be having more fun if a friend sat with him in the second row up from the performers.

He did not know exactly how long he had been watching the show and eating peanuts and candy and some popcorn, too, when he saw a little girl standing with her mother beyond the show ring and outside of the picture.

"Millicent! Millicent Weatherby!" Jimmy was not certain that he had waved. Could she hear or see him?

Millicent Weatherby was Jimmy's girlfriend. Well, sort of. He wanted her to be. And of all his friends, she was the one that he wanted sitting with him at "The Circus." So, Jimmy continued waving. He thought of doing so, anyway. And he yelled.

Millicent Weatherby stood transfixed in front of the painting. "I'm going down to the corner of the room. Just down there, Millicent, dear. If you want to stay and look at the picture longer I'll just be down there. See?" Millicent's mother pointed while her daughter continued studying the picture.

Millicent frowned when someone called. Her attention went to the painting's left side audience bleachers.

"M-I-L-L-I-C-E-N-T!" she heard her name again. It was not her mother's voice.

She took a couple of steps forward.

Her gaze rested on a little boy's face in the audience. It was a familiar looking face. Who was it?

Millicent leaned in toward the painting.

Why, it's that brat, Jimmy Peiffer.

One more step forward took her to a seat next to that awful boy who last week had tried to kiss her during school recess.

Millicent did not care how she came to be sitting under a large tent watching marvelous performers while dipping her hand into a bag of peanuts held out by Jimmy Peiffer. She forgot her mother. She forgot about her brothers and sisters and her dog Tabbard and an exhausted father who would come home for his supper. "The Circus" was so absolutely thrilling! Even Jimmy Peiffer did not seem terribly bad, after all.

Time was lengthy in the picture. In the gallery, only a few minutes passed.

They heard their parents call. Both children looked out from the picture that they were a part of. They saw both mothers scurrying around the gallery room. The two children could not hear what was being said outside of the picture. There came a man in uniform with a badge on his coat lapel who joined the two gesticulating women. The three adults moved away to the next gallery room entrance.

Millicent said: "Perhaps we had better ..."

"... You can always come back another day!" "The Circus" ringmaster beamed down at the two children.

"Let's go!" Jimmy Peiffer said. "I've had enough candy and peanuts. Maybe I don't feel so good."

The two children moved from the audience stands in "The Circus" and found themselves standing on the outside of the picture looking in.

"Children!" screamed Mrs. Weatherby.

"Jimmy, where have you two been?" Mrs. Peiffer said loudly as the two women and the museum guard rushed over.

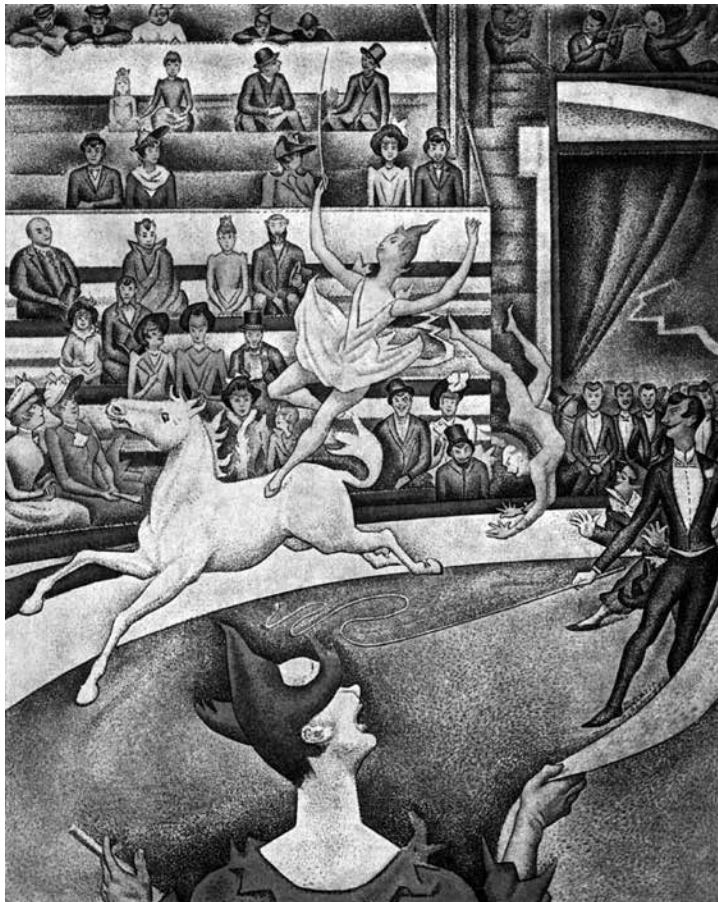
It was summer vacation from school and Millicent Weatherby and now her close friend Jimmy Peiffer wanted their mothers to take them to the art museum frequently. This, the two mothers did but only on condition that the two children always stood with them, sometimes holding their parents' hands. But that was all right because Jimmy and his girlfriend found that even when they held their mothers' hands, they could still go inside the picture and sometimes meet other school students whom they knew. They could stay a long, long time—perhaps an hour or two—while holding their mothers' hands. The mothers felt rewarded having quality time with their young children, even though they might hold their offsprings' hands for only a minute or so while looking at Seurat's "The Circus."

Day after day when the gallery was open, adults would sometimes think they heard the light giggling of little boys and girls in the gallery room of the art museum; they would look around and, sometimes, there were no children to be seen. Meanwhile, inside the picture there was laughter as children ate candy and

clapped their hands at horses and high-wire artists and ballet dancers surrounded by silly clowns!

The children never became tired. They forgot homes and cuddling in mothers' laps and going to sleep under painted stars sprinkled with glitter shining down upon them from bedroom ceilings. Neither did they worry about having to wait until their "Hellos" were heard in future days by other boys and girls being led through the art gallery by parents who had long since lost their virginal abilities to see instead of look and to listen instead of hear.

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[poetry]

EMINENT DOMAIN



A black snake crosses
a plain of common good,
trailing silence behind
like a second skin. Albino
eyes flash—a distant marker.
Tongue out, the world tastes
empty. An instant of fear
descends like a vulture.
Nothing is swallowed.
Night passes
like a precision scream.

—aj huffman

OCTOBER'S BREATH

Blood mars my unclean hands,
As into the woods I run.
Stumbling, falling, halfway crawling,
Hiding there from the sun.

For if It shall burn upon my flesh,
It shall light my blackened soul,
Shining, painting, illuminating,
Where no one dares to go.

Its hands reach in, like October's breath,
Weakening all that I am,
Groping, grabbing, always having
Every piece of me that It can.

And if I falter, if I cower,
Might I escape Its grip?
Looking, peaking, always reaching,
Hoping that I slip.

—angela ash

An Accidental State of Grace

by paul magnan

“Your 1:00 is here, sir.”

“Thank you, Lili.” Satan hung up the phone. Acrid smoke curled from his nostrils. *What did the Old Man want now?*

The office door opened and the angel entered, all ten feet of him, with a glittering robe and impossibly white wings. Satan folded back his own black, leathery wings. He remembered when he had wings that were even more impressive than those of his visitor. But the price for keeping them had been too much to bear.

Satan indicated a seat on the other side of the desk and the angel sat. He nodded at the green-skinned succubus who had shown the visitor in. “Thank you, Lili.”

Lili looked fearfully at the angel and quickly closed the door behind her.

Satan rested his clawed hands on his charred-wood desk and leaned forward. “What is it, Gabriel? Why did the Old Man send you?”

Gabriel’s beatific smile irritated Satan. “Is that a way to greet a former brother? Not even an offer of coffee or tea?”

“You wouldn’t like our brands,” Satan said. “We brew it with the blood of cherubs. Now cut the crap. Why are you here?”

Gabriel chuckled. “You always were direct. Okay, down to business. The Old Man wants someone you have. Name of Melvin Krombs. He died on earth two days ago.”

Satan turned to his computer and clicked a few keys. He found the file and read it, and then turned to Gabriel in bemusement.

“This guy? Are you kidding? He was a hopeless drunkard in life. And do you know how he died? He drank a bottle of nail polish remover. Roll that around

on your tongue a few times. *Nail polish remover*. I could claim this as a suicide if Krombs weren't so abysmally stupid."

Gabriel nodded. "I agree, Krombs was an idiot. But he gave his last five dollars to a homeless child. With no money to buy booze, he drank the nail polish remover he had found in someone's trash. But the previous act of generosity caught the Old Man's attention and earned Krombs his absolution. Unfortunately, Krombs drank the remover and died before the paperwork had been processed. However, stupidity is not a sin, and the Old Man wants him."

Satan smiled and wagged a finger. "That's not my problem. Melvin Krombs committed enough sins during life to end up here." He tapped the computer screen with a talon. "I received no absolutions from upstairs. And once a soul passes through my gates—that's it. He's mine. The Old Man didn't move fast enough. Too bad."

Gabriel sighed and stood up. His impressive wings fluttered behind him and he took out his cell phone and speed-dialed a long-established number.

"Hi Boss ... yeah, he's being stubborn. You called it. But I wanted to try first. Yeah ... I guess giving the benefit of a doubt doesn't work down here. Do I have your permission to proceed with Plan B? Okay, thanks."

Gabriel disconnected the call.

Satan sat back in satisfaction. "What's Plan B? Going back to the Old Man with nothing but your celestial dick in your hands?"

"No," Gabriel said. "Not quite. The humans have a phrase, 'good cop, bad cop'. When the good cop is unable to get the job done, the bad cop is sent in. I, the good cop, couldn't convince you to release Melvin Krombs. So perhaps ..."

Gabriel's fair, beautiful features shifted and twisted, becoming darker and angular. His soft body hardened with muscles, and his glittering white gown transformed into brilliant armor. The feathers of his white wings bled until they became a dark crimson. A long, blazing sword materialized in his hand.

"... you need a touch of the bad cop to show you the error of your ways," Michael finished for Gabriel, in a voice that boomed and echoed and blew out one of Satan's office windows, allowing in a sulfurous brimstone breeze.

Lili peeked in sheepishly. "Is everything all right?"

Michael swung his sword behind him. Lili's head popped off her body and rolled to the corner. The headless body immediately fell to its hands and knees and searched for its missing head, which tried to shout directions from its resting spot a few feet away.

Satan shook his head in exasperation. "Really, Michael? Why do you have to be so damned melodramatic all the time?"

The point of the flaming sword found Satan's neck. "Melvin Krombs. Now."

Lili's hands finally found her head and stuck it back in place. She looked to her boss for instruction.

Satan sighed. "You want to bring Krombs back to the Old Man, Michael? Fine, he's yours. If you want, you can take all of the idiots here. Empty this place out, why don't you?"

"I only want Krombs," Michael intoned. Satan reflected that Michael and the Old Man were the only ones who *intoned* when they spoke. *Talk about hero worship.* Michael looked out the broken window. "Where is he? I'll get him."

"Oh, no you don't," Satan said. "Hell has been harrowed once already. I don't need for you to do it again." Satan glanced at his receptionist. "Lili, I believe Melvin Krombs is in Belial's area. Have Belial bring him up."

"Right away, sir." Lili fled the office.

The point of the sword was removed from Satan's neck. Satan realized he would have to spend several uncomfortable minutes alone with the archangel until Krombs was retrieved.

"Now that you're getting what you want, any chance of Gabriel coming back? I can have an actual conversation with him."

Michael stood in silence, his only response a frown.

Fine. So be it. Satan gestured to the broken window. "Once you bring your precious Krombs back, tell the Old Man I want to be reimbursed for that."

Michael glanced at the shattered glass. "Send a requisition. You know the procedure."

Satan shook his head in disgust.

Only in Hell.



Indian Singh

Hiding in the trench in the French sand,
Indian Singh fights like a British soldier.
It seems it is the ending of the universe.
Dark curls of smoke rise up - cradles are
shattered, and buildings collapsed. Roar
of the war planes gobble all the shrieks
by the mothers and their mothers in a jiff.
Wounds play a sad raga on the strings in
the throats of some fallen military men.

Indian Singh seeks his sweet lady among
the golden corns in a Punjabi wheat field
during the horrible silent interval. A red
salwar kameez flutters in the day dream.
A sudden roar makes him raise his rifle.
Though he is Britain's adopted son, he
fights for his new mother with true love.

She opens with a smile the creaking gate
to the ecstasy of reunion- soon this smile
is scattered like a phial in an explosion.

She waited for him with the same verve
for years and years in vain, until the earth
worms claimed her wrinkled body one day.

Thousands of memorial stones were erupted
here and there after the First World War, but
not a single stone remains to honor his valor.

—fabiyas mv

To--

You come bringing me peace of mind
to only bore deep into my core
And with little lead effort pieces of my mind
Splay across the floor

To the bloodletting fools
To the faint-hearted
This flooding is to cool
Our red-painted departed

Adverting advantageously
any gesture to venture
But to die would be courageously
An awfully big adventure

Defeated and yet forever steadfast
Told in some kind of fable
From a far place in the past
Somewhere much less fatal

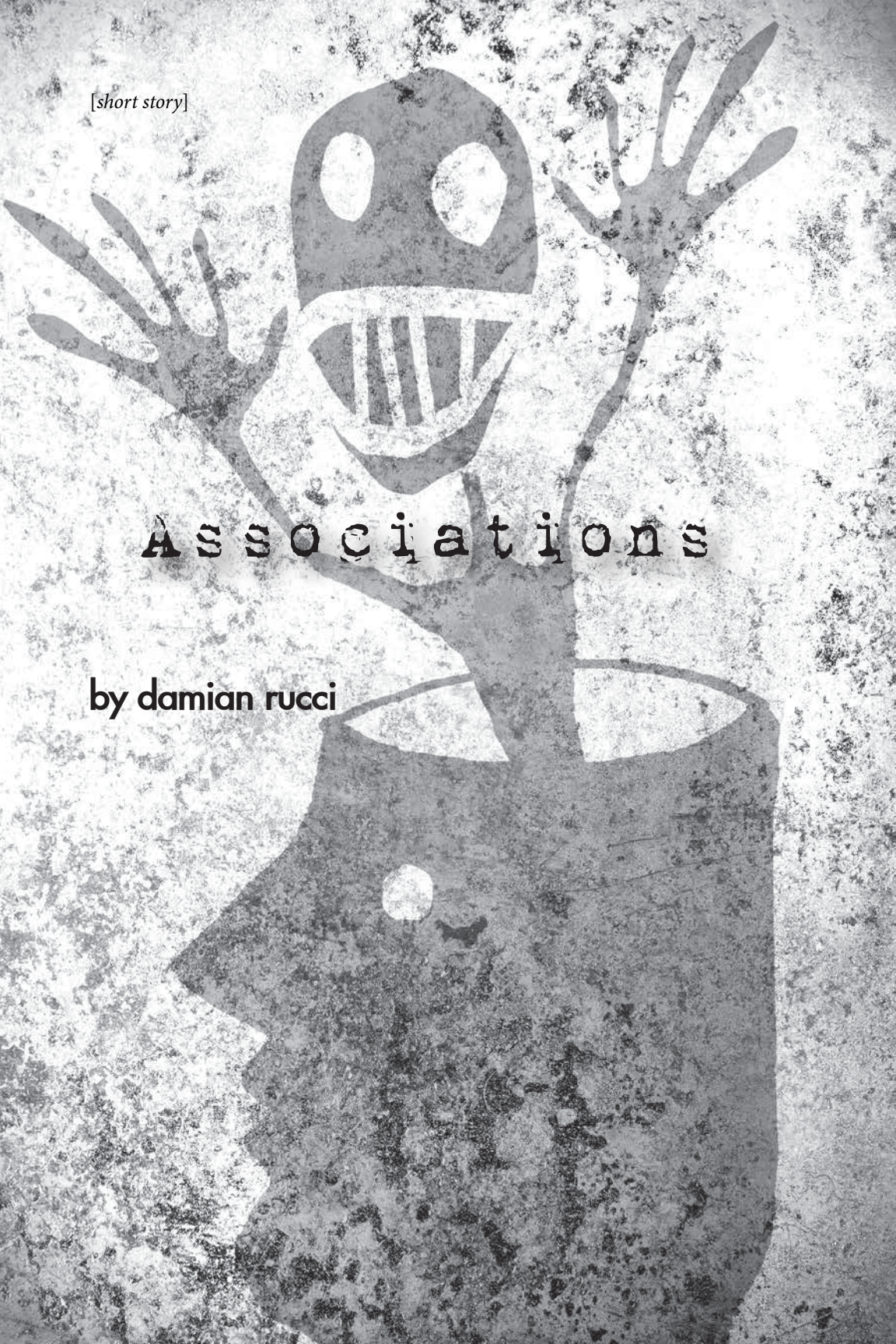
Now you come to me as if with good tidings
yet your words are cursed leaving me damned
scraped and bruised I've turned to hiding
to only find my heart's in your hand

—grim k. de evil

[short story]

Associations

by damian rucci



I am a myriad of broken phrases.

"What—man, what the hell are you doin'?" I said as he pulled a pistol out from his jacket.

Alan held the gun tight in his hand, pointing it at the store clerk who was quivering in the corner like a child being punished. He walked closer and gestured to the small man to open the register. "Don't even think of hitting an alarm," Alan said, and he was so cool about it. A cigarette was on his lip and his eyes were hidden behind his black shades.

I wasn't too sure how we ended up here. Alan wanted to go for a walk and I just followed. I wasn't too good at arguing with him. Really, I just wanted to spend the day in bed, but he insisted.

The clerk did as he was instructed and walked over to the cash register, his fingers were clumsy as he typed. Alan brought the pistol down on the register and the poor bastard jumped, finally popping it open. The clerk fumbled a hand full of money as he made eye contact with me, his eyes swollen and afraid. He got the money together and threw it down on the counter.

I am a quiet inferno.

"Man, I'm sorry," I said as Alan gathered the money up in one hand and buried it in his pocket, the other hand still gripping the gun so tight it made my hand ache just watching.

"It's my friend, I'm sorry," I said again, and tapped on the counter.

The man looked bewildered. Alan smirked and flicked his cigarette at the man, who didn't even try to dodge the burnt butt. Instead, he let it hit his chest. Alan shot me a look and smirked, pointed the pistol at the ceiling and pulled the trigger twice. *Bam! Bam!* The gun shot rang throughout the convenience store and roared through my ear canals making every single hair on my body stand up on end; my mouth went dry, and an electrical vibration hummed through my veins like I had been struck by lightning. The store clerk let out a terrifying shriek and leaped for the floor.

We pushed open the glass doors diving for the street and ran the entire way home. My stomach plunged down and I could still feel my heart fighting against my chest. Alan laughed the whole way home; we hopped two fences and dipped behind a building as three police cars raced past us with their sirens.

Once we pulled ourselves into our apartment and peaked through the windows, I shoved Alan. "Why did you do that?"

"You did it," he said and lit a cigarette.

"I didn't do shit," I said.

"Guilty by association." He sat on the couch and pulled out the wad of cash from his pocket, counting it out in silence.

Alan had always been a bad influence, but I had known him my whole life. Whenever things were going well, he'd ruin them, but he was my only friend. Every now and then he'd get a bit crazy like robbing a convenience store or fighting random men on the streets, but he had always been there for me. He hated my medicine though. Last time I went to the doctor and was put on a prescription, he disappeared for an entire year. I stopped taking it and he came wandering back, and with him came his cousin Autumn.

Autumn was sex. She was beautiful and loved me. She walked in and hugged me. She asked me what was wrong and I told her. She was pissed but certainly not shocked. We walked back to my room and she kissed me. I had her on my bed with the door open. It was good, so fluid and simple. It was almost like I was fucking myself.

I am screaming self-desperation.

Afterwards, I lay there holding her in my arms, sweaty and out of breath, but I trembled. The scene at the store still pulsed behind my eyelids. My hand ached; it was a soreness I couldn't forget. "I might have to get back on my meds," I whispered. "I'm feeling all weird again. Like you know when you remember something wrong?"

"You don't need it, baby," Autumn whispered.

I opened my eyes and in the open door way stood Alan. "Did I just hear you thinking 'bout going on your medicine? Are you dumb?" He was pissed, his shoulders like he wanted to fight, yet he looked almost scared. I didn't even know how he heard me.

"Yeah, I'm having weird feelings like I was holding the gun before," I said, stretching my body and rubbing my temples.

"You did," he said.

"Guilty by association," I said, and shook my head.

"No, you did it," he said again. "Check your jacket."

I leaned forward and picked up my jacket and a pistol fell from the pocket onto the floor. I looked up at Alan and he smiled. "No, no, no," I said and I blinked hard. Each time my eyes closed I could see the clerk cowering from me.

"I'm getting my medicine," I said.

Alan blocked the doorway.

I dove for the gun on the floor and pushed past Alan racing down the hall to the bathroom as he chased me and Autumn trailed behind. I swung open the door and darted for the medicine cabinet. Alan grabbed me and tried to pull me back, but I put the pistol to his head.

"You ruined my life man, you ruined everything I could be," I said and Autumn screamed something I couldn't hear.

"You know what's going to happen," his voice trailed as we locked eyes.

I shut the cabinet. I looked in the mirror. I held the gun to my head, Alan my best friend's head, and Autumn my love's head. We all disappeared as I pulled the trigger.



Poets Out of Service

Like a full service gas station,
or postal service workers,
displaced, racing to Staples retail
for employment against the rules of labor,
poets are out of business nowadays, you know.
Who carries change in their pockets?
Who tosses loose coins in their car ashtray anymore?
iPhones, Smartphones, life is cam ready to shoot, destroy.
No one reads poets anymore.
No one thumbs through yellow pages anymore.
Who has sex in the back seat of their car anymore, just naked shots online?
Streetwalkers, cosmetic, bleach blonde whores,
plastic altered faces in neon night,
do not bother to pick pennies or quarters off the streets, anymore.
The days of nickel bag of candy, pennies lying on the counter top-
for Tar Babies, String licorice, Wax Lips,
Pixie Sticks, Good and Plenty, no more.
Everyone is a stop end player in time.
Monster technology destroys culture fragments, efforts in mindlessness.
Old age is a passive slut, conversations distilled, serrated
measurements by number of slim toothpicks,
matchbooks of many colors vanished.
Time is a broken stopwatch gone by.
Life is a defunct full service gas station.
Poets are out of business.

—michael lee johnson

ST. VINCENT

by paul stansfield

Art Bonner was sleeping the sleep of the innocent. Not that he was, but he slept it all the same. He murmured something inarticulate, and rolled over onto his back. His large water bed correspondingly moved in congress with him, and stopped seconds after him.

A short man stepped near the bed. He was clad all in black. Even his hands were encased in black gloves, his face masked too. Glittering blue eyes focused on Art Bonner for a second, then blinked. The dark hands rose up and squirted lighter fluid on the sleeping man, on his chest, arms, and face.

Bonner sputtered, began to awake. Just before he did the lit match hit him, igniting his upper half. Art awoke to the sensation of being burned. He tried to scream, but his molten lips couldn't quite manage. A weird shriek and a whistle was all he produced.

The man in black watched calmly for several seconds, then quenched the flames with a portable fire extinguisher. Bonner's shriek/whistled once more, then slipped into unconsciousness. The swine-like smell of charred flesh continued to engulf the room, along with much smoke. The short man picked up the phone next to the bed, dialed 911, said, "Help! Hospital!" then put down the receiver without hanging up. He checked Bonner's vital signs briefly. All disturbed, naturally, but adequate. Bonner should live. Satisfied, the man checked his belongings, and then went out the window he'd jimmied open.

With no more information to go on, the 911 operator decided to send an ambulance, using their automatic call tracer to locate the address. The paramedics made it to Bonner's lavish home within fifteen minutes, accompanied by the police. They found the man of the house upstairs, severely burned. They did what

they could on the spot, then whisked him away. It was obvious where to take Bonner. Maguire Hospital had by far the best emergency trauma center, including a specialized burn unit, in the area. Bonner was under their expert care within another twenty minutes.

Byron Blake forked the last bit of his barbecued pork into his mouth, and grinned in pleasure. It lit up his face in an attractive, boyish way. What a tasty meal, as usual. Mom's Place had a boring name, but the food here was top notch. He was lucky that his metabolism was positively shrew-like, or he'd weigh 300 pounds. As it was, his stomach's only bulges were those caused by muscle. He'd traded in his black work clothes for tight khakis and a bluish marbled sweater. He let his eyes look over at the blonde hostess he was positive was checking him out earlier. Sure enough, she was checking him out again. Her gaze found his momentarily, then slid away. Byron grinned again, slapped down his bill and tip next to his check, and sauntered over to meet his admirer. A nice way to end a busy day.

Although she knew him as Phil Stowe, Betsy Palmer giggled at Blake's comment, and tossed her auburn hair coquettishly. She started to reply, then abruptly her eyelids snapped shut, opened again, and then snapped closed once more. Her entire body slumped against "Phil's." It was rather a nice body too. One he'd normally have enjoyed trying to jump. And he suspected he could without trouble; since he'd picked her up at that college bar she'd obviously been enthralled with him. Blake shook himself. Never mind that, he had work to do. Get it done, leave, fade away. Detract suspicion.

He observed that her sleep was coma-deep. Excellent, he thought. Roofies were nice and predictable. He stood up and pulled Betsy down across the couch, until she lay prone, her face nestled against the cushion. Yanked her shirt up, looking for cuts or blemishes. Ah, there was one, a small pimple just above her bra strap. Byron whipped out his hypodermic and stuck it in the bull's-eye, pressing down the plunger in quick time. Withdrew just as rapidly. He'd gotten quite good at injections. Not surprisingly, considering all the practice he'd had. Still, a point of pride to him. He knew he was faster and more painless than most nurses. It didn't matter in this case, but in others he'd successfully injected awake people in public without them fully knowing.

He dabbed at the dot of blood with a tissue, then carefully pulled her shirt down into place. Then he put the already made note on the coffee table in front of them. "Betsy," it read, "You fell asleep, and you looked so comfy I didn't want to wake you. I had a great time with you. I'll call you, or you can call me. 589-6009." Whose number that was, Blake didn't know. Certainly not "Phil's."

Byron Blake chuckled as he grabbed his coat and walked out of Betsy's modest apartment (in which she lived alone, her rent paid by her well-to-do folks), stopping to lock the bottom knob as he closed the door. He found his rental car and drove on home. It was hilarious, really. Betsy's encounter with Roofies had been both better and worse than most women's. Better in that she hadn't been raped, as many were

with this “Date Rape Pill.” Worse in that a slim glass penis had penetrated her back, impregnating her with a nasty disease. Hepatitis B. Or was it cancer? He couldn’t remember offhand, have to look at his records. Not that it mattered. Maguire’s was known to have excellent treatment programs for both of these.

Dr. Walden sat comfortably on the park bench, waiting for Blake to arrive. It was nice to sit down for a while, after his three mile run. His sweat-dampened T-shirt stuck to his well-muscled chest. His tan face was still flushed with exertion. Walden was a healthy specimen. Thin, fit, very energetic. Someone who took the “Physician, heal thyself” taunt very seriously.

Walden didn’t have to wait long. Punctuality was just one of Blake’s virtues. He ambled up, looked casually but carefully around to make sure they were alone, then began talking.

“Hiya Doc, what’s up?”

“Not much. How are you this fine spring day, Mr. Blake?” Walden smiled broadly, his tone jovial.

“Just dandy.”

“Great! Well, here’s your money,” Walden said, handing over the cash-stuffed envelope, “and here’s your list.” He handed Blake a few sheets of paper. Blake counted up his pay quickly, noting with satisfaction that there was \$1,000 extra.

“A bonus!” crowed Walden. “We just got a new federal grant for a cancer study. Just wanted to say ‘thank you’ to the man who helped us get that.”

“Glad to help,” replied Blake. He stashed the envelope in his pocket and looked at the list briefly. Names, addresses, potential afflictions, all pretty routine.

“Excellent job on that burn guy, Bonner. Charred him to Hell, but he’ll live fine. And I know burnings are tricky.”

“Thanks. Like Kenny Rogers says, ‘You hafta know when to light ‘em, and know when to douse ‘em.’”

“Indeed! It’s great fun to repair and replace burnt flesh. A nice challenge.”

“Good for you, then.”

Dr. Walden sensed he should wrap it up. “Okay, then. If you need anything, you know, how to reach me. Otherwise, see you.”

“Yeah. I got samples of all the stuff you want on this week’s pages. Running low on Lyme, but I can get through this bunch all right. Later.”

Walden got up and resumed his spirited jogging. Blake headed in the opposite direction, passing several other joggers, strollers, and frisbee-throwers as he threaded his way out of the park. He was in a better mood now. Walden had been unusually cheerful today, and complimentary. Typically the good doctor was curt and condescending. A bonus even! Blake hadn’t got one of those for quite a while. Not that he needed it that much. He still cleared \$4,000-\$5,000 a week. Not as much as he made when he was with Papini, but steadier money, and in most ways, less risky. It had been two years since he’d switched jobs, and he seldom regretted it.

Blake had been extremely skeptical at first, when Don “Pappy” Papini had laid out the situation to him. Papini had been approached by a fellow member of

his country club, a rich and famous doctor, Dr. Walden. Walden had wanted to know if he could rent one of Papini's hitmen, and employ him to drum up business for his privately owned, for profit (definitely for profit) hospital—someone smart, someone discreet. Papini had thought about it for a bit, then agreed. Had thought the idea had definite possibilities. Papini was always on the lookout for new business opportunities. It was obvious that hospitals had deep pockets. Plus, it didn't hurt to have a respected hospital at your disposal, either, given the violent nature of Papini's other business ventures. So he'd sought out his best guy, Byron Blake. Young, vicious, cunning, and loyal. Blake's conscientiousness made up for his sin of only being half Sicilian. His discretion was, so far, beyond reproach too.

It was mostly due to this loyalty that Blake had agreed. But he'd quickly learned he'd been wrong to doubt the good doctor's plan. It was pretty easy work. Instead of moving against other battle-cautious mobsters and crooks, now Blake's targets were ordinary civilians. Ordinary, but usually wealthy, or at least well-insured persons. (Never were they members of Papini's or his rival's "families" though—that was the one condition.) The actual activities required were fairly standard for Blake. Brutal (if well designed) beatings, hit and runs, shootings. Requiring Blake's skills at breaking and entering, using disguises, stalking and spying, all routine hitmen duties. As a safeguard, even if Blake got sloppy, which he emphatically did not, Papini's influence with the cops and politicians could be relied on to help out.

It was kind of fun, actually, thinking of new schemes to create patients. Blake switched his methods around liberally to prevent a predictable pattern from developing. Varied the ailments, in addition. Transmitted HIV one day, broke a person's face so badly that they needed extensive, expensive plastic surgery the next. The nature of the diseases themselves helped some too, in that they often didn't kick in for weeks or months after the infection. Effective and a cakewalk.

Their plan had exceeded Dr. Walden's expectations as well. Instead of waiting for random patients to come in, he could have them made, and with the problems he wanted. Those necessitating the most inflated tests, drugs, treatments, etc. There were also non-monetary benefits. Dr. Walden wasn't just an administrator; he also continued to practice, and having so many patients with rarer ailments fueled his curiosity and his reputation. He was now known as one of the leading experts on Hepatitis B, for example. The cuts taken by Papini and Blake didn't hurt much either. There was more than enough to go around. Furthermore, there was little risk to Walden; their scheme was far-fetched enough to be unthinkable to most, and the Mafia (although clearly not perfect) was pretty good as keeping things quiet. And, so far, no trouble. No one had put the many various assaults together. They were thought to be more incidents of a general increase in crime.

Walden had told Blake once of yet another benefit of their partnership. He'd explained that the extra patients had naturally led to more learning about these disorders, and was helping them to learn how to better treat them. Blake had privately thought this was a ludicrous rationalization, but he'd held his tongue. He didn't want to insult his boss. Besides, it wasn't like his hands or his character, were clean in this matter.

There had been a few setbacks, of course. Despite his carefulness, Blake had accidentally killed a few prospective patients. And a few had inexplicably opted to go to personal physicians not employed at Maguire's. But not many. Acceptable business losses. Maguire Hospital, and Dr. Walden, Papini, and Blake, were all still well in the black as a result of their effort.

Blake pulled up the folding lightweight (yet sturdy) ladder and left it by the sill. No close neighbors nearby to see a suspicious hanging ladder, but it didn't hurt to be safe. He took out his smallish club and crept stealthily down the stairs, clad in his trademark black suit. When he reached the living room he felt foolish. The babysitter (he realized from his studies that her name was Suzi) was snoring away on the recliner, feet up. Tsk Tsk. Blake walked over and gave her a mild sedative, to ensure his privacy. Then, on a burst of inspiration, he looked around for some liquor. He found plenty in an ornate carved cherry wood cabinet. He dumped a fair bit from the whiskey bottle (Old Granddad) down the drain, then forced some down Suzi's throat, and spilled some on her lips, chin, and clothing. Even a ridiculous patsy wasn't too shabby.

This done, he went to work. First, the Jones's two-and-a-half year old son, Marcus. Marcus received his sedative too (a dicey process, that, figuring the proper amount with kids and especially infants. But Blake knew his stuff). Then Blake snapped both the boy's knees, bending them back so that the toes touched the upper thighs. He reversed the lad's elbows in the same way. Reconstructive surgery was always complicated, and thus always pricey.

Next he moved on to Marcus's six month old brother, Allan. Allan was awake, gurgling happily. Blake smiled and poked the cute little guy, then anesthetized him. He used his knife this time, severing Allan's left thumb and both his ears. A delicate practiced thrust inside each ear ensured that Allan would also need some sort of auditory surgery. Then the crowning achievement—a slice in the abdomen messed up little Allan's intestines, hopefully seriously, but not fatally. Blake made sure that he clotted all his incisions before he left. He grinned again as he did. Walden had been bitching that their new pediatric surgeon hadn't been producing much. Well, she'd probably have ample opportunities now.

After checking that everything was okay, including the "drunken" babysitter, Blake crept out of the Jones mansion as quietly as he'd entered. They were due home in about a half hour or so. It always amused him how most people didn't alarm their second floor windows, only the first. Not that most burglar alarms would have stopped him, but at least they would have delayed him, inconvenienced him a little. Oh well. He drove away minutes later thinking he'd enjoy some veal for dinner tonight. He did so like to have meals tailored after the night's work. Kind of poetic, in a way.

The patient lay quietly in his bed in room 777 of Maguire Hospital. The several machines hooked up to him made some noise, but even these were muted.

The man was a mess. Fresh plaster encased his torso, right leg, and both arms.

Bandages covered his head almost completely; only a couple of inches of forehead, one eye, and his nose were exposed. Tubes pierced his arm, and protruded also from his nose and mouth holes.

Abruptly the stillness was broken by a man's entrance. The doctor walked up to the bed, consulted the chart hanging at the foot, and then managed to get a needle into a rare patch of naked flesh. He waited several minutes, watching the machines and patient carefully. After several minutes the mummy-like patient opened up his uncovered eye.

"Hello, Mr. Blake," said Dr. Walden in a low voice, "Welcome to Maguire Hospital. You've been in here many times, but I believe this is your first time as a patient. Alas, I'm afraid your care isn't going to be quite up to our usual high standards."

Blake's eye squinted slightly, focusing on Walden.

"I must apologize for this. A mistake. Our buttonman, sorry, buttonwoman, bet that was a surprise, wasn't as thorough as you would have been. She was supposed to cause a fatal crash, not just a serious one. Guess your driving skills pulled you through. But not for long. I'm killing you tonight. Don't worry; the substance is obscure, and with your horrible injuries and condition no one'll suspect anything." He paused. "But just wanted you to know it wasn't personal. You really did a great job. We—Pappy and I—decided we'd better lay low for a year or two. Just in case. You've done a laudable job in keeping your clients random, but still—probably best to quit while we're ahead, for a while. Pappy said you're loyal and discrete, but, hey, they probably thought the same thing about Joe Valachi or Donald Frankos, or all the others. We can't take the chance of your squealing. So, goodbye, but thanks for all your good work." With that, Walden produced a second needle, plunged it home, and waited again. A short while later Byron Blake's eye closed for the last time.

Walden then promptly left, whistling a happy and relieved tune as he did. He walked past the people in the hall and boarded the elevator, heading to his office.

One of the people he'd passed, a petite, attractive young woman, sat on her chair and regarded her swelling abdomen grumpily. Damn Robert! Screwed her once and never called her back. Seemed to have disappeared from the world; she couldn't locate him anywhere to tell him about their kid.

Inside her, unbeknownst to her, her fetal boy slowly grew and developed. With a catch, though. He had won an unlucky lottery, beating the odds to "win" cystic fibrosis. Undetectable at present, but the genes were there, biding their time.

What a dedicated worker was Byron Blake. Even his leisure time had furthered his career. Because Maguire, in addition to its other specialties, had a superior cystic fibrosis program. Another customer sure to be satisfied.



THE HUNT

"I don't understand," Thomas said. "I thought vampires were supposed to be sexy. You know what I mean?"

"Yeah," Rupert replied, taking a sip of his drink. "Anne Rice and all those role-playing games. And those damn *Twilight* books. The girls ate them up, right?"

"Oh yeah. Eternal life. Brooding, maudlin personalities. The elixir of life. Stylish clothes. What's not to love?"

"I don't know, Thomas. I just don't know."

The two of them sighed, practically in tandem, and took synchronized sips of their Bloody Marys. They looked around the bar. It was called The Graduate, probably because it was so close to the college campus and there were plenty of attractive young women here. Short skirts, low cut tops, high heels, all calculated to seduce and ensnare. Yet none of them had given Thomas and Rupert a second look. Or, rather, they had, but the looks had not been flattering.

"Hang on," Thomas said, "you've got a little something on your cheek. Just a moment." He reached up and snagged a small flap of skin that had sloughed off the other man's cheek. A shining glint of bone peeked out from underneath. "There. Got it."

"Looking good?"

"Looking good. But you need to feed soon."

"Excellent, because I think my dinner's headed our way." He pointed at a petite redhead who wore a tight pair of jeans, a tighter halter top, and a pair of red heels. "Look at her. Reminds me of Anastasia. Remember her?"

"That Russian girl? Nah, the hair's all wrong. Besides, I thought you were over her."

Rupert did not reply. The redhead had approached the bar and was ordering a drink.

"Hey," Rupert said to her. "Let me buy that for you."

The girl looked at Rupert; her face twisted into a grimace of disgust. "Vampires, huh? Out on the prowl?"

by richard s. crawford

Rupert and Thomas looked at each other and then back at the redhead. “How did you know?” asked Thomas.

“You got that look. You know. Pale skin. Fangs. Clothes that went out of style a century ago. Rotting flesh. Did you know that your cheekbone is showing?”

Rupert put a hand to his cheek. “Yeah, but ...”

“It’s really ugly. You don’t seriously think you’re going to attract anyone looking like that, do you?”

“We’re vampires,” Thomas said. “On the prowl. Haven’t you read *Interview with a Vampire*?”

“Come on. Let’s go out back. You have to feed. And I’ll let you turn me. I can show you everything you need to know about women.”

Rupert turned to Thomas and grinned. Thomas grinned back and winked. “Go get her.”

The redhead returned a few minutes later, smiling and dabbing delicately at her lips with a paper napkin.

“Hey,” Thomas said to her. “Where’s Rupert?”

“Dust,” the girl replied. “It was his own fault. He got too frisky and I had to drain him. That’s just how things go sometimes.”

“But he was my best friend! We went to school together in the 1700s!”

“Then he should have known better than to hook up with a hunter.” She smiled coquettishly. “You want a go at me? If you’re gentle, I promise not to kill you.”

Thomas looked her up and down. He touched the shedding skin on his face, his thinning hair, and the spot on the side of his head where his left ear had once been. Then he shrugged.

“What the hell?” he said. “You only live once.”



Kindergarten Girl

She doesn't like the garden on the wall,
where the flowers are without fragrance.
You hammer the alphabet nails into her
brain. Her little thumb and index finger
waver on a hard pencil.

She can't install her mind in the classroom
as her Barbie lies uncared at home. Your
refrains die in her ears. Her mom's lullaby
lives in her soul.

A naughty classmate pinches her. She wants
to play, 'elephant – and – mahout' with her
dad.

Your tale has a head and tail, but no soul.
An impulse-trimmer your dopey 'don't' is.
She wants to sleep in the valley beneath
the breast.

Ten to three's an inhuman schedule.
Tension termites eat each twitchy day.
Only the skeleton of infancy remains.

—fabiyas mv

REFLECTIONS

There's a soft click
And the TV goes cold.

Watching my image
Skewed on
The black mirror,
I look fat,
Unhappy.

The clock ticks,
5:00 a.m.
Darkness moves behind the couch.
I turn,
Nothing.

It's on again,
Flickers,
White noise.

From within my own eye,

The disembodied
Bacchus calls:

Drink it in.

And my teeth
Begin to chatter.

—gregory holland

ALEXANDER'S EMPIRE

by brenda kezar

"I should have married Richard."

Yes, you should have. He rested his elbows on the kitchen table and calmly sipped his coffee.

"Look at this place!" She swung a meaty arm wide. "Everything's falling apart! The back burner on the stove is out, the garbage disposal's broken, the front window is cracked, the table is wobbly ..." She grabbed the edge of the table and gave it a shake. Coffee sloshed from his cup. "Richard could fix anything." She crossed her arms and glared. "What can *you* do?"

He watched the spilled coffee make a run for the far side of the table. *You forgot one: the trailer is listing starboard.* He shrugged. "I'm doing the best I can with what I have."

She snatched a roll of paper towels from the counter. "Damned, good-for-nothing Count."

He watched her ease her bulk, groaning and popping, down to the floor to mop up the mess. Her grey, thinning hair rolled into curlers she never bothered to remove anymore, her scalp showing through, white and dusty. Her wardrobe consisted only of shapeless housedresses, which was a good thing, considering she didn't *have* a shape anymore. He understood why they were called "muumuus."

She looked up at him and scowled, as if reading his mind. He recoiled. *When*

did she stop having her lip waxed? Her lip-pelt would have been the envy of all the werewolves he used to run with in the wild nights of his youth.

Ah, the wild nights of his youth ... he sighed and watched her struggle her considerable bulk from beneath the table. *Can this fleshy behemoth really be the beauty I met, on that wild night, so long ago?* The memory could still raise his hunger. At one time, her long red hair spilled in soft ringlets across the pillow, her skin milky-white as the finest porcelain, and her figure lithe and trim, swelled in all the right places beneath the sheets. He had already overindulged that evening—blood *and* cheap whisky—so he had not bitten her; he had done nothing more heinous than seduce the great beauty he'd stumbled upon. Four months later, she hunted him down at his favorite jazz club and told him she was with child. He took great pride in being an old-fashioned gentleman—his family line included true royalty—so his only option was to take responsibility and marry her. She had been pregnant with their second child and packing on the pounds like a Sumo wrestler when he'd had an epiphany. Was it even *possible* for a vampire to sire children? He should have demanded a DNA test ages ago. Or maybe they should have gone on one of those trashy talk shows she enjoyed so much, the ones where the topic du jour was always “Who’s the baby-daddy?” But it would have only made her angry, and nothing frightened him more than an angry, peri-menopausal Marguerite.

She pitched the wet towels in the trash. “The least you could do is run to the store for me.”

“Ask one of the boys. They both have their licenses now.”

“They’re at the lake. Randy’s throwing a big party.”

Party while you still have the chance, boys. He drained the last of his coffee. “Fine. Assemble a list.”

Fifteen minutes later he stepped out the door, her shopping list crumpled in his pocket. He kicked at one of the pink flamingoes standing sentinel on the lawn. The flamingo’s flimsy aluminum leg snapped, and it clattered to the balding lawn with a hollow plastic rattle.

“Oh, crap.” He made a mental note to fix it before she noticed. She *loved* those flamingoes.

“And don’t forget my cigarettes and maxi-pads,” she yelled out the window. He cringed. Her voice echoed through the whole trailer park.

He walked to his rusted-out compact car and jerked the door handle. It came off in his hand. “Great,” he muttered, “one *more* thing to fix.” He walked around the car, opened the passenger door, and slid across the seats, mindful of the gearshift. He sighed and tossed the handle onto the dash. *If only I could talk her into a new vehicle. A truck, maybe. No. A big SUV.* He grinned, imagining the magnificent feeling of sitting up high, controlling a powerful, throbbing piece of machinery. And the cargo space! He would get one with tinted windows and keep a spare coffin in back. He’d back the SUV up to his favorite fishing spot, fish through the night, and crawl back inside during the day. When night fell, he could just crawl out again, pop a beer, and get right back to fishing. *Pure nirvana.*

He glanced toward the trailer—*she* stood silhouetted in the kitchen window.

Alfred Hitchcock in curlers. The silhouette folded its arms dourly, as if reading his thoughts again. He sighed and started the car. She was right. With gas prices the way they were, his twenty-year-old compact car was a rusted blessing. The *last* thing they needed was a gas-guzzling SUV.

He reached Walmart and slid into a parking space not far from the door. The almost-deserted parking lot lifted his spirits; he was in no mood to fight a mob. He walked inside, grabbed a cart, and pulled the list out of his pocket. He read the first item and snarled—kitty litter. He hated the cat, a one eyed, tattered-eared bundle of attitude. It hated *him* right back. He would have sucked it dry years ago and been done with it, but it was Marguerite's baby. He lost his temper once and nipped it, after it hissed at him. It slashed him across the cheek in return. The worst part was Marguerite had taken the cat's side. Now he and the cat gave each other a wide berth; wary bedfellows, both suffering under the weight of Marguerite's love.

He turned down the cat litter aisle and paused—a fine, college-age brunette scrubbed the fish tanks at the other end of the aisle. He kept his eyes glued to her round, little bottom and slid a thirty-pound canister of kitty litter into his cart. The cart rattled. She turned around. He gave her the Aleksander smile and the hypnotic bedroom eyes that left women powerless to refuse him.

She wrinkled her nose and narrowed her eyes. "Dirty old man!"

He backed his cart out of the aisle and hurried away.

After he'd put a few aisles between them, he looked at the next items on the list—yarn and craft sticks. *More fodder for those wretched church fund-raisers.* He wasn't comfortable with Marguerite's growing involvement in the church—not just on principle, but financially, as well. They might have been able to move out of the trailer park long ago, if not for the constant spending on craft supplies, bake sale ingredients, wedding and baby shower gifts, and so on, adnauseum. There was always some fete or another at the church, sucking the money from his wallet. Just who was bleeding *who* dry, anyway?

He dropped the craft sticks and yarn into the cart, looked at the list again, and shuddered. He slinked to the feminine hygiene aisle and let his eyes wander over the endless selection of products. *What am I doing? What happened to me? I'm in the feminine hygiene aisle of Walmart at 3 in the morning, trying to decide between the ultra and ultra max.* He looked up at the security bubble, knowing full well it couldn't see him. "I'm the fricking Prince of Darkness. How did I end up like this?"

He grabbed the first pack within reach and scurried away.

He juggled the bags and wiped his feet on the rag rug by the door. *Where is that woman? She could at least give me a hand.*

Marguerite's voice carried down the hall. "Aleksander? Come here, sweetie ... I have a surprise for you." Her voice sounded cheerful, enthusiastic, with a musical lilt—foreign, and yet somehow familiar ... *Oh dear God, not that! Haven't I been through enough tonight?*

He swallowed hard and walked down the hall with the slow, resigned steps of a man going to the electric chair. He stepped into the bedroom. A skinny teenage

girl sat tied to a chair in the middle of the room. Marguerite stood behind her, beaming.

"Surprise!" She chirped, throwing her meaty arms wide. She rushed over and smothered him in a fleshy bear hug. "I'm sorry I was so hard on you earlier. It's just 'the change'—sometimes it makes me crazy. I popped out and got you a little treat from the soup kitchen to make up for it ... and to show you how much I love you."

"For me?" He grinned.

"Eat up, before it keels over on its own." She patted his arm and turned to leave. After all these years, she still couldn't watch him take a fresh meal. She hesitated, and then leaned in close. "But remember," she whispered, "its clothes stay on!"

"Don't be ridiculous." He chuckled. "I only have eyes for you!"

She arched an eyebrow but smiled, her eyes glittering with appreciation at his flattery. "I'll be watching Jerry Springer, if you need me." She hurried out the bedroom door.

Alecsander sauntered toward the girl. She trembled, her eyes wide and sparkling with tears. Life on the streets had put two exquisite purple smudges under her eyes, and he fought back the urge to kiss them away.

"It's all right," he purred. "It won't hurt for long." He hoped his eyes were smoldering enough, hypnotic enough—he was a little out of practice, after all.

He touched her forehead. Her eyes were wide with panic, and she whimpered. He tilted her head to the side, exposing the pale, smooth whiteness of her neck. He paused a moment, listening. Jerry Springer yelled for Steve to break up a fight, and Marguerite muttered something he couldn't make out. *Talking back to the TV*. Marguerite laughed; her laughter dissolved into the breathless hack of a long-time smoker. *She really needs to give up those cigarettes*. Outside, a dog barked in vigorous fury, and two voices, male and female, argued loudly back and forth. A bottle crashed on the pavement.

He found it oddly comforting—the sounds of home. Sure, they didn't have much. And yes, it wasn't the lifestyle he would have chosen for himself. But still ... it was all his, and it wasn't so bad. Marguerite still loved him, and that's all that really mattered. So what if they were trailer trash? He'd be the Prince of Trailer Trash, and proud of it. He bared his fangs and leaned into the girl's neck.



My Illiterate Mother

A software to read and write is not installed
in my mom's system.
We download pages of ignorance. Sometimes,
her monitor is blank.

Our neighbours wake up hearing the divine songs
from a rural temple,
when I jump up listening to the metal words
rattling in the kitchen.

She pours calumnies into the ear-buckets nearby
from her vast tank.
There are pores on her palms, and her liquid money
always leaks through.

My dad is often tossed on her tongue. Today
the sea is serene.
I hear the roar of some unnamed anxieties
from her white shell.

I grew up on her barren lap. My tap-root
went down so deep.
I resisted the droughts. Thanks, Mom. I owe you for
all my burning blooms.

—fabiyas mv

STORM

Since you left there's been a storm.
You wouldn't know. How could you know?
But one results when two fronts meet
and there's a sudden loss of heat
from one, and then there's lightning, rain,
harsh wind and hail and even sleet.
The same occurs when lovers go
away from lovers: cold and warm
start swirling in a hurricane.

—james nicola

Pets

by rick mcquiston

Sara watched Mickey gracefully navigate his way across the room. With his abundance of gray fur and large, fluffy tail, the cat hardly noticed its new owner.

Or it simply didn't care.

When Sara took him in, the house seemed more complete, cozier, more alive. Her daughter, Lizzie, and husband, Ben, both loved the cat, each wanting to name him. Lizzie wanted to call him Bony. She said he reminded her one of the characters in a TV show she watched.

Ben, on the other hand, wanted to name the cat Mountain, due to his large size.

But Sara had won out with Mickey, and not named after the famous Disney mouse, but after a childhood friend she once had.

Sara steeped her cup of tea. Tiny plumes of steam swirled up from the hot liquid, drifting into the stagnant air of the kitchen.

A cup of tea. It was one of the few things Mickey let her still enjoy. That and food of course, which he provided from some unknown source every day.

He *wanted* to keep her alive.

Sara took a sip of tea and gazed out a window into the backyard. She knew it wasn't real, but it was still better than nothing. If she looked long enough she could see cracks in the fake sky.

Mickey jumped onto the counter. He glared at Sara with elliptical eyes that reflected a dark intelligence far beyond what it should have been.

The cup crashed to the floor, shattering an impact and spraying hot tea and shards of porcelain across the tile.

Sara held her breath. She stared at Mickey, vainly thinking that if only she could go back in time, if only she could have seen the signs, she wouldn't be in the predicament she now found herself in.

Ben had mentioned more than once how he had never seen such a large cat. She thought Mickey was rather small.

Lizzie used to say that she loved Mickey's golden-colored fur. She saw gray fur.

At the time Sara thought nothing of her family's strange misperceptions of Mickey, but in hindsight she knew better.

Mickey made them see what they wanted to see.

Perhaps she too only saw what she wanted to see. Maybe Mickey's real form was far too terrible to comprehend. Maybe Mickey knew if she and her family saw him for what he really was they wouldn't have taken him into their home.

Mickey glanced down at the shattered cup and quickly swung his stern gaze back at Sara. A sinewy white tongue slipped out of his mouth, tasted the air, and vanished back between the near-perfect rows of needlelike red teeth.

"C ... clean it up," the cat hissed.

Sara, bolstered by her determination to survive, and not as something's pet, snatched the still-hot tea kettle from the stove and threw it at Mickey. Steaming hot water splashed on the cat, causing him to shriek in pain. He fell off the counter and began to roll on the floor.

Sara wanted to run, but from past experience she knew it would be pointless. Even if she made it outside there would be no telling what she might find.

Once, when she was sure Mickey was asleep, she tried to sneak out a bedroom window, only to find that her yard was nothing more than a painting, a cardboard imitation that folded as soon as she fell into it.

She was scared, but not surprised, and in a sense, accepted her fate for the time being.

Mickey stopped groaning and straightened up. A wet sheet of fur slipped off his body, revealing sore-ridden, angry red flesh that pulsed as if ready to burst.

Sara instantly regretted her decision to attack him. He would be angry with her behavior and would undoubtedly discipline her.

God, if only Ben or Lizzie were still alive.

The anguish of losing both her husband and daughter seared straight through to Sara's very soul. They, as well as she, had not only mistaken what Mickey really was, but had also underestimated him.

Mickey cut off her thoughts with a stare of such cold malevolence that Sara couldn't help but contemplate suicide as a way out.

"B ... bad pet. Very bad pet," the creature slurred. "Very bad."

Sara turned and ran. She couldn't take it anymore. Anything would be better than living another day as that thing's slave.

She bolted out of the kitchen and down the hallway.

Mickey followed. He wasn't hurrying, instead keeping a casual distance. He knew his pet couldn't escape.

The front door was locked. Sara pulled on it with all her might but it wouldn't budge. Apparently Mickey had sealed it to keep her inside. He would decide when, or if, she could leave.

Sara swung around and put her back to the door. She thought of the windows, and the back door, but knew they wouldn't open. Surely Mickey would've sealed them shut as well.

But she had to try.

She snatched a lamp from a small table and flung it at the nearest window.

The lamp bounced off the glass like rubber on concrete.

She picked the remains of the lamp up and threw it at another window.

Same result.

"Why?" she cried. "Why me?"

Mickey sauntered into the room. "Beauseth you're my pet." He cocked his head to one side, revealing raw meat beneath loose tufts of wet fur. He smiled with rows of razor-sharp teeth cutting into his lips. Black blood seeped from the wounds. "And you'd are a bad pet ... very bad."

Officer Nick Mannert was surprised to find the door unlocked. He nudged it open with his flashlight and entered the house.

Inside, only darkness and silence greeted him.

"Hello? Is anybody home? This is the police."

No answer.

He stepped into the living room. The beam from his flashlight roamed across the displaced furniture, the torn carpeting, the smashed lamps.

He drew his gun.

"Hello? This is the police."

Still no reply.

This is a situation. House ransacked; apparently nobody home.

He sniffed the air.

Strange odor similar to ...

He turned and shined his flashlight down the hallway.

Blood?

At the end of the hallway an open archway led into the kitchen. No light came from the room, and this only added to its mystery and potential for danger.

Easy there, Officer Mannert. You're a trained professional.

The hallway seemed miles long as he approached the kitchen. With his firearm in one hand and his flashlight in the other, he stepped through the archway.

Blood covered the floor like paint. Nearly every square inch of the tile was coated in a glossy sheen of blackened red that reflected the beam from the flashlight back into Nick's face. Occasionally, chunks of bloody flesh dotted the crimson sea like tiny islands.

Nick gasped for breath. His training prepared him for situations like this, but now that he was confronted by one, he struggled to respond to it.

Call for backup? Need to call for backup.

He reached for the radio clipped onto his shoulder, and was about call for help when something crept out from behind the refrigerator.

It was a cat. It was dirty, with matted black fur hanging off its body in clumps and a skeletal frame that hinted at starvation.

It growled, flashing bloody incisors and a scarred tongue that darted out of its oversized mouth like a snake's.

But Nick didn't see it that way. He saw a beautiful, helpless creature that distinctly reminded him of Oscar, the orange tabby he had as a kid.

"Hey, little guy," he cooed to the twitching abomination. "You look like you need a good home." He tucked his handgun back into its holster and approached the cat. "Do you want to come home with me?"

The cat hissed. A glob of bloody spittle dripped from its snarling mouth.

"Sure you do. Lisa and Bobby are going to love you." He reached down and scooped up the cat (by then a trembling mass of sores and blood-matted fur) and cuddled it to his chest. "Come on ... ahh ... Oscar, you'll love your new family." He stroked the beast, running his hand over the bloody sores, but felt nothing other than soft, silky fur, much like his childhood pet had.

Nick walked out of the house, anxious to bring his new pet home.



CONFESSIO~~N~~AL

The old priest crossed himself and entered the confessional booth. It was late, approaching midnight. The cathedral was nearly empty, the pews occupied by only a few nocturnal worshippers. The lights were out, the candles were lit, and it was dark inside the confessional.

Saying a quick prayer to the Virgin, the priest sat, slid the divider back, revealing the screen, and asked, "What did you do now?"

The voice that replied was low and mocking. "Hi, Father Thomas. Aren't you supposed to call me 'child' or something?"

Father Thomas didn't reply.

"And what makes you think I've done something wrong?"

"The newspapers," Father Thomas said tightly.

Beyond the screen, his face hidden, the killer laughed. "Ah, the newspapers. It's always the newspapers. Which one do you read?"

Sighing, Father Thomas said, "*The Chronical*."

The killer snickered. "How about that crime photo they had? I was kind of shocked they published it. No class, that's what I say. I mean, kids could see that shit."

"Please don't curse in the confessional booth."

"Goddamn it, I'm sorry, Father. I have a dirty mouth."

Indeed. His hands weren't clean, either. If the first murder the police knew about was, in fact, his first—the San Francisco Slasher had been active for two years. His first victim was a college student named Mary Parkins—dragged out of the bay on January 8, 1970. His next, a grandmother named Dotty Mason, was found in a wooded area north of the city, her panties wound so tightly around her

by joseph rubas

throat that she was nearly decapitated. Father Thomas knew all of their names, their faces; at night, instead of sleeping, he gazed into their eyes, praying for them and their families.

For him, the nightmare began in October 1971; the killer came to him.

"I just have to get it off of my chest," he said. "It's too good *not* to share."

Father Thomas was bound by his oath to never reveal the sins that he heard in confession, no matter how disgusting they may be.

Even if the penitent was a mass murderer.

His inability to go to the police conflicted with his yen for vengeance—a sin. At times, he almost broke his oath and went to the authorities. But he was weak. He was a God-fearing man. His entire life had been dedicated to the Lord, all sixty-three years of it; thus, the thought of going against the Lord flew in the face of everything he had ever known.

"You whackin off in there, Father?" the killer asked.

Father Thomas swallowed.

"I'm not here to talk about what happened last night," the killer went on. "I wanna talk about tonight."

Tonight? Oh, God. He killed another.

As if divining the priest's thoughts, the killer chuckled. "Her name was Rebecca. Pretty redhead. Twenty-two, twenty-three. Nurse at the hospital. Good person. Loved animals, wanted a family, said her prayers. I finger-fucked her with a switchblade."

Father Thomas's stomach turned.

"Cut her clit off, threw it in a pan with some olive oil, onions. She didn't like it. Guess it wasn't cooked right. My fault. I'm not much of a chef."

Father Thomas prayed for this Rebecca, that her agony in her final moments pale in comparison to the Glory of Heaven.

"She had a daughter. Two-years-old."

If a man's heart can actually stop without killing him, Father Thomas's stopped in that confessional booth.

"I've never fucked a toddler before. Tightest pussy ever."

Father Thomas fell back, his head clunking softly off the wall behind him.

The killer laughed as if fondly reminiscing with an old friend. "Good times, Father. Look, I gotta get going. I can squeeze one more in before sun-up. Happy trails."

The confessional door opened, and the killer walked happily away, his footfalls echoing.

Father Thomas wept.

Father Thomas couldn't sleep that night. He couldn't even sit still. So at nearly three in the morning, he threw on his coat and hat and went for a long walk through the dark, predawn streets of San Francisco. Around him the city was quiet, stores closed and homes buttoned up against the night. Inside his own heart, however, chaos reigned. What could he do? Something. He had to do something. He couldn't just let this beast continue on his way. Especially not after tonight.

He had to tell the police.

But he couldn't.

He was duty-bound to silence.

Surely the Lord wouldn't mind him talking to the police if it meant a murderer was taken off the streets.

But all were children of God. And all children of God were to be afforded the same standing in God's eyes.

Dawn found Father Thomas halfway across the city in a depressed industrial neighborhood by the ocean; the waves lapped gently on the shore, and the damp, cold air had begun to warm.

On the final corner before he turned around, Father Thomas came across a 24-hour pawn shop.

He went inside.

Night fell over San Francisco, a city under siege. A pretty twenty-three-year-old nurse and her two-year-old daughter were found dead in their apartment near Ashbury. A thirty-year veteran of the force puked on his shoes when he saw what the Slasher had done to them. Young patrolmen slept uneasily for years afterward, and men with children and families hugged their kids just a little tighter that night.

At midnight, Father Thomas, wearing a pair of brown trousers and a blue checkered shirt buttoned to the throat, went into the confessional, sat down, and slid the divider back.

"Good evening, Father," the killer said, his voice light and gay. "No Roman collar tonight?"

"No," Father Thomas said.

"Why's that?"

"I don't deserve to wear it."

The killer chuckled. "No one does. We're all sinners, Father. We all fall short of grace. I think it's funny how people put priests and deacons and pastors and whatever up on a pedestal like they're above it all, true consorts of God. Please. You're just as bad as I am."

Father Thomas nodded. "I know," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. Tears stood unshed in his eyes.

"So how did you like my double-header last night?"

"I never heard of another," Father Thomas said. "Just the woman and her daughter."

"That's who I was talkin about, though I did get another one after I left here last night. Old lady on Russian Hill. I beat her over the head until her brains started seeping out of her ears."

Father Thomas stood. "I'm going to be sick," he said. "Excuse me."

He stepped out of the confessional, but instead of heading for the bathroom, he walked over to the other booth and threw the door open, startling the man inside—a chubby cherub with black, natty hair, and sensuous lips.

"What are you doing?" the man asked, his smug tone suddenly gone.

Father Thomas pulled out the .38 he'd bought from the pawn shop that morning and aimed it squarely at the Slasher's head. "God forgive me," he said, and pulled the trigger.

The body of twenty-one-year-old David Mauer was found three hours later, slumped in the confessional booth of Saint Anthony's on Coates Street—a neat, expertly placed bullet hole in his forehead. The murder was never solved; neither was the disappearance of Father Matthew Thomas. Police suspected Thomas was kidnapped by whoever killed Mauer and possibly murdered later; he probably saw it happen. Wrong place, wrong time.

Others thought that maybe *the priest* was the murderer. But that was ludicrous. The poor man was dead, shoved into a shallow grave somewhere in Death Valley or out in Napa's wine country. By the odds, that was certainly the case.



'Tween the Orchard 'n' the Graveyard --a Bluegrass Polyphony


Lonely Lilly dwelled jus' yonder
'Long the edge o' Springersville,
Where she'd sit up in a window
With 'er elbows 'long the sill.
There, she'd often get to ponder
'Bout the kind o' life she'd lead
If 'er momma weren't a widow,
Or their orchard gone to seed.

Now, ol' Willy loved cavortin',
An' he loved to pick a fight
—Not to mention catch a lickin'
Down the cathouse ev'ry night—
'Til one dusk he came a-courtin'
In 'is fancy, leather shoes,
An' he did some ol' time pickin'
'Long with croonin' these here blues:

"Lovely Lilly, lovely Lilly,
Won't ya' come 'n' take a ride?
O now Lilly, lovely Lilly,
Won't ya' come 'n' take a ride?
'Cause this road I'm on won't straighten
'Less yo' ridin' by my side."

Well, young Lilly sat there list'nin'
To that devil's serenade,
While the ev'nin' grew mo' chilly
With each banjo note he played,
'Til beneath that first star glist'nin'
—High 'n' lonesome 'bove this land—
Off she rode with that damned Willy
In 'is Vicky, hand in hand. . .

O, they rambled past the coalmine
Where 'er daddy worked 'n' died,
Past three crosses in a farmyard
Standin' sternly side by side,
Past that church where folk drink strychnine,
Handle snakes—an' raise the dead!—
'Til he parked up in the graveyard
Where sweet Lilly turned an' said:



"O now Willy, wicked Willy,
Lawdy knows, it's plain to see,
Said now Willy, wicked Willy,
Lawdy knows, it's plain to see
That ya'll ride The Road o' Satan
Even when ya' ride with me."

Well, there ain't no need in tellin'
What that bastard gone 'n' done,
Or, the way the foun' po' Lilly
Once he'd had 'imself 'is fun,
An' there ain't no need in dwellin'
On how folks still in this town
Took their sweet time killin' Willy,
When their stones came rainin' down.

Nawwww, there ain't no need in tradin'
In ol' gossip from the past;
Though, it's no small feat fo'gettin'
Ain't one summer meant to last,
Not once leaves commence to fadin'
'Roun ol' Springersville each fall,
While the sun—so slowly settin'—
Gets them mountain winds to call:

"Lovely Lilly, lovely Lilly,
Won't ya' come 'n' take a ride?
O now Lilly, lovely Lilly,
Won't ya' come 'n' take a ride?
'Cause this road I'm on won't straighten
'Less yo' ridin' by my side."

"O now Willy, wicked Willy,
Lawdy knows, it's plain to see,
Said now Willy, wicked Willy,
Lawdy knows, it's plain to see
That ya'll ride the Road o' Satan
Even when ya' ride with me."

Coda

Up a piece from Lilly's orchard
There's that mine we used to work;
There's three crosses in a barnyard
Where the devil fears to lurk;
There's that church where folk soun' tortured
When they cry unto the Lord,
An' this Vicky—up the graveyard—
That was built by Henry Ford.

—johnny longfellow

Nathaniel

by jack everett

The dull-gray tiled walls made the room look cold, almost like the inside of a freezer. It was warm inside though, nearly eighty degrees, enough to make a suspect sweat. There was a table in the center of the room, with two armless metal folding chairs on either side. Our suspect was sitting in one of the chairs. I was watching him from behind the one-way mirror. He had claimed his name was Nathaniel, and hadn't given a last name. He had thick black hair that ran down to his shoulders. His eyes were dark brown. The shadows from his brows made them look black. His skin was fair, not white by any means, but it didn't look like he saw much sunlight. His face was resolute and clean shaven, and he appeared to be in his early-thirties. He was wearing a charcoal suit. Expensive worsted wool. Underneath his jacket, he wore a lavender silk shirt with the top two buttons undone. No tie. He should have been sweating buckets, but he wasn't sweating at all. He was calm. His hands were clasped, and resting on the table in front of him. He'd been alone in there for twenty minutes. We wanted to give him a chance to think about what he was going to say.

Earlier in the day there had been a double homicide at St. John's Antiques. Two civilians were dead—the owner of the store, Arthur Bookman, and a customer, Gloria Moon. Dispatch had received a report of gunshots. A nearby patrol unit was there within two minutes, and when they arrived they found the front door splintered from gunfire. The man, Nathaniel, calmly walked out of the entrance, past the shards of wood. His hands were empty. He was taken into custody without argument. The officers found the bodies inside, and one witness, Mrs. Moon's nine-year-old son, Todd. The boy was a few feet away from his mother's body, in shock and completely silent. My partner, Detective Wilkes, and I had arrived at the crime scene half an hour after the murders occurred. When we were done with the crime scene walk-through it was up to forensics to find any trace evidence that would really be useful. The boy had been taken to the Department of Human Services to be counseled and interviewed. We had returned to the station to question the suspect, Nathaniel.

Our supervisor, Captain Reynolds, was with me and my partner as we studied the guy through the one-way. The case file was in my hands. I'd reviewed the crime scene photos and read the responding officers' reports three times. "I want to go in there by myself," I said to my partner.

"You sure?" Detective Wilkes asked me.

"Yeah. There's something unusual about this guy," I said. Nathaniel looked so calm that I had a feeling he wasn't guilty of the shootings, but at the same time I was sure he knew something. I'd treat him like he was guilty.

"Go on in," Wilkes said. "If you need my help, just give the signal and I'll be right there."

Captain Reynolds gave a nod of approval.

"I will," I said, "but I got a feeling that I'm not going to need any help."

I was confident as I walked into the room. I'd interviewed suspects and witnesses a hundred times before, and this guy was going to be no different. If he were guilty, I'd have him wetting his pants by the time I was done with him. I made eye contact right away, and he watched me as I sat in the chair opposite him. Other than his head, he didn't move. A clock was ticking at the side of the room. It was there to rile the suspect's nerves, but didn't seem to affect Nathaniel at all. I set the case file on the table in front of me.

"Hello, Detective Perry," he said.

His greeting came as a surprise to me. We hadn't been introduced. Someone must have told him the names of the detectives assigned to the case, but even then he shouldn't have known me from Wilkes. I figured he must have made a guess, and just happened to be right.

"Would you like a glass of water?" I asked.

"No," he said. His voice was gentle, soft, and the single word he said felt strangely compassionate. He should have wanted a drink. I wanted some water myself, even though I'd only been in the room a few seconds. It was warm. Nathaniel should have taken his jacket off, but hadn't. I wasn't wearing my own jacket. My weapon was visible. It was supposed to intimidate him. He was sitting still, confidently leaning towards me.

I cleared my throat. "You claim your name is Nathaniel?" I asked, and waited for a response.

"I am known by that name," he said. Again, his voice was calm. His answer, however, left no doubt that *Nathaniel* was an alias.

"Last name?" I asked.

"No."

"That wasn't a yes or no question," I said. "We're going to find out what it is anyway, so you might as well tell me now."

He leaned back just a little, and said, "Detective, it is my intention to be honest with you concerning your investigation, but there are some questions I cannot answer." His eyes remained on me, not glancing away for even a moment.

Like your real name? I looked down from his eyes and flipped open the file and pretended to read from it. I already had the important details memorized, but I

wanted him to think that I wasn't prepared to interrogate him, give him some false confidence. "You gave your address as the Imperial Hotel."

"That is correct."

We'd already contacted the hotel to confirm that he'd been staying there. He'd been there for almost three months. The clerk didn't have shit on his name, though, only Nathaniel, and he paid by cash so there wasn't a credit trail to follow. "Expensive," I remarked.

"I will admit that I take pleasure in some of the finer things." No doubt. The thread count on his suit was so high it looked like polished obsidian.

"Are you also willing to admit that you murdered two people?" I said sharply. His eyes narrowed defensively.

Except for his mouth, he didn't move as he spoke. "No, detective, I haven't murdered anyone." He maintained eye contact, his body didn't shift.

I flipped through the file some more. He looked down at it, exactly the way I wanted him to. "The facts don't lie," I said. "Two dead at St. John's Antiques and you walk out the bullet-ridden door like you just finished your morning shopping."

"They do not lie," he agreed, with a slight nod. "I was present during the events you described. As I said, I intend to be honest with you."

Then why not tell me your real name? "Then explain to me two dead bodies." I moved aside the last page of the summary report, revealing the photos underneath. I lifted the first one up. It was of Bookman, the shop owner. He was in his early sixties, bald, gray, his glasses, probably antique, were lying next to his head, and there was a final glimpse of horror in his eyes. I set the photo down in front of Nathaniel, and then I studied him carefully. He looked at the photo for several seconds. I couldn't see any emotion in his face. The photo might as well have been of a dirt road. He unclasped his hands though, as if he intended to pick the photo up.

I pulled out the next photo, Mrs. Moon. She was in her thirties. Her hair had obviously been styled earlier in the morning, but it was smeared with blood. The gunshot wound in the side of her neck was visible in the photo. Her carotid artery had been ruptured, and blood had pooled around her head. The photo should have shocked anyone. It bothered me every time I looked at it. It bothered me as I set it in front of Nathaniel. Again, he reacted the same way that he did with Bookman's photo. He simply looked at it, glancing at it as if he'd seen things like it a thousand times before. His face was expressionless.

I placed more photos in front of him. Each was as gruesome as the last. When I had placed the last one in front of him, he closed his eyes, and his shoulders dropped an inch. He opened his eyes, raised his head, and said, "Very tragic." His voice was still calm, but softer. I wasn't seeing guilt, but at least he was reacting.

"Tragic!" I yelled as I slapped my hand onto the papers in front of me. "It's a goddamn slaughter." There was a slight movement in his eyes and a shift in his posture. I wouldn't have noticed it, except that his hair brushed slightly against his jacket. His eyelids closed a few millimeters, and his jaw seemed to stiffen just a bit. His reaction could have been guilt, but it seemed more like pain. I collected

the photos in front of him and replaced them in the folder, covering them up with the reports.

"It is a terrible thing," he said. "Though, I had no part in it, save that I witnessed it and did nothing to prevent it." His voice was soft, barely audible, yet perfectly pronounced.

I waited for a few seconds to see if he would fidget or do anything else that might suggest that he was lying. Nothing. "Are you telling me that you were hiding during the shooting?"

"No, detective. I was present during the events. I stood as close to the man who did this, as I am to you now."

"Let me get this straight. You watched a man murder two innocent people, and he decided to let you go?"

"No. He did not decide to let me go," he said a little louder, with authority, fully sincere. "He had little choice in the matter."

Nathaniel was playing a game with me, I was certain of that. If he wasn't the shooter, then he was an accomplice. I'd play along with his game, until he trapped himself, then I'd nail him. "He didn't have a choice to shoot you?" I set my elbow on the table, held my chin in my hand, and leaned in closer to Nathaniel.

"That is correct, detective, though he did try."

I jerked back, shaking my head. "What the hell do you mean he tried? He shoots a man in the heart, and a woman through the neck, and he misses you?" I laid my hands flat on the edge of the table.

"He did not miss."

I paused for a long minute. Nathaniel was looking right into my eyes, almost as if he were looking into my soul. I was looking right back at him, a smile almost forming on my face. His suit and shirt were wrinkle free, certainly free of bullet holes. He hadn't been shot. "You're insane," I said.

"If only it were that simple," he replied.

"What do you mean?"

He didn't say anything right away. Instead, he contemplated for a minute, his eyes moving over me. He must have been deciding how to fabricate the next part of his story. Maybe he wasn't as prepared as he thought he was. I'd have a confession soon. Finally, he said, "I can't die. I have walked this world for hundreds of years. I will never die, and one man robbing an antique shop would not change that." His voice was still calm and serious. All reason told me that he was insane. Part of me wanted to draw my pistol, and threaten to shoot him, just to see how he would react. To prove to him that he could die. I restrained myself.

"Hundreds of years, huh?" I crossed my arms, looked away from his eyes, and leaned back a little.

"Yes." He nodded and expressed a complacent smile. This guy was digging himself in some deep shit; there was no way he was going to talk himself through this. Yet he began his explanation. "I suppose by modern belief I would be called an angel. That is why I chose the name Nathaniel from the Christian bible."

"Let me guess," I said loudly, raising my brow and shaking my head. "You came

down here from heaven?"

"Heaven is a name often used to describe where I am from," he said. "Though, the word heaven implies peace, and the ethereal world, where I come from, is not the paradise of Christian mythology, but I am not here to tell you of such things. Allow me to explain the crime you are investigating."

With a grimace of distrust, I unfolded my arms and rested my hands in my lap. "By all means," I replied.

He began immediately. "As I said, I have been here on Earth for hundreds of years, and for that reason I have many memories of the past, and with them, a certain fondness of objects from history. It is not uncommon for me to venture into an antique shop. I prefer older relics, and I had learned that Mr. Bookman had a fine collection of Nineteenth Century European.

"The proprietor, Mr. Bookman, was there to greet me as I entered. He sat comfortably at the front desk reading through an antique manuscript. I gave my own salutation in response, and, as is common with owners of such shops, he allowed me to browse his wares uninterrupted."

As Nathaniel spoke I began to picture his story in my mind. I imagined him in his expensive suit, giving a quiet greeting to Mr. Bookman, and then slowly making his way further into the store. I prided myself, as a detective, in having a good imagination.

Nathaniel's account continued. "I looked about the store and scanned each of the shelves and displays for particular pieces that might interest me. The mother and child had arrived before me, and the boy saw me as I browsed. With some shyness he took his mother's hand. She, not expecting such a grasp looked about, and saw me as well. Her smile was warm and friendly, and I was not opposed to having a brief conversation with her. We greeted each other and she explained to me her interest in phonograph recordings from the 1920s.

"She introduced her son, and explained that he had claimed to be ill that morning, and despite her instinct that he was telling a lie, she had allowed him to miss school for the day. She went on, in some detail, describing her original Edison phonograph player, and though I knew of such things as well as you know of the technology of today, I allowed her to find pleasure in telling me about them."

Nathaniel's explanation might have sounded rehearsed, except that his voice was strangely compelling. His words began to blend with my imagination, and though I could still hear him speak, the event he was describing became vivid in my mind. It was as if I were seeing Mrs. Moon from his eyes. The boy was there, very real to me, hiding ever so slightly behind his mother's legs, and Mrs. Moon was laughing about her hobby, occasionally using her free hand to brush some loose strands of hair from her face.

His words never ceased. "The boy had overcome his shyness, at least enough to leave his mother's grasp. On a shelf nearby he noticed a collection of old comic books, though he was unsure if it was permissible to open them up, so he merely looked at the artwork on the covers.

"You should know, detective, that I have a certain amount of omniscience, and

at that time, I was aware of the events that were about to transpire. I knew of the man on the street, contemplating the crime he would commit. My conversation with the woman ceased, and I continued my browsing. The man entered the shop. With his pistol in hand, he demanded that Mr. Bookman give him the money in the cash register. Mr. Bookman procured the few dollars that he had.

"The man was not pleased by such a meager sum. Mr. Bookman explained that antiques were not popular, and he had few customers. I suppose the crook would have robbed the shop of whatever valuable items he could carry and make his way onto the street, except he was caught by surprise when he heard the woman make a noise.

"The woman had seen the man, and fearing for her son's life, she had quietly told the boy to hide behind a nearby armoire. When the man heard her voice he demanded that she show herself, and she obeyed."

My imagination was going wild. As I envisioned it, Nathaniel had continued browsing even as the robber entered. Nathaniel had made his way to the back of the store. I could see him looking over the various objects and trinkets. I saw them in a perfect detail. I pictured a clock, bronze, with doves above the timepiece and a woman resting against the side of it. I couldn't remember if I had seen such an object during the crime scene walk-through.

He went on. "I took the liberty of making my presence known as well. The crook asked if any of us had a vehicle. I did not, and Mr. Bookman had not driven that morning. The woman did, and the man demanded that she give him her keys. She complied. He held us at gunpoint for several minutes. I suppose planning his robbery and escape. The boy remained hidden.

"There came a surprise, as the bell on the front door rang, notifying us that a customer was about to enter. This gave the man a scare, and he turned and fired his weapon at the front door. The oak panes of the door were shattered, though the customer that was about to enter had escaped. The man then asked the proprietor if there was another exit, and Mr. Bookman told him there was one at the back of his shop. However, police sirens became audible, and in panic the man fired once at Mr. Bookman.

"He turned to the woman, and shot her as well. He then fired upon me, and when he saw that I could not fall, he fired repeatedly until his ammunition was spent. Then he ran to the back door. The police arrived and I left the shop to greet them. Following that, I was taken here."

As Nathaniel finished his account, the image in my mind faded, and it was as if I had just opened my eyes to see him sitting in front of me, even though I had never closed them. I was certain that what I had seen was more than the simple conjuration of a detective's instincts. The details had been as real as if I'd been there myself. I had even seen the killer, fidgety, nervous, with needle tracks on his forearms. I sat there, completely awed. It was the most unbelievable story I had ever heard in my life, and yet I couldn't help but accept what I had seen. I had to remain objective, though. Despite what I thought I might believe I still intended to find some error in his story. "If you're an angel, didn't you have the power to

save them?" I said, trying to sound skeptical, even though I was really asking out of curiosity.

"Of course, detective," he replied casually. "Even after the matter I could have raised them from the dead. As I said though, I did nothing to prevent this thing from happening."

"Why?" I said quietly and slowly. I couldn't even fathom what his explanation would be. I'd never put much thought into believing in angels. It was my understanding that they were supposed to be messengers or guardians, but then again it was also my understanding that heaven was paradise and Nathaniel had already said otherwise.

He studied me for several seconds. It seemed like several minutes. The clock seemed to be ticking louder. It was grating at my nerves. I felt sweat drip down my brow. "It wasn't my place to interfere," he stated.

"It wasn't your place?"

"I know that answer does not satisfy you, and I cannot give you one that will. Things are the way they are. When I came to this world, my assignment was to observe only. I am forbidden to interfere with the agency of man, and I have been faithful to that calling." His words came out softly, his lips barely moved.

I shook my head. "What do you mean you're here to observe?"

"I have been honest with you, Detective Perry. My mission here is to observe. In time, I will be called back to the ethereal world to give an account of the chaos I have seen, but these matters are not of concern to the mortal world."

"And while you're here, you don't give a damn about what happens to anybody?"

"I did not say that, detective," he said quickly. "In my time on Earth I have seen terrible things," his voice slowed. He looked down to the table. "Villages burned, women raped, and children slain." He looked to my eyes again, and leaned closer to me, his hair curving around his chin. "It is my duty to seek out and witness the cruelty of mankind. I have done that, always observing, and never impeding the will of men." The shadows on his face had shifted, and his eyes didn't look as dark as they had when I'd first seen him. "I do care, detective." A somber expression of honesty was in his eyes and mouth. A shiver ran through my body.

We sat there in silence. The clock was still ticking, but it wasn't bothering me so much anymore. I could barely hear it. I wanted to question Nathaniel further about where he was from and why he was here, but I knew he wouldn't give me any answers. Like he said, he wasn't here to tell me about such things, and he wasn't going to. It was time I got back to the details of the investigation anyways. Otherwise I'd start looking crazy. "That's quite a story," I remarked.

He leaned away from me into an upright position. The shadows on his face shifted again. "Isn't it," he said softly.

"And the boy? Is he going to verify that things happened the way you said they did?"

"The boy was not privy to all that happened, as he was in hiding, but his account will not contradict what I have told you."

"It's that simple?"

"Yes," he said. Then he clasped his hands, and rested them on the table. I noticed the cufflinks on his shirt, white gold, simple in design. His suit jacket was a flawless fit around his body.

Looking over to the one-way mirror, I wondered what Detective Wilkes and Captain Reynolds were thinking. There was no way they had taken Nathaniel as seriously as I had. I collected the case file and stood up. I felt like I was soaked. I'd been sweating the whole time. There wasn't so much as a bead running down Nathaniel's brow. "Would you like me to get you anything?" I asked. "A glass of water, maybe?"

"No," he said.

I turned to leave. Even though I couldn't see him, I knew his eyes were following me. I walked out the door, and around the hall. Reynolds and Wilkes were waiting for me.

"What do you think?" Reynolds asked me.

That this guy really is some kind of angel from another world. "That he's a nut," I said.

"No kidding," Wilkes said. "What's up with that angel bullshit? With that black hair he looks more like a devil." Wilkes laughed. "It's weird, though, his story sort of adds up. Mrs. Moon's keys haven't been found even though her car was parked in front of the store, and this guy didn't have them when he was booked. Plus the forensics report came in while you were interviewing him, and they found something like fifteen shell casings on the floor."

"Really?" I asked.

"Yeah," Wilkes replied. "The victims were each shot once, but whoever was shooting went crazy at some point, and other than the bullets in the victims and the door they didn't find any more."

"They could have landed in some of the antiques," I offered. "Hell, there's so much copper and brass in the shop that they might be impossible to find." *Or they vaporized before they made contact with Nathaniel.* I looked from Wilkes to Reynolds. They both nodded, unsure. "What about the boy—he see anything?" I asked.

Reynolds answered, "Kid is pretty shook up, and hasn't said anything yet. Can't say I blame him, he may have seen the whole thing. Dr. Walker is talking to him over at DHS. She thinks it will be at least a few days before he'll be able tell us anything, maybe even a lot longer."

"VICAP turn up anything?" I asked.

"The computer's still chugging away at his prints," Reynolds said, "but at this point it doesn't look like we're going to get anything. No luck finding his real name either, but it's a big database to search. If he's in there we'll find him."

"What about the murder weapon?"

"Still haven't found it," Wilkes said. He motioned through the one-way at Nathaniel. "This guy didn't have it on him when the patrolmen arrested him, and it wasn't in the store. It is likely that someone carried it out the back door."

Officers were still canvassing the neighborhood around St. John's Antiques.

If the killer had run out the back alley, there was a good chance that someone witnessed it. There were still plenty of leads to follow. “So what do we do with this guy?” I asked.

“It’s your call, detectives,” Reynolds replied. He looked from me to Wilkes, then back to me. “We can hold him for another eighteen hours, but then we’ve got to charge him with something.”

I looked at my partner. He gave me a half smile. “Well, he is nuts,” I lied, “and he was definitely there, but my gut tells me he isn’t the killer. We should probably keep him here anyway. At least until we see what else turns up. When he does leave, we tail him and make sure he doesn’t sprout wings and fly up to heaven.” I faked a laugh. Wilkes laughed as well. His laugh was real.

“Very well,” Reynolds said. I handed him the case file and he walked to his office. I couldn’t help but imagine Nathaniel spending the night in lockup. The guy probably didn’t need sleep. He’d sit there, calm, letting the time pass by. Maybe he’d have a pleasant conversation with someone who’d been booked for driving on a suspended license.

Wilkes slapped my arm. “You think he was hiding the whole time and made up that bullshit because he was afraid of looking like a coward?” he asked me.

“I don’t know,” I replied. Turning back to the one-way, I watched Nathaniel. He was calm as he’d been the whole time. His head was bowed slightly, though, and I couldn’t see his face past his hair. He looked tired, but not the kind of weariness that could be remedied by sleep.

We captured the actual perpetrator the next day. It was a junkie that had been riding horse during the robbery. The latent prints on the shell casings turned up a name, and a few weasels on the street led us right to him. The guy was a multiple offender with a history of violence and armed robbery, the type of scumbag that would do anything to get his next fix. He was in possession of the murder weapon and Mrs. Moon’s keys when we collared him. His memory was clouded from the high, and when he confessed in the interrogation room he tried to justify the murders by saying he thought he was dreaming. They always try to justify it.

Nathaniel walked out of the station with a subpoena, just in case we needed him to testify at the trial, but the perp plead guilty; no testimony was necessary. I never saw Nathaniel after that, and I never interviewed the boy, Todd, either. With the perp’s confession there was no need for the boy to corroborate Nathaniel’s story. I planned on keeping tabs on the kid, however, and maybe approach him when he was older. Nathaniel had said that in time he would report on the chaos he’d seen, and even though he had left so many questions unanswered, I couldn’t help but think that there was an unending night approaching.



THE SONG OF DEATH

At night she comes to the window
Singing beneath an ebon moon
Whispering love songs to the dead
Or soldiers on their way to doom.
She was beautiful before the war
Now she sings to masters via lyre
He who gave her back her voice
And her dark loins cold desire.

Her songs bewitch her master's enemy
These poor fools who join the fight
Shot down by arrows as they listen
To her music shaming all star-light.
Guards who should be fighting drink
Too drunk to fight from off the floor
When her dark master kills the sun
Scattering men without voices to the moor.

—matthew wilson

ON THE PEDESTAL OF HARDSHIPS

A child keeps his poverty
beside a peacock feather
in his text-book.
He zips his pain
in a bag of silence.

Loneliness broods his thoughts,
when his youth sits drooping.
He creeps like a worm
among the books in a shelf
in search of his shelter.

Later, he marries a bucolic beauty,
who burns like a kerosene lamp
in his dark kitchen.
Noble births grow in scarcity
as the chaff smoulders.

Now, Mr.Duridhan stands
as a broken statue
on the pedestal of hardships.
His remnants resist all
the droughts and the rains.

—fabiyas mv

SAJAN'S SORROWS

His hopes take off like an Indian
Airlines aircraft.

It's a shelter – from the hundred
degrees Celsius
issues – that Sajan seeks in the
Dubai Desert.
Days are dry like the 'kuboos' in
the labor camp.
Here laborers live to labor – never
labor to live.
His fallen hairs on the bathroom
floor scare him –
he fears a marble pate.

Fresh date bunches can't tempt
him. Alluring
fragrance of the herbal oil – from
his wife's hair
sea miles away – passes through
his nostrils again.

As he lies in his bed, his distant
babe's babbling
detains his sleep awhile.

His alter egos are all around. An
expat is like a
tap-root – going so deep under the
dry sand for the
green leaves and the bright blooms
beyond the sea.

**Kuboos – an Arabian flat bread.*

—fabiyas mv

Pie Birds

by janet slike

At the annual bookkeeping convention, Nellie Bushay cooed to the souvenir china pie bird before encasing it in her luggage. She didn't realize that the garish crow sporting a row of hot pink hearts from the top of its head and over its back and tail would be the first in a collection. She only expected to add a splash of color to the kitchen.

Back home, Mama huffed and asked why she had wasted perfectly good money on a tacky geegaw.

She bought her second piebird, a bluebird with a chipped wing, at an upscale antique mall. Of course, Mama didn't see what was so upscale about the mall if they sold damaged goods. Nellie merely set the bird on the windowsill, turning the chipped wing outward so it wouldn't offend Mama.

The collection grew, piece by piece until the kitchen resembled an aviary. Though Nellie skimped on everything else for herself, watering down shampoo and purchasing only generic peanut butter, she always found money to support her collection.

She spent hours on Ebay, sorting the items by price, lowest first. Though initially she fussed about the birds she gathered, her standards dropped over time. She would bid on almost anything and savor the thrill of winning even if she overpaid and even if the bird wasn't attractive. Looks sometimes just bought you trouble, Nellie knew. Mama always said Nellie was no winner, that her sister Patrice, the attractive one, was the one who'd make something of her life. Each time the UPS man delivered a package from a stranger, Nellie felt that a bit of self-esteem had arrived wrapped in the brown box. Someday she would have enough to feel whole again, but then how would she act? She hadn't known *whole* and *normal* since she was nine.



Mama didn't understand.

"Patrice has a husband and two kids. All you have is a bunch of tacky, useless birds," Mama drawled between coffee sips three days before Christmas. She left her cup on the table for Nellie to take to the sink for its rinsing. "Well, at least stick that brown one in an apple pie. Your nephews are partial to your apple pie. It's not half bad, though it never did catch you a man."

Most of the pie birds were never used for their practical purpose of releasing steam from a pie's interior. Nellie used the sparrow pie bird for that and as her mental circuits overloaded from Mama's endless nagging and the overwhelming housekeeping, she spoke to her bird and heard it speak back. The meek-mannered bird spoke of pure darkness. It encouraged Nellie to stop giving Mama medication. You could say it's egging me on, thought Nellie, chuckling inwardly at her simpleminded joke.

Nellie rolled the lump of pie dough into a thin, even disk while Mama watched *Jeopardy* in the family room.

"Who is Elliott Gould?" Mama yelped out from the faded moss green armchair. Mama barked out the few questions she could, as if Alex Trebek would suddenly pause from attending to the contestants and say, "Yes, Mrs. Bushay, that's correct," and award her one thousand dollars. Papa used to talk to the television too. Nellie, raised by parents who talked to televisions, didn't find talking to pie birds any more unusual.

She anticipated her sister's visit. Five days with Patrice, Dave, and the boys. Five days of small talk when she'd rather find another bird. Five days of wondering how Patrice managed a family, high-powered job and active social life and stayed thin to boot. Five days when she would have to be polite even if Evan dominated the computer with another round of *Civilization*.

She couldn't help looking forward to five days; such is the power of family.

Such is the power of Christmas to bring out the best in us as we offer the best gifts we can afford, the best food we can prepare, the best decorations we can create.

"What is the periodic table?"

Nellie saw Mama's blood pressure pills in their amber plastic vial on the gray granite counter, smudged with cinnamon and sticky with apple juice. She lifted the container and peered in. Two left. How easy it would be to forget to refill the prescription and just blame the error on holiday stress.

"Who is Jack Ruby?"

The coincidence was not lost on Nellie, who quickly pushed the murderous thoughts from her mind, not because they lost their appeal but because she was certain she, like Jack Ruby, wouldn't get away with it.

Nellie picked up the glass measuring cup and squirted a glob of store-brand lemon dishwashing liquid into it, swished it around with the brush, and rinsed it. Nellie kept a tidy kitchen.

The scent gave her an idea. Patrice liked lemon meringue pie. She'd whip one up in the morning and still have plenty of time to pick her sister up at noon at the Nashville airport.

In the oven, the tender crust blistered up like Nellie's rage. The sparrow screeched out its warning call. Nellie removed the pie in time and stood in silent witness to its golden perfection. Yes, pie-making was her talent, her gift. And the birds were her friends and confidants.

Jeopardy ended, signaling the finish of Mama's interest in network television.

Nellie switched the dial to PBS and miraculously found a program instead of a fundraising drive.

"You set that pie on the cooling rack, didn't you? I can't have the heat ruining my good new counter."

"It's not THAT hot." Granite can probably withstand thousands of degrees, but somehow can't tolerate a fresh-baked pie."

"Just answer my question without the sass, OK?"

"It's on the rack."

"Was that so burnt-biscuit hard?" asked Mama, the inventor of many food-related sayings.

"No, Mama."

"Course not."

They barely said another word to each other until bedtime. Nellie held her tongue, knowing that she was feeling vinegar sour tonight toward Mama. She hoped Mama would be candy cane sweet for her sister's visit.

Patrice breezed through Gate 12 of the Delta terminal, two blond boys and Mel Gibson-lookalike husband in tow. She carried silver Nordstrom bags laden with elegantly wrapped packages.

"Nellie! How's my baby sister? We couldn't wait to see you!" Patrice enveloped her in a snuggly bear hug, snagging her diamond tennis bracelet in Nellie's shoulder-length brown hair. With a swift wrist twist Patrice released the hairs. Nothing stayed stuck for long in Patrice's world. She moved from success to greater success.

She can always make things right, thought Nellie.

Once passengers and presents were encased in the minivan, they left the airport.

Nellie calmed in the presence of the group. Good reliable Nellie fought with her anger and the anger and darkness lost this time. But Patrice, her protector, wouldn't always be around.

"We need to stop at the pharmacy and get Mama's pills. It'll just take a minute."

"I just read an article in *The New England Journal of Medicine* about those pills. They said long-term use could cause kidney damage. They recommended some herbal supplements just as effective."

"I don't think she'll be around long enough for long-term use." Nellie clamped her mouth shut and gripped the steering wheel tighter. She couldn't reveal her plan.

"She's not that ancient. And you know she's chili-pepper irritating enough to stick around just to spite us," Patrice said, intentionally affecting Mama's speech patterns.

"Mom, why are you talking like that?" asked Nathan, her younger son.

"It's a family thing," said Patrice with a giggle.

"Whatever, Mom."

Evan punched his little brother. "Look, igloos" They both checked out the retro roadside motel.

The family swarmed into Carl's Pharmacy and dispersed, each visitor realizing he or she had forgotten to pack an item that would make them more comfortable in the ranch house ruled by Mama. Nellie saw Dave twirl the rack of paperbacks using more force than necessary behind his spin. The cover images of cowboys, submarines, and spies melded into a testosterone-spiced soup. He settled on book 4 of a science fiction series.

He waved the book to get Nellie's attention.

"Did I tell you I actually know Peter Ress? Met him at a book signing, and he made an appointment for some financial advice. I shifted his assets from bonds to futures and saved him from quite a loss."

"You've mentioned it a time or ten."

"Well, I wouldn't be surprised if he mentioned me in the dedication to book 5."

Nellie wandered the aisles, in no hurry to ask the pharmacist for the refill. She saw Nathan select a stuffed tiger, a source of strength. Evan chose a remote control car, probably intuitively realizing that any control any of them would have in the house of Mama would be quite remote indeed.

For her part, Patrice threw a box of Lady Clairol #23 to perk up her locks and a large jug of Chardonnay to blur the intensity of coming home.

"Nellie, honey, how do you stand it there? I'd have to drink all day to stop from shooting that nasty old witch." Nathan held up a candy bar, and with sad eyes and a pout, wordlessly asked his mother to buy it.

"Of course, babe, I'll get it for you."

He scampered away, grinning.

"Patrice, how could you talk like that in front of your son?"

She shrugged. "Some things just need to be said."

And some things don't. Some things are way too evil to come out. They belong rattling about in your brain forever, too wrong for release.

Patrice picked up the box of dye. "We could dye your hair too. We both have that Bushay pale skin. This shade would be perfect for you too."

"Okay."

Patrice picked up a second box of hair dye.

Nellie shuffled up to the pharmacy counter, where Samuel, the best-looking single man in town, worked. She wished she had learned how to flirt, but she never thought she was attractive enough and couldn't bear making a fool of herself and, by extension, Mama.

Not that she didn't know things about men--Papa for instance. Mama knew about him too and how he'd scarred his gentle daughter with his wicked ways. It could have been worse, though. Patrice had protected her.

Nellie nursed her scars trying to fill them with her purchases. As if skin and soul could be replaced by china.

Mama wore a stylish navy pantsuit and pearls and dispensed stiff hugs to the group as they arrived. "Tell me all about your trip."

"We saw an igloo, Grandma!" Nathan yelled.

"That's nice, hon. Nellie, get our guests some pie. What kind of a hostess are you?"

Nellie retreated to the kitchen, where surprisingly her birds didn't chatter. The swallow didn't sing. The nightingale didn't nag. The parrot didn't provoke. Nellie, a bit disturbed by the silence, stared at the cardinal by the flour canister. But he said nothing. Nellie felt as she sometimes did when she left voice mails for her supervisor and buddy since grade school Carleen. She took it personally that Carleen would make her leave four or five messages, each sounding increasing desperate for attention, before Carleen tossed her a scrap of friendship and gave her three minutes of sharp staccato sentences. She did enough begging with Carleen; she would not beg for conversation with the birds. She didn't need them right now. Patrice was home.

A rare snow covered the ground in the night, drifting gracefully into peaks resembling vanilla soft-serve sundaes.

Nathan burst into the kitchen clutching the snow-flecked newspaper. He handed it to his grandmother, but she didn't look up from her orange juice and waffles.

He turned to his brother. "Evan, there's snow. Let's go sledding!"

"We could do that, little bro."

"Mama Bushay, are there any sleds in the house?" his father asked.

"Now Dave, what would an old woman and an uncoordinated spinster in Tennessee be doing with sleds? Is your brain mushier than grits?"

"I'll just run down to Peterson's and get some then."

"No you don't. Then the boys would get bored with them in twenty minutes, and I'm stuck with the clutter because you couldn't take them home with you. I swear I'm the only one around here with a lick of sense," Mama answered and the decision was duly made.

The family gave up and gave in to Mama's wishes about how to spend the day. It was the only survival tactic to use. They moved like robots as they placed the ornaments and icicles on the Christmas tree. Patrice sang carols in her perfect-pitch soprano, but the group allowed them to be solos.

"Did you bring those peppermints from Neiman Marcus I asked you to bring for Mr. Steiner, Patrice?" Mama asked.

"Of course, and the other gifts for the neighbors. I'll wrap them right now."

When the wrapping paper ran out, Dave and the boys found their chance to escape.

"Remember, I want gold or red. That's my color scheme this year," Mama barked as Dave and the boys zipped their ski jackets. "I'm going to take my nap, girls. Nellie, you best start washing that load of towels from upstairs and the one your sister's using to wipe up the wine she sloshed all over my counter. When did you

turn into such a lush, child?"

Nellie heard a twig snap in the room, but simultaneously realized none of her birds were perched on twigs. Snap. Snap. Something's broken and I can fix it, she realized.

Her hands trembling, Patrice handed the dishrag to her sister. Nellie noticed a wildness in her eye. She hadn't seen defiance in a while, but she thought that's what made Patrice's shoulders stiffen.

Mama's heels clicked down the hall and into the bedroom.

Nellie threw the towels in the dryer in the basement, came back upstairs and, from the hallway, overheard the long-overdue confrontation.

"You saw what he did to me, all those summer nights. You heard my sobs. You smelled my Heaven Sent on him when he slithered snakelike back into your bed. You knew! You knew! You could have stopped him. Why didn't you stop him?"

Mama, her face lit only by the nightlight in the corner of the room, sniffed and stared at Patrice.

"When he was with you he wasn't hitting me. I knew you could take it. You were the strong one. You still are. And you did okay for yourself. At least he never bothered Nellie. She couldn't have handled it; she got weird enough as it was, because she saw you two."

"You should have stopped him. You should have taken us away from here," Patrice paused. "He hit you?"

Mama rolled over on her side. "It doesn't matter now. Get over it, Patrice. What a time to even mention this. My God, girl, it's Christmas Eve and he's been dead for years. How did you girls turn out to be such whiners?"

Behind Mama's back, Patrice smiled a sneaky grin that Nellie, lurking, understood. "You're right, Mama. We need to be more proactive. I swear you'll never hear us whine again. I'll talk to Nellie about it. She listens to me. I'll wake you in a couple hours."

Nellie watched Patrice lean down to kiss Mama on the cheek.

In the hallway, Patrice and Nellie nodded at each other. Words weren't needed. They walked with purpose to the kitchen.

"Mama always liked your mixed berry pie," Patrice said,

Nellie stared at the bottle of pills they had bought at the pharmacy. "Then that's what we'll use."

Patrice followed her gaze. "Yes, that will be our special pie just for Mama."

Nellie found blueberries and plump raspberries in the refrigerator and a baggie of gooseberries in the freezer, tucked behind the chocolate ice cream. She pureed all the berries, then added sugar.

Patrice mashed in some pills. Nellie mashed in some pills.

Patrice called Dave and asked him to pick up enough extras to keep him away until the pie was baked and consumed.

Then the vial of far fewer pills was carried almost ceremoniously to Mama's nightstand. No one would question their fingerprints on the vial. Loving daughters naturally would help their mother twist off a childproof cap.

“This tastes different than usual, girls,” Mama declared. Still she gobbled it down. As she clutched her chest, the sisters returned to the kitchen to wash the plate and throw the rest of the pie into the disposal.

“Does that hoot owl always screech?” asked Patrice. “How annoying. The oriole’s song has a charming lilt, though.”

Nellie looked her square in the eye. “What are you talking about? I don’t hear a thing.”



Newborn

by jenna moquin

I walked down Teluna Lane. The ice shavings pelted right through my jacket, and the wind felt more like ice than the ice did. But I didn't care. I liked the numbness it brought.

I shouldn't've left Liz in the car, but I just couldn't take it anymore. She was holding Mallory, rocking her back and forth, singing to her, pretending she was still alive. Pretending that her face wasn't blue, that her eyes weren't huge bulges, that her mouth was laughing instead of gaped open like a fish ... that her ... fuck it. I can't take this.

Just can't believe it was only a couple months ago that I brought Liz to the hospital, and after six hours of labor our daughter was born. That was the greatest day of my life, next to the day Liz said "Yes, I'll marry you Harry Watts!" and made me feel like the luckiest guy alive.

It was a running gag with her, to rhyme "I'm gonna marry Harry!" She giggled every time she said that. When she got pregnant last year, after we'd been trying for two years, I thought everything was working out for us. Wasn't but a week later I got laid off; then Liz got a letter in the mail from those bastards telling her that a return to work after her maternity leave would not be required as the company was shutting down.

Can you fucking believe that? And she worked up 'til two weeks before her due date!

I can thank good ole Bob Newburne for this. That piece of shit would rather close the doors than give up his swank house in the hills. Liz and I worked for Berkshire Communications for nearly ten years, and this is the fucking thanks we get.

Past Teluna was Crescent Hill, where Bob Newburne and family lived. I found my feet bringing me closer to his house. Liz and I were there two summers ago for a barbeque in his backyard. His wife ... hell is her name? Beth? Betty? That's it, Betty. Bob and Betty Newburne, golden couple from college parties and crew matches. They both went to Harvard, both came from money, blond hair and blue eyes, WASP-y types if I ever saw them.

Betty took us on this tour of their house, showing off all the artwork, expensive-looking antiques displayed in cases, custom-made furniture and a kitchen that was bigger than our bedroom. We were planning on getting a bigger place after Mallory was born, but we got evicted instead.

Thought I'd get a job soon, no big deal. I'd get a steady paycheck again; we could find a new apartment. But there's nothing out there. Nothing. Everywhere I go, boards up on shop windows. Overgrown lawns on foreclosed homes. All we had left was the car; luckily it was paid for years ago so no one could take that away. Not exactly the best place to live in, but at least it's some kind of shelter. But it wasn't enough to keep Mallory alive. Not with this winter.

Got to the Newburne's house. Their lights were on and the window shades up; I could see inside. It looked so warm; everything looked golden. Then I saw him.

Bob stood by the picture window wearing a fuzzy looking robe and drinking out of a mug. I wanted to pick up a rock and throw it through the window; wipe that smug look off his face and drop the mug right onto the floor, stain the carpet. That sonofabitch.

Not sure how long I stood there staring at the house, just stood there until I was numb all over. The lights went out, and I couldn't see inside anymore. Then I thought about Liz, how I'd left her in the backseat rocking Mallory. My heart pumped, feeling came back and I ran to the car.

Liz was so still in the backseat, I was scared they were both dead by then. I yanked open the door and sat next to her. She didn't move. She was so cold. I put my arm around her, and placed my palm under her nose. I felt air. Saw her shoulders heave really slightly. I had to do something with Mallory.

I tried to pry her out of Liz's arms, and that's when she woke up. She screamed and slapped me, and gripped Mallory.

"We have to bury her, honey," I said, keeping my voice as soft as possible. "We can't keep her here."

"No! I have to keep her warm; she's too cold!" She went back to rocking.

I figured what harm could it do to let her rock the baby back and forth. She started singing again.

"Hush, little Mallory, don't say a word; Mama's gonna buy you a mocking-bird." It was her go-to song whenever Mallory couldn't get to sleep.

No harm in singing, really, or pretending Mallory's still alive. We're both going down the same path. Pretty soon we'll die of exposure just like Mallory. What harm could it do to let her live in this fantasy for a bit longer?

I turned on the car to let the heat run, and I noticed the gas was running low. We had nothing left to pawn, no money for more gas, and just a few packages of

cheese crackers in the glove box. I figured it wouldn't be much longer.

I stayed awake all night, kept my arm around Liz who finally drifted off. I kept checking her breathing, half expecting her to drift off in that final way at some point during the night. But I didn't want that. I knew what our fate was, and I wanted us to go through it together—not alone like Mallory did.

Maybe I should use the last of the gas in the tank to drive us off that hairpin turn in the mountains. I've often wondered what it would be like if I made that turn too quickly one day and lost control of the car—over the edge. What a way to go, right? Be helluva lot better than starving to death or freezing to death out here.

When morning came, the sun reflected off the snow and made everything around the car a blinding whiteness. Liz was so out of it her arms had dropped, and loosened her grip on Mallory. I saw my chance and carefully scooped her up, and covered Liz with a blanket. I stepped out of the car with Mallory in my arms.

The ground was too frozen to try and dig through, so I had to make do with the piles of snow all around. I brought her over to the big elm tree near the park; there was a crystal clean bank of snow that looked perfect. I knew when the snow melted, she'd still be there, and it would probably freak out whoever ended up finding her in the spring. But I also knew that Liz and I would be long gone before then.

I kissed her forehead before I placed her in the snow. She looked so weird—all blue and her face scrunched up—but she still looked as beautiful as she did the day she was born. I prayed to God to bring her to a good place, and to bring Liz and me to the same place. I found some comfort in the thought that we'd all be together again soon, and I walked back to the car.

Sitting in the driver's seat, I thought about driving us over the cliff while Liz was still asleep. That way she'd die peacefully, and might not even know what was going on until it was too late. I played it out a dozen times in my head, but never turned the key in the ignition. I ate a couple of crackers, kept checking Liz to make sure she was breathing, and sat there while it was warm in the sun.

When the sun started to go away, Liz stirred under the blanket. I panicked, not wanting to face her when she woke up and realized Mallory wasn't there. I started up the car, visualizing myself driving to the hairpin turn. I drove down Teluna, and when I reached the turn near Crescent Hill something made my hands turn the car onto that road instead of the one that would lead us to the mountains.

I found myself driving near the Newburne house. Dusk was settling in. I could see inside the house and see Bob and Betty, the two blondies, rushing about looking like they were in a hurry. I parked the car in front of the house next door, and a couple minutes later their garage door opened and a shiny white Lincoln Continental rolled down the driveway. It passed us, and I glanced inside to see Bob behind the wheel, and Betty in the back fussing with a baby in a car seat.

A baby. When did they have a baby? Then I remembered. She had a baby just before Liz's maternity leave. I remember Bob bragging about it; they had a baby girl ... hell is her name? Something with a C or a K. Bob was showing off newborn pictures in the office, but I was too distracted by the fact that Liz could go into labor at any point and didn't pay much attention. Now that I look back, I even remember

Bob saying something about our families getting together for birthdays and trips to Chuck E. Cheese since we had kids around the same age. Then that bastard let all of us go, so he could keep this big house in the hills.

"Where's Mallory?" Liz spoke from the backseat. I jumped, thought she was still asleep.

"Where's Mallory? Where is she, Harry?" She started to rummage around the backseat, as if I had her hidden in the empty cooler or underneath a blanket.

"Um ..." I looked at the Newburne house, imagined how warm it must be inside. I bet they had lots of food, coffee ... can't remember the last time we drank coffee. Hell, if we're going to die we might as well get a decent last meal. The guys on death row get one before they get the chair.

"She's in there." I said it before I even thought about it, and pointed at the Newburne house. "I brought her in there so she could get warm. Let's go in and get her, okay?"

Liz looked at me, and I knew she didn't believe me. But she also knew that Mallory was dead, and was pretending otherwise. I just wanted inside that house.

"Okay, let's go get her." Liz stepped out of the car, and I followed her. She must still be up for playing pretend. Figured if they catch us and put us in jail, at least we'd be indoors.

I remembered Bob bragging in the office one day about the house key he'd hidden in the backyard. He thought he was so clever hiding it underneath a fake plastic rock, and the rest of us rolled our eyes when he walked away. Luckily he still had that hide-a-key contraption; the fake rock was so obvious sitting apart from the garden, right next to the backdoor.

The door opened so easily, I half-expected an alarm to start going off, but nothing happened. I brought Liz inside with me, and stopped her when she tried to turn the light switch.

"Let's keep the lights off, okay?" I didn't realize how hoarse my voice was until I tried whispering. I grabbed her hand and we went very slowly down the hallway. Much of the house was familiar from the barbeque a couple years ago; the end table near the guest bathroom still jutted out and I successfully sideswiped it.

The next hall led to the dining room, and the kitchen beyond that. Pulling Liz behind me, we walked through the dining room and entered the kitchen. Betty had made a few changes to it. The glass-topped table had been replaced by one made of chunky oak, and the cabinets now had glass fronts so you could see the plates and cups inside.

I went straight for the fridge, and the sight of chicken salad, pickles and a gallon of milk almost gave me an orgasm. There was a loaf of bread on the counter, and I grabbed it along with the chicken salad. Liz took some glasses from the cabinet and sat down with me. She munched on a pickle while I spread the bread so fast it tore, but I didn't care. I stuffed my face with everything in front of me, only taking short reprieves for swigs of milk.

"Slow down, Harry! You'll make yourself sick." She nibbled on a sandwich and drank two glasses of milk.

"I don't care if I get sick. This tastes so damn good—I don't even like chicken salad!" I started laughing. I don't know why; maybe just giddy from all the food, but I couldn't stop laughing. Liz cracked a smile, and soon joined in with me. It felt so good to be sitting there with her, laughing and eating; it'd been so long since we felt that good. I never wanted it to end.

"Think we could make some coffee?" Liz spotted a canister on the counter with a label on it that said "Coffee," next to a similar canister that said "Decaf."

"Why not?" I thought about looking around to see if ole Bob kept any cigars in the house.

Liz found some filters and started up the coffeemaker. The scent of brewing coffee wafted through the kitchen, one of the greatest smells I could've imagined at that point. I couldn't believe it when I felt myself getting hard, and wondered if Liz would be up for a little romp in Bob and Betty's bed.

The second the coffee was ready we heard a rumbling noise like the sound of a garage door opening. Then a light came on in the driveway. I rushed over to the window and peered out; sure enough, the Newburnes' car was turning into the driveway.

"Oh my God, Harry, we have to get out of here!" Liz started putting the food back into the fridge, and turned off the coffeemaker. But I didn't want to leave. I wasn't ready yet. I thought if we hid out somewhere, they'd go to bed and we could sneak into the kitchen and get that feeling back.

"Harry, come on!" She grabbed my arm, but I wouldn't move. The garage door closed, and I heard footsteps, and the sound of a baby crying.

"Mallory?" Liz let go of my arm. "She's here, Harry; she's here!"

Liz ran out of the kitchen before I could stop her, so I ran after her. Bob and Betty with their baby walked through the door that connected up from the garage. For a few seconds, we all just stood there looking at one another in shock. Then Betty screamed, and the baby followed suit.

"What in the name of God is going on here?" Bob placed his hands on his hips, in the same way he used to do when he was reprimanding one of us at the office.

"Hi, Bob; remember us?" I put my arm around Liz's waist. I don't know if he did or not, he never said.

"Betty, get the baby upstairs. I'm calling the police!"

I considered letting him do it; at least in jail we'd be warm, have food and be able to stretch out for sleep. Bob grabbed a cordless phone from the wall and started to dial. Without even thinking about it, my hand flew up and slapped the phone out of his hand.

"You don't remember me, do you? But I guess that's because an asshole like you doesn't give two shits about the people he puts out in the street."

"Wh-what? I have no idea what you're talking about!"

"Berkshire Comm, you moron. You sold it, you took away both of our jobs."

I could hear the baby screeching, and Liz turned toward the sound. I clasped her hand to keep her next to me.

"That doesn't give you any right to break into my home!" Bob bent down to pick up the phone; I kicked it away from him, let go of Liz's hand and shoved Bob against the wall.

"Unhand me! Unhand me!" Man, he even talks like a douche bag.

"Get out of here, Liz," I said to my wife, but never took my eyes off my former boss. She ran upstairs toward the sound of the baby's cries.

"Where is she going? What are you doing?"

"This has been a long time coming, ole Bobby Newburne."

I punched him square in his jaw; blood squirted out of his mouth and he doubled over. I never felt so alive. I don't know if it was the food in my belly, the erection bursting through my pants, or doing something I'd wanted to do for years—punch out Bob.

While Bob was doubled over trying to catch his breath, I gripped his shoulders and my knee found its way to his face. It hit his nose, and I heard this awful yet satisfying crunching sound. Blood everywhere.

Bob fell to his knees clutching his shattered nose. I looked around and saw a fireplace a few feet away, and next to that one of those iron pokers. I didn't stop and ask myself what I was intending to do—I just did it.

I picked up the poker, and Bob was still on his knees, sobbing and bleeding and probably couldn't even see what was coming at him. I held that poker with both hands, thought about the time my dad taught me how to chop wood, how to pick your mark and try to hit it square on, and how to use the full force of your upper body.

The poker came down just like the axe that day, my mark was the middle of Bob's head, and just like that day I didn't miss my mark.

I let go of the poker; it was stuck in his head. Bob collapsed to the floor; the poker twisted and then tore out of his skull. He twitched a couple of times and then he was still. I didn't even realize I'd been holding my breath until I let it out and felt my lungs gasp for air. A brief thought came through my mind that Bob wouldn't ever gasp for air again. We really had to get the hell out of there.

The baby had stopped crying, so I had no sound to go by. The upstairs of the Newburne house had a long hallway and many doors that were closed, but one was open.

I walked over to it and stood in the doorway; the room was dark, but I could see the shape of a body.

"Liz? That you?" I stepped into the room. It was then I realized it was a nursery. Big crib in the middle of the room with a mobile above it, and Liz was standing next to the crib. She reached down and pulled out the baby.

"We found her, Harry! We found Mallory! She's okay, she's okay!" Liz held the baby and half-laughed, half-cried. I didn't know which to do myself.

"Where's Betty?" I had the eerie feeling she'd already called the cops and that we'd be hearing sirens any second.

Liz didn't answer; she rocked the baby back and forth and seemed to be in a

different world. My eyes started adjusting to the dark of the room, and the rest of the nursery came into view—stuffed bunnies and bears on a dresser, a changing table, an armchair with a breast pump on the floor next to it, a pair of feet—and my line of vision centered on the body of Betty Newburne lying on the rug.

She was perfectly still. Arms splayed out, and there was a knife sticking out of her chest. I assumed Liz grabbed it from the kitchen.

“Jesus Christ,” I said very softly, partially relieved that there wouldn’t be any sirens approaching, at least not just yet. I looked at Liz; she rocked the baby and had this delirious smile on her face.

“Hush little Mallory, don’t say a word; Mama’s gonna buy you a mocking-bird. If that mocking-bird don’t sing, Mama’s gonna buy you a diamond ring.”

My legs gave out and I crumpled to the rug, opposite of Betty. I stared up at Liz, she was still singing. I didn’t have the heart to tell her the baby’s name wasn’t Mallory, but Claudia. Suddenly everything I knew about the Newburnes ran at me—Bob’s liking for hot pastrami for lunch, and those goofy Santa ties he’d wear in December; the greeting cards Betty sent us for every single holiday, even Flag Day; how depressed Bob was when his father passed away two years ago, and that Betty sewed a mourning patch for him to wear over his sleeve. I always thought that was real classy. The Newburnes had always been a classy pair. Had been ... the Newburnes were a “was” now.

Then for the first time throughout everything, from the lay-offs to living in the car, even Mallory’s death, I cried. I looked at little Claudia, who had classy parents and a great life ahead of her, now an orphan thanks to us. I bawled harder than she was bawling, and Liz kept singing. She kept singing, even when sirens could be heard outside, getting louder as they got closer. Betty did call the cops after all, must’ve done it before Liz got to her.

I tried to get Liz to sneak out through the back door, but she wouldn’t budge. When I told her cops were outside, she started singing again. When I tried to take Claudia from her, she shrieked and bit my hand. I leaned over and puked inside Claudia’s crib. I should’ve driven us over the cliff at the hairpin turn ... at least we’d be in heaven with Mallory. Now we’re going to hell.



ALONE

Alone and unhappy, in need of some cheer,
I called to the Universe, "Lend me your ear!
In all of your vastness I fear I've been missed!
So give me a sign that You know I exist!"
The Universe answered, "I grant that you do,
but I'm under no obligation to you.
You're merely a speck in my infinite eye."
Then blinking, the Universe bade me good-bye.

I said to the planet, "I feel so alone.
Could you provide comfort to one of your own?"
"I'll try," said the planet, "but first you must learn
you're one among billions and must wait your turn."

I spoke to the country to argue my plight,
"You said I'd find happiness, called it my right."
"That right," said the country, "I promised to you
was not to find happiness, just to pursue."

I turned to my loved ones but no one was there;
the limbs on my family tree were all bare.
My mother and father had long ago died.
My brother and sister had cast me aside.

I looked at Myself. "You are all that I've got,
and we can be happy together," I thought.
But then I grew sad as I seemed to recall
that I didn't care for Myself much at all.

—kevin gallagher

THE ADDICT

I open the fridge and there it is, staring me right in the face. I slam the door and put on my coat and go for a walk. It's cold out, but I don't care. I'm having one of those days. I need to get my mind off the stuff. The meetings say the first step to recovery is admitting you have a problem. Well, I admit it. I most definitely have a problem.

So then why would you keep it in your fridge? you may be asking yourself. I would probably say that it's a way to take away the power it has over me. Knowing it's there within arm's reach and ignoring it. Not partaking.

The real answer is I can't bring myself to get rid of it. I miss the taste, the feeling I get after I have a few. I know it's not good for me, but it's so satisfying.

I pass a bar packed with people on my walk. There are plenty of other routes I could walk, but I torture myself by going past it, day after day. Through the glass I see a group of women, some blonde, some brunette, tilting their glasses and bottles up to their awaiting mouths, the skin on their arms smooth and shiny under the lights. They talk and laugh together and I curse myself for not being strong enough to do the same. I feel like a disease. Why can't I go in a place like this and just enjoy myself? The answer is simple. The addiction has its claws in me and I'd never be able to control it.

My hands are shaking and my mouth is watering. Quitting cold turkey wasn't the way to go. I pry my longing eyes away from the bar's window and head back the way I came.

by john teel

I decide I can have just one tonight. Just a taste and I'll be able to get through another day. I practically run back to the apartment and take the steps two at a time, the anticipation killing me.

In the back of the fridge, wrapped in white butcher's paper, is the head of the call girl I'd been saving. I dumped her body in the river, weighed it down with a couple pieces of scrap metal from work. I get some water boiling in a big crab pot and put her head in there. When it's done cooking, and most of the hair has boiled off, I strip a couple pieces off with two forks. The meat's tender and it comes off the bone easily enough. And boy, let me tell you, it is delicious. This is why it's so damn hard to give it up. I can't stop eating and before long there isn't much left and my stomach is bulging.

After the head's picked clean, I bag it up with some river stones and take it to the same place I sunk the body. I try telling myself that enough's enough, but who am I kidding? It's never enough.

Tomorrow I'll try to go about my day and not think about it. Maybe for lunch I'll eat a hamburger, but that won't help. The textures are different. And the taste—my God, the taste. I'll have to get some more. The urge will be just too strong. I know I have a problem, I admit it.

But, hey, it could be worse. I could be addicted to crack.



[short story]

Attitude Adjustment

by john bruni

I never really liked Derrick. He was too much of a bro, if you get me. Drank a lot, liked sports too much, lied about hookups he'd had—things like that. I had to be nice to him—or at least polite—because we worked in the same department. Every time he talked about selling drugs when he was a kid or training boxers in college, or whenever he fist-pumped like the guido he wished he was, I had to choke back a snarky or sometimes even hateful comment. It's bad enough working with an asshole. But to be at each other's throats for eight hours a day? No thanks.

My tolerance toward him got me into this mess. Because I wanted to keep the peace at work, I was stuck in the break room, listening to his macho wannabe lies. Honestly, I wasn't listening. I just kept looking for a way out of the conversation. Nod in the right places, offer a polite laugh here or there, and I hopefully I could get this over with and get back to work.

And then it happened. He gently tapped my arm and carefully looked back and forth, like a pedestrian about to cross the street. Just then, I knew he was going to say something truly reprehensible.

"Hey, so he told me this joke, right?" A sly grin worked its way across his face, and he whispered, "How many black guys does it take to tar a roof?"

Ugh. Dude. Come on.

He didn't hesitate: "One, if you slice him thin enough." And he laughed, slapping his knee.

"What is wrong with you?" I asked.

"What?" He seemed confused.

"What about me made you think I'd be cool with hearing a racist joke?"

"Oh, come on," he said. "It's not like I'm a racist or anything. I just thought it was kind of funny. I don't hate black people. Hey, I censored the joke. The way he told it to me, he used the n-word. I changed it."

"Oh, I'm sorry then. You're a real standup guy."

"Admit it. You thought it was funny. You just don't want to say it because of the PC police."

I couldn't take it anymore. "Oh, my God. Stop talking. In fact, you're an asshole. Never talk to me again."

"But—"

I didn't give him a chance to plead his case. I stalked off to my cube, where I fumed for the rest of my break. It took a certain level of insensitivity to get to me, and Derrick hit it perfectly. It sucked that I'd blown up like that. At least he'd never talk to me again—I hoped.

Ten minutes later, he came back from lunch. Didn't even look at me. Good.

Maybe about an hour later, one of the supervisors came by his desk and took him off the floor. I didn't think anything of it at the time, so I just went about my work.

Derrick came back twenty minutes later. Something about him seemed a bit off, like a slightly deflated balloon hovering low enough for its string to brush the ground.

Part of me wanted to ask what happened, but I had to remind myself of our disagreement. I figured he'd screwed up, and the boss had taken him down a peg or two.

Shortly after, my supervisor came by, a big fake smile plastered on her face. Felicia was incapable of having a genuine, honest emotion. "Are you busy?"

Of course I was, but you can't just say that to management. Instead, I offered my own phony smile. "No. What's up?"

"Got time for a quick meeting?"

As if I had a choice in the matter. "Sure."

She took me off the floor and into one of the conference rooms, where she closed the door. Uh-oh. It was going to be one of those meetings.

Felicia took a seat across the table from me and opened her laptop. She started typing. "How is it out there today?" *Almost absently.*

"You know how it is." *Just like I knew all the safe answers to give.*

Finally she looked over at me. "So. We heard about a little incident earlier this morning between you and Derrick Riley."

Oh. That's what this was about. She just needed to talk to witnesses for her report, or whatever. "Yeah," I said.

"I'd like to hear what happened from your perspective."

So I told her everything, from when Derrick intercepted me while getting water in the break room to when I called him out for being a racist asshole—except, I didn't say the a-word, not with management.

Felicia took notes the whole time, fingers clacking away at the keys of her laptop. Only when I finished did she look up from the screen. "That's everything?"

"Yeah."

"Good. That matches the other stories." She leaned back as if she'd just finished a filling meal and couldn't eat one more bite. "There is an issue, though."

"Hm?"

"Well, we don't like it when employees feel the need to settle issues on their own. We needed a chain of evidence, if you understand what I mean. These things need to be handled by a supervisor, especially considering how you handled it."

Baffled, I asked, "What do you mean?"

"By confronting Derrick out in the open like that, it could be construed as workplace violence by some."

Had I heard that right? "It's not like I hit him or threatened him."

"We don't tolerate confrontation here," Felicia said. "You should have come to me or another available supe instead."

"But ... he told me a joke I found offensive. I called him out on it. I don't see what the problem is."

"You shouldn't have said anything. You should have come to us instead."

I've never been a tattletale. I prefer the old playground rule about snitches

getting stitches. However, even though every fiber of my being wanted to rebel against Felicia, I knew how to play the corporate game. This was just a new wrinkle, that's all. *Just tell her what she wants to hear and go back to doing whatever you want. Just ride this out.*

"Okay. Well, now I know. I'll know what to do next time."

She smiled. "Splendid! There's just one more thing. Because we have a zero tolerance policy when it comes to workplace violence, some of those in HR wanted you to be terminated."

I almost gagged, and fear gut-stabbed me with its cold dagger. I couldn't believe what she'd just said. I had to literally bite my own tongue to stop from saying something that would surely have gotten me fired.

"We've never had a problem with you before," she continued, "and you're an invaluable member of our team. Considering the nature of the incident, I was able to talk them out of it. Instead, you'll be getting a write-up."

This couldn't be real. I forced a tight smile onto my face, as if to thank her for this stark raving bullshit.

"I want to remind you that you only get three write-ups," she said. "This is your first, okay?"

I choked back any sensible response. "Okay."

"I sent a copy of the write-up to your employee dashboard. Read it over, and if it looks good, check the box that says you agree, all right?"

I nodded.

"If you have any questions, let me know. Thank you!"

Dazed, I shambled out of the conference room, pausing by the mystery door across the hall. Nobody knew what was behind it because only the supes were allowed to go in there. A sign proclaimed, in big bold letters, DO NOT ENTER. My coworkers joked about there being a torture chamber back there, but it's probably just a room for employee records.

Today, that sign seemed to mock me. I ignored it and went back to my cube, where I pulled up the write-up on my screen and stared at it. A million things ran through my head—things I should have said, things I wanted to do now—but all of it would have ended in me getting fired. As much as this job sucked, I liked it better than the other jobs I'd had. Plus, the pay was good and the benefits were better than most.

I sighed and clicked on the box. Saved it. Went about my day.

And then I went about my life, business as usual, except I was a bit more careful at work. Derrick stopped bothering me, though. He didn't talk to anyone. I was surprised they didn't fire him on the spot. You see guys on TV who say offensive things, and they get clipped off at the knees, even if they *do* apologize.

Later, I heard that Derrick was on his final write-up. I guess he really wanted to keep this job. That didn't last long, though. One day, I came in and found his desk cleaned out. No one ever mentioned what happened to him.

Time passed, and I forgot the whole thing, at least until I saw Kristen walking out of the conference room just after her overly cheerful supervisor had exited.

Kristen looked like she'd just been told a relative died, so I asked her what had happened.

"I got written up," she said.

Kristen was one of our best workers. I'd never heard of her screwing anything up. A customer had never complained about her. I couldn't imagine what could have gotten her into trouble.

"It was over my Fantasy Football league. The one I do every year here. They said it wasn't a good use of company time."

Okay, I couldn't have cared less about Fantasy Football, or any sports for that matter, but this kind of thing didn't get in the way of our jobs. We had our dry seasons. The employees had to do something. Fantasy Football helped build morale, and it improved team communication, which was something our supes were always on our case about.

Kristen wasn't the only one. Every once in a while, someone would come to me and start a conversation with some variation of, "Dude, you're not going to believe what just happened."

Tony got written up for looking at the internet. I asked if he was looking at porn or some other offensive thing. Nope. It was a news article. They told him that he should go on break and use his own device for something like that.

Esteban got written up for reading on the job. Just a book. Something by Steinbeck, I think. Esteban was a part-timer who went to college in the afternoons, so it was for class.

And then Paul got written up for having a friendly conversation in the break room. By then, our hushed conversations ended. Message received.

Every company has down time. It's unavoidable. You can't make people look busy just to satisfy some need to keep up appearances. Employees need to cut loose sometimes. Eight hours a day is a long time. No one should be 100% business in all that time.

Things became quieter after that. Not a lot of smiles in the office. Not a lot of fun. Work quickly became unbearable, which was probably why I'd become irritable. Before long, the anger had to get out.

I took that out on Ariana.

I'm not going to explain what I do for a living. No one gets it, anyway. Suffice it to say, it looks really hard, but in all actuality, it's simple. Ariana had been with the company five years longer than me. I'm in for seven years, yet somehow I knew more than she did.

She screwed up something super-easy, and I saw her do it. I wanted to be kind of a dick because she should have known better, but since things in the office were a bit tense, I decided to be nice about it, even though I was calling her out in front of everyone for being incompetent. I politely told her that she did something wrong and gave her advice on how to avoid the same mistake in the future. She thanked me, I you're-welcomed her, and I went back to my cube.

By close of business, Felicia called me into the dreaded conference room. The door closed. The laptop came out. Keys were tapped.

Smiling, Felicia asked, “What happened between you and Ariana today?”

In that moment, I realized that I was in trouble again. I didn’t waste time pretending otherwise. I spun the whole story—corporatese and all—so it appeared like I was looking out for the customer. I practically auditioned for a customer service award.

I finished with this: “I’m just looking out for the company. That customer brings in a lot of money. If we lost them, we’d be in trouble. I gave Ariana advice so she wouldn’t make the same mistake going forward.”

I thought I did a good job, but as soon as I saw that unflappable phony smile on her face, I knew I was screwed.

“We appreciate your efforts,” Felicia said, “but you should have come to us instead. We need a complete record of everything that happens so we can track trends.”

I wanted to argue the point—and part of me wanted to tell her how I *really* wanted to handle the situation—but my corporate sense kicked in. “Okay.”

“Also, what you did could be construed as bullying.”

Bullying?! Oh, if only she could have looked around inside my head when I caught Ariana messing up. If what I’d done was bullying, then I’d committed a ghastly murder in my mind.

“Because of this,” she continued, “we’re going to have to write you up. Just so we’re clear, you’re on second warning. You only have one left after that.”

I bit back so many curses that Urban Dictionary yelled. “I understand. It won’t happen again.”

“Great!” And she gave me the usual spiel about signing the document in my dashboard.

We left the conference room, and I paused by the DO NOT ENTER door. Something back there hummed, and I could feel a headache forming.

I went back to my desk and clicked the blah blah blah. I felt so annoyed at the whole thing that I swore I would never help a coworker again, not even if I had a bucket of water and they were on fire. I even half-heartedly looked for outside employment. *Anything is better than this corporate bullshit.* I found nothing. Good thing I didn’t get caught, since that would have put me on final warning.

Work became a real drag after that. I didn’t even bother to say hi to people when I arrived every day. Didn’t want to put pressure on people to have a good morning, after all. That might offend someone. Or that might be considered bullying. Or whatever.

A few months passed, putting me closer to the end of the year, when my write-ups would expire and I’d have a clean slate. Unfortunately, one of the people in the office didn’t make it.

Surprisingly, it happened to a supervisor. Of course it had to be Wallace, the one cool guy in management. He was the only one who went out with us for drinks after work, at least to the official outings, where he’d usually complain about our employer in hushed tones.

But he messed up, and a lot of people noticed. Apparently, he'd been on final warning because all the supes—including Katie, the head of the department—came by his desk. Felicia said to him, "Hey, are you busy?"

Oh yeah. He was doomed.

They all spoke so quietly that none of us could hear them, even though work had ground to a halt so we could all watch this.

Then Wallace snapped. "You know what? I think you need an attitude adjustment." He cast his gaze at the supervisors. "*All of you.*"

"Let's just go to the conference room and talk about it," Katie said. "It'll—"

"Why bullshit me? I know what you're going to do to me. Why not let it happen out here?"

"Calm down," Felicia said.

"No! These people have a right to know the truth about this place! Morale is at an all-time low because you're trying to mold their behavior—"

"Stop," Katie said. The warning stood out clearly in her voice.

"—You're brainwashing them! Trying to get them to become safe little people in a safe little world! Well, I won't have it! I—"

Two very large men in uniforms showed up, and they displayed their Tasers, ready and waiting.

"You think this scares me?! I know what's going to happen! You're going to—"

One of the guards fired and ran five thousand volts through Wallace's body, immobilizing him instantly. They moved quickly after that. While the remaining supervisors tried to give us the old nothing-to-see-here speech, Katie and the office goons picked up Wallace and took him away. Not to the conference room, by the way. Not even to the onsite medical facility, either.

They took him past the DO NOT ENTER door and in.

We all tried to go back to work, but none of us could completely ignore the remaining supervisor cleaning out Wallace's desk.

The next week went rough because Wallace did so many important things. It was the week of New Year's, though, our driest week, so it didn't get too bad. And then my warnings expired, giving me a fresh start. I didn't take it as an opportunity to get lazy in my vigilance, but I relaxed a bit.

A few days after that, Katie pulled me into her office. My danger sense didn't go off, even though she closed the door. If I'd done something worthy of a write-up, Felicia would have handled it. No, the vibe I got was that Katie wanted to ask me for a favor.

I sat down across the desk from her, and she asked me how it was going out there. I gave the stock response. Only then could we get down to business.

"I know things have been hectic since Wallace left the company," she said. "We're still making some adjustments in this period of transition."

Right. He'd "left the company." As if he'd had any choice in the matter.

"We're looking to get someone to fill the position," she continued. "The company doesn't like to hire outside for such an important position, so we're looking at personnel within the department."

A chill wormed its way through my stomach, and I knew why she'd called me into this meeting. I kept quiet, though.

"We've taken an interest in you. Your work is impeccable. You're never late. You always commit to your projects. It helps that you have so much experience, so you have an excellent level of knowledge."

Dear God! I never wanted to be management. I could never handle that kind of position. I didn't have that kind of mindset. I couldn't cope with betraying my close-kipped rebellious nature. I'd be selling out if I agreed to this lunacy.

"We've had our issues in the past," Katie said, "but they seem to have been resolved. You've learned from your mistakes. When we needed you to become better in your relationship with your coworkers, you stepped up and fell in line. We appreciate your effort and loyalty. We would like to offer the position to you."

My heart nearly stopped. I knew if I stayed true to myself and said no, they'd find an excuse to get rid of me. Lack of ambition was not rewarded by the company, especially since they were asking me for such help in a desperate time of need. I had bills, in particular monthly payments for my new car. I couldn't afford the risk.

"Wallace worked the same shift as you," Katie said, "so you won't have to change your schedule. Plus, you'll be salaried. You'll make sixty thousand dollars a year. How does that sound?"

Compared to my fourteen bucks an hour? With the OT I got last year, I barely cracked forty thousand before taxes.

Greed made my heart swell. "I'll do it," I told her.

"Great! Welcome to management!"

I didn't like the way that sounded. My guts churned as we started filling out paperwork. On the one hand, I couldn't have been happier with the raise. Suddenly, my bills didn't seem quite so daunting. Yet ... I just couldn't bring myself to look forward to the job. The bullshit I had to deal with on a regular basis was bad enough, but now I had to become bullshit. I knew I could do that for a while, but after a few years? I'd break just like Wallace.

After I signed everything, I went back to my desk, my head clouded with the haze of disbelief. *Had I really just been promoted to management? What had I gotten myself into?*

I didn't have time to ponder it. Felicia popped up over the top of my cubicle like a whack-a-mole, all smiles. "I just heard the news," she said. "Congratulations!" As if there had never been trouble between us. As if we were lifelong friends.

Then she did something odd. She reached over the wall and offered me her hand to shake. I didn't think we'd ever done that—not even on my first day. It kind of creeped me out, actually.

We shook hands, and she passed me a tightly folded piece of paper like it was some kind of drug deal going down. She didn't acknowledge it. Instead, she just congratulated me again before walking away.

I unfolded the paper, which tried to close back in on itself like a dead spider. Given Felicia's secretive attitude, I hunched over the note to hide it from anyone who might walk up behind me, the only way into my cube.

The handwriting was nothing like hers. She wrote clearly in elegant cursive, pretty to the point of calligraphy. This note, however, was in block letters, all caps, like someone wanted to hide penmanship.

It said, "YOU AND I NEED TO TALK. IT IS URGENT. MEET ME TONIGHT AT 10:00. THE STONEWOOD HOUND. I'LL BE AT THE CORNER BOOTH IN THE BACK, FAR LEFT. DO NOT TELL ANYONE."

Then almost as an afterthought: "BURN THIS NOTE."

In all my years of dealing with corporate craziness—in particular Felicia's corporate craziness—I'd never encountered anything like this. It had to be a joke. I wanted to show it to friends—after hours, of course, far away from the office—because it struck me as hilarious.

But it couldn't have been a joke. Felicia, the company woman of all company women, did not have a sense of humor.

I took a break and went outside for some fresh air. I don't smoke, but I carry a lighter, mostly because all of my friends smoke and they constantly lose theirs. It drives me crazy because we have to stop everything—*everything*—until they find it. I don't mind carrying it, though. It's a useful tool to have on hand.

It came in handy that day. I burned Felicia's note and watched until nothing remained of it but ash in the wind.

After work, I went home and got a good workout in before taking a shower and heading out to the Stonewood Hound. It was a great little bar-and-grill a couple of blocks from the office. A lot of my coworkers liked to have unofficial outings there, where we could maybe have a couple drinks too many and bitch about our jobs without having to whisper.

In that moment, I realized my days of going to those get-togethers were over. Management never got invited to them, not even Wallace, as cool and laid back as he had been.

I got there early, which I usually did in all things. Felicia knew me well; I arrived at 9:40, and it looked like she'd been sitting there for a while. She wore a t-shirt and jeans. Odd. Could it be that outside the office, she was kind of a slob?

I could almost like her for that.

I sat down on the other side of the booth. We were beyond pleasantries at this point, so I didn't bother with a greeting. "What's all this about?"

Felicia opened her mouth but paused when the waitress stopped by, asking us if we needed anything to drink. I ordered a beer, and Felicia had water.

When the waitress left, I said, "Not drinking anything?"

"I don't drink," Felicia said. "I quit a while ago. I recommend you do the same. You should also quit all of your other bad habits, anything that lessens your control over yourself. You can't get sloppy around Katie and upper management. They'll be watching you like a hawk, making sure you're a good fit with the company."

I had to restrain a laugh. The whole thing struck me as absurd. Had I stumbled into a spy movie? If I'd known how crazy Felicia was ...

"You should also kill any social media you might have. Anything you say there will get back to the company. And watch what you say to whom. The company

has spies everywhere. Some of them have been here, drinking with you while you complained very loudly about the company. In case you thought we didn't know about your unofficial outings ..."

Our drinks arrived, and I took a healthy swig from mine. I couldn't wrap my mind around this surreal meeting. But part of what she said made a little sense. My write-ups had happened surprisingly close to these unofficial parties, particularly if I'd said something really bad about the company. *Could one of my friends have snitched me out?*

Felicia sipped daintily at her water. "I know you sense something's wrong at work. That's why you pretend so much. I'm not stupid. I know you don't like me, no matter how pleasant you seem. I don't like you much, either. But we have to keep our phony faces on. It's a matter of survival."

Something about the way she said that made me look up from my beer. In a fleeting moment, I caught something unusual in her eyes.

Fear.

Felicia was afraid of upper management.

"I just wanted to give you a word of warning. Now that you're a supe, their eyes—" She pointed up. "—will be on you more than ever. You don't want to mess with them. They won't take a lie to their face as graciously as I would."

I couldn't take it anymore. I had to say something. "You can't possibly be serious. This sounds too crazy."

She nodded. "That's what I thought at first, but I've been here for twenty years. I've seen things."

"Well, if you hate the job so much, why don't you quit?"

"You don't get it. It isn't just our company. It's *all* of them, going back to the One True Corporation."

A part of me wanted to laugh. The bigger part was too shocked for humor, though. "Come on," I said. "That's just ridiculous."

"You'll see."

"Okay, if that's how things really are, then why? Why do they do all of this? What's the conspiracy?"

"Mind control," Felicia said. "They expect all of us to obey them at all times. The government can't do that, but your employers? They're the real Big Brother. They know how to hurt you—in your wages. You get three chances to be manipulated into behavior of your own free will. After that, they give you an attitude adjustment."

Despite her insane rambling, that phrase sounded familiar. "What's that?"

"It's ... unpleasant. But it's the craziest thing I can't tell you about. Instead, I'm going to let you find out for yourself. If you can accept that, then everything else will make sense to you."

She slid out of the booth and stood, dropping enough money on the table to cover my drink and the tip.

"You can't just lay all this loony tunes shit on me and then walk away," I said.

"I've warned you as best as I can." And then she started for the door. She got two steps before she turned around. "If you want proof, stop by the convenience store

on your way home. The one by the ramp onto the expressway. Be there at—" She took her phone out of her purse to check the time. "—eleven."

"And then what?"

"Take a look around." This time, she headed to the door and left me alone with my drink as I tried to sort through everything she'd told me.

I had a while to go before eleven, so I ordered another drink and tried to figure out if tonight had been a hallucination. I couldn't work through it, so I paid up and headed for the convenience store. I needed some caffeine for the drive home, anyway.

Once there, I headed back to the freezer and made my selection. As I started toward the counter, I saw a janitor mopping the same spot on the floor. I thought back to when I walked in and realized he hadn't mopped anything else in all that time.

Maybe he had a mental problem. Stores in the area tended to hire such people to help them out, get them some real world experience. Yet this guy seemed familiar. Had I seen him before?

I stepped around the cleanest tile in the world, and when I saw his face, I couldn't help but gasp. I know that sounds melodramatic, but it happened because ...

Well, I *did* know the janitor.

"Wallace?" I asked. "You all right?"

He didn't even acknowledge me. He continued mopping, and a single strand of drool ran from his lips.

I had to try again. "Wallace? It's me, John. What happened to you?"

I waved my hand in front of his face and got no reaction.

"There a problem?" The clerk.

"Uh ... no." I couldn't take my eyes from the thing that had once been Wallace. "I just thought I knew this guy."

The next day at work, Felicia greeted me as cheerfully as she usually did with no indication of our talk from last night. I treated her the same.

On my way to my new desk, I passed the DO NOT ENTER door. I thought about Wallace and his attitude adjustment, and I suddenly no longer cared to find out what was really in this room.

In short, I settled into my new job, and I made zero waves at work. I did what I was told, no matter how stupid it was. And it was often stupid. I just got along to get along.

I guess I wasn't the rebel I thought I was, but then again, with that kind of threat hanging over us—who could be?

Sometimes I think about taking down the system from the inside, especially whenever I have to write someone up or—God help me—send someone for an attitude adjustment, but I know I never will. Just like when I sent out those half-hearted job applications. I knew I'd fallen into my rut. I'd never leave here, and I'd never rebel.

It's safer that way.



The Baron's House

No one went to house beside the woods
Whose hungry shadows home red eyed bats
Twittering about the cracked spire roofs
Watched by hungry snarling sneaking cats.

The old baron played his games inside
Taking those who could not pay their taxes
Fitting them with fine clothes and poisoned wine
Leaving their bodies outside marked with axes.

The villagers grew bold and collected their hate
Breaking down the barons door that night
But whispers say the baron's ghost walks on
Limping through graves in the dying of the light.

Punks have tried to win respect and burn this place
But buildings made from fire cannot be destroyed
By the simple flicking of a match to beat the dark
When the evil baron has his gothic toys deployed

—matthew wilson

West Pier Rotter

Even the starlings shun me,
they no longer surge around
my corroded coronet--a rusted,
busted bird cage open to the air--
they sense my briny smell
of death and keep away.

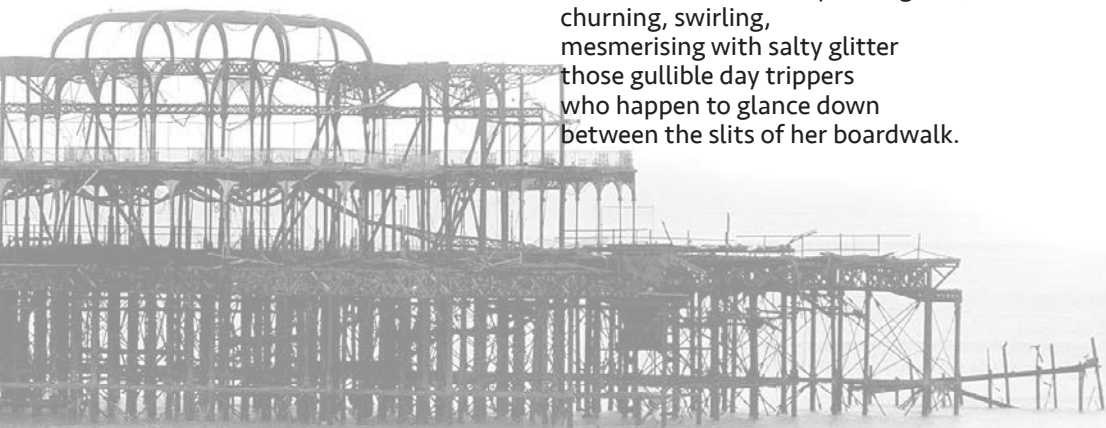
At low tide the sea looks
splendid, while I look a complete
wreck--torn scraps of my iron flesh
rise up like the pathetic heads
of poorly faked sea monsters.

I'm a sad derelict,
drunk on empty legs,
a slightly risqué comedian
stripped of my signature baggy suit
with wide lapels stinking of gin--
evolved from decades of neglect into
this stubborn skeletal hulk.

An ingenious conundrum for some,
or a structural nightmare,
held together with age-old guano--
missing chunks,
gritting my teeth against
the boisterous overtures of storm tides,
the lead violinist
in a winter garden quartet.

On calm summer days,
I scowl at carefree cyclists
as they weave about the lower prom
and offer a sideways leer
at those weekend hobby girls
pointing their digital long lens
SLRs at me.





And I am always at pains
to ignore my near neighbour,
'call me Brighton' she coos--
that bloated whore, Palace Pier--
a shameless hussy,
who will go to any length to swallow
what doesn't belong to her

spreading her thrills
across the latitudes of poison green,
churning, swirling,
mesmerising with salty glitter
those gullible day trippers
who happen to glance down
between the slits of her boardwalk.

Not long ago, her pimps
hired some pirate assassins
who in the early hours with cans of
petrol
tried to finish off what the storms
couldn't accomplish.

But hey ho--I will survive,
my defiant bony frame
a blot on everyone's conscience--
a grade one pièce de résistance
of seaside heritage gone to seed.

—lise colas



[short story]

Plastic Metastasis

by joshua dobson

Did you know they make fake rubies for costume jewelry outta recycled slaughterhouse blood?

I work for a company that makes consumer goods (LEDs, stained glass church windows, translucent plastic flowers little old ladies stick to their windows with suction cups) from recycled slaughterhouse blood. I drive a mosquito truck through the alleys of the meatpacking district in the dead of night, sucking the blood from the blood-pits with a proboscis-like hose.

There's a tracking device in my skeeter truck that records my every stop. My supervisor will dock my pay, but my bladder's about to burst.

All manner of hungry creatures roam the maze of alleys behind the slaughterhouses and butcher shops, scavenging scraps from the dumpsters and garbage cans. I pack a pistol just in case I meet something I wouldn't wanna in these darkened alleys.

I nearly trip over a doll lying on the ground as I exit the cab of my truck with my gun in my hand.

Nothin' better than holdin' my gun in one hand and my dick in the other.

As I drain the snake, a hoarse voice from inside the dumpster I'm pissing against faintly whispers "Help me. Help me. Help me."

I flip up the lid of the dumpster and behold a sight that makes my half-digested lunch creep up the back of my throat.

A vagrant half-devoured by a blob of baby doll parts, writhes in the bottom of the dumpster. His head, neck, left shoulder and corresponding arm are the only bits not encased in a tumor-like mass of melted doll parts.

He must not be from around here. Local lazars avoid the alleys of the



meatpacking district after dark, especially on damp nights like this when the dolls tend to be especially bad.

Nobody knows from whence come the heaping piles of baby dolls one finds littering the alleys of the meatpacking district. They seem to just materialize here. No one can account for their presence save vague rumors of illegal dumping by some shady doll factory whose agents are somehow never seen whilst filling blood spattered dumpsters with truckloads of dolls.

The mysterious doll factory, if it exists, dumps a staggering number of dolls in the alleys of the meatpacking district. Heaping piles metastasize and dumpsters overflow while one glances away for so much as a split second. The dolls even infiltrate the blood-pits. I find them clogging the hose I use to suck up the blood.

So many dolls are deposited in the alleys of the meat packing district that special squads of garbage men have been tasked with combating the smothering tide of cheap plastic. Some say there is a special landfill, a doll graveyard somewhere out in the sticks. Others insist the dolls are loaded onto special garbage barges which dump them into the sea where they form a huge swirling doll vortex like the garbage patch in the Pacific Ocean.

The strange dolls are made from some cheap plastic which when it rots (and it does so quite rapidly) fuses the heaps of dolls into huge tumor-like masses.

I'd never seen a man partially devoured by a doll pile before, cats sure, quite a few, once even an opossum, but never a human, not before tonight. Whenever I found an animal trapped in a doll pile I would put a bullet through its skull.

The bum speaks again, mouthing the same entreaty that led me to discover him inside the dumpster, only now I'm not so sure if he's saying "Help me!" or "Kill me!" Sounds like, "killp me." The way his eyes are riveted to the gat in my hand makes me think he's begging for the latter.

I stare at the pistol for what seems like a very long time. I don't think I got it in me to kill a man, even in a situation like this where death would be a mercy. I slide my gat into its holster and whip out my phone. I dial 811, the department of sanitation emergency line and report the mess in the dumpster to a bored-sounding operator who tells me a unit will be dispatched as soon as possible.

"Killp me," the bum begs.

"Wanna cigarette?" I ask him.

He nods his head yes. I light a square and place it in his free hand.

"I'll be right back," I say before I run to my truck and grab the bottle of rotgut I keep in the glove compartment for emergencies. I hand the bottle to the bum. He tilts it and drains the whole thing.

"I gotta get back to my route, but help'll be here shortly," I tell the bum encased in melted baby dolls.

"Don't leave me," he begs, his voice so weak I have to strain to hear it.

The tracking device in my skeeter truck will record my dawdling. My dispatcher won't be touched that I stopped to help a dying hobo, but I don't have the heart to leave the poor bastard here like this.

"Everything was normal, tweren't no dolls t'all when I went to sleep in here.

I dreamed the lid opened and dolls began to crawl inside. They crept right down the wall of the dumpster in a single file like a column of ants. I was terrified at first, but then the lead doll spoke, without moving its mouth. ‘We just wanna cuddle. It’s so cold, we’ll be much warmer snuggled up all cozy,’ a cutesy baby doll voice said inside my head. Then I woke up like this,” the bum whispers.

“Does it hurt?” I ask.

“What da fuck ya think?” the bum says, his voice strong enough that for once I don’t have to strain to hear.

A garbage truck and several vans rumble down the alley. Sanitation workers in biohazard suits climb out of the vehicles.

My pay’s already gonna be docked, so I stay and watch the rescue operation.

Garbage men in biohazard suits have to cut the dumpster apart with a buzz saw in order to extricate the mass of dolls and hobo.

“What’s gonna happen to him?” I ask one of the garbage men.

“He’ll be dealt with,” he replies.

The remark is punctuated by a gunshot that causes the vagrant’s head to slump lifelessly.

As they’re tossing the doll pile, dead hobo and all, into the back of a dump truck, one of the garbage men hands me a clipboard with some forms attached. I skim the text, the gist of which is that if I disclose any of the events I’ve just witnessed I could face up to two years in prison and a ten-thousand dollar fine.

I notice that the garbage man who handed me the clipboard has his hand on the butt of the pistol holstered at his hip.

If I don’t sign the forms, my corpse will join the hobo’s in the back of the dump truck. My corpse, mummified in masses of rotting doll parts, will be interred in the doll graveyard, or left to endlessly swirl around the doll patch in the center of the sea.

I find the latter notion rather beautiful.

I guess it doesn’t really matter whether I sign the form or not. My ultimate fate is the same either way; I will be devoured by molten masses of doll parts, either tonight in the back of that garbage truck, or at some future date wherever I happen to be when the phantom doll factory’s deposits spread from the alleys of the meatpacking district and the whole world finds itself engulfed, just as the hobo was, in molten masses of doll parts.



The Waves

Demented waves roar through the night
like wronged men coming for a fight.
Clashing against the tongue-tied shore
they feed on fury, keen for more.

Foam at their mouths, flame in their hearts.
They join hands and the storm starts.
"You must come to us", they repeat.
And that's when they cling to my feet.

Their chilly touch penetrates me.
I slowly stride into the sea.
The dark blue sky insanely raves
as I surrender to the waves.

The ripples begin to decrease.
The sky is calm, the sea's at peace.
I smile at my made-up fancy
as I sip my morning coffee.

—niloufar behrooz



My Vampire Love

Shadowed by the macabre walls,
his silhouette starts marching my way.
With his seductive voice he calls
and my innocent heart falls prey.

Those piercing intense blue eyes
against his jet black brows and hair.
His marble white skin his disguise.
His wicked smile, that haunting stare.

He kisses my neck, my pulse dies.
I feel his fatal fangs sinking.
Now Immortality's my prize.
I don't mind his frenzied drinking.

I'm drowned into his gothic clutch.
Our souls detach, floating above.
I lavish in his melting touch,
consumed by his vampire love.

—niloufar behrooz

KARMA

by calvin demmer

Doctor Michael Carrington marched into the waiting area. It wasn't often that he noticed the sterilized smell or the generic seaside paintings separated by otherwise barren white walls. The hospital had become more home than home.

He pulled a chair out. The screech alerted the man who sat next to it. Nurse Claire had told him the man's name was Bill Wheeler. Time was scarce and Michael chose to forego introducing himself. He sat down.

"They tell me she was found on site, covered in waste?"

Bill turned his head towards him. He scratched his beard, the wrinkles on his sunburned face accentuated under the white light shining down on them. "Yes. We don't know how she got there. The place has electric fencing all around. And security guards stationed at the entrance."

"Yes. But I am not interested in that. I want to know what happened to her and what chemicals she may have been exposed to."

"I ... uh."

"Uh can't help me. Tell me what you know. Go."

"I was having lunch, and ... well I left the designated area where we and all other the other guys were meant to sit and eat. That's against protocol. You won't tell will you?"

"Just carry on."

"All right, so, I wandered around one of the other dump sites. One I didn't work at and didn't see often. And there she was lying on the ground; that was at site H. She was all covered in dirt. I ran to help her, and that's when I saw she had green muck all over her. It hit me. She had been exposed to the waste."

Bill exhaled. "So I rushed her to one of the decontamination rooms—she was so light, barely weighed anything. I, I then, rushed her—"

"Bill, I'm not worried how you got her here. I need to know the chemicals she may have been exposed to."

Bill's head dropped a touch. "But surely, it can't be. I mean, we bury that shit so deep."

Michael noticed tears swelling in Bill's eyes. "Could she have been exposed somewhere else and stumbled to that area?"

"No. No, I didn't see any footprints on the ground around her. It's like she came up through the ground, through all the waste and dirt. That or she just magically appeared there."

Michael exhaled, and was about to try another line of questioning, when he saw a slender man wearing a pale gray suit striding towards them. The man's face had a striking bronze complexion, fake without the usual healthy glow; his dark brown hair had been combed into a neat side-part.

The man paused; he looked at his smartphone's screen; he nodded to himself, and made a straight line for Bill.

"Bill Wheeler?"

Bill's eyes widened. "Yes, that's me."

"I'm Charles Penn," the man said. He placed his phone into his jacket's inner pocket. "I'm here on behalf of the Rubbec Company, primarily the Waste Division in this area, your employers."

Bill stood, reaching out with his right to shake Charles' hand. But Charles paid him no attention. His eyes had shifted to Michael.

"And you are?" Charles asked.

"I'm Doctor Michael Carrington. I am overseeing the patient your man brought in."

"I see," Charles said. He turned. "Let's go Mister Wheeler."

"Hang on," Michael said, jumping to his feet. "I have questions that I need answered concerning the patient."

Charles did not stop. "I will be around tomorrow to answer any questions. Mister Wheeler is required at the offices ... company policy. Feel free to phone and enquire if you wish."

Bastard, Michael thought. He watched as Bill turned to give him an awkward wave and mouth the words, "I'm sorry."

Michael entered the patient's room, and was taken aback to see a shadowy figure slouched forward on a chair near her bedside. The curtains had been closed, and his eyes narrowed in the dim white light of the room.

"Nurse Claire, is everything all right?"

No response, but Claire's left hand was massaging her forehead, while in her other hand she held a clipboard on her lap. He took a step towards her.

"Claire?"

"Ah, Doctor Carrington. Sorry, I just felt a little ... odd."

Michael continued towards her, and reached for the clipboard. "Let me see that." Claire took effort in passing it the last distance to him. He scanned it over.

"No first name? Surname? Any identification yet?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I have alerted the authorities. We will get answers."

"Okay, Doctor."

"Nurse Claire, are you sure everything is okay?"

Claire dropped both her hands into her lap, and glanced towards the patient in the bed, before returning her eyes to Michael. Her face flushed, her mouth opened slightly, but no words came out.

"Claire?" Michael said.

"Something ... something happened."

"You mean to the woman? We know that."

"No." Claire shifted in her seat. "When I came in to check on her, well, I know this sounds crazy, but, I noticed tattoos covering her body. They were everywhere. I couldn't resist. I touched one on her forearm—"

"Tattoos? Of what?"

"Life," Claire said as she looked up at Michael. "There were animals, plants and trees.

They were beautiful."

Michael shrugged. "Claire, this lady's skin is as pale as snow in the Arctic and is covered in scars and blemishes. She definitely has no tattoos."

"I know, but they were there. And when I touched one, there was a flash of light, a bright white light. The next thing I saw was a little girl in a red riding hood. We were sitting in a place that I could only describe as ... well, like drawings you always see of the Garden of Eden. Yes, that's what I thought when I saw the place. It was beautiful. We spoke, the little girl and I, but all I can remember was her telling me she wanted to see you. Then I blinked, and I was back in the room, lying on the floor. And she ..." Claire looked at the patient. "She was back to normal, if you can call that normal."

Michael tapped his fingers against the clipboard. "Claire, I know that this patient is unique, and I understand her appearance can be difficult to take in, but we are professionals. I think you should go take a break in the staff lounge. I will be along shortly, and we can continue this talk."

"Okay, Doctor Carrington."

Michael watched her leave the room, it seemed as if every step took a great deal of effort. When she had closed the door behind herself, he turned towards the patient. He walked to her side. He looked over the IVs in her arms, glanced at the nasal cannula entering her nostrils, and then stared at the pale blue blanket that covered her lower half. Finally, he looked at her.

Michael knew her appearance was not merely caused by some waste at the plant. No, she looked beaten and ravaged by many hard years and illnesses. She was bald, and her glassy eyes had no light behind them. The irises were white, almost as if someone had replaced her eyes with two white marbles. Her pallid skin, with its deep scars and dark blemishes all over, held the tale of much pain.

A cold draft drifted across the room. Michael glanced towards the window, but it was closed. He returned his view to the patient, and noticed a dark circular mark on her right wrist. It looked as if it had been drawn with ink. He reached down, and ran his finger around it. "What is this?" he mumbled.

The patient's hand lifted. Michael froze in place, before he could rationalize what he saw, the hand closed around his right wrist.

"Hey let go," Michael said. But, when he looked towards the lady's face, she was still lost in her catatonic state.

He attempted to pry his hand free with his left hand, but it was to no avail, her grip too tight. The mark started to lighten; he watched as dark green lines shot up her arm. Blurry pictures began to form all over her arm along the lines. The lines continued to spread all over her body. Michael pulled her gown open with his free hand, following some of them, and pictures formed there too. The lines however, had turned to vines, and even the pictures began to clear. A plethora of colorful animals, plants and trees became visible all over the pale white canvas of her upper body.

Like tattoos, he thought, and understood what Nurse Claire had been on about. He struggled to take in all the beautiful, life-like images his eyes forced upon him. An African elephant from the savannas, a polar bear from the Arctic Circle and a giant panda from the mountain ranges in central China. His eyes shifted, he saw roses and violets of the age old poem. He glanced at a cypress tree, and then an oak tree, both reminded him of his childhood neighborhood.

Michael felt a surge of current enter his hand from hers. And before he could summon strength for another attempt to escape, a white light exploded in the room. He felt his eyes flutter; he blacked out.

"Mister, are you all right?"

Michael opened his eyes. The sun beamed down from high above in the pellucid sky. He turned his neck, and saw lush green hills in the distance.

It occurred to him he was lying on his back. "Where am I?" he asked.

"You're seeing one of the few remaining places on earth untouched by the hands of man."

Michael sat up. A little girl was standing a few feet in front of him, her red riding hood danced under the spell of a zephyr. "But how did I get here? I was in the hospital."

"Oh, you are a loooong way from there. But, we don't have a lot of time," the little girl said. "You seem like a good man, are you a good man, Doctor Carrington?"

"I'm a confused man is what I am," Michael said. He felt his head, expecting a bump.

"Did I pass out in the hospital? Am I dreaming this?"

"You ask too many unnecessary questions."

"I must have passed out. Surely I will awake at any moment—"

"Stop it." The little girl frowned, while shaking her head. "Doctor Carrington, you need to pay attention. You and your kind are hurting this world, this once beautiful world, and along with it ... me."

"Man, I must have fallen hard," Michael said. He look beyond the girl, a wide, deep forest began a few hundred yards behind her. He could hear the sounds of life, and wondered what fauna and flora existed deeper in. Even though he could see branches being moved by a breeze, the world around him felt warm.

"You really need to listen, Doctor Carrington."

The girl took a step closer.

"You are the girl Nurse Claire saw."

"Nurse Claire saw me as she wanted to see me, no doubt influenced by some fairy tale of her past it seems. You see me the same, as you've been influenced by her view. I look quite different, but that is of little importance."

"I am going to give you one chance," the little girl said. "To save the bad man you saw today ... get him to immediately close down the place where I was found, or he will be punished. Do you understand?"

"You're saying you're the lady in the bed? And the bad man is Charles Penn? Who works for the Rubbec Company?"

"Yes, yes and yes. I'm so glad you understand."

"You must be kidding? He will never listen to some random doctor."

"Then he will be punished," the girl said. She smiled, glanced towards the sun. "Things are only getting worse I'm afraid, and if things don't begin to come right, the only way forward will be without your kind. That would be a shame."

"Don't you see?" the girl said, holding her hands up. "The world around you is dying. Deforestation, the extinction of animals, the constant and many ways your kind finds to pollute the ocean and the atmosphere, oh, how I could go on. Your kind began phasing out chlorofluorocarbons when they realized the damage being doing to the ozone. But that was but a drop in the ocean, as your saying goes. Why can't they see the need to act now?"

"I don't know how I could help even if this was real. I'm just one man."

"Yes, but many 'just one man' put together could make a lot. You are not the first I have come to see. I've seen many over the years, unfortunately most disappoint me. And you're lucky ... some people don't even get warnings."

Michael got to his feet. "Listen I have had enough, I want to wake up now."

"You have twenty-four hours to convince the bad man to close that bad place, or he will serve a punishment much worse than death. He will live the vision he brings."

Michael shook his hands; a tingling sensation had erupted around his fingers. "You're cra—"

Michael opened his eyes. Above him, the hospital room's white light flickered.

He got to his feet. He had been lying on the floor of the patient's room. *I really passed out, wow, what a strange dream*, he thought.

He looked over the patient. She was just as she had been when he had entered the room: bald, pale, frail and sickly. No tattoos. The mark by her wrist had also vanished.

Michael picked up the clipboard he had dropped on the floor, and exited the room. He walked to the nurses' station, his mind making a list of all the further tests he wanted done. Dream or no dream, if the Rubbec Company's waste site had done anything to aggravate her illness, he would find out.

As for Charles Penn, he decided to let the authorities handle him if they found any foul play in how the lady had ended up there, or if they were disposing of any waste that was illegal. He felt around his head while he waited for one of the nurses, and was surprised to find he had no bump from his fall.

He frowned. "Can't do any harm," he muttered as he set an alarm on his watch, an alarm that would go off in twenty-four hours.

The next day, Michael was stuck in meetings most of the morning. It was not until after lunch that he checked in on the patient who had caused him a restless night's sleep. Her condition unchanged. He looked over her wrist, no tattoos appeared, no strange light exploded within the room either. He couldn't help but think of the girl's warning. *Yeah, right. Phone Charles Penn and tell him he's gonna pay a price if he doesn't shut down a site belonging to his employers. Not only would he think I'm mad, but I'd likely be sued and suspended for making threats. No, there is a right way to figure out how this woman got to be there and what is going on at the site.*

He was eager to ask Claire if any results had come back for some of the tests he had asked for. He left for the nurses' station, but Claire was nowhere to be found. He could've asked one of the other nurses, but after their similar experiences he wanted to see her. He had relegated their passing out episodes to the trauma of seeing the woman, and their similar dreams down to his own imagination. *Yes, Claire passed out due to the condition of the woman, and then so did I. Claire saw the girl in her dream, and then so did I, he thought, even top professionals can have moments of weakness. It's nothing to be ashamed of.* He figured the warning was simply his mind searching for a way to punish those he thought responsible. Still, the woman's state clearly had a bigger effect on him than he had at first realized. The sooner he solved what was wrong with her, the better.

After patrolling the seemingly never-ending white walled corridors, he walked with intent to the staff lounge. Inside, and there was still no sight of Nurse Claire. *Where the hell is she?* He decided he'd head back to the nurses' station and get someone to call her. He exited the staff lounge, only to feel a tug on his coat.

"Doctor Carrington."

He turned around. Nurse Claire, panting, flustered stood before him. "Where have you been? I've been looking for you."

"I tried, I tried to stop him," she said.

"Stop who?"

The beeping of his watch's alarm interrupted them. Michael looked down, and switched the alarm off. "Charles Penn," he muttered.

"Yes, how'd you know? He came here with a camera and demanded to see the patient. I was on my way to get security when I bumped into you,"

Michael pushed past Claire, and then began sprinting towards the patient's room. *That son of a bitch.* He could hear Claire a few steps behind him.

When he reached the patient's door he signaled for Claire to stay back. He entered the room, closing the door behind him.

Michael looked around the room. There was no sign of Charles. An object stuck out in his peripheral vision however. He knelt and picked up the camera. He shook his head, as he stood back up, wondering why Charles had left the camera behind. He looked towards the patient, something was off.

The patient was gone, but in her place: Charles Penn. Michael gasped, as a frozen spear spiked down his spine. His eyes shifted all around the room, as he felt the tendons tighten around the base of his neck.

"Where is she?" he asked out loud.

His gaze returned to Charles, and he decided to check on the man's vital signs, not trusting the machines around him. He reached for Charles' wrist, to check his pulse. Before he could find a heartbeat, he saw the mark, in the same spot as the woman's, except this one was a deep red. The smell of burnt flesh entered Michael's sense of smell. The mark shimmered as he stared at it.

Red tendrils shot up Charles' arm. Michael tried to step away but felt the surge of energy enter him. A red light erupted in the room.

The light faded to black.

"Get up you son of a bitch."

Michael opened his eyes. At first all he saw was what looked like a massive black cloak hanging across his view. He turned his neck, and saw an active volcano in the far distance. Hot lava flowed down its sides, while up above, he realized the sky had been blanketed in black clouds of smoke. He inhaled, noticing the heaviness of the air.

"You did this, you no good bastard."

Michael stood up, and looked for the voice which spoke. Ten yards from him, Charles Penn was battling to free himself from an ashen colored bush, which Michael assumed was riddled by sharp thorns due to all the cuts that bled on Charles' naked upper body.

"What's going on?" Michael said.

Charles managed to pull himself free. "You tell me, I was taking a photo of that stupid woman, then she grabs me and I'm here. Did you inject me with something or knock me out?"

Michael didn't reply; he walked towards Charles, who was pulling what remained of his shirt from the bush.

"Careful," Charles said. "Look at the ground."

Michael looked down. The ground was black, lifeless, but pockets of coals graced some areas of otherwise barren ground.

"You don't have a drink by any chance?"

Michael looked back at Charles. "A what?"

"Something to drink. I've been thirsty for quite some time. I saw a pond or something a little while ago, but it was just black sludge, and it smelt like shit."

"Quite some time? But you've been here a few minutes?"

"Minutes? Sure doesn't feel like it."

Michael surveyed the lands around him. "Where are we?"

"I thought I had passed out too."

"What do you mean?" Charles said. "But now, I'm thinking that I must have passed out in the hospital room and that this is all a dream. So you're also an illusion, right?"

Michael looked around. Apart from the volcano, there was nothing but the blackened sky above, and lands that seemed as if they had been on the losing end of a scorched-earth policy. His nostrils burnt when he inhaled, an acrid taste had surfaced in his mouth. And, even with the lava in the distance and coals over parts of the land, the air held a frigid chill.

"I came to a place," Michael said. "When I saw her the first time, she grabbed me, but it wasn't anything like this. She said yours would be like a vision. I think it's your fault you're here."

"What you talking about? This some trick? Did you drug me? I swear I will sue you and the piece of shit hospital—"

"No, it's not that. There was a little girl, and I was meant to tell you to get the company you work for to stop all the waste operations and close."

Charles spat some black gunk on the ground. Michael could hear Charles' chest wheezing as he raised his voice. "Are you out of your mind? Stop a multimillion dollar operation because of a dream."

"I didn't think ... couldn't think. I mean, how was I to know it was real?" Michael said. He felt a tingling sensation in his hands. "Oh shit, I feel the tingling in my hands again. I think I'm going back. I'll try and find her."

"No, wait," Charles screamed. "You have to wake me up. Wake me up you son of a—"

"Doctor Carrington, are you all right?"

Michael opened his eyes. Claire stood above him.

"I'm fine," he said and got to his feet.

"Did you see her there? The little girl."

"No, I saw him."

Claire looked towards Charles. "What's wrong with him?"

"I think it is some kind of a coma, to be honest, it's worse than that. I think he's being forced to live some nightmare vision as punishment."

Claire walked toward Charles. "So my dream was real," she said, now reaching out with her arm toward Charles.

"Wait, don't touch him," Michael said. "It might not be safe. And, we need to find the woman."

"But how on earth did she leave? She is so sick."

"Shit, Claire, I don't know. But I think she's the only one who can do anything for him. No medicine or procedures will do shit."

Michael left the room. He made his way toward the nurses' station. He tried to align his thoughts. He knew he needed to ask the nurse on duty if she'd seen a woman walk by, then he'd need to alert security. His heart thundered within his chest. Whether the company Charles worked for was damaging the environment or not, no man deserved the nightmare he'd seen Charles in.

He almost crashed into a woman that had been turning into the corridor. He got his arms out in front of himself just in time, and instinctively gripped her shoulders. The woman didn't flinch.

"I'm so sorry," Michael said, as he inhaled an earthy fragrance with a hint of citrus.

"It's okay, Doctor," she said. "Is everything all right?"

Michael was momentarily lost in the woman's beauty. Her green dress wrapped around her hourglass shaped body with perfection. Fair skinned, ample breasts peered out the top of the dress' cut, while her soft brunette hair cascaded to her shoulders. Her full lips formed a smile, and emerald green eyes softened. Whether it was instinct or not, Michael was not sure, but he had looked at the woman's wrist. He could have sworn he'd seen the faintest remains of a circular tattoo.

He wondered whether the sight of Charles lying comatose and the other inexplicable experiences since the strange woman had arrived the previous day were causing him to see things that weren't there. He wanted to take another look at the woman's wrist, but she had turned her arm. *You're imagining things, and who could blame you? After the last twenty-four hours.* But Michael could not let it go.

"I'm sorry miss, do you mind—"

Michael felt someone tug on his arm; he turned around to see Claire standing behind him.

"I can't find her anywhere, have you asked the nurse at the station?"

"Just a sec," Michael said. He turned back to the woman, but she was gone. There was someone else however. A middle-aged man wearing a pale blue shirt, with its sleeves rolled up revealing thick forearms, was walking towards him.

"Doctor Carrington?" the man said.

"Yes, that's me," Michael said. He turned to Claire, and whispered, "Keep on looking." Claire nodded and began shuffling down the corridor.

Michael turned back to the man. "How can I help you?"

"I am Detective Holland," the man said. He held up his badge. "I need to see the woman you called in about yesterday, immediately."

"We don't know where she is, something has happened."

"You're saying she's not here?"

"She was, but she just disappeared."

"Hang on," Holland said.

Michael watched as Holland made a call, he couldn't make out everything that had been said as Holland had drifted off, but he knew more officers were on the way. Michael wondered if they already knew about Charles' situation, someone at the hospital may have already alerted the authorities, but he couldn't understand why the detective had not asked about him then. He figured the detective had been keen to apprehend the woman first.

"Should I take you to Mister Charles Penn?" Michael asked when Holland had finished the call and returned to stand in front of him.

"Charles Penn?" Holland asked, as his brow furrowed.

"Aren't you here due to him?"

"No, I am here about Bill Wheeler. It should be all over the news by now."

"Bill Wheeler? I'm confused."

"He brought in the woman yesterday?"

"Yeah."

"Well, during the lunch break at the Rubbec Company's waste site today, he somehow managed to blow half the place to shit. Luckily no one was hurt, as they all were sitting in another area. He gave himself up immediately and since then he's just been mumbling about the woman that he had brought here yesterday."

Apparently," Holland said then paused, his voice dropped in volume, "she visited him during the night and told him the place had to be destroyed. He did a good job too, hearing the company will be moving operations somewhere else. They've had a lot of shit come their way the last while."

Michael rubbed his forehead. "That's ... crazy."

"You're telling me. I thought you informed the officers yesterday she was in a coma or something?"

"Yeah, she was."

Holland frowned. "That's odd. Well we've put out her description. I can't imagine she will get too far looking the way she does. But I think we need to take a look around here, and then we can finish this discussion."

"I have to show you Charles first, he was the Rubbec's lawyer or something."

"What's wrong with him?"

"Let me show you."

"Lead the way."

Michael turned and headed back to the room Charles occupied. His mind felt as if it had been tossed in a washing machine. He had to wrestle for clear thoughts. He realized the woman must have given Bill some kind of ultimatum, like she gave him. Except Bill had followed through, and he had not. Bill would get off after a few years, no one had been injured, and everyone in town hated the place anyway. To many, Bill would even be seen as a hero. They'd petition for an early release; he would always be looked after by the community. As for him, Michael would have to endure knowing that it was his inaction which had seen Charles punished. He'd have to live with that forever. For some reason, he knew there would be nothing

that could be done for Charles.

In twenty-four hours his world had been tossed upside down. He wondered how to explain it all to the detective. He figured it best to leave out the strange vision he'd had or the trip to Charles' hell. He would speak to Claire before she spoke to the police, to convince her to do the same.

As for the woman, he doubted they would ever find her. *She's not ... human*, he thought, and then hastily he blocked off further ideas as such. What he knew for sure, however, was that this woman with the love for all things nature, its guardian, was not to be messed with, and she was growing ever more restless. He felt sorry for whoever ran into her next.



FALL IS GOLDEN

THE LAST GOLDEN YELLOW APPLE
HANGS LIKE A HEALING MIRACLE
BOW DOWN OLD APPLE TREE
WINTER IS COMING.
LIFE IS A SINGLE THREAD THIS TIME.

— michael lee johnson

Ridley's Rat

by lawrence falcetano

Everyone in Lambert County thought Carl Ridley was crazy for keeping a rat as a pet. Some folks were downright angry about it; most were concerned. The last thing a farming community needed was a rat foraging among its livestock and crops. It was bad enough that farm owners had to contend with indigenous predators, but as Sheriff Malcolm said, "To cultivate one and keep it as a pet is a creepy thing."

There had been occasions when a farmer had discovered a portion of his crops eaten or come upon a dead calf in an open field partially devoured from its hooves upward. These occurrences had always been attributed to local predators and had been accepted and even expected. But now, if such destruction occurred, Ridley's rat immediately came to mind. Everyone agreed something had to be done. They didn't care that Carl claimed he had never let the rat off his property. It didn't matter to them that he said he kept it in a cage in his barn, letting it out only to walk it on a leash about his grounds, "to give it exercise." As far as they were concerned, the rat had to go.

"Why don't ya get yaself an ol' tomcat to play with?" Burt Hagger suggested to Carl one night when they were at the bar at the Blue Bonnet Inn. "Or a hound dog to sit with ya on your front porch."

Carl spoke over his glass without looking at Burt, his elbows resting comfortably on the bar. He was well kept for sixtyish, despite years of outdoor farm labor that tanned and wrinkled his skin. His once-dark beard was peppered now with silver gray, as was his hair, which he kept covered by the New York Mets ball cap he wore, with no allegiance to the team, but merely out of habit.

"Because a cat won't pay you no mind," Carl said. "And a hound dog'll lie in the sun all day, too dumb or lazy to move his ass to the shade. Besides, rats are smart. I read up on it. You can teach them almost anything."

"Like what?" Burt Hagger joked. "How to fetch your slippers?"

Carl downed the rest of his beer, turned on his stool, and left Burt Hagger laughing at his own joke.

At the next town council meeting, it was agreed that Sheriff Malcolm pay Carl Ridley a visit. He would go not only in his official capacity but also as a friend in an effort to persuade Carl to get rid of the rat.

When the sheriff drove the cruiser out to the Ridley farm the following afternoon, things got really weird.

He parked in front of Carl's house, got out and climbed the stairs to the front porch. He rapped on the front door and waited. When no one answered, he shouted Carl's name several times. When there was still no response, he walked to the barn expecting to find Carl there. Inside the barn, he let his eyes adjust to the semidarkness then looked around. He didn't see Carl and supposed he had gone to town for supplies. He would try again tomorrow. But as he turned to leave, he heard what sounded like someone speaking in a low voice in a far corner of the barn. He listened curiously and walked in the direction of the sound. As he got nearer, he saw Carl Ridley standing in the shadows speaking to someone, and although he couldn't make out the words, Carl's voice was calm and clear, almost instructive, as if he were reciting a lesson, yet the sheriff saw no one other than Carl. The sheriff moved closer for a better look. He stopped behind Carl's old tractor and leaned his head around the front fender, and that's when he saw it.

Carl Ridley was talking to his rat!

At first he thought the shadows might be playing tricks on him, but the reality of what he was seeing sent a prickly chill up his spine. In the sallow light streaming through the dirty barn window, Ridley's rat was seated on its haunches on a worktable in front of Carl, its arms outstretched like a child enthusiastically waiting for Carl to feed it the piece of cornbread Carl had torn from the loaf he held under his arm. After Carl placed the piece of bread on the table, the animal undoubtedly recognized that it was not to accept the bread until Carl gave the verbal command to do so. Upon Carl's command, "Go," it quickly snatched up the bread with its clawed paw and stuffed it greedily into its mouth. Carl broke off another piece and placed it on the same spot. This time the animal slapped its paws together in eager anticipation but still waited for Carl's instruction before taking it. Carl laughed hardily. "Very good," he said as he stroked the animal's back approvingly.

The sheriff was stunned with disbelief. He was witnessing an exercise in learning, unheard of in the annals of human-and-animal relations. The rat was interacting with Carl; it obviously understood exactly what Carl expected of it. How had Carl accomplished such a task? What else might Carl have taught it?

The sheriff watched Carl place the loaf on the floor between his legs and slide a mouth organ out of the top pocket of his bib overalls. Delicately he tapped the instrument a few times on his thigh, wet his lips, deeply sucked in some air, and

began to play an up-tempo of “Sweet Betsy from Pike.” The sheriff’s eyes widened. It was impossible, he thought--the manifestation of his mind suffering from the summer heat or a lack of sleep. The eeriness of what he was seeing made him uneasy, but he was unable to avert his eyes as he watched Ridley’s rat raise itself on its hind legs and begin to dance happily like a marionette without strings. It kicked its legs and spun about while Carl tapped his foot in time with the music. The sheriff squeezed his eyes shut in an attempt to dispel what he believed could only be an illusion, but when he opened them, the song-and-dance was still there with even more exuberance.

The sheriff dropped the idea of seeing Carl that day and crept out of the barn without Carl having ever known he had been there. He never told anyone what he’d witnessed that afternoon in Carl Ridley’s barn, fearing they would deem him mentally unfit to keep his position. But at the next council meeting the sheriff confessed he had seen the rat once while visiting the Ridley farm, and—at the urging of Mayor Albright—obligingly gave an accurate description of the animal to the committee members.

“It’s a big rat,” the sheriff began, “bigger than some cats, a four pounder, I’d guess, and not pleasant to look at—not that rats are. Its fur is a dull gray, but for the area around its eyes, which appears darker. Its snout sticks way out and is tipped with a shiny black nose to which wiry whiskers are attached. A set of pointed teeth protrudes from a pair of thick lips that quiver and constantly drip bubbling saliva, giving it the countenance of a vicious predator, which it might well be. Its round fleshy tail is hairless and pink and almost as long as its body. But it’s the eyes that give it its most ferocious appearance. They’re dark and deep and appear sightless, until struck by light when they turn a bloodshot crimson.”

“Why does he keep such a hideous thing?” Mayor Albright wanted to know. “It’s not something you can love and cuddle.”

“It’s morbid and strange,” Bob Woodman added.

“It might be carrying disease,” Bill Smith said. “It could start an epidemic right here in our town. If that thing should bite someone—”

“I share everyone’s concerns,” Allan Briskly, the town attorney, said. “But we have no legal recourse to compel him to do away with the animal. Just because something might happen doesn’t give us the right to legally intercede.”

“You mean we have to let him keep that thing?”

“Until the animal becomes a danger or a nuisance to the community, there’s nothing we can do.”

“Well, I know what I can do,” Bill Smith said. “Keep my shotgun loaded and by my front door.”

“Keep your pants on, Bill,” Sheriff Malcolm said. “We might be making too big a thing out of this.”

“It’s a delicate situation,” Allan Briskly said. “It’s not like Carl is or has ever been a criminal. We have to treat this carefully.”

Mayor Albright shook his head in bewilderment. “Why would anyone want to care for a thing like that? It’s not something I’d expect of Carl.”

"Carl hasn't been himself since the loss of his daughter," Bob Woodman said. "He's been quiet and reclusive and sometimes downright unfriendly."

"That's understandable," Allan Briskly said. "But it has no relevance to what we're concerned with here. Until some law has been broken our hands are tied."

Carl and his wife Ellie had been solid members of the community for nearly thirty years, and although Carl hadn't been as socially active as he had been before Ellie died two years ago, he was still respected in the community for the civil work he and Ellie had done during their more youthful years. The council members all agreed that a man like Carl Ridley was hard to reproach for an odd but probably harmless thing like keeping a rat for a pet--especially since his only daughter had been murdered just a month ago. They had seen the changes it made in Carl--his sudden reclusiveness, his unsociability, and his desire to be left alone and grieve in his own way. The committee agreed that placing any kind of reprimand or warning on him now just wouldn't be right.

When Carl returned from the feed store that afternoon on the day of his daughter's murder, he found his daughter lying in the grass by the open doors of the barn. The bruises on her throat made it evident that she had been strangled. The county coroner concurred.

"I know who did it," Carl had told Sheriff Malcolm. "It was that Kirk Mosby. He had it in for Melanie ever since she broke it off with him."

"How can you be sure?" the sheriff said.

"Because Melanie told me," Carl said. "When I found her and lifted her in my arms, she whispered Kirk Mosby's name, just before she..."

Emotion prevented the rest of the words from leaving Carl's mouth. He removed a handkerchief from his back pocket and touched his eyes.

The sheriff put a consoling hand on Carl's shoulder. "Why would Mosby do that if he loved your daughter, Carl?"

"Jealousy and rejection," Carl said. "Jealousy and rejection can bring out rage in a man he never knew he had in him. Besides, I always thought Kirk was a little *off*, capable of doing such a thing. You know how he was before he met Melanie. I was glad when Melanie stopped seeing him."

"Melanie loved Kirk," the sheriff said. "Maybe she was calling his name as an affirmation of her love for him."

"No," Carl Ridley said. "She was telling me who attacked her...who killed her."

When the sheriff questioned Mosby, he had an airtight alibi. He claimed he'd been at the Blue Bonnet Inn that afternoon and had procured two drinking buddies willing to testify that they were with him at the time the murder was committed. Their claims generated more ambivalence in the sheriff's mind, but not enough to eliminate Mosby as a suspect. Although he agreed that Carl Ridley's theory of jealousy and rage was a distinct possibility, the sheriff was left with the arduous task of trying to convince Carl that he might be wrong. Carl made it no secret that he believed Kirk Mosby had killed his daughter. He was as adamant about it as he was about keeping his rat.

Twenty-five year old Kirk Mosby lived with his widowed mother in a small house on the outskirts of town. Kirk had always been somewhat detached and not very well liked by the community. He had gotten into trouble more than once with the local law, mostly for minor infractions--drunk and disorderly, public indecency, and had once been arrested for his alleged involvement in a service station hold-up for which charges were dropped. Kirk Mosby had had a meagerly impressive list of misdemeanors. But now the bar had been raised by adding suspicion of murder to that list. He may have wantonly killed the one thing he loved—Melanie Ridley.

Kirk and Melanie had met at the 4H club Harvest Dance. They hit it off quickly and ostensibly fell in love. For the next eight months they were *the couple*. Everyone in the community was aware of their romance. And in time, Kirk's "bad boy" reputation seemed to fade away in light of his relationship with Melanie Ridley. There was nothing inordinate about Kirk and Melanie's relationship; they were young, happy and in love; they had even made plans for their future together--until that afternoon outside the barn on the Ridley farm when their plans were shattered.

It had been almost a month since Melanie's murder, and other than the sheriff questioning Mosby about it, there had been no further inquiries. Kirk had no fear of getting caught. No one could pin it on him, he thought.

It had all happened so quickly. She just wouldn't listen. He was sure she still loved him. He had to make her understand that they were meant for each other--bound by love for eternity. Things had been okay between them until she started acting differently--until she told him she didn't want to be tied down and wanted to see other guys. He had begged and pleaded with her to reconsider.

They had been having a civil discussion on the front porch of the house when she suddenly became annoyed with something he said. She had asked him to leave, said she never wanted to see him again. When she stepped off the porch and headed for the barn in an attempt to get away from him, he followed her. That's when the fight began, the arguing and the shouting that led to her slapping him hard across his face, unleashing the anger, frustration and rage that had been building inside him for weeks. He tried to make her stop hitting him but she wouldn't, until his hands came up around her neck, almost uncontrollably, like they had a life of their own. Wild-eyed, he watched his fingers dig deep into the soft white flesh of her neck. She tried to scream once as he tightened his grip; she thrashed about in his grasp like a rag doll. In a few seconds it was over. He let her lifeless body drop to the ground with no regret, no feeling of guilt or contrition. She deserved what she got. He had given her his heart, and she had broken it without regard. If she hadn't slapped him the murder might not have happened. But she had kept swinging at him and he had to put his arms up to protect his face, especially when she began to scratch and claw at him so fiercely that she yanked off his bracelet.

The bracelet!

He felt a sensation of panic as he suddenly remembered. Yes, he'd been wearing the bracelet, the one she had given him that had his initials engraved on it. He remembered putting it on before going to see her. It had fallen to the ground

during the struggle, but he had forgotten about it until just now. It was probably still lying in the grass. If they should search the area and find it, or if old man Ridley should stumble upon it, it would become his one-way ticket to the hangman. If it had been discovered, the sheriff would have confronted him with it. Anyway, he had to be sure about it. He had to go back and find it before someone else did.

It was nearly midnight when he parked his car on Emory Road and sprinted across the open field toward Carl Ridley's barn. The moon was full in a cloudless sky, which didn't present the ideal situation for someone trying to go unnoticed, but on the other hand it would illuminate the ground, making it easier for him to find the bracelet. When he reached the barn, he pressed himself against the dark side of the building. He looked back at the house. No lights. Carl Ridley had already gone to bed. It encouraged him to begin searching the spot where he had left Melanie's body. He had followed Melanie from the front porch of the house to the barn when she began her physical assault on him. The barn doors were open, as usual, and he was sure this was the right place to look. He got on his hands and knees and began sweeping his opened hand across the grass. The grass was wet and cold and his hands and knees quickly became saturated. He wiped his hands several times on his jeans before continuing. He crawled in a circle around the area he remembered, feeling every blade of grass and every stone. But his effort only brought him a handful of wet grass and dirt. He tried circling in the opposite direction, widening his search, this time using both hands to cover more area, but after two full circles he still came up with nothing. He got to his feet and looked over the area again. Could he be looking in the wrong place? No. He was sure this was where the bracelet had fallen. It had to be here. He looked up at the house again . . . quiet, still, and dark.

He was about to get down on his knees a second time when he heard the voice behind him from inside the barn, and he turned quickly. There stood Carl Ridley in silver moonlight like a ghost that had appeared from nowhere. In the crook of his right arm he held a shotgun, its two barrels aimed straight at Kirk Mosby.

"Lookin' for this?" Carl said as he held up the tell-tale bracelet in his left hand for Mosby to see. The moonlight bounced off the silver finish as Mosby stared at it with disbelief. It had happened. Carl Ridley had found the bracelet.

"You left your calling card in the grass by the barn," Carl said. "Lucky for me, I found it before the police arrived, and unlucky for you."

It was, of course, Mosby's death warrant.

"Step inside," Carl Ridley said.

Kirk Mosby had no choice but to walk through the barn doors, followed by Carl Ridley and his double barrels.

"All the way to the back wall," Carl said.

Mosby walked to the back wall of the barn, then turned to face Ridley. "Are you gonna shoot me?" he said.

"No," Carl said. "Although I could. You're a trespasser." He tossed the bracelet at Mosby. It landed on the floor at his feet.

"She gave that to you with her love," Carl said. "A love that you killed."

"But I didn't kill her," Mosby said. "I came here tonight to find out who did and why. I want to know the truth."

"We'll know the truth before we leave here tonight," Carl said. With this, he turned and looked into the shadows to his left. "Come," he said.

"What did you say?" Mosby said. "I thought you—" But the rest of his words were caught in the tightness of his throat; they hung there in his open mouth when he saw the rat. It waddled out of the darkness at Carl Ridley's command and stopped by his feet.

It squatted on its hind quarters staring intently at Mosby through black hollows that might have been eyes. It bared its teeth several times spilling syrupy saliva onto the barn floor, making muted squealing sounds while its body quivered as if in a state of anxious agitation. It sat beside Carl like an obedient dog awaiting its next command. Carl looked down at it with an air of parental pride, smiled as he gently stroked its nape. He looked back at Mosby.

"I know you killed my Melanie," he said. "Tell me you did."

"I-I didn't," Mosby said, never taking his eyes off the rat. "I already told you I didn't."

"I'll ask you one more time," Carl said.

"What do you want me to say?" Mosby said.

Without hesitation, Carl looked down at his rat and said, "Go."

The rat dropped forward onto all fours and began a slow walk toward Mosby.

"No! Keep it away!" Mosby shouted. Instinctively, he pressed himself against the wall of the barn.

"Tell me what you did," Carl said.

"Don't let that thing near me!" Mosby shouted. His entire body was trembling now as fear began to build in him. When he took two steps to his right, Ridley's rat took two steps with him ... and then one step closer.

"I'll kill it if it comes nearer," Mosby said. But he had no intention of touching the filthy thing and he had nothing to use as a weapon. If he could get around the rat and out the barn doors, he might be able to outrun it, but then there was Carl Ridley and his shotgun.

In a futile attempt at escape, he turned and ran left toward the far corner of the barn. The rat scurried along with him, making high-pitched squealing sounds, as if overjoyed by the thrill of the chase. When Mosby stopped running, the rat stopped with him ... and then took another step closer.

Mosby's breathing came hard and fast, his face pale, perspiration dripping into his eyes from his glistening forehead. He squeezed his eyes shut only for an instant, and wiped them quickly as he watched the rat lower its head to the ground and begin to stalk toward him. Slowly ... calculating ... its teeth chattering with excited eagerness, waiting for the right moment to strike.

Images flashed through Mosby's terrified mind as he envisioned the rat gnawing through to the bone of his ankle and then moving quickly up his leg where the flesh was thicker and more succulent. He could feel its coarse fur and rubbery

tail against his skin as the animal thrashed about in a feast of frenzy, its razor sharp teeth ripping flesh and muscle from his vulnerable body. The pain would become unbearable. He heard himself scream, a scream that begged for a swift and merciful death as he fell helplessly to the ground where the beast would make a meal of him until it had its full.

But then he heard Carl give the command, “Quit,” and the rat immediately sat back on its haunches and waited like a submissive servant. Carl smiled at the animal and then looked at Mosby. “Are you ready to tell the truth?” he said. “Are you ready for a confession?”

But I already told you, I didn’t kill her.”

“Lies!” Carl Ridley said and then he gave the command, “Go!” The rat lowered itself to all fours again and moved quickly toward Mosby. This time its ferocity was more evident than before as it screeched a loud high-pitched cry that echoed in the hollow ceiling of the barn. It charged Mosby with its mouth wide open, its jagged teeth wet and shining with saliva in anticipation of its imminent kill.

Mosby screamed and ran on shaky legs until he reached the opposite corner of the barn. The rat stayed close, snapping its jaws at the air near Mosby’s heels, squealing and screeching in excited eagerness. Mosby dug himself into the dark corner, knowing it was a false refuge, but desperate for escape. His breathing was labored and his heart pounded heavily in his chest. The animal was upon him now, no more than three feet away, close enough for him to detect the foul stench it carried with it. Mosby watched in terror as the rat raised itself onto its hindquarters and prepared to spring, its red eyes glowing with excitement, its jaws quivering in anticipation of its reward.

“Call it off!” Mosby shouted. “I admit the murder! I killed her!” Those were his final words before the barn swirled around him in a vortex of light and dark. He grabbed his chest, heaved one last breath, and collapsed to the floor.

A single gunshot rang out, reverberating against the barn walls and echoing inside the vaulted ceiling. Ridley’s rat leaped a foot into the air, spun around one full turn, and then dropped to the floor. It convulsed and kicked for nearly a half minute before lying motionless.

From behind the old tractor, Sheriff Malcolm emerged, his service revolver in hand. Ridley looked angry and surprised as the sheriff approached, looked down at the dead rat, and walked over to Mosby lying in the corner. He bent over him and felt for a pulse. There wasn’t one.

“Why’d you do that?” Carl said, more concerned for the loss of his rat than a dead Kirk Mosby.

“Because it had to be done,” the sheriff said, “for your sake.”

The sheriff holstered his weapon and walked back to where Carl was standing. He eased the shotgun from Carl’s arm and set it upright against the wall.

“How long have you been here?” Carl said.

“Since you came into the barn with Mosby. I followed him here tonight. And it’s a good thing I did.”

“Why?”

"Because there's a dead man in your barn, Carl. You'll have to account for it."

"But you saw what happened," Carl said. "I didn't kill him. You know that. You heard what he said. He admitted murdering my daughter."

"I heard it," the sheriff said. "But do you think anyone would believe me if I told them what I witnessed here tonight? I'd lose my position, maybe be ordered to undergo psychiatric evaluation myself. I've got two more years before I retire, Carl."

"But I didn't kill him."

"Yes you did, Carl. The twisted unbelievable thing you created caused his death. Just as Dr. Frankenstein was responsible for the deaths his creation caused."

"I didn't kill him," Carl repeated. "His heart gave out. You saw it." He tapped his own chest with his finger and said, "Bad ticker."

"How would you know that?"

"Melanie told me. It was a secret the three of us kept."

"Then you knew when you planned this? You knew his heart would . . ."

"He killed my Melanie," Carl said softly.

The sheriff sat on a small barrel and rubbed his temples between his thumbs and forefingers. "This whole thing is fantastic," he said. "No one will believe it." He looked back up at Carl. "But you took a man's life, Carl and you *should* pay for it."

"Are you gonna arrest me?"

"Not before I take time to think. Put together a plausible story that's as close to the truth as I can make it without compromising my own integrity. I've got twenty-three years on the job. I don't want to screw up my retirement pension. We've been friends for a long time, Carl. But tonight, you've put me in a pickle."

"Carl Ridley phoned me after midnight," Sheriff Malcolm said. "He told me he had Kirk Mosby corralled in his barn and was holding him at gunpoint till I came to get him. When I arrived, I found Mosby lying dead on the floor."

The sheriff was addressing Mayor Albright in his office the morning following the incident. Allan Briskly, the town attorney, was also there at the mayor's request. The mayor wanted to know details and the sheriff was telling the story he had rehearsed over and over in his head, trying to strike a balance between his own moralities and bending the truth enough to keep out of harm's way. He had never considered himself a liar, but he wasn't a moralist either. The only lies he'd told were the little "white ones" everyone tells now and then. But now he'd been confronted with something different. He had to protect himself. His own self-respect was at stake. That and the sense of justice and fairness he had believed in all his adult life. Carl Ridley had committed a crime, and by all things just and holy, he should answer for what he had done. But why should he pay for Carl Ridley's crime? Why should *he* be entirely truthful and suffer the inevitable consequences?

"How did this happen?" the mayor said.

The sheriff chose his words carefully before he spoke. "We have Carl's Ridley's statement," he said.

The mayor leaned back in his chair, tented his fingers and bounced them

against his lips as he took a moment of thought. “Did Carl attack Mosby?” he said. “We all know how he felt about Kirk Mosby.”

“I don’t think so,” the sheriff said. “The autopsy report will help.”

“Seems like a strange coincidence that Mosby winds up dead in Carl Ridley’s barn,” Allan Briskly said. “What was Mosby doing in the barn? Why was Ridley there at that time of night?”

“Carl claims Mosby came to look for a bracelet he lost the night of his daughter’s murder,” the sheriff began, “one with Mosby’s initials on it. Carl, not being a good sleeper, saw Mosby standing outside his barn. The moon was full, making it easy for Carl to spot Mosby through his bedroom window. When he grabbed his shotgun and went to investigate, he found Mosby on his hands and knees searching for the bracelet, ‘sniffin’ like a hound dog,” Carl said.”

The door behind the sheriff opened and the sheriff’s deputy came in, carrying a manila envelope. He handed it to the sheriff. “Preliminary medical report,” he said, then turned and left.

“I’ll take that,” Allan Briskly said, sliding the envelope from the sheriff’s hand.

He opened the envelope and began to read the top printed page. After nearly a full minute, he looked up at Mayor Albright. “Kirk Mosby died of cardiac arrest.”

The mayor widened his eyes. “A heart attack? How does a healthy twenty-five-year-old suddenly die of a heart attack?”

“According to this, Kirk Mosby was living with congenital heart disease. The condition originated from birth. Any undue stress could cause cardiac arrest and possible death.”

The mayor considered this, and then said to the sheriff, “Was there any sign of a struggle at the scene?”

“None I could determine,” the sheriff said.

“This report says there wasn’t a mark on the body,” Allan Briskly added. “Not so much as a scratch.”

“Are you suggesting there was no crime committed?” the mayor said to him.

“The report corroborates Carl Ridley’s statement,” the sheriff said. “Carl admitted he and Mosby had words, and eventually a heated argument ensued. During the shouting and arm waving, Mosby suddenly began to gasp for air, grabbed his chest and fell to the floor. Carl swears he never laid a hand on him.”

The mayor leaned back in his chair, tented his fingers again and touched them to his lips once more. In thoughtful silence, he looked at Allan Briskly and then to the sheriff. No one said a word.

Later that morning, Carl Ridley was released without charges. He went back to his farm and buried his rat.

Sheriff Malcolm took an early retirement.



Willow Tree and the Rain Falls

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 work-
economizing 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 leftovers-
with the thunderclaps, and lack of sleep, well deserved.

— michael lee johnson

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

DIFFERENT WORLDS

by lisa finch

The doorbell rings. It's that kid again, my grandson Todd's friend. The one with the biggest earrings I've ever seen and the strange tattoos. I answer the door, because everyone else in this house is busy screaming at each other. I shake my head. My family is clearly ...

Dysfunctional.

I picture the word in the air with a cartoon ball bouncing over the syllables. But I push this thought away. They're family, after all. However odd we are, I know the troll at the door must come from something far worse.

The troll grins and says, "Sup." His eyes are dark and empty like a doll's.

"Fine, thanks," I say, supposing this is an appropriate response. "Lovely day." I look past him into the morning sky and see a single white star, twinkling at me beside a sliver of a moon.

"Righteous," he says. I blink. What does that mean? I wonder.

I can't help notice as he saunters by that his pants don't even cover his underwear-displaying arse. I follow him into the living room where all hell has broken loose.

"I can't find my cell phone!" Todd hollers like a two year old. His parents scramble around to find it, because he won't leave home otherwise. Also, he's going to miss the school bus. Again.

I can't help but chuckle to myself at the irony as I open my newspaper and try to tune them out. There was a time you couldn't lose your phone; it was attached firmly to the wall. There was also a time when all a phone did was make a phone call. Now it does everything. But with all these gizmos and gadgets, kids have become forgetful. I think it rots their brains. They lose their phones along with just about everything else.

I shake my head, glad they can't see me behind my newspaper.

The shouting increases. I can't take any more.

"Why is it your parents' responsibility to find your phone?" I ask. They look at me like I have two heads.

Then I see it on the floor under the end table. A wee thing no bigger than a deck of cards.

"That it there?" I point.

Todd scoops it up and flies out the door with a mumbled, "Thanks, Gramps." His friend, Mr. Tattoo, shadows him.

I notice as they leave that at least Todd's ass is covered. His parents have that at least.

I fold my paper neatly and place it in its spot in the magazine rack. "That boy, Todd's friend, I think he is in some sort of cult."

"Oh, Dad." My son Frank sighs and rolls his eyes. I hate it when he does that.

"They all dress that way," says Janet, his wife. "The earrings, the tattoos, black make-up ..."

"But there's more about that boy. Can't you see it?"

A look passes between them. I hate that, too. They think I'm an old fool, but I've forgotten more than they'll ever know.

Though I'm likely wasting my breath, I say, "There are things we can't understand nor explain. And I'm telling you, something's not right with him."

"All right, tell me what specifically makes you think so." Frank folds his arms across his chest.

There he has me and he knows it. My son, the scientist, the man with all the algorithms and math, all the empirical truths he thinks defines the world, and even our existence. He doesn't know that there are more things in the universe than we can measure or study.

He doesn't know. More to the point, he doesn't believe. So, how can I tell him? It's been a gulf between us since he was old enough to read. He and I are from different worlds. How can he share my DNA and not have any of what makes me ... me?

"I don't know." I sigh and look across the room.

Sometimes it's lonely here.

I feel a vibration. I hear a low hum. There it is. In the china cabinet, a tiny antique cup trembles in its saucer.

There now, little fella; sit tight.

I take a deep breath and turn back to my son. "One day, that kid will make history, you'll see," I say. "But not the kind you'll want to be part of." I picture dark, murderous clouds around the boy, and his eyes, those empty, hateful eyes. "You shouldn't let Todd associate with him. It's bad magic."

I put my slippers on and go to my room to find a book. Why do I bother to try to talk to these people?

The day whiles away as usual until Todd comes home with more drama. This time a math test that he flunked and they're supposed to sign and return. The

conversation takes a nasty turn when Janet mentions tutoring. Our little world cracks in two and everything goes haywire.

My head hurts something awful when they shout like this.

"Won't you all please just SHUT UP!" I holler, a thing I almost never do.

They're frozen in place. I sit down.

"There," I say to my little family. They are paused in mid-fight.

We're blood, but they don't see things I do. They aren't interested in knowing what I know.

Sometimes it's lonely. I look at them while they are still in pause mode. Oh, I won't leave them that way forever. These days I can only make it last for a few minutes no matter how hard I try.

I get up and carefully take the cup and saucer out of the cabinet. The china pattern reminds me of my wife and better times.

I sigh.

I turn to them—this family of mine. I know I have to bring them back. I do love them. It's just an awful lot quieter when they're like this.

I snap my fingers and they spring to life, hollering as if they'd never lost a beat.

A knock on the door makes them quiet for a second. It's Todd's friend again. This time, the dark aura around his head is quite visible.

I look at their blank faces. How can they not see it?

"Party tonight, down at the ridge," he says to Todd. "Coming?"

Todd takes a step.

Don't go.

I mentally focus all that I have on those two words. His father never picked up on my thoughts. Maybe there's hope for Todd though.

He takes another step, but there's a puzzlement brewing in his face.

Don't go.

"Can't," Todd says. He shrugs. "Sorry, man. My parents are making me study."

"Suit yourself," he says and leaves, the darkness tailing him.

Todd gets a phone call. He doesn't say a word but the colour drains from his face.

"What is it?" asks his mother.

"There was an accident down at the ridge. Three kids are in hospital. Critical condition."

"What about your friend?"

Todd looks at the floor and mumbles. "He's fine. Not a scratch."

His mother fusses over him but he brushes her away.

He turns to me. "Gramps, you want to play cards or something?"

"Sure, Todd." I put away my book.

"Thanks."

He doesn't speak the word out loud. I hear it all the same.



All That Was Left

Five years of war,
fires that burned for days,
long before she was born.

In a locked trunk
belonging to her grandmother,
stored away with all that she cared for --
the silverware, her jewels, a few fine gowns,
family photographs in golden frames,
love letters posted from Berlin
tied in yellow ribbon,

two dolls
smelling of camphor,
russet stains on their dresses,
a soldier's blood -- a hidden lover?
perhaps German,
perhaps not.

She sorts the items,
some she'll sell,
some give away,
but she keeps the dolls,
a priceless mystery
in their porcelain silence.

—marge simon

[short story]

by melissa monks

LITTLE THINGS

"I need to get rid of Teddy," Jen's whispered breath set the helter-skelter strands of web in motion and its long legged resident twitched. The web spanned the wooden shelves next to the mustard colored washing machine where Jen sat swinging her legs and listening to the *thump, thump, thump* her feet made against the dented metal. She touched one of the spider's long, fragile legs and it skittered deeper into the tangle of its web. The marbled cellar spider, *Holocnemus pluchei*, was also known as the daddy longlegs for its spindly limbs that could grow as long as a man's middle finger. Jen preferred spiders to men, as the former had never infested her heart with rot. Teddy was nothing like the thin-waisted huntresses that slaughtered like belly dancers, every movement a calculated undulation. He was inanimate, an ugly stone dropped into her days. He'd appear then sink out of sight, leaving behind memories that rippled through her mind, pushing her life out of shape.

Needing its comfort, Jen prodded the spider from its web and into her hand.

Teddy had his own memories, but he always made her think of her daddy first.

When her daddy was alive there were no webs, not even under the shadowed eaves or in the darkest corner of the garage. Every Saturday evening, regardless of the weather, she'd trudge along after him with a broom and a wastebasket while he walked the perimeter of the house and yard. Jen would watch him spray each spider they found, watch the corners of his mouth hook up into a grin while the tiny thing twitched its last. Then she'd pick the dead spider up with a rubber-gloved hand and put it in the wastebasket. Its web she'd swipe away with the broom. Although he never wore protection of his own, he did allow her a mask and gloves.

"Hafto," he'd say, "or the damn neighbors will call the Goddamn kid police on me."

Later at super, after they'd cleaned up the spiders and webs, he'd tell her the same things every Saturday. "Spiders are survivors." he'd say, "They don't drag their bellies when they walk or clean themselves like insects. They won't pick up poison you leave around for them. You've got to spray them individually. Get their egg sacs too. Goddamn gut suckers will breed and breed 'til they're crawling over ya at night, tiptoeing over your dinner. Hang over a man's TV chair and drop into his beer. Disgusting." Spittle nestled in the corner of his mouth while he talked and fat, white veins pulsed in the red mass of his forehead. "You get to watch a spider die. Watch 'em suffer. I swear I've seen fear grip them. A real good feeling, I tell you. The *Latrodectus hesperus* are the toughest, those fat assed bitches take the most spray." Then he'd laugh, it came from deep in his chest and sounded hollow, like something else inside him was laughing and shoving the sound out his throat. "You remember which one *L. hesperus* is?"

"Western black widow, Sir." She'd sit with her back straight in her chair, picking at her food and watching him for any signs of eruption.

"Yep, that's real good, Jenny." He'd take a bite and pause, mulling the food around in his mouth. It was never good enough. "Hey, a little less salt in the potpie next time, it's like you're trying to cure me for winter storage or something. Jesus." If he put his fork down, her stomach would drop and palms start to sweat because next he'd make her go get the switch. Otherwise he just sent her to bed hungry, "You'll go to bed without dinner. I'll choke this shit down, I guess." His steely blue eyes would look her up and down. "Go."

Some nights she'd hear the *pft pft pft* of his insecticide sprayer in her dreams and wake with her chest seized up and her bed soaked with sweat. Lying sleepless in her room for hours, watching the night march its shadows across her wall, she'd wonder how such a little sound could be so terrifying.

She could hear it still, *pft pft pft*, as she blew a puff of air at the spider making its careful way up her arm. It stopped in the sensitive hollow opposite her elbow, a place where wants collected, pooled, waiting to be tickled away by probing feet. She straightened out her elbow, prompting the spider to crawl upward again. The cellar spider's steps along her skin were twitchy, like a tender pulse moving up her arm. It paused again on her shoulder, familiar, a fragile killing pet. Jen shivered in the hot mudroom. She never could have explained it to her daddy, he would have beaten her for it, but she was kin to spiders.

As the spider whispered along her collarbone, the black flap in the bottom of the mudroom door waggled, then exploded inward. In a rush of fur and pride a floppy eared dog with a stiff, half-eaten rat held tightly in its jaws pushed through the doggy door. It bounded over to Jen and dropped its prize at her feet, staring up at her with a lolling tongue and eager eyes, its tail swishing back and forth across the concrete floor. Jen lowered her head and shook it. Jasper. She nudged the spider off her shoulder and into her hair and slid off the washer. She grabbed some gardening gloves from a nearby shelf and shooed the dog away from the rat.

"I see the neighbors have been throwing their dead stuff over the fence again. If only we had a rabid badger on hand ..." She held the half rat up to her nose

and frowned. "This one has poison all over it. I can smell it. Why would you eat this? You're smarter than that." Jasper's ears drooped and he lowered his soft brown head. Hanging onto the rat by the tail Jen lifted it into a plastic grocery bag and tied it up with a double knot. With Jasper at her heels she went outside. A flagstone path led around the back of the house to a wooden gate. Jen spun the combination on the lock and pushed through the gate. On the side of the house the garbage can stood against white clapboard siding covered in compact funnel weaver nests. Standing with the dead rat in its funerary plastic, Jen considered the webs. Tucked into the overlap between the clapboard planks a hundred or so Agelenidae rualena had spun tube-like webbed dens surrounded by flat, triangular sheets of web. The spiders would lie in wait in the web tunnels and pounce on anything that touched the flat web spread out before it. She poked at one of the webbed tunnels and watched the veiled rust and cream colored spider wriggle inside. She envied their small lives. Their milky white caves. Simplicity. No memories. No pain. Jasper whined at her side and she shot him a silencing glance as she dumped the dead rat in the garbage can. As the green lid slammed down she turned to the dog, his tail wagged less enthusiastically and he cocked his head to one side. She scratched behind his drooping ears and let sorrow make its home between her ribs.

"Jasper, you've been poisoned. You're going to die, soon. Hopefully it will be quick and painless, but not much ever is."

Across the street a lawn mower growled and sputtered to life. Jen spat out a curse and spun around. The man mowing his lawn was shirtless with skin the color of sour milk, a meager belly barely overspilled his stiff, dark blue jeans. She watched him push the lawn mower from his tippy toes, needing his full body weight to force the mower across the shaggy lawn. Teddy. She turned and walked back around the house. Slamming the gate behind her.

The image of Teddy's bony back arched over the lawn mower like a malnourished troll followed her inside and she stood in the middle of the mudroom floor with her hands balled into fists. Jasper swept past her and flopped down on the cool kitchen linoleum. Nausea spread like fire through her belly and licked up into her chest. The past was bitter going down and worse coming back up. She forced herself to take deep breaths, to focus on the scents of soil and clean laundry that mingled in the mudroom. But it was pointless, like trying to smooth out rough water with her hand. Her nerves felt like tense trap lines, her synapses fired venom. With her heart pounding Jen crept through the mudroom and kitchen to the big picture window in the living room. The drapes were closed and she pulled them apart like they were hundred year-old tissue paper she didn't want to rip. Across the street, Teddy had cut the motor and was struggling to detach the full bag from the mower. Even his muscles were skinny.

"Little things are the most dangerous," Jen said through the window to his struggling form. Teddy had whispered it in her ear once. "Little things are the most dangerous, and that's why they all have to die," it was just after he'd moved in across the street with his mom. They'd moved because he'd been severely bullied at his old high school. At first they'd talked in the street, leaning over the handlebars of

their bikes. That was the end of summer, before their Sophomore year. Teddy was a scrawny blond lurker with asthma and a mullet.

Two days before the first day of school, sitting on her front porch eating creamsicles, Jen had told him that her dad was an exterminator and watched dismayed as his eyes lit up like a pin ball machine. He'd begged her for weeks after that to show him her dad's equipment and poison. She gave in when he stopped asking.

"It's called a wand, but it ain't magic," he'd said one chilly November afternoon in her garage, waving the long metal sprayer under her nose so she could smell the acrid pesticide. When she showed him her father's hoard of banned DDT, and antique bottles of embalming fluid, arsenic, laudanum, some with their original contents, he'd put his hands on his hips, a wheezy squeal escaped his lips as he nodded his head so hard Jen thought it might fall off. Her father had collected other weird things Teddy liked to look at, too. He had shelves crammed with jars of deformed animals floating like ghosts in formaldehyde—two headed kittens, birds with extra wings, a puppy with its heart on the outside, monkey brains, a preserved human hand.

And there were bones too, a necklace made of human teeth, a femur allegedly stolen from the corpse of a man executed in the electric chair, a Christmas wreath made out of hundreds of bacula and a gaudy red and gold ribbon, a babirusa skull with tusks curling up toward its eyes. Teddy would spend hours with her, while she dusted and polished the jars and bones and remnants of human and animal misery. He never asked about the objects, he only asked where her father had gotten them, how he found the stuff, why he loved each piece, what his favorite food was, what music he listened to, which oddity was his favorite. He never asked Jen if she liked dusting the stuff.

Across the street Teddy still struggled with the full mower bag, heaving his body forward to tug it over the lawn. Halfway to the garbage can he dropped the bag and doubled over with both fists jammed into his chest. Jen watched his body spasm on the freshly cut grass, his mouth gaping open in a feckless bid for air, his back arched, hands clawing at the sky. It was for the best she couldn't hear his struggle, his whining wheeze made her itch to hold his red face under a bathtub full of icy water until the silence was permanent. Until not even his memory remained.

She watched him roll back and forth on the grass, ramming a shaking hand into his pocket. He came out with a yellow inhaler, fumbled taking off the cap, and dropped the entire apparatus in the grass. Jen smiled watching him on all fours, his mouth still gaping open as he groped for his life line. He finally picked it up and crammed it in his mouth. He knelt in the grass and sucked hard on the plastic mouthpiece, his cheeks expanding and contracting like a bellows. With a visible shudder, Teddy collapsed backward on the grass, lying with knees bent and his arms out to his sides. He could be dead. Jen realized her chest ached from holding her own breath. But he coughed, a great racking hack, his fingers clutching the short grass as his body convulsed. Even through her dirty windows she could see his chest rising and falling as he lay on his back catching his breath. Living.

Jen yanked the drapes closed. A spider fell from the dusty folds of crepe wool and sprinted for cover. The spider she'd put in her hair when Jasper had surprised her with the rat climbed down onto her forehead. Its gentle footfalls raised goosebumps on her skin and eased her nerves. She walked back through the kitchen and into the mudroom to the spider's web. A fly struggled among the tangle of threads. Its wings buzzed furiously against its prison as Jen urged the spindly predator from her forehead to her fingers and set it back in its home. The spider immediately set to work. It held the fly at a distance with its long legs to avoid being injured as it wrapped the fly in silk. When the prey was suitably restrained, the spider delivered a fang-load of venom to its head. The venom would liquefy the fly inside its own exoskeleton. Jen watched the show and day-dreamed about having fangs of her own.

Jen sat at the breakfast table drinking coffee and scanning eBay on her laptop with easy flicks of her fingers. Daddy's illness had eaten up any savings he had and his pest control business had never been much more than him, his big Dodge Adventurer, and his love of watching helpless things die. But the oddities he'd collected over the years had turned out to be worth something. Jen figured out she could buy and sell online and at flea markets to keep herself afloat and eventually she learned the trade and became a respected name in the oddities and antiques community. She was munching wheat toast with strawberry cream cheese and examining a 19th century dental kit when Jasper hobbled into the room. He lurched forward, his limp hind legs made purchase on the slick linoleum, skittered, then gave out. He collapsed in a heap in the middle of the floor.

"I told you," Jen said. Jasper whined. She closed her laptop and took a last swallow of coffee. Then she knelt by the old dog. Jasper panted and whimpered while she stroked his soft fur, "Let's get you to the vet, huh?" She patted his head and went to get a blanket for the drive to the vet. He shouldn't suffer. Little things should never suffer.

Outside, Jen wrenched open the door of the sky blue Dodge and braced for the smell. He'd been dead for two years but Daddy's scent still lingered in the cab of the truck. Bitter chemicals, his favorite cologne, a sickly sweet scent called Eau D'Amour, and putrefaction.

"That's your body eating itself." She could hear him say it, see him pulling some unidentifiable, greasy bit of road kill from the bench seat and grinning at her.

"It's called enzymatic decomposition," she'd remind him with her nose covered, just to see the flash of shame flicker across his face.

"I teach the lessons here." His jaw tight. Hand full of gray-red goo. Coming at her. Always coming at her.

She leaned into the truck and laid the blankets across the seat, folded one end for a pillow, and tucked the length of it in between the seat and back cushion. When she stood, a breeze caught a folded piece of loose leaf paper tucked under the windshield wipers and it fluttered, waving at her. She reached around and grabbed it.

*Jen,
I'm still interested in buying this truck and anything else your dad had. He was
truly a great man.
Teddy*

Jen crumpled the note into a ball in her palm, squeezing so hard she thought she'd wring the ink from the page. Then she tossed it in the recycling bin and went back inside for Jasper.

At the screen door leading into the kitchen she could hear his labored breathing. He still lay on the cold linoleum, his side heaving with every breath, his pink tongue stuck to the kitchen floor like a strip of fly paper.

"I'm so sorry, Jasper." Jen ran her hand along his length. He pumped his front legs, nails clicking on the hard floor. His back legs were limp, useless in his attempted run from death. Jen covered his rolling eyes with her hand. She looked wildly around the kitchen for anything to end his suffering. Knives, plastic bags, rat poison, blunt and heavy things, awkward, messy, unkind things. A high-pitched keening rose from Jasper's throat as Jen mentally ran through the cabinets for something quick and painless. Painless. Painless. There was no such thing. Jasper would not live long enough to make the drive to the vet.

"It's almost over," she said, stroking his head, her other hand still covering his eyes.

Jasper was dying just like Daddy. Gasping, gurgling, his eyes rolling, straining so hard for one good breath. Just one. Sickness had come on quick with her father, years of exposure to poison had left his lungs looking like burnt, bubbly meatloaf. One morning Jen heard his thick, wet cough, like a diseased volcano, erupting from his bedroom and for the next six months he'd lingered. If she stood in his vacant bedroom now, she could still hear his body wracking coughs and smell the capsaicin cream he insisted she rubbed on his chest. For much of his sickness his lungs had been too weak to speak. He tried though, hissing her name, "Jenny. Jenny. I can't eat this crap. You trying to starve me? Little bitch. Jenny. Jenny." Hissing like a cat, every word spat out at her. A long, low moan was the last sound Jasper made. Daddy's was an apology, cut short by the pillow Jen shoved in his face. She let her hand slip from Jasper's dead body and let her body slip to the floor. Lying on her back on the cool linoleum Jen watched the network of spiderwebs covering the ceiling float and ripple. Invisible air currents moved the webs, invisible poison had killed Jasper.

"Maybe little things are the most dangerous," Jen said to the spiders hanging above her. An idea rippling through her mind, a thought she didn't want to articulate to herself. Not yet. She pushed herself up, stepping over Jasper's already cooling body on her way outside.

Inside the sky blue Dodge the musky scent from Jasper's blankets mingled with Daddy's stink. Jen shuddered as she pulled the blankets from the truck and slammed the door.

"What's up?" The pinched voice startled her and she dropped her bundle.

"Teddy," Jen said. She turned, the blankets at her bare feet itchy in the morning heat.

"Everything okay?" Teddy slid his open palm along the bed of the truck. "Hot today, huh?"

"Jasper died." She scooped the blankets up from the driveway and turned to leave, but Teddy's hand on her breastbone stopped her.

"That's a shame, Jen. Your dad picked a real winner with Jasper. A fine example of good breeding. Too bad he's not around to pick a replacement, too." Teddy dropped his hand from Jen's chest.

"Jasper was a mutt Daddy bought out of a box on the side of the road." Jen looked at Teddy. "But you're right, he was a good dog." Teddy stood with his hands on his hips, squinting into the sun.

"I could pick out a new one, if you want. I mean, I wasn't as close to your dad as I would've liked, but I think I got some good qualities. I mean, good ones like him. I could pick out a new dog." He rubbed the lump in his jeans' pocket where his inhaler was and nodded.

"It's okay, I'm thinking of getting a cat," she said, lying. Cats killed spiders.

"But he hated cats."

"He's dead, Teddy." Jen hugged the blankets and watched Teddy deflate into a wrinkly, sagging human balloon-skin. Finally articulating to herself the thought she'd had inside and deciding to dangle the bait in Teddy's face.

"Cats make me wheeze," he said, rubbing the back of his neck.

Jen shrugged. "I saw your note. Without Jasper around, I guess I don't need this big truck. Come to dinner tomorrow and we'll talk about you buying it. I know you've always wanted it." Trap set.

Teddy's eyes bulged like greasy blue eggs over easy. He opened his mouth, a tight, high-pitched wheeze escaped, and he shut it, snapping his teeth. Jen was waiting for the tears, but they didn't come. He just turned toward the truck and leaned his head against the hot window. His dry, stubby fingers slipped through the chrome door handle, his thumb resting on the button that unlatched the door. He rubbed his thumb over the button in slow, gentle circles while he muttered something low and unintelligible. Jen turned away, fighting the bile rising in her throat.

"I have a grave to dig." She ran, her feet pounding up the back steps.

"Wait. What time tomorrow?" Behind her, Teddy's voice was rough. Jen shivered in the baking sun and told him six thirty, sharp, before letting herself into the house and slamming the door behind her.

She dropped the blankets next to Jasper's body and marched to the mudroom. The shovels, rakes, and other gardening tools hung on the wall next to the door, they were grouped by kind and then arranged from biggest to smallest. She grabbed a long-handled shovel and took a wide brimmed hat from its peg on the back of the door. She put it on, tucking her chestnut hair behind her ears.

Outside, the sun hit her full in the face, she tilted her head back and let it burn into her skin until it prickled and beads of sweat rose on her upper lip and

forehead. Then she started across the lawn for the overgrown cherry tree her father had planted before she was born. Its spring yield had been good, at least a couple hundred dark, sweet cherries she'd picked and thrown straight into the trash.

She examined the ground on the sunny side of the tree. It was covered in cherry pits and dark splotches of bird shit, but was soft enough for digging. She adjusted her hat and sliced through the topsoil with the shovel. The sound echoed through the quiet, late morning air and made her feel purposeful. Her muscles protested under the first few shovels full of dirt, but eased as she worked under the hot sun. Only two feet down the shovel struck with a tinny reverberation. Jen wiped sweat from her eyes and knelt, scraping handfuls of dirt from the grave in search of whatever she'd struck. She uncovered the red edge of the Altoids tin first and grabbed it with two fingers. The cool of the metal crept through fingers, hand, and heart as she sat back in the grass to brush it clean. She felt it breathe in her palm, a pocket-sized beast expanding and contracting. It seethed, red white red white, as its coolness shifted to heat. The little hinges squeaked as she lifted the lid revealing a square of black plastic with gold lettering. Jen picked it out and turned the package over in her hands. A condom she'd stolen when she was sixteen. She'd pushed little wheezy Teddy up against the tree and kissed his chapped lips, whispering, "I want you," like lovers did on TV. Teddy pushed back.

"Geez, Jen, what if your dad sees us?"

"Who cares?"

"I care. I want him to think highly of me. If he doesn't need a woman, neither do I."

She'd slapped him; she still remembered how it felt, the give in his neck when her hand made contact. How it stung. How he acted like nothing ever happened, still lurked around, pestering her father. In the year after they'd graduated from high school Teddy had become her father's apprentice. Unpaid. They'd both been nineteen when he died.

She shoved the condom back into the Altoids tin and stuffed it in her back pocket to throw in the trash later and heaved another shovelful of dirt from the hole. With each shovelful she imagined the blade edge of the tool slicing into Teddy's face.

She buried Jasper wrapped in his favorite blankets and thanked him for being a friend and for showing her how to get rid of Teddy. She filled in the hole, gently at first, laying the dirt on top of Jasper and watching it cascade down his form and fill out the space around him. Once he was covered she worked faster, anxious to get out of the burning sun. She lined the plot with rocks and made a note in her phone to order a headstone, a granite one.

After she put her shovel and hat away and washed her hands, Jen examined the mudroom shelves next to the washing machine. Wrapped in thick webbing were some ancient jars of food canned by her grandmother before she'd died five or six years ago. Her grandmother had done everything old school, all heat canning, no matter what the doctors said about bacteria. Jen grabbed as many jars of green beans as she could carry and took them to the kitchen. She pried the lids off

each jar and smelled them. Surprisingly, most of them smelled edible. Those, she dumped down the sink. One smelled so rancid she had to throw it away outside, but two jars only wafted a faint hint of rotten under her nose. She capped them and stuck them in the fridge. It might not work, true, but if it did she knew she'd never get caught by the police for poisoning someone with botulism.

Teddy stood on her porch in a powder blue button-up shirt and dark denim jeans. His white Reeboks were scuffed and untied and he held his hand behind his back. He cleared his throat when Jen opened the door in bare feet, jeans, and a white T-shirt with a picture of Albert Einstein sticking out his tongue.

"I thought we'd be dressing up," he said, fingering the inhaler in his pocket.

"It's not a date and I'm not a damn banker, so why would we do that, Teddy?" Jen lowered her gaze at Teddy as he turned red then pale again.

"I brought you something. There Mom's, she's losin' em like crazy." From behind his back he brought out an empty pickle jar and shook it. Three teeth rattled against the glass. Jen grabbed it and stood aside, letting Teddy slink through the door. The last time she'd let him inside was the day Daddy died. He'd knelt at dead man's side pulling at his hair and screeching, his face a contorted, splotchy mask, like Colby Jack cheese smeared with tears and snot.

"Jesus, Teddy, you want a jar for those tears?" she'd asked him, leaning on the door jamb, killing hands coolly tucked in her hoodie pocket. When his screaming sorrow had decrescendoed to heaving sobs, she told him he could pick a memento, something of Daddy's that he connected with. He'd taken the stainless-steel pesticide canister with the hose and sprayer.

Now he walked through the foyer again, touching things. Jen set the pickle jar on a shelf.

"Where's that giant preserved kidney stone that used to be right here?" He pointed to the tea table with uneven legs.

"Sold it," she said, watching his lips tense and twitch.

"Lots of webs in here." He waggled his index finger around in the air as he walked through the doorway into the living room.

"Spiders in the webs, too. And other bugs. Crawling around."

"Your daddy wouldn't like it. Can't say I do either." He swept a web from between a bookshelf and the wall and wiped it on his stiff jeans.

"Daddy's dead. The house is mine. I'll do what I want."

"Man like your daddy still deserves respect. His memory ..." His eyes went watery and red. Jen felt heat surge through her body. Looking him over, saggy ass, inhaler clutched in his hand now, moving to his mouth, she wanted to punch him in the gut. She clenched her fists and waited for the hiss of the apparatus and his hollow breath to remind her that little things would kill Teddy.

"Hungry?" She said, pointing in the direction of the dining room. Teddy brightened, taking one more hit from the inhaler and holding the medicated mist in his mouth behind a tight grin.

"You always were a good cook," he said as they crossed back through the foyer

and into the formal dining room. The room was small and bordered by dusty wainscoting. Behind the place she'd laid for Teddy was a hutch full of Victorian medical equipment and a few small medieval torture devices. A filigreed pear of anguish shone softly in the room's dim light.

"Didn't have much choice in the matter," she said, yanking his chair from under the dusty oak table and pushing it in for him as he sat. She took her seat and watched him unfold his napkin and toss it on the table next to his plate. He frowned as he poked at the meal with his finger.

"You dished it up for me already," he said, making it sound like an accusation and wiping his gravy wet finger on his pants. Jen picked up her napkin and gave it a snap to straighten it out before she laid it across her lap.

"Habit, I guess. I used to do it for Daddy. This was his favorite meal actually, I thought you'd like that." She began to cut the parmesan chicken on her plate into tiny pieces but then laid her knife and fork down. Teddy dabbed his eyes with his napkin and dropped it back on the table.

"That's a great honor, thank you. Are we praying?"

"No. How's your mother, Teddy? She still working nights at her age?" Jen smiled. Teddy coughed and took three big gulps of wine.

"Naw. She's retired. Collects Santa figurines. The whole house, all year round is decorated with Santa. It's hard for a man to live like that. She needs me though, can't see too well. Can we talk about the truck?"

"I want seven. Which is a steal since it's a classic and has been taken care of. I could get double that, easy, if I put her online." She clasped her hands together and rested her chin on them, watching Teddy squirm under her gaze.

"Seven *thousand*? Geez, that's *quite* a bit." He lowered his head, staring at his food, then shrugged and started shoveling it into his mouth. Jen watched him eat, the top of his head bobbing like a buoy in rough seas.

"Damn, this is good. I can't remember the last home cooked meal I had. You're a real good cook." He wiped the gravy from his chin and grinned.

"Have more." She heaped more food on his plate and refilled his wine. He ate fast and chewed open-mouthed like a starving street kid, belching and banging his chest every few bites like he was clearing a clog. At least he'd stopped talking. When he'd finished sopping up the spaghetti sauce on his second plate Jen cleared her throat.

"So, the truck?" She raised her eyebrows and drummed her fingers lightly on the table. Teddy leaned back in his chair, rubbing his belly. He belched and chuckled.

"No way I can give you seven. I kinda hoped you'd just give it to me since your dad and me were so close." She felt his foot bump hers under the table.

"I'm not a charity, Teddy." The cold leather of his Reebok rested against her bare foot. Jen clenched her fists, digging her fingernails into her palms.

"It's not charity. It's just, like, kindness." He slid his foot up her leg. Her chair scraped across the hardwood floor like flame hissing along a fuse as she pushed it back.



“Get out, Teddy.” She stood and pointed to the door.

“Don’t be that way.” He stood, stumbled backward and Jen grabbed his elbow to steady him and steer him into the foyer.

“You look a little like him, Jenny. It’s in your eyes, you know. You and your daddy have the same eyes.” He reached for her. She slapped him hard and sent him reeling. He spun sideways and tripped, landing on his backside. Jen watched him crab walk backward as she grabbed a crude hand axe from the wall, a fist-sized stone bound to a curved antler tine. She hefted it, feeling its weight and reeling from the sudden rush of bloodlust. An airy squeal, like a perforated scream, escaped Teddy’s mouth. He sucked in a breath and waved his hands in surrender.

“Okay. Okay. I’ll leave,” he said, flipping over and using the door handle to pull himself up. He stumbled out with his head down and his hands thrust in his pockets. Jen slammed the door behind him. She leaned against it until her tense body quit trembling. After a few minutes she forced her breathing into a regular pattern and set the heavy hand axe down on the wobbly tea table. She wanted Teddy dead, but she didn’t want to pay for it.

In the kitchen she rinsed the dishes and drank the rest of the open bottle of wine. She picked up a small Mason jar filled halfway with pale green syrup and rinsed the fetid bean juice down the sink. A vivid black and iridescent green jumping spider crouched near the soap dispenser and Jen felt her chest tighten as she watched it skitter along the counter. Next to the soap sat the dirt encrusted Altoids tin.

For two days she watched Teddy’s house. On the afternoon of the second day, EMTs wheeled him out on a gurney, a sheet covering his stupid face. The bacteria had paralyzed his already-weak lungs, just like she expected. Jen smiled and opened the drapes wide; she wondered if Teddy’s mom could get on without him.

In the back yard, she tossed the Altoids tin and its contents over the fence and wished the neighbors a lifetime of bad memories.

Road Buggies, Recession, Depression, Obama

Faith is here, but so is fear.
Mirror held reflection vision of our times.
Skeleton bone, starvation, and Indian folklore;
George W. Bush, Yale playboy drunk, transition,
best jackass of the decade candidate,
layover, hangover, fussy cat eater--
residual economic leaves that were left over's
convenient forgot to rake, residual links.
Daddy asked me to come home to the oil fields
comfort, and keep my mouth shut.
Sky blues, anxieties touch nerves, resorts
to prayers, however do you define it: Muhammad
drenched in Islam and child perversion,
Christianity
Jesus Christ no sin, Buddhism many gods
in a shack, a sling shot for hope.
Buddha, the wasted years, the big belly
that has always needed a diet.
All are sinners of the clove and the garlic.
Piles of money mount in an Arab land.
Wasted dollars in Iraq that could have been
used for health care.
Simple sentences poetic and prose,
syntax undefined in desert sand nights.
Notes, bitches to myself:
\$50,000 Hummer,
struts bumping
up down
pop holed streets.
Recession, depression, Obama
George W. Bush.

—michael lee johnson



The Victorian Era: When Death was Grand and the Dead Were Puppets

by pat bussard

Anyone living in the Victorian era witnessed the rise of Spiritualism, a new way of looking at the world and the other world—a belief system in which it is thought that the dead can and do wish to communicate with the living. These new mediums, or communicators with the dead, opened the door for public understanding about the existence of ghosts and spirits. Their legacy is that we now have the opportunity to seek out the company of ghosts.

This period in history also gave the world a number of other events, such as grinding poverty for the masses and common diseases with no cures. The result was early death for a number of the inhabitants of the cold, dank dwellings in which the average person lived.

As the Victorian Age is most closely linked to Queen Victoria of England, after whom the era is named, this article will focus on the death and burial customs of that area of the world. The following is a very quick tour of this era and how it developed its unique character and obsession with death. Queen Victoria ruled from 1837 to 1901 and, during that time, there were a number of events that culminated in the death culture of the Victorians.

The Industrial Revolution saw factories opening in towns around the country. These towns drew the desperately poor to them. Many of the poor had been farmers, but because the wealthy wished to buy the cheapest goods, they imported the same products that were being raised by these local workers. In just a very short time, two-thirds of the farmers were out of a job and looking for work, anywhere, doing just about anything, no matter how dangerous. These towns quickly became cities, whose leaders had given not a thought to urban planning or to the common people who lived in them or their needs. Even the most basic services of water and sewage were ignored.

The cities thrived and the population exploded. Because there was so much of it, cheap and disposable labor was the order of the day.

Technology and engineering were making great advances. Steam ships and the railways revolutionized travel, which had been regulated to the horse and buggy.

With the rise of a middle-class, factory and business owners, making a buck to the detriment of their employees, led to a shift in the social structure. Before this age, one was landed gentry, royalty, or abjectly poor. There had not been a true middle class. All of a sudden the currency of the day did not include a title, but the almighty buck. This is when the phrase, “Yes, they come from a good family, but penniless,” was commonly used. In other words, you could have the title, but money ruled the day.

Since, for the first time, those without the proper background could achieve a modicum of social status, it was important to show it. Middle-class homes of the day were overstuffed with furniture and their children were told they were better than other, poorer children. In short, they treated the poor as they felt they had been treated by the aristocracy.

Personal charity was a rarity; what is now commonly called philanthropy. The people in this era still believed the Queen had been anointed by God to lead the country, simply by the good fortune of her birth to the royal family. So if you had the unfortunate luck to have been born poor, it was your lot in life, pre-ordained by God himself.

So why should the rich care?

In addition to the middle-class feeling quite grand about themselves as individuals, there was that little matter of world domination as a nation. This was during the time when the quote “the sun never sets on the British empire” was accurate. Queen Victoria’s reign was marked by relative peace and expansion. During the Victorian age, the nation gained control of one quarter of the world’s total land mass and an equal percentage of its people.

*“Far as the breeze can bear the billow’s foam,
Survey our empire and behold our home,”
cried the Marquis of Westminster, in a fit of national pride.*

England was the center of the world. She called the shots and the English language became the language of commerce, law, and government. However, all of this change led to a nervous populace eager to control aspects of their world. One aspect that was constant in their world was death.

The phantom of Death was a common companion. Rich or poor, all felt the sting of the unwanted emotion of personal loss as the grim reaper took loved ones gently from their arms, or flung them from life into the hereafter.

All may have felt the agony of losing those they loved, but the poor bore the greater burden.

In the Whitechapel District of London in the 1840s, made famous by one Jack the Ripper, a laborer or servant could expect 22 years of life, a tradesman 27 years, and the upper class could live to the grand old age of 45, on average. In Liverpool,

26 years was the average for all who lived in the city during the middle of the Victorian era.

In 1899, infant mortality was still rampant. If you lived in the slums, a person could expect to lose over half of their children before they reached the age of one. The working class fared better with 274 deaths per 1,000 births, and the upper class fared the best, losing 126 babies out of 1,000. As a baseline, the current mortality rate in the U.S. according to the CIA Factbook is less than 14 (13.83) per 1,000.

People, especially children were dropping like flies. What was the cause of all this death?

The Victorians were still encumbered by archaic medicine. There were no antibiotics. Cut yourself and you could die. Have a child and you could die. Have a gum infection? Just die already. And, by the way, do it without any anesthetic, as it was not in common use yet; unless you call a good bottle of whiskey anesthetic.

Poverty prevented the masses from acquiring access to even the menial medical attention available. It was cold then too, so the lack of dependable heating systems helped to insure that the dead, both rich and poor, would be stacked like cordwood until ready for the grave.

But if you had some nice teeth, a rich person could buy them from you for a few pence, maybe enough for a bit of wood for your hearth and food for your stomach. The teeth might be set into some sort of ivory and used as fake choppers for the buyer.

By ignoring the basic needs of the burgeoning population of poor people, city leaders didn't realize that they were doing themselves a similar disservice.

In 1858, London was embroiled in what was affectionately termed "the big stink." This little known and embarrassing bit of history was the result of a corrupt municipal corporation selling drinking water pumped straight from the Thames into which the city's open sewers ran. Of course, along with the water came typhoid and cholera. It is estimated that as many as 53,000 people died because of this lack of social responsibility.

However, a few dead bodies really weren't enough to persuade Parliament to do anything about it. But the stench sure was. The smell was so overpowering that the curtains "of the Commons were soaked in chloride of lime." A bill was rushed through Parliament and became law in 18 days to provide more money to construct a massive new sewer scheme for London. Death was disappointed.

With factories billowing deadly smoke and with no EPA standards to be found, the air became as healthy to breathe as the water was to drink.

And let us not forget poverty. Yes, it was mentioned before, but it truly bears repeating.

It was a grinding, life-sucking poverty in which its victims were given no relief, had no hope, and were ground to emotional dust by the relentless onslaught of hunger, pain, and death.

The children of the poor followed their parents into the death traps of the factories, mines, and other unregulated industries.

The experience of one of these children, Patiente Kershaw, is recounted in her own words: "I never went to day-school; I go to Sunday-school but I cannot read or write ; I go to pit at five o'clock in the morning and come out at five in the evening; I get my breakfast of porridge and milk first ; I take my dinner with me, a cake, and eat it as I go; I do not stop or rest any time; I get nothing else until I get home, and then I have potatoes and meat - not meat every day."

On May 15, 1842, Patiente's testimony to her gruelling existence in the mines was gathered by Lord Ashley, when he conducted an investigation into the conditions of labour in mines. His report led to the mines Act of 1842 that prohibited the employment in the mines of children under thirteen.

All of these factors created human fodder for the burgeoning funeral industry.

The gears of the Victorian "Death Merchant Machine" churned loudly and greedily, revving into high gear upon the death of Prince Albert, husband of the Queen. She demanded that the country mourn and mourn it did, although not to the extent of the Queen herself, who remained in mourning until her death in 1901.

Because the Queen commanded such a high place in society and she had designated black as the fashionable color, and mourning as the latest trend, the rest of English society followed suit. The society of Victorian England was closed, that is to say ranks were tightly closed around issues such as titles and money. If you weren't one of them, you weren't invited to the club and had no way, such as through education, to ever gain access. However, there was an underlying fear even among the ranks of those who were socially accepted of becoming "the other." "The other" was the one who was not like everyone else, who might be too outspoken, or too promiscuous, or too much of a drinker, or partake any of a number of other vices, or who might have too many original ideas. This society would close in on its own and socially cut them off. One person being sent to social Siberia could destroy their entire family's standing in the social hierarchy, as well as its income.

Excessive mourning had become an established social custom. To ignore it was to do so at your own peril.

Because in some areas over 50% mortality rate existed among children less than one year of age, poor families as well as the rich would begin saving for their child's funeral as soon as possible, just like parents save for a college education today.

Many parents would bankrupt themselves to give a proper funeral for their loved one. To do less would be to dishonor the person and themselves in Victorian society.

There is a sad photo that exists amongst the paraphernalia of Victorian history. It depicts several young boys, brothers, who do not have shoes on their feet. Yet the family scraped enough money together to have a photograph taken in an attempt to memorialize their young sister who has died. The meaning of what the boys are doing in the photograph, such as pointing to their deceased sister's chair, is noted by the photographer on the photo. But there is one that is not mentioned. The mother's hand lies upon her stomach, where she held the baby for nine months

before her birth. Victorian prudery would not allow him to mention it in the photo. But the poignancy of its meaning is not lost on most modern observers. No adult male is pictured. Are the children without a father, the mother without a husband?

A popular poem of the time summed up the ache that Victorians' felt at the loss of life and echoes all the way into our own time.

*A light has from our Household gone,
A voice we loved is still;
A place is vacant in our Home
That never can be filled.*

The funeral industry of the time offered a vast number of accouterments for every pocketbook. Some of the most notable included mutes, whose job it was to symbolically guard the dead. These individuals would stand near the dead, either outside the church or near the door to the home. Many of the mutes had terrible reputations as drunks and rapscallions. Standard bearers were also often employed; these individuals carried poles with a black flag on the end, emulating the standard bearers of royalty. Professional mourners might also be on the payroll. These individuals had the job of wailing, crying, and fainting, which helped in Victorian culture to demonstrate the depth of sorrow felt for the recently departed. Gifts given to those who attended the funeral, invitations to the funeral itself, and the list went on . . . and on.

During this time of grand funerals, undertakers had earned the reputation of preying on the poor. In 1897, an article appeared in a professional journal concerning the "Universal Conspiracy" against their trade: "It would seem that the whole world was leagued against us ... Physicians devote all their energies to cheat him out of a funeral: life-saving appliances are invented for the same purpose, and boards of health seem to have no other object but to decrease the mortician's business ... The people should be given a fighting chance to die, in the interest of our trade." Whether written tongue-in-cheek or not, the fact that the article was written at all is indicative of the reputation of undertaker's profession at the time.

An example of a method by which the undertaker would market a funeral to a victim was written by Clarence Rook in 1899: "A series of photographs showed me what I could expect for five pounds, and the additional respectability I could attain for an extra two pound ten."

Part of the accouterments of death was fashion. To insure social respectability, women would wear full mourning for a year and one day. This garb consisted of dull black clothing without any ornamentation. This was followed by second mourning, which lasted a period of nine months. Women were allowed to wear minor ornamentation on dresses still made from dull material. The veil, the most recognizable accouterment of Victorian mourning, could be lifted and worn back over the head in public. Half mourning was a period of three to six months, during which the woman would ease back into more colorful and ornamented clothing.

The standard mourning time for a widower was two years but it was up to his

discretion when to end his widower status. As an added bonus for the men, they could go about their daily lives and continue to work. Typically young, unmarried men stayed in mourning for as long as the women in the household did.

For the death of a child a period of mourning for a year was common.

Because the need for mourning clothes was immediate, these were actually the first off-the-rack clothing items available to people. Poor folks would just dye what few clothes they already had to the required shade of black.

Mourning jewelry often included the addition of hair. The jewelry could be an intricately cast gold piece decorated by the finely woven hair of the dearly departed. The poor would often do something like braid the piece of hair, tying it with a bow, and then attaching it to a simple pin. Like the affluent woman who may have originally owned the more lavish piece of mourning jewelry, the poor woman would have worn the pieces to remember the individual whose hair they held.

There was a number of other mourning accouterments, including veils, fans, gloves, jewelry, photographs, and more.

In addition to the mourners, the home would also be decorated in a lively shade of black to denote the depth of proper sorrow that society expected of them.

Doors were draped in black crape to signify that a death had taken place within that house. Neighbors and friends knew to knock gently on these decorated doors. Some families would leave the door slightly ajar so that visitors could quietly enter and leave.

In addition, sending flowers in memory of the deceased was a well-known custom.

What may not be as well known is that the flowers would be delivered to the home, where the body was kept before the funeral. The flowers were then grouped together and made into a temporary shrine to honor the deceased. The flowers also served as a sensory mask to cover the odor of decaying flesh, as embalming was not a very uncommon practice during that time period.

One common practice during this period was to permanently memorialize the faces of the dead through photography. At one time photos were extremely expensive and beyond the means of many laborers. However, when someone died whom they loved very much, they would often pull together whatever funds they might have available to them for a final portrait of their loved one, either by themselves, or posed with the family, in as natural a position as possible.

What may seem morbid by our modern sensibilities was simply a desperate attempt by the family to grasp a moment where the dead might seem to live again. A moment made permanent through the magic of photography.

There are so many photographs of the dead of this era. However, several stand out: a portrait of what appears to possibly be twin boys, one alive and one, obviously, dead in repose; a man posed with a newspaper to give a more realistic depiction of life; a photo of a young girl with her deceased brother; a lovely young girl surrounded by her dolls. This child had probably played many hours with these beautiful dolls and they had meant a great deal to her.

One of the most disturbing is a photograph of a girl with what appears to be

her parents. The photograph of the girl is quite natural everywhere except the her eyes. It was quite common during this time to “paint in” the eyes in order for them to look more natural. The awkward positioning of her hands is also notable. The wooden stand behind her is barely visible.

Photographers of the time who specialized in post-mortem photography would advertise that they could be at the home within an hour after death in order to take the photo.

For the poor who had no rest in life, death offered but a brief respite. Until 1832, no commercial graveyards existed. Instead, the rapidly dying population was wedged into small churchyards around the city or into vaults, often teeming with the dead and subsequent disease, just below the floorboards of the church and the parishioners it held.

An 1839 description of the Enon Chapel interments follows: “This insect, a product of the putrefaction of the bodies, was observed on the following season to be succeeded by another, which had the appearance of a common bug with wings. The children attending the Sunday School held in this chapel, in which these insects were to be seen crawling and flying, in vast numbers, during the summer months, called them ‘body bugs.’ The stench was frequently intolerable.”

This chapel, in a physical space of 60 feet by 29 feet and six feet deep, interred some 12,000 bodies in a space of 20 years.

James Payne in 1867 wrote in the *Last Homes of the Londoners*:

Thirty years ago, the last home of even a wealthy Londoner was a crowded vault beneath some church hemmed in by houses; while that of the poorer sort could hardly be called a resting-place, since, sooner or later their bones had to make way for the more recently deceased and were thrown to the left and right by the grave-digger. Higher and higher grew the half-human churchyard, shutting out window after window of the many peopled houses round from outlook and air, and substituting for the one a wall of rank rich grass, whose greenness speaks not of life and spring-time, but of death and corruption and for the other, the pestilence that walketh in the noonday and the night alike. Even in the vaults of so-called fashionable churches, not only were no pains taken to render death less abhorrent, but it was positively made more hideous by circumstance. The tawdry pomp of crape and baton, of pawing horses and nodding plumes, and all the hired panoply of sorrow, went no further than the grave’s mouth.

How bad was the cemetery overcrowding? St. Martin’s churchyard, measuring 295 feet by 379 feet, in the course of ten years received 14,000 bodies. St. Marys, in the Region of the Strand, and covering only half an acre, in fifty years received 20,000 bodies. A Methodist Church in New Kent Road, beneath the floor of that church measuring 40 yards long, 25 wide, and 20 high, 2,000 bodies were found in wooden coffins, stacked one on top of the other.

Because churches charged the next generation of parishioners for temporary use of the land, they would dig up remains and send them to the Charnel House for

disposal. Out with the old and in with the new. Only, according to a grave digger in 1852, some may have been in the ground as little as three weeks. Large pits were left open until they were filled to the brim with coffins before covered with as little as a foot or so of dirt.

Thus was the deplorable state of burial grounds in Victorian England until the arrival of the Magnificent Seven in 1832. This allowed the “haves” to further separate themselves from the “have nots.”

This time the separation would occur after death. Now, because private companies could provide large, lush garden cemeteries for a price, the dead could, if not take it with them, at least surround themselves by symbols of their wealth.

For the first time and for those who could afford it, “Rest in Peace” took on a whole new meaning.

But all good things must come to an end and the death knell for the Victorian era itself began to sound.

Three things occurred in close succession that nailed the proverbial lid on the Victorian coffin:

1. The diva of death herself, Queen Victoria, passed on to her just reward, leaving the country to another monarch whose favorite color was not black.

2. World War I occurred and suddenly there were widows everywhere. The country’s morale depended on women not wearing mourning dress for extended periods of time, because now there were thousands of them.

3. WWII began and there were more widows with a different sensibility. Most of the vestiges of the Victorian Death Culture were now gone, but not forgotten.

The door of history officially closed on this interesting passage in time. A time when Death was Grand and the Dead were Puppets.



Previously published in *Thirty True Tales of the Strange, Unusual, and Macabre* by Pat Bussard

The Dance

Wooded hills above the river
where wild blossoms lay
and honeysuckle scented
skin before a last kiss
goodbye; passed well as
they succumbed to the
evening mists.

She thought about the
moonlight as silvery shadows
made plans of their own
dismissing the splutterings
of time to die away, in this
refuge for sinners where
beauty exalted spirits

once familiar to an aging
heart. With reluctance
she turned to her music,
to the Steinway sitting alone
in semidarkness. There
was a delay as she calmed
her breathing before

her heart swelled up
again with pain. Her eyes
prideful, sulky, rebellious.
She grinned as perspiration
dripped from her forehead
defining the wrinkles on
her face.

Her audience, the candle
that flared in the distance
that brought with it her
thoughts from the past-
the dead. As her hands
traveled across the piano
keys, she saw them,

and they, smoked in silence,
danced.

—morgaine moran

IAN BRADY AND ME

by denise noe

I first became aware of one of the most infamous cases of serial child murder in history when I was but a child myself. I was a teenager when my slightly younger brother Dave told me he was reading a book about the “Moors Murders.”

Upon hearing “Moors Murders,” I experienced a chill. The alliterative title was eerie.

The facts were more so. In England in the early 1960s, an unmarried couple, clerk Ian Brady and typist Myra Hindley, murdered several people simply for the thrill of committing murder. The perpetrators were in their twenties--their victims even younger. Brady had originally been arrested for murdering Edward Evans, 17-years-old. It would soon emerge that there were two other victims-- John Kilbride, 12; and Lesley Ann Downey, 10. The couple was suspected in two other cases but their involvement would not be confirmed for another decade. It turned out that their first victim was Pauline Reade, 16; they had also murdered Keith Bennett who, like Kilbride, was 12.

The motives behind the murders were bizarre. Ian Brady was fascinated by the crime committed by Richard Loeb and Nathan Leopold in the 1920s. These wealthy young men decided to commit the “perfect murder.” They murdered Bobby Franks, 14, but were soon caught because their perfect murder was full of flaws. The most infamous boo-boo was that Leopold had left a pair of prescription eyeglasses beside Franks’ corpse. Brady wanted to find out if he could succeed where Loeb and Leopold had failed.

In addition, Brady was an aficionado of the writings of the Marquis de Sade. This is not unusual as the Marquis has many fans, some of them quite respected in literary circles. What was unusual was the way Brady took certain parts of de Sade's fiction to heart. In a passage in his work, de Sade states there is no objective reason to value human life over other life. Brady apparently was deeply influenced by this idea.

Another distinctive feature of de Sade's fiction is that it often depicts adults murdering children.

Society has long attached a special taboo to adults murdering children--a taboo that continues because it is both appropriate and necessary. The size and strength differences between adults and children mean that such murders outrage the simplest concepts of fair play. Additionally, child murders are especially immoral because children have more potential years in front of them than adults. Finally, since children are the adults of the future, it is doubtful that any society that failed to strongly stigmatize child murders would long survive.

The Moors Murders were committed during the "Swinging Sixties," a period famous (some would say infamous) for startling changes. It was the self-consciously "mod" era of The Beatles, the miniskirt, Twiggy, psychedelic drugs, and psychedelic fashions. During this era, many old values were being questioned and some of them discarded by those who considered themselves "hip." However, the taboo against adults murdering children was not one of them. The swinging hippie and the stodgy old fogey were united in their horror at the crimes of Brady and Hindley.

Prior to committing the crimes that would shock the world, Brady decided that human life had no "objective" value and there was no reason he should not snuff it out just for the experience of it. He was certain he could commit the "perfect murder" that authorities could not possibly solve. Girlfriend Hindley adopted Brady's warped value system and agreed to commit murder with him.

Gender and the Moors Murders

Part of what caught public attention in the Moors Murders was Hindley's gender. Of course, a woman killing a child is not surprising. Women are around children more than men so it is not surprising that women might be *more likely* than men to kill children. Indeed, mothers are the most common culprits when small children are killed. Killings of newborns often occur after an unmarried young woman hides her pregnancy and/or denies it and--after giving birth in secret--kills the baby. Other killings of children by mothers can be the result of postpartum depression or the far more rare--but far more serious--postpartum psychosis. In addition, female child-caregivers--mothers, babysitters, nannies, daycare workers, and relatives--often suffer a loss of temper that has horrendous consequences. The public does not necessarily revile women who kill children. Indeed, murderous mother Andrea Yates received an outpouring of sympathy because many people feared she had been driven to madness by the 24/7 responsibilities of caring for the five children she drowned.

The crimes Myra Hindley committed against children were profoundly different from those of most women who kill youngsters. Her crimes were premeditated. She knowingly and deliberately lured children to their deaths. She did so knowing not only that they would be murdered, but that they would be sexually molested or raped before getting killed. Thus, she was the target of seemingly endless public outrage and vituperation.

Her gender was important in another way because it is unlikely Brady alone could have perpetrated these murders. Children are routinely warned to beware of men who are strangers. However, when Hindley--a woman--offered youngsters a ride and/or requested their help in searching for a lost item, they automatically trusted her.

In one of her many desperate bids for parole--she died in prison--Hindley accurately said, "It is because I am the woman that I'm the double devil. People expect a woman to be a protector of children."

Gender also played a role in the trial. The defense made a motion asking that women be excluded from the jury pool. The judge granted the motion--presumably on the grounds that women would be especially prejudicial about crimes against children. The motion, the reason for it, and the easy granting of it, seemed oddly ironic since one of the two defendants was a woman.

Buried on Saddleworth Moor

While tried, the couple was labeled the Moors Murderers because they had buried two of their then-known victims on Saddleworth Moor. They were caught before being able to dispose of last victim Edward Evans. It would turn out that Pauline Reade and Keith Bennett were also buried there. Reade's remains have been recovered; the search for Bennett's remains continues as of this writing.

During the trial, Hindley passed a note to Brady in which she whimsically observed, "I didn't murder any moors. Did you?"

More than thirty years after their incarceration, Brady commented on the role of the media-bestowed title in stirring continuing public interest in his crimes. He commented, "Jack the Ripper, after a century, it fascinates them because of the dramatic background; capes, cobbled streets--the moors is the same thing. *Wuthering Heights* and all that, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*." Here Brady makes a valid point. His crimes continue to grab headlines, in large part, because "Moors Murders" has literary resonance.

I decided to write to Brady, using his observation on the title bestowed on his crimes as the hook to start a correspondence. I should add that I often write to prison inmates. I write to them because I have questions for them or because I wish to discuss relevant issues with them. In doing so, I try to keep in mind the uncomfortable but vital truth that, regardless of the horror a person has caused, he or she is a human being. One experience I had underlines this fact. In my first conversation with Charles Manson, we first talked about the weather. You read right--human beings appear to be constructed to talk about the weather when they

meet and Manson and I discussed the weather. I also had a coughing fit during the conversation and had to apologize to him for it. He graciously accepted the apology.

Although I often put “Dear” even in letters to inmates, I omitted that salutation in my initial letter to Ian Brady and addressed him simply as “Mr. Brady.” I told him I thought he made an “astute observation” when he said his crimes continue to attract attention, at least in part, because of the literary associations conjured up by the title “Moors Murders.” I then noted that when he and Hindley perpetrated the crimes, neither of them thought of themselves as the “Moors Murderers.” I asked Brady if he found the “Moors Murders” title “appropriate” or “somehow misleading.”

He wrote back. His first letter complained of his treatment by authorities and reminded me about his book, *The Gates of Janus*, that “can be accessed on Amazon and other main book websites.”

I wrote him again. In that letter I promised I would never ask if he had remorse because I believe that his brain, and that of criminals who commit similar crimes, is structurally different from that of other people. It is my belief that his brain simply lacks the capacity for empathy. In my letter to Brady, I noted that most people suffer a deep sense of pain when they wrong another person. People who kill accidentally are often terribly tormented afterwards. Accidental killers often express deep remorse and humbly apologize to the loved ones of those they killed. I asked him if he agrees with me that his brain is structurally different from that of people who, unlike Brady, suffer when they cause suffering to others. I referred to his “fellow serial murderers” as lacking empathy.

In his reply, he took me to task for failing to “include the adjective ‘petty’” in referring to other serial murderers because they do not cause nearly as many deaths as those Brady calls “the most prolific serial killers” such as “Bush, Blair, Obama” and “past notables” such as “JFK, Nixon, Thatcher.” He asks, “If the *petty* serial killers are stereotyped as lacking empathy and other qualities the ‘ordinary’ citizen claims to possess, how would one adequately categorize the *major* political, military, corporate global destroyers, who thrive and smile through their abundant crimes, *unaffected* and *unpenalized*?” He continued that he had “analyzed the double standards of acceptable society in my *book* more comprehensively.” Later he even asserted that prison inmates may “possess a higher degree of *empathy*” than the “*conformist* citizen.”

In a reply letter, I told Brady that I believed there could be some confusion between us on the meaning of the word “empathy.” In *his* reply, Brady sent me a cute card that had a series of photographs of dogs, cats, and horses on the cover. In answer to my assertion about confusion, he said he has long “studied psychology” along with classic literature and that there was no confusion on his part about the meaning of “empathy.” He again pointed to the pillars of society, particularly politicians, who give orders that lead to far more deaths than Ian Brady or anyone like him has caused.

Brady's pointing to socially approved killings in order to downplay the seriousness of his own crimes reminded me of something another serial murderer, Lawrence Bittaker, wrote in a letter to me. Like Brady, Bittaker performed his crimes as part of a murder team. Bittaker and friend Roy Norris raped and murdered five teenaged young ladies in California in the 1980s. In a letter, Bittaker suggested his mind might not be abnormal since an Allied bomber pilot helped turn "a German city in flaming rubble, killing 100,000 people, mostly civilians, in WWII."

What do I make of these analogies? Firstly, I have to grant that these murderers may have a point. The simple fact of the matter is that society's leaders often make decisions that result in the deaths of far more people than are murdered by criminals like Brady and Bittaker. However, the analogy quickly breaks down--at least regarding those leaders who are "decent"--and it is my belief that, at least in the West, most leaders are decent, moral, empathic people. A prime minister or president may give orders that lead to massive numbers of human deaths but they do so in the belief (correct or not) that more lives will be saved in the long run by the unfortunate casualties involved.

Brady, Bittaker, and others like them took lives simply for their own pleasure, or what they hoped would be their own pleasure.

Brady probably denies lacking empathy because he does not want to admit to being defective in any respect, although his crimes made his emotional defects glaringly obvious. My opinion is that if he possessed normal empathy, that moral emotion would have stayed his hand when Pauline Reade, John Kilbride, Keith Bennett, Lesley-Ann Downey, and Edward Evans begged him to stop hurting them.

Ian Brady is intelligent and articulate. He could have contributed much to society had he directed that intelligence wisely. He is yet another example of the importance of scientific research into psychopathy and a possible treatment for this most destructive of mental disorders. So much was wasted when Brady took lives. So much will be gained when we find effective treatments for psychopathy. Brady has said that there is little left for him but to die incarcerated. In that, he is quite correct

Let us all hope that scientific research into psychopathy will hasten the day when those who might have become as destructive as Ian Brady and Myra Hindley can be helped to live as decent and contributing members of the human family.

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The Prowler

a review by denise noe

The Prowler is a 1951 black-and-white motion picture in the film noir genre that upends some noir traditions and bravely strides past others. Joseph Losey directed this tight little gem. The screenwriter is listed as “Hugo Butler” but it has long been known that Dalton Trumbo, then-blacklisted, was the screenwriter.

The film opens with the audience seeing pretty housewife Susan Gilvray (Evelyn Keyes) through a bathroom window. Sweet, pretty music plays in the background as she cheerfully pampers herself. Then she suddenly looks in the direction of the window--and the audience--lets out a brief scream, gasps, and yanks down a curtain. The music shifts to an ominous sound.

The understandably frightened woman summons the police officers to her large, luxurious, Spanish-style home. Cops Webb Garwood (Van Heflin) and Charles “Bud” Crocker (John Maxwell) arrive. They cannot locate the peeping tom who scared Susan. The cops prepare to leave. As Webb and Bud chat, Bud tells Webb, “You should have a hobby.” We learn that Bud and his wife are dedicated rock hounds, who make excursions into deserts in search of good rock specimens.

I have to admit that the introduction of rock collecting helped endear this film to me as rock collecting is one of my major hobbies and interests. (However, a major boo-boo is made when a character refers to “rockology” as there is no such area of study. The study of rocks is called “petrology” but this word sounds so much like petroleum that the filmmakers probably believed they were better off fabricating a discipline that sounds less like the study of petroleum and more like the study of rocks.)

Soon after the peeping tom incident, Webb returns to the Gilvray home,

ostensibly to “check up on” Susan but really to flirt with her. He learns that she once aspired to a career as an actress but “lack of talent” derailed those aspirations. Thus, she married husband John Gilvray (Sherry Hall), the host of a radio program. She wanted to move into their large home because she envisioned many kids. There is an evident regret, a poignant sadness, when she acknowledges that she and her husband “do not have them.” She never specifies the reason that the marriage is childless but the audience easily gets the idea that it is John, not Susan, who cannot have children. Thus, as his wife, she cannot bear the babies she craves.

Part of what makes *The Prowler* wonderfully creepy is that, for much of the early part of the film, her husband is unseen yet peculiarly present as an oily disembodied radio voice announcing, “The cost of living is going down” and ending, “I’ll be seeing you soon, Susan.”

To their surprise, Susan and Webb discover they hail from the same small town in Indiana. However, Webb noted that Susan lived in the area “with sidewalks and lawns” while he languished on the wrong side of the tracks. Webb was a high school basketball star. He received a scholarship for college. “What happened?” Susan wonders--along with the audience. At college, Webb argued with his coach who denounced him to the Athletic Director. “They cut off my money,” the dissatisfied Webb recalls so that he is now, in his own words, “just a dumb cop.” He is obviously bitter at the bad breaks he has experienced and that he is a police officer rather than having advanced to a high-paying, white collar position that might buy him the sort of fancy home in which Susan resides.

One striking element that distinguishes *The Prowler* from most film noir is that the story shows an awareness of social/economical dichotomies that are rarely highlighted in this genre. That the United States is far from a classless society is emphasized in an interesting way. Although the affluent may tend to believe themselves of a superior society, there are also the victims of bad breaks such as Webb whose bitterness drives him to an obvious envy for the way Susan and her husband live. Similarly, the film shows an awareness of the gap that exists between rural America and urban America. Few film noirs from this era make distinctly obvious sociological observations embedded within their story lines.

When Webb first makes romantic and sexual advances, an outraged Susan repeatedly slaps his face and insists he leave. “What do you think I am?” she asks. Her tone when she asks this classic question is odd--a kind of despair tinges the outrage because she is attracted to Webb--and is not satisfied in her marriage.

However, the cop “prowls” around and she succumbs to his overtures. Their romance is threatened when Susan reveals that her husband suspects it. But Webb cannot let go. He wants Susan, he wants the money she will get if her husband dies, and he begins thinking about how easy it might be for a cop to get away with murder. Things spiral out of control as Webb sheds law enforcer for lawbreaker.

Keyes gives a performance that proves she was richly talented. Her portrays Susan as shocked, bored, frustrated, in love, afraid, and disillusioned at all the right times and in all the right amounts. She is not a classic femme fatale, for *The Prowler* is a film noir with a *homme fatale*. Van Heflin’s mild manner is used

here to excellent effect as it permits the suggestion of roiling emotions below the surface. Van Heflin's Webb is cold-blooded, conniving, and ruthless. However, he also captures sympathy because of his frustrations, bad breaks, and his seemingly genuine love for Susan.

This reviewer will not be giving too much away when she reveals one vital aspect of the film--the first prowler is never discovered in *The Prowler*. The viewer has to wonder why there does not even seem to be any interest on the part of the filmmakers in following up on this. Thus, a peculiar puzzle is left open--could that initial prowler have been Webb? Did the "dumb cop," acting as a frustrated and wily man, have put the entire bizarre scenario into motion?

A fascinating part of *The Prowler* is the curious way in which it indicts the audience. After all, is not any audience in some sense acting the peeping tom?

As previously mentioned, the film is outstanding for the way it brings into view tensions between the upper classes and the working classes as well as tensions between those living in, or originating from, urban and rural environments. It also draws out a conflict that is often invisible--the possible conflict for a woman between marriage and motherhood. While oceans of ink are expended on conflicts between marriage and career for women or motherhood and career for women, very little is explored about the possibility that marriage and motherhood could be conflict for the female gender. The truth is that women must often choose between putting husband or children first and may even have to choose between their marriage vows and having children at all.

Susan yearns for the large house in which she resides to be filled with little ones. She wants a life filled with diaper changes and early morning feedings. We are given to understand that she cannot have babies if she stays married to John Gilvray. Thus, she is torn between loyalty to her husband and marriage versus her deep desire for motherhood.

The Prowler is a deeply nihilistic motion picture in which symbols are adroitly employed. Webb weaves a skillful and fatal "web" of lust-turned-love around Susan. In contrast to most noirs, which take place solely within the urban jungle, *The Prowler* takes its characters into a literal desert. The brutal, dry landscape helps underline the ultimate hopelessness of its central characters. Susan and Webb seek refuge in a ghost town only to find, quite appropriately, that there is no escaping the "ghost" Webb created. One of the most chilling moments in the film occurs when the besieged couple is in the desert and the dead man seems to intrude upon them in a truly unexpected fashion. Fans of film noir will find a special resonance in this *The Prowler*.



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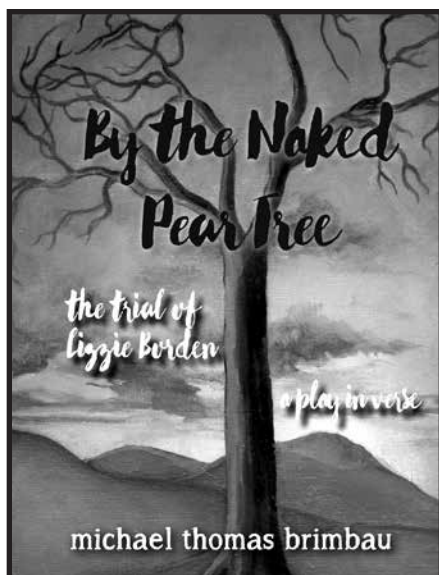
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Hired by Euripides to allusively defend Lizzie Borden, Darrow invites his colleague and adversary, William Jennings Bryan, to a challenge, giving the dubious Bryan a chance to play prosecutor—to change the course of history, and help convict Lizzie Borden of the murder of her parents. In doing so, the two men agree to a friendly game of poker. Winner of the ensuing card game gets to decide the fate of the accused. But the outcome is not what one would expect, and those who tamper with history are left to reap the consequences.

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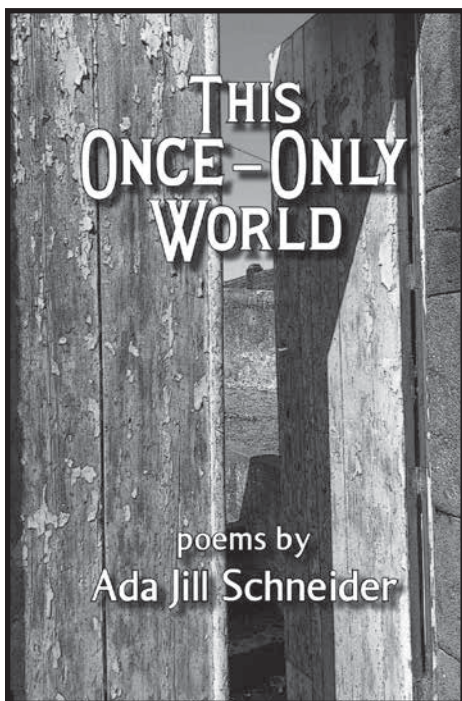
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This Once-Only World

poems by Ada Jill Schneider



This *Once-Only World* is a collection of personal, yet universal, poems that dance on every page with gratitude and poignancy: poems that celebrate long love and reflect on family; poems that appreciate the world and plead for justice; poems that know what lies ahead for someone turning eighty but who insists, like Edna St. Vincent Millay, "I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned."

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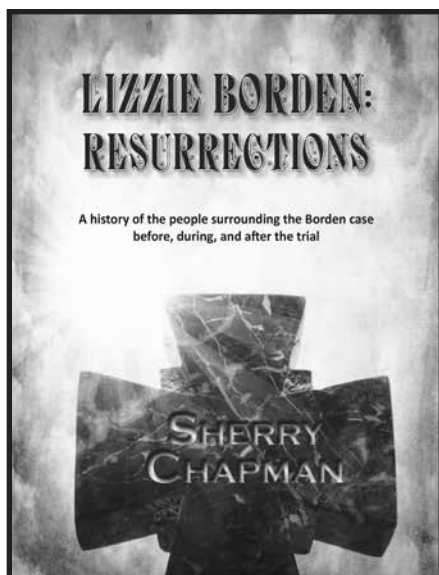
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Lizzie Borden: Resurrections

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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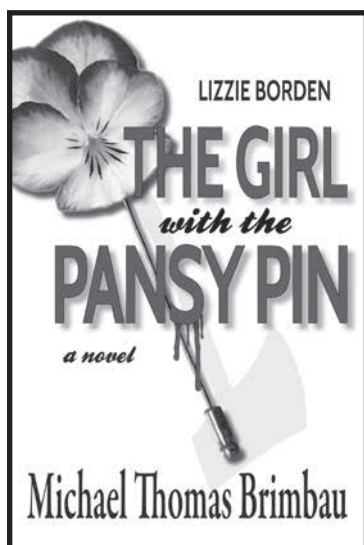
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Lizzie Borden: The Girl with the Pansy Pin

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.

But Father's 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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Fall River Revisited

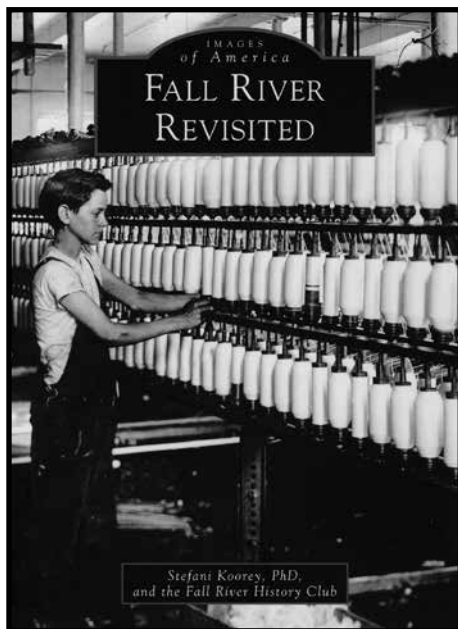
by Stefani Koorey and the
Fall River History Club

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.

The city's motto, "We'll Try," originates from the determination of its residents to rebuild the city following a devastating fire in 1843. The fire resulted in 20 acres in the center of the village being destroyed, including 196 buildings, and 1,334 people were displaced from their homes.

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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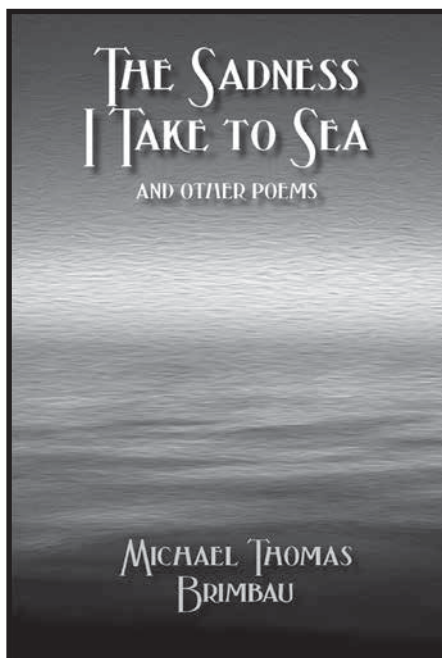


The Sadness I Take to Sea and Other Poems

by Michael Thomas
Brimbau

Putting pen to paper and allowing its ball tip to bleed and spill out is a good thing, and helps with the venting as well as needed healing. After all is said and done, following all the missteps and failings, to move on and search for lost love all over again is not only essential but the absolute specimen of a yearning and healthy soul—and the fundamental spirit conveyed in *The Sadness I Take to Sea*.

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Do Come In and Other Lizzie Borden Poems

by Larry W. Allen

with a new Lizzie Borden
sketch cover by Rick Geary,
famed author and illustrator of
The Borden Tragedy.

Lizzie Borden. For some, the name conjures an innocent young woman who bravely faced her trial with strength and fortitude. To others, she has become the icon of all things gruesome because of the bloody nature of the crimes for which she was charged. And yet others see Lizzie Borden as a woman who got away with murder.

These 50 poems trace the life of this enigmatic woman—from the 19th through the 20th century. We meet her as a young adult and watch her develop into an old woman living alone on “the Hill.”

Do Come In is a remarkable collection of poems entirely devoted to the Lizzie Borden story.

So *Do Come In*, and meet Lizzie Borden and other characters as diverse as Jack the Ripper, Bob and Charlie Ford, and Rachael Ray, in poems that range from humorous to horrific.

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Lizzie Borden: Girl Detective

by Richard Behrens

Introducing Miss Lizzie Borden of Fall River, Massachusetts, a most excellent girl detective and the most remarkable young woman ever to take on the criminal underworld in late 19th century New England.

Many years before her infamous arrest and trial for the murders of her father and stepmother, Lizzie Borden pursued a career as a private consulting detective and wrestled unflinchingly with a crooked spiritualist, a corrupt and murderous textile tycoon, a secret society of anarchist assassins, rowdy and deadly sporting boys, a crazed and vengeful mutineer, an industrial saboteur, and a dangerously unhinged math professor—none of whom are exactly what they seem to be.

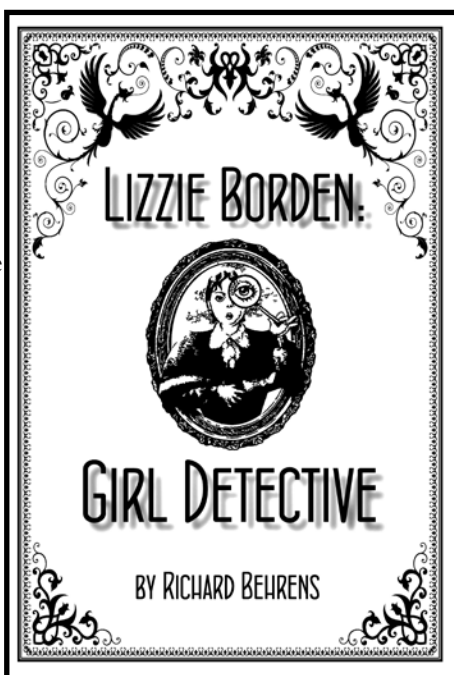
In these five early tales of mystery and adventure, Lizzie Borden is joined by her stubborn and stingy father Andrew; her jealous and weak-chinned sister Emma; her trusted companion Homer Thesinger the Boy Inventor; and the melancholy French scion Andre De Camp. Together, they explore Fall River's dark side through a landscape that is industrial, Victorian, and distinctly American.

You have met Lizzie Borden before—but never like this!

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Contributors

Niloufar Behrooz has an MA in English literature from University of Isfahan, Iran. She enjoys writing poetry and short stories as well lyrics for her own music.

Andrew G. Bennett is from Sydney, Australia, and has been writing fiction for well over ten years. He has published three books of short stories, written an as yet unpublished novel, and has had over forty short stories and poems published in many fine journals and magazines, including *Skive Magazine*, *Tincture Journal*, and *The Literary Hatchet*.

Angela Ash wrote her first poem as a young girl, whilst in “time out” for something bizarre and unexplainable. She lives in Louisville with her ever understanding husband, where she continues to pour words onto paper, fueled by her muse, Kendyl Rae...who most decidedly walked through the looking glass.

Wayne Scheer has been nominated for four Pushcart Prizes and a Best of the Net. He's published hundreds of stories, poems and essays in print and online, including *Revealing Moments*, a collection of flash stories, available at 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.

Edward Ahern resumed writing after forty odd years in foreign intelligence and international sales. Original wife, but after forty seven years we are both out of warranty. Have had sixty short stories published thus far.

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.

Chantal Boudreau has a publication history that includes ten novels, seven of them published by May December Publications, and dozens of short stories with a variety of publishers, primarily fantasy and horror. I am an affiliate member of the Horror Writers Association in good standing. chantellyb.wordpress.com/

John Bruni is the author of *Tales of Questionable Taste* and *Poor Bastards and Rich Fucks*, both from StrangeHouse Books, and *Strip*, a crime novel from the now defunct Musa. His shorter works have appeared in many places, most notably *Shroud*, *Hardboiled*, *Morpheus Tales*, *Tales of the Talisman*, and a number of anthologies. He was the poetry editor of *Middlewestern Voice*, and the editor and publisher of *Tabard Inn*, a fiction magazine.

Richard Crawford's short fiction has appeared in *Shimmer*, *Pseudopod*, and *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*.

Rick McQuiston is a forty-five-year-old father of two who loves anything horror-related. His work has appeared in over 300 publications. He has written three novels, six anthology books, one book of novellas, and edited an anthology of Michigan authors. Currently, he is hard at work on his fifth novel.

Jack Everett is a Software Engineer in the video games industry. He graduated Summa Cum Laude from Utah State University with a degree in Mathematics. jackeverett.com.

Michael Strayer is a writer from California. Most recently, his work has appeared in *Bareback Magazine*, *Avalon Literary Review*, and the anthology, *Bloody Knuckles* (Thunderdome Press).

Lawrence Buentello is a writer and poet living in San Antonio, Texas. He is the author of over 90 published short stories.

Pat Bussard is a gifted photographer, author, columnist, psychic medium, and paranormal investigator. She has authored numerous featured columns on non-fiction paranormal topics for *Ghost Voices Magazine*, *Haunted Times Magazine*, *Phenomena*, and *Paranormal Magazine*. She has also had several stories and photographs featured on George Noory's "Coast to Coast AM." Pat is the author of the book, *Thirty True Tales of the Weird, Unusual and Macabre: From the Notebooks of the Paranormal Journalist*. patbussard.com

AJ Huffman has published eleven solo chapbooks and one joint chapbook through various small presses. Her new poetry collection, *Another Blood Jet*, is now available from Eldritch Press. She has three more poetry collections forthcoming: *A Few Bullets Short of Home* from mgv2>publishing, *Degeneration from Pink Girl Ink*, and *A Bizarre Burning of Bees* from Transcendent Zero Press. She is a Multiple Pushcart Prize nominee, and has published over 2200 poems in various national and international journals, including *Labletter*, *The James Dickey Review*, *Bone Orchard*, *EgoPHobia*, and *Kritya*. She is also the founding editor of Kind of a Hurricane Press. kindofahurricanepress.com

James B. Nicola has several poetry awards and nominations to his credit, with recent or upcoming poems in *The Literary Hatchet* and *Southwest*, Atlanta, and *Lullwater Reviews*. His nonfiction book *Playing the Audience* won a Choice award. His first full-length poetry collection, *Manhattan Plaza*, has just been released. More at sites. google.com/site/jamesbnicola.

Ada Jill Schneider is the author of *This Once-Only World*, *Behind the Pictures I Hang*, *The Museum of My Mother*, *Fine Lines and Other Wrinkles*, and several chapbooks. She directs "The Pleasure of Poetry" at the Somerset Public Library in Massachusetts. Winner of the National Galway Kinnell Poetry Prize, she has an MFA in Writing from Vermont College. Ada started writing poetry at the age of fifty-three, when she thought she was old.

Michelle DeLoatch lives in the Atlanta, GA area with her son and husband. She loves the poetry and short stories of Edgar Allan Poe and has been writing poetry since her early teens.

Brittany Horton is a twenty-eight-year-old free spirit with an insatiable love for words.

Janne Karlsson is a widely published artist from Sweden. His books are available at Amazon. When this hyper productive maniac isn't busy drawing, he's enjoying red wine and Bach. svenskapache.se.

Calvin Demmer is a freelance writer, currently residing in South Africa. When not writing, he is intrigued by that which goes bump in the night and the sciences of our universe.

Joshua Dobson likes to make his own fun, some of which can be seen at joshuadobson.deviantart.com.

Kevin Gallagher enjoys writing and reading poetry

Stanford Allen is a writer and lover of poetry.

Henry Brasater has taught at various colleges and universities, including Cairo University as a Fulbright Senior Lecturer. Brasater's stories are published in ezines, print anthologies and magazines. His published novels are: *Upheaval*, Spanking Pulp Press, 2013; *Nondum*, Dead Guns Press, 2014. A nonfiction book, *A. E. van Vogt: Science Fantasy's Icon*, is available from Booklocker.

Lawrence Falcetano enjoys writing mystery, suspense and horror short stories from his home in New Jersey. He has been published in numerous anthologies from Horrified Press, Static Movement and Wicked Press. He has also published online and in print magazines, such as *The Storyteller*, *Midnight Screaming*, *Great Mystery and Suspense Magazine*, *Calliope Magazine*, and more.

Ryan Falcone lives in Minnesota and has had more than 30 stories published in various markets/anthologies since 2010. Ryan currently serves as a story editor for Dark Moon Books and Dark Moon Digest, and is an active member of Cornell University's Irving Literary Society. His platform of work is summarized at ryanneilfalcone.com

Michael Fantina has had hundreds of poems published in North America, the UK and in Australia.

Lisa Finch has had her work, both fiction and non-fiction, published online and in print. Her most recent stories have appeared in *Every Day Fiction*, *Alfie Dog Fiction* and two horror anthologies, *Beyond the Midnight* (A Murder of Storytellers) and *Robbed of Sleep Volume 2* (Troy Blackford Publications). Her story, "Ricky", was a finalist in the Flash Fiction Chronicles String of 10 Seven Contest. She is a finalist for the WOW Women on Writing 2015 Flash Fiction Competition. She lives in Forest, Ontario, with her wonderful family. finchtales.webs.com.

Sarah Gailey is a Bay Area native living in beautiful Oakland, California, with her wonderful husband and terrible cat. Her writing has appeared in *Cease*, and *Cows Magazine*. She tweets @gaileyfrey.

David Gialanella has been published in *The Bookends Review's Best of 2014* compilation and in *Crack the Spine*. Aside from writing fiction, he is an award-winning chili chef, out-of-practice musician, impatient driver, lousy gambler, devoted consumer of beers of varying price and quality, and sufferer of sports fandom and other neuroses. David lives with his wife and daughter in the unclaimed borderlands between North and Central Jersey. He works as a journalist for a legal trade publication.

Denny E. Marshall has had art, poetry, and fiction published, some recently. dennymarshall.com.

Eugene Hosey holds an MFA from Georgia State University. He has written for *The Hatchet: A Journal of Lizzie Borden & Victorian Studies*. He has written and published short stories, articles on film and history, and book reviews. He has revised and edited books, financial research documents, and personal journals. He has been the Short Story editor for *The Literary Hatchet* since it began in 2008. His short stories and nonfiction articles have also appeared in *The Literary Hatchet*.

Marge Simon's works appear in publications such as *DailySF Magazine*, *Pedestal*, *Urban Fantastist*. She edits a column for the HWA Newsletter, "Blood & Spades: Poets of the Dark Side," and serves as Chair of the Board of Trustees. She won the Strange Horizons Readers Choice Award, 2010, and the SFPA's Dwarf Stars Award, 2012. She has won three Bram Stoker Awards® for Superior Work in Poetry and has poetry in HWA's Simon & Schuster collection, *It's Scary Out There*, tpb 2015. Marge also has poems in *Darke Phantastique*, *Qualia Nous* collections, and *Spectral Realms*, 2014-2015.

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*.

Gary R. Hoffman has published over two-hundred and sixty-five short stories, non-fiction articles, poetry, and essays in various publications. He has placed over one-hundred and ten items in contests. He taught school for twenty-five years and lived on the road in a motor home for fourteen years. He now resides in Okeechobee, Florida.

Paul Magnan has been writing stories that veer from the straight and narrow for many years. He lives in Rhode Island.

John Teel is a union ironworker from Philly who loves all things horror.

Grim K. De Evil is from Grand Island, NY. He moved to Central Florida in his youth and hopes to leave the state someday soon. He's a graduate of the UCF with a BA in English – Creative Writing. He has also written the first novel in a series of twelve, *Dedd Wright & the Lion*, which is an eBook through Kindle.

Gregory Holland studied poetry at the University of North Texas and is currently working and living in Denton, Texas, while developing his writing skills in his free time. Since graduating from University, he has developed a strong personal esthetic that unifies his most recent works. He writes dark pieces that confront philosophical themes (mostly regarding identity) through the use of dense, minimal, and symbolic imagery.

Brenda Kezar's writing has appeared in *Daily Science Fiction*, *Tell Me a Fable* (Dark Opus Press), *Silverthought*, *Bonded by Blood V*, *SNM Horror Magazine*, *A High Shriill Thump* (Third Flatiron Publishing), *Penumbra eMag*, *Zombidays* (Library of the Living Dead Press), *Emerald Tales*, *Thema*, *AlienSkin Magazine*, *Down in the Cellar*, and *Loving the Undead* (From the Asylum Press).

Michael King writes horror and dark suspense. He loves his children, chips and salsa, his wife and his cats. Sometimes he loves his puppy when it isn't attempting to chew on the bone inside his arm or leg. michaelkingstories.com.

Michaël Wertenberg is a French-American novelist, teaching English in Paris.

Johnny Longfellow's poetry has appeared in a handful of online journals, including *The Barefoot Muse*, *The Five-Two*, *Pigpenn*, and *The Rotary Dial*. He has also served for nearly twenty years as a mentor to Newburyport, MA, high school students through their Poetry Soup reading program and annual print journal.

Paul Stansfield is New Jersey born and raised. He works as a field archaeologist, and has had over 20 stories published, in magazines, horror anthologies, and ebook format. One of the latter was nominated for Long and Short Reviews Book of the Year for 2012. paulstansfield.blogspot.com.

Mickey Hunt's unmentionable decades-long work in portraying the seriously dark and macabre has taken him to sixty-some university campuses around the southeast United States and elsewhere. Readers may find more of his literary and speculative exposes at chaoticterrainpress.blogspot.com. He lives with spiders near Asheville, North Carolina.

Matthew Wilson has had over 150 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.

Damian Rucci is a writer and poet from New Jersey.

Michael Lee Johnson lived ten years in Canada during the Vietnam era. Today he is a poet, freelance writer, photographer who experiments with poetography (blending poetry with photography), and small business owner in Itasca, Illinois, who has been published in more than 875 small press magazines in 27 countries, he edits 9 poetry sites. Michael is the author of *The Lost American: From Exile to Freedom*, several chapbooks of poetry, including *From Which Place the Morning Rises* and *Challenge of Night and Day*, and *Chicago Poems*. He also has over 71 poetry videos on YouTube. facebook.com/poetrymanusa

Fabiyas MV is a writer from Orumanayur village in Kerala, India. He is the author of *Moonlight and Solitude*. His fiction and poems have appeared in *Westerly*, *Forward Poetry*, *Literary The Hatchet*, *E Fiction*, *Off the Coast*, *Anima*, *Structo*, and in several anthologies. He won many international accolades including the Poetry Soup International Award, USA, the RSPCA Pet Poetry Prize, UK, Speaking of Women Story Prize, Canada, and The Most Loved Poet For March 2014 Award by E Fiction, India. His poems have been broadcast on the All India Radio.

Walter Dinjos is Nigerian and enjoys singing and songwriting 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.

Anna Mavromati earned her MFA in fiction from CSU, Long Beach, and has been published in *Day Old Roses Journal*, *Shaking Lit Magazine*, *Like Water Burning*, *RipRap Journal* and others. Her journalistic work has been published in *Westside People Magazine*, *The Daily Breeze*, *The Beach Reporter*, *Easy Reader News*, *Peninsula People Magazine* and *Rave! Magazine*. She lives in the Los Angeles area and teaches English and journalism at Santa Monica College and El Camino College.

Eris McEncroe is an Australian who, though always an avid reader, has only recently discovered the joys of writing. Currently working as a software developer and running his own IT business in his hometown of Sydney, Eris has had a varied career in fields as diverse as finance, energy, and telecoms. His one credit so far is "The Laugh" published in the April 2015 edition of *AntipodeanSF*.

Melissa Monks is an avid reader, gardener, and knitter fascinated by the darker side of life. Her work has been published in *Quantum Fairy Tales* and *Weirdyear*.

Phylinda Moore's book is titled *Herculaneum's Fortune*, (published by Anaphora Literary Press). She is currently working on a manuscript called *Amber Skin*. phylindamoore.com.

Jenna Moquin's work has appeared on HorrorBound.com and in *The Wilmington Town Crier*. Her novel, *Deluded Blood*, was released in 2012.

Joseph Rubas' work has been featured in a number of 'zines and hardcopy publications, including: *[Nameless]* (professional paying 'zine); *The Horror Zine*; *The Storyteller*; *Eschatology Journal*; *Infective Ink*; *Strange, Weird, and Wonderful*; and *Horror Bound Online*. His short stories are also collected in *Pocketful of Fear* (2012) and *After Midnight* (2014).

Timothy Ryerson is a resident of Ponchatoula, Louisiana, but is originally from Greenville, South Carolina. He retired from the printing industry in 2011 as a plant manager. He began writing poetry in the 1980's but did not take it seriously until the death of his son in 2001 in an effort to find an outlet for his feelings of grief and loss.

Katherine Sanger was a Jersey Girl before getting smart and moving to Texas. She's been published in various e-zines and print, including *Baen's Universe*, *Black Chaos*, *Wandering Weeds*, *Spacesports & Spidersilk*, *Black Petals*, *Star*Line*, *Anotherrealm*, *Lost in the Dark*, *Bewildering Stories*, *Apelion*, and *RevolutionSF*, edited *From the Asylum*, an e-zine of fiction and poetry, and is the current editor of "Serial Flasher," a flash fiction e-zine. She's a member of HWA and SFWA. She taught English for over 10 years at various online and local community and technical colleges.

Rory O'Brien lives in Salem. His debut novel is a murder mystery titled *Gallows Hill*. roryobrienbooks.com.

Janet Slike is a freelance writer/editor living in Dublin, Ohio, with her husband and two cats. Her short stories have appeared in a CCC anthology, *Antique Children*, *The Zodiac Review*, *The Screech Owl*, *Black Denim Lit*, and *Taproot Literary Journal*. Her poems have appeared in *scissors and spackle*, *The Screech Owl*, and on eggpoetry.com.

Lise Colas lives on the south coast of England and writes poetry and short fiction. She has a BA (Hons) in Fine Art and used to work in the archive of Punch Magazine.

Morgan Griffith was born in California and currently lives in central Florida. Recent publications of her work include *The Literary Hatchet*, *The Horror Zine Magazine*, *The Book of the Dead*, *In Creeps the Night*, *Cellar Door*, and the upcoming anthology *A Mythos Grimmly*. Her Muse is a spirit named öröm born of the night sky, Halloween, candlelight, Goth Rock music, and rats.

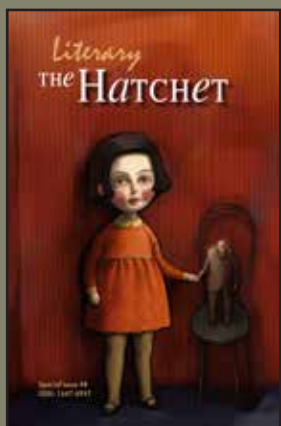
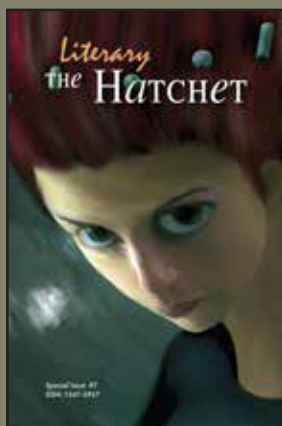
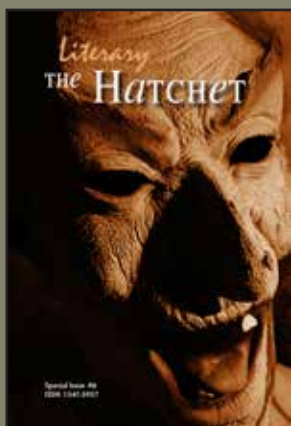
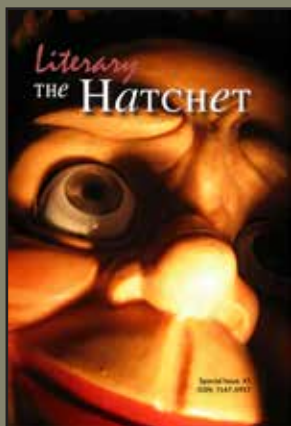
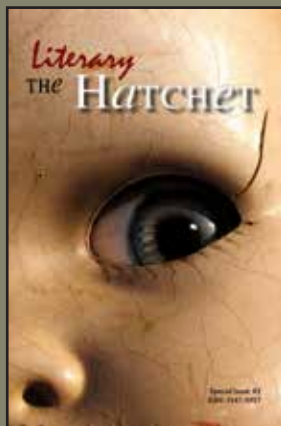
Paul Tristram is a Welsh writer who has poems, short stories, sketches and photography published in many publications around the world. He yearns to tattoo porcelain bridesmaids instead of digging empty graves for innocence at midnight, this too may pass, yet.

Alan Meyrowitz received his PhD in Computer Science and retired in 2005 after a career in research. His poetry has appeared in *California Quarterly*, *Eclectica*, *Existere*, *Front Range Review*, *The Literary Hatchet*, *Shroud*, *The Storyteller*, and others. In 2012 the Science Fiction Poetry Association nominated his poem "Wishing It Were Otherwise" for a Dwarf Star Award.



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