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ISSUE #13

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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:

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We really would love to read your work.

Stefani Koorey Editor and Publisher

TABLE OF CONTENTS

SHORT STORIES 15 December 2015

demons wayne scheer	8	148	baby doll alexis henderson
the sandbox matt duggan	16	154	knowing robin c. jones
joseph and killer jason lairamore	26	160	assholes with guns jack campbell jr.
listen to your mothers ian mullins	34	166	pauline jackie bee
the dead are alive! andrew g. bennett	32	172	problem solving m.y. kearney
the last gift a.w. mckinnon	40	178	the larcenous mrs. lewis steven slaven
black thumb michelle ann king	46	186	no room for daisy tim dadswell
writer rick mcquiston	54	192	all i can see are sad eyes tim major
the taste of metal dustin farren	60	198	collaboration jim courter
jolene, sd, and her gary r. hoffman	66	208	what friends are for josh sczykutowicz
bad things stuart guthrie	7 6	218	the parrott paul edmonds
the middle box d.l. shirey	82	228	the man in the cat mask ray mears
solla rani's stoic endurance fabiyas mv	84	232	the witch's flowers joshua flowers
milk cameron trost	88	240	a scandelous bohemian rory o'brien
absolving lynn Iee todd lacks	98	250	snow load kevin mulligan
uncle tom's theory sue barnard	102	258	night terrors michelle k. bujnowski
coma white craig steven	112	262	a day like any other edmund lester
the master's duty joshua rex	116	274	a cave in the valley shane fraser
gnat daniel marrone	124	278	brother, can you spare a dime? josh craven
the punishment of lily chandler denise noe	132	284	the fill-ins leland neville
character driven a.w. gifford	142		

TABLE OF CONTENTS

15 December 2015

note, one robot to another

one of these jars is yours

filled with broken daisies

in a quest to touch the line death crosses

counting

a.j. huffman

alan meyrowitz

amelia gorman morning's moon

ashley dioses

andrew nelson

angela ash beneath it sleep angela ash picnic john roche

city girl blues daniel stern

zippers darrell lindsey

mannequins darrell lindsey

deborah guzzi early warning

denny marshall dolly bone dream

deborah walker lots of poems

deborah walker

the london necropolis railway

earrings do not belong on a deer

soren james

denise noe the adoration

ed ahern perfect town

e.m. eastick

a villanelle for a villain

meat

ada jill schneider

15

31

32

33

58

59

65

71

72

73

74

87

96

196 bedbugs

joyce richardson

POETRY				
110	evenings steeping in rum fabiyas mv			
111	mini dubai fabiyas mv			
123	the prepared piano gregory palmerino			
128	the noonday demon gregory palmerino			
129	i'm no captain grim k. de evil			
130	two gifts james b. nicola			
131	shadows james b. nicola			
141	cheru fabiyas mv			
147	two birds james b. nicola			
153	that skater in the park john grey			
158	a history of want james b. nicola			
159	the cat eye girl fabiyas mv			
165	the coconut leaf top fabiyas mv			
171	the world blasts everyday fabiyas mv			
175	warwick dungeon joann grisetti			
176	after the ball john grey			
177	buried love celebrated janne karlsson			
185	the breakup john grey			
190	my dad died today janne karlsson & aletheia adams			
195	am i alone? michael seese			

a new generation ride fabiyas mv	97
-------------------------------------	----

TABLE OF CONTENTS

POETRY 15 December 2015 i ride a train 248 faust 197 joyce richardson phil slattery we will pardon the witches of salem 249 hungry moon 203 joyce richardson robert perez le cirque 204 254 find shelter lee glantz wendy I. schmidt beach thing eight arms to hold 205 255 mary king robert perez 256 chop those mice only me 206 mckinley henson sally basmajian barely a portrait, images, transitions 207 272 mutual rape michael lee johnson soren james 273 a corporeal dilemma crossing the border divide 217 michael lee johnson stephanie smith this isn't a nightmare a thought and a violin 226 277 william doreski stephanie smith the screams of winter clay-colored 230 282 william doreski stephanie smith the girl on the moor 237 283 what makes the man? michelle deloatch t.c. powell 201 me that was red wave 238 michelle deloatch tyree campbell a youthful old soul staying in on pay-day night 239 292 bradford middleton nicholas powell **REVIEWS & ESSAYS**

edgar g. ulmer's detour into 292

darkness denise noe



[short story]

Dem On S

by wayne scheer

Douglas Feiffer no longer expected much from his freshman literature students. He laughed when he read the title of Chandler Griffith's essay, "Exercising Demons." The student obviously meant "Exorcising." He imagined the devil, wearing shorts and a T-shirt, doing jumping jacks while counting, "twenty-two, twenty-three ..."

The assignment had grown out of a class discussion of Sylvia Plath's poem, "Daddy." Students were asked to write a short essay about dealing with their personal demons. Douglas circled "Exercising" in red ink, and jotted down the essay title to share with his colleague, Martha Foote, who had been teaching English even longer than he had. They kept a list of their favorite student malapropisms, like "She's the kind of person who would stab you in the back right to your face" and "Elevators are so crowded, sometimes you can't squeeze in like sardines."

Douglas remembered when he wasn't so cynical, when he found teaching exciting.

Now he felt like an over-the-hill athlete operating on muscle memory. He made the right moves, but with little passion.

He tried blaming his burnout on his ex-wife. But he knew Sara was a good woman. He had hardly given her a choice. Obsessed with work was his excuse. But he knew better. He had been obsessed with himself. So busy with his students and showing off to his peers what a creative teacher he was, he hardly paid attention to his own family. Now, almost fifteen years after his divorce, he barely knew his sons.

All Douglas had was his work, and he had grown bored with it although students still loved the show he put on. Ironically, in their evaluations, they praised his flexibility, his love for his subject, and his respect for their opinions.

Tired and jaded, he knew it was time to retire, but he still needed three more years to collect full benefits. Then what? Retirement frightened him.

So he sighed and began reading Chandler's essay.

"My imaginary friend, Octavius, is also my demon. I have to exercise him, keep him busy, or he gets me in trouble."

So Chandler knew what he was doing by using "Exercising" in the title.

"Sorry," he wrote, near where he had red-circled the word 'Exercising.' "My mistake. Clever pun."

Then he returned to the essay.

Ever since I was a little boy, Octavius would dare me to do things I new would get me in trouble." (Douglas circled "new.")

I would try to be good because I wanted my stepfather to like me, but Octavius would tell me to jump on the couch, even though my shoes were dirty. Or he would make me say something nasty. I would try to explain to my stepfather that Octavius made me do it, but he never understood.

My mother would yell at him and he would accuse her of choosing me over him. I never wanted to come between them. Even though the therapist my mother made me go to said I did so subconsciously.

Douglas circled the misspelled word. It broke his concentration, but he was impressed. This kid was really opening up, he thought.

He tried picturing Chandler in class. Clean-cut and unassuming, Chandler was one of those students he hardly paid attention to anymore. He seemed neither bright nor dull. He sat in the back of the room, spoke only when called on, but usually seemed prepared. His comments, as he recalled, were often correct, but not particularly insightful. Douglas checked his grade book and saw that Chandler had a respectable B- average.

He thought of his own sons. He hadn't seen them since last Thanksgiving, nearly a year ago, when Sara invited him up to Maine to share the holiday with them. Ward, the older boy, brought his girlfriend. She seemed pleasant, Douglas thought. Eddie, younger by two years, appeared uncomfortable around him. He was a child when Sara remarried and moved to Maine.

It's hard to be a father when all you have are visitation rights. Again, that was the way he rationalized the situation.

Douglas didn't want to think of his own rumpled life, so he returned to the essay. Chandler wrote more about the problems Octavius caused, but none were particularly serious. He ended by saying that he learned to keep Octavius controlled by exercising him. He would take Octavius on long runs or work out with him after school in the gym. He joined the high school wrestling team and imagined that he and Octavius combined to defeat their opponents.

Douglas wondered if Chandler had some kind of dual personality disorder—was this why his mother sent him to a therapist?—but he ended his essay by saying that he knew Octavius was imaginary and tried to make his demon work for him, especially in sports.

The essay, itself, sputtered to a mechanical conclusion and ended at three typed

pages, the minimum called for. Normally, Douglas would ask a question, like "Does Octavius still play a role in your life?" He'd make a comment about the weak ending and offer a positive statement, like "Original idea" or "I enjoyed this, just wish you'd have written more and proofread better." He'd give the paper a B-, record the grade, and toss it in the Read pile as casually as tossing out yesterday's newspaper.

Instead, something about Chandler struck a familiar chord. Douglas recalled how he, as a freshman, managed decent grades but took the easy way out of most assignments until an English professor, Dr. Braun, showed an interest in him. It was a paper Douglas had written about *The Catcher in the Rye*. Professor Braun had singled out the essay and asked him to stop by his office. They worked on it together and submitted it to a college literary contest. It won Second Place and a prize of ten dollars.

From then on, Douglas, who had floated through high school and found himself in college only because there wasn't anything he'd rather do, began preparing for a career as an English teacher.

Douglas felt energized for the first time in years. He wanted to mentor Chandler, help him find his way in life. He scrawled along the top of the essay: "See me." He didn't give it a grade, knowing that Chandler might otherwise not even read his comments.

At the end of the next class, he returned the papers. Usual comments, ranging from "Sheeeiiittt" to "Yes" filled the classroom like white noise, as students took their essays and left the classroom.

Chandler waited until the last student had gone. "You wanted to see me, Dr. Feiffer? If this isn't what you wanted, I'll do it again."

"No, no, Chandler. This is exactly what I hoped students would do. Write about something real. I was just wondering how Octavius was doing."

Chandler stared at the ground. "You probably think I'm crazy, don't you?"

"Crazy? The way you use your demon for your benefit. You're probably the healthiest person I know. Plath wrote depressing poems and finally stuck her head in an oven. I've spent a lifetime ignoring my own demons. Or, at least, I've tried. You win wrestling matches and write fascinating papers that deserve an A."

Chandler smiled. "Did I get an A?"

"Not quite." Douglas wrote a B- in the grade book in pencil. "If you write more about Octavius, I'll change the grade to an A."

"More?"

"Extend this essay or tell me more about Octavius. Bring me up to date. What's he been up to lately? Is he still getting you into trouble? How do you cope with him? I think this has real potential, Chandler. I think you have real potential."

Chandler shrugged. Douglas took that as a positive affirmation. He'd been around teenage boys enough not to expect Chandler to jump up and down and shout, "Yippee!"

He told his colleague, Martha, that Chandler was why he went into teaching in the first place. "He reminds me a little of myself and my younger son, Eddie. I'm not sure why." "I'd just say, be careful. Eighteen-year-olds who hear voices in their heads can be dangerous." She looked up from the piles of papers littering her desk. Her upper lip curled into what, for Martha, was a smile. "If you're not careful, Feiffer, you can influence him to become an English teacher. Do you want that on your conscience?"

The next morning when he got to his office, Douglas found a typed story from Chandler slipped under his door. It told how Octavius dared him to run away from home as a child. Another, later that afternoon, described how Octavius encouraged him to set the living room curtains on fire.

Over the next few days Douglas didn't see Chandler, but stories about Octavius flooded his office. Some frightened him, like one where Octavius urged Chandler to hold a lighted cigarette to the inside of his thigh.

After class, he spoke to Chandler. The boy appeared nervous.

"Do you want to talk, Chandler? I don't have a class for another hour."

"No, sir," he said, staring at the ground.

"You seem to have a lot to say about Octavius. He seems more demonic than you originally made him out to be. The, uh, one about where he dares you to burn yourself disturbed me, Chandler."

"It just ... well, I sort of exaggerated." He offered an awkward smile. "The real Octavius never went that far."

Something about the way he said, "The real Octavius," scared Douglas even more.

Chandler left abruptly, saying he had a class.

Douglas showed some of the essays to a psychology professor friend at the college.

"The kid's either playing with you or he's deeply disturbed," the professor said.

"Or both?"

"Or both."

Douglas checked Chandler's transcripts and talked with some of his professors. Nothing seemed unusual. He called his former high school and inquired about him. He had graduated only a year earlier from a rather small school, but the guidance counselor had to check her records to remember Chandler. Although she made it clear she couldn't say anything specific about him over the phone, she assured Douglas there were no red flags in his files. He asked to speak to Chandler's wrestling coach, but she said according to his records, he never wrestled. In fact, there was no record of extracurricular activities.

Douglas confronted him the next time he saw him.

"You caught me," Chandler said, grinning. "The truth is I made up Octavius for the first paper and since you said it had to be about a real personal demon, I just made up more stories. I've been straining to come up with crazy things to say about Octavius. I hope you're not mad."

Douglas laughed, and gave him an A for creativity. He said he'd be happy to read more Octavius stories, fact or fiction. "You had me believing you. You may have a future as a fiction writer."

Douglas recalled the stories his son, Eddie, had written when he was about twelve. Sara mailed them to him. Strange, dark tales about superheroes who lost their powers and were defeated in the end. His seventh grade English teacher praised them for their originality. All Douglas could see was how poorly written they were. Eddie's spelling was atrocious. Douglas had just moved in with a woman and he was adjusting to living with her and her teenage daughter, who had taken an instant dislike to him. Instead of encouraging his son, as he knew he should, he joked about his creative spelling. "We'll talk when I see you this summer," he said. "Keep writing," he added as an afterthought.

Eddie never mentioned his stories again. Until now, Douglas had forgotten them.

In class, Chandler began participating more and his writing grew more sophisticated. He chose to do an extra-credit reading assignment on Sylvia Plath's autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*. By the end of the course, he deserved the A he received. Douglas felt proud and urged Chandler to keep in touch, encouraging him to sign up for the course on Faulkner and Hemingway he was preparing for the following semester.

Douglas found one more Octavius story in his campus mailbox during Christmas break. It told how Chandler had decided he had outgrown his imaginary friend. According to Chandler, he and Octavius went for a run in the woods, and he left him there. "Octavius won't be coming back," he wrote. "He has a lousy sense of direction." In pen, he scrawled—"Thanks, Dr. F."

Douglas wanted to call his sons and tell them about his success with Chandler, but he knew they wouldn't understand. He felt like he had done something worthwhile; he had positively affected a young man's life. He hadn't felt that in a long time.

Just before the start of the new term, Chandler Griffith shot himself in his car while parked outside of Douglas's office. The police found a stack of essays about Octavius with Professor Feiffer on them. They told about a troubled young man who wanted to be normal, but couldn't live without his imaginary companion. On top of the pile of stories was a note to Douglas from Chandler.

"I'm sorry Dr. Feiffer. I came by your office but you weren't there. I guess Octavius found his way back from the woods and was mad that I left him."

Douglas attended Chandler's funeral. He introduced himself to Chandler's mother.

"He talked about you, Dr. Feiffer," she said. "My son respected you very much." Sobbing, she added, "He told me he was thinking of majoring in English." Douglas tried to speak. All he could do was gasp for air.

Chandler's father gave the eulogy. There was no hint of him being a stepfather. "We had no idea anything was wrong," his father said before breaking down. "He seemed like such a normal kid."

When Douglas got home, he called his sons. Ward wasn't home, but he left a message telling him he loved him and just wanted to say hello.

He spoke with Eddie. The conversation stalled at weather and sports. Finally, he asked, "Do you still write short stories?"

"Nah," Eddie said. "They were just some crazy stuff I did as a kid."

After a long silence, Douglas said, "I love you, son."

Eddie said, "I gotta go."

Douglas sat at his desk, the phone receiver still in his hand. Without conscious thought, he turned to his computer and typed an e-mail declaring his intent to retire, addressing it to the president of the college, the academic dean, and his department chair. He hit the send button. He wasn't sure if he felt relief or panic.

"It's time," Douglas told Martha, who had stormed into his office the next morning having already heard the news. "Time for me to stop doing half a job."

"This is where I'm supposed to say, 'It's not your fault." She rested her arm awkwardly on her friend's shoulder. "You know that's true, don't you?"

"Of course. Chandler was troubled. I didn't see it. His parents didn't see it. But

"No one will hold you to your e-mail. In fact, I'm here as a messenger from our beloved Chair to talk you out of it."

Douglas shook his head.

"But what will you do? As much as we both hate to admit it, teaching is our lives."

Douglas stood up from his desk and hugged Martha. It was the first time they had ever embraced. "I'm going to move up to Maine to be near the boys. I need to get to know them." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I may do some writing. Maine seems like a good place to exercise my demons."



How much time dare we hope for? Look how fast this past year has gone and here we are, six months into the next.

I remember counting and crossing off the months and days leading to our wedding. I practiced writing, over and over, what was to become our new title, "Mr. & Mrs.," on the cover of my college loose-leaf binder.

Everyday I look at you and think, "He is here. Today he is here." Carpe Diem. We delight in ordinary things: reading, watching TV, planning dinner, going dancing. We visit the oncologist—hand-in-hand, hands on handrails, hands in Purell.

The earth turns and the calendar, in turn, flips to the next month so quickly we get dizzy. Once again, the pillboxes have been emptied. "How many refills do we have left?" we ask the pharmacist at Walmart.

-ada jill schneider

THE SANDBOX

by matt duggan

I am sitting at my desk with my pen hovering above this opened notebook. *Time is such a thief,* I think to myself as I look at the pages full of my history. And then I glance up, look out the window onto the long grassy slope of the back property, and there I see the young boy. He has made his way through the column of thick pine trees and he has managed to climb up onto the one well-worn branch that provides the only unobstructed view of my home and its hidden surroundings. The boy has fixed his stare on the centerpiece of my wide, well-groomed landscape: the sandbox.

I set down my pen and take a deep, lamenting breath. Here is the little boy. It starts all over again. But, for the purposes of this story, I must start from the beginning.

The beginning concerns another little boy named Gregory Baiston, who lived a quiet life with his mother and father. All were happy and, more importantly, all were healthy.

Gregory was eleven years of age. He was reclusive by necessity because he was mercilessly bullied at school. He was also compulsively curious, like most other little boys.

What most roused Gregory's curiosity was the mansion at the end of his street, which nobody knew anything about because it was hidden behind an imposing curtain of tall, old pine trees that ringed the entire property. The thick rigid trees shot sky high and lined up shoulder-to-shoulder like a security force.

Gregory passed one particular section of the pines each day on his way home from school. The sidewalk abruptly ended as the adjacent road veered left. The sidewalk became a dirt path, went on for about twenty yards, then met with the road and became concrete sidewalk again. No cars passed along this stretch of road since it only led to a cul-de-sac. Nobody used this portion of sidewalk except for Gregory since his house was just up the way. It was his private little adventure trail.

At first Gregory only slowed his pace as he neared this spot of pines to glance into the thick crowded darkness and gather whatever information he could: How far in did the pines go? Was there a fence somewhere back there? What if he just stepped into the first couple of trees?

That last thought soon turned into a self-dare. Gregory rushed home, flung his backpack onto his bed, then quickly returned to the pines. He looked both ahead and behind, then he stepped from the path and into the woods.

The young boy went from light to shadow immediately. The trees creaked as a cold wind rustled through their high branches. A deep chill crept over Gregory but soon he giggled. He was only a few feet from the path. What if he took two more steps into the pines? There was no danger; he could always run right back out.

Two steps led to two steps, which led to two more steps.

Soon Gregory was squeezing between trunks, his skin rubbing against the bark. Not only were the trees so closely bunched, but their branches all stuck out like bayonets. Several times a branch jabbed Gregory in the ribs as he pushed himself past another tree trunk.

Just when his fears began to dominate his curiosity, at the moment when Gregory knew he'd gone too far, he caught sight of the pale blue sky peeking out from behind the trees up ahead.

The trees here were so close together that there was no path through. Except for one individual branch. It wasn't rough and gnarled and pointy like the other branches. This branch was smoothed and worn down like it had been treated with oil. Its end was dulled. And it was just high enough for Gregory to climb onto. So he did.

When he stood on this first branch, he saw a second branch on the tree in front of him, just slightly higher off the ground and just as inviting.

Gregory followed a succession of branches until suddenly he stood on one last branch, thicker and flatter than the others. He hugged the cold trunk of the tree and looked onto a beautiful enormous mansion atop a vast lush carpet of grass. The house looked like it had enough rooms to sleep the entire town.

More beautiful than the mansion was the property on which it sat: the grass was greener than a crayon, without one dead blade. There were several bubbling fountains on the edges; brick walls lined the perimeter; an array of flowers and flowering trees were dotted throughout.

But all of this was only set dressing for the star: In the center of the great lawn was a black-marbled sandbox. It was the most curious and inviting thing Gregory had ever seen.

"Hey! Get down from there this instant!"

A man barked up so suddenly that Gregory nearly fell from the branch. He froze, his heart punching through his chest like a fist.

"Please. I didn't mean to startle you. But you must come down. It's dangerous;

you might fall." The man changed tone, spoke softly. Gregory turned his eyes downward and stole a look at the man: He looked the same age as Gregory's father. He smiled up at the boy like a school teacher encouraging a child back to the classroom after recess.

"You are quite an explorer to navigate through those old trees," the man said as he took the boy's hand and helped him down from the last branch. "What's your name?"

"Gregory."

A trusting warmth was felt in the man's hand.

"Would you like to take a closer look?" the man asked.

"Oh, I didn't mean to...I wasn't snooping." Gregory stammered, still nervous. "It's quite all right," the man replied. "I once did exactly the same thing as you." The man knelt down on one knee and looked Gregory in the eyes.

"My name is Robert, and it is a great pleasure to meet you. You are an impressive young man. You found the one branch that offers a view onto our private sanctuary. You are brave and curious."

Robert gave the boy a tour of the property: they walked through the Japanese garden, climbed along several of the old moss-covered brick walls and looked at the frogs in the small lily-covered pools of the water fountains. They passed a clay tennis court on the side of the mansion where a vigorous and youthful couple was in the middle of a heated match. They briefly stopped and enthusiastically waved up to Robert and the new visitor. Robert smiled and told Gregory that they were his parents.

Robert intentionally avoided the sandbox, which only further piqued Gregory's curiosity. At each stop along the way his attention turned back to the sandbox. Its black marble siding glistened like an eye; the sand looked like a virgin beach waiting for its first footprints.

"Would you like to see it?" Robert asked and Gregory nodded his head "yes" with delight.

The sandbox's black marble edging was cool and smooth to the touch. *I could invent so many fun games here*, Gregory thought. *How fun, and no other boys around to pick on me*. He kneeled down for a closer look as he gazed at the sand. He stretched out his hand to touch it.

Robert violently seized Gregory's hand and stopped him. "No! Not yet." Gregory looked up at Robert, frightened as startled tears formed in the corners of his eyes. Robert tightened his grip. "Listen to me, boy. And listen well. Your life and your parents' lives depend on it. Do you hear me?!"

Gregory's wrist felt as if it were being broken and he couldn't breathe; he was drowning under water. He choked for breaths.

"This sandbox is alive. Each grain of sand is a tormented soul who needs to feed on life to ease its anguish. Your curiosity brought you here, guided you to the sandbox. You are to be its new guardian."

Robert paused. Gregory had closed his eyes but he could hear Robert's deep, ferocious breaths. They sounded like horses galloping in his ears.

"Look at me," Robert demanded in a grave voice. Once, when Gregory was five years old, he had fallen off the jungle gym and landed on his head. For an instant he thought he'd broken his neck. A consuming fear shocked his body and mind. He felt that fear all over again as he looked into Robert's narrowed eyes.

"You're too young to understand, so you will experience what I'm telling you." And as quick as lightning Robert thrust Gregory's hand into the sand.

Immediately a thousand needled teeth bit into the very fingerprint of each finger. Razors were peeling back each layer of his skin with excruciating care. Gregory screamed with such force that he thought his eyes were going to burst. Blood began to run down his nose.

Robert patted Gregory's forehead with a wet handkerchief as Gregory lay flat on the grass, staring up at splotches of gray clouds skulking past. He had passed out.

"You are now in charge of the sandbox. You are responsible. You must feed it. Human flesh."

Robert hoisted Gregory to his feet.

"Time moves quickly, you must not he sitate. This is your responsibility. You must feed them. Once every three months on the full moon."

Gregory ran home in a panic but stopped two times along the way to vomit. His knees were about to crumble beneath him at any moment.

He ran through the front door and zoomed past his mother who quipped, "Not even a hello?" Gregory ran upstairs and dived beneath his bed covers. He curled up in a ball and cried as he wished he'd never set foot into those pine trees.

Gregory feigned illness for two weeks and wouldn't get out of bed. He thought that if he stayed there, maybe everything that had occurred would turn out to be make-believe.

After the first couple of days in bed the hours began to melt one into the other, and hallucinations developed. Real events were confused with imaginary events. Did the doctor visit and take my temperature? Gregory asked himself. Did mom make me chicken soup this morning? He soon convinced himself that perhaps it was all a terrible nightmare. Perhaps the sandbox was nothing.

But then his father fell ill. It happened quickly, and it was severe. At first, Gregory's father had become sick at work. He came home early one day with a harsh cough that he described as a painful dry scratching, as if his throat were lined with sandpaper. Soon after that, he was spitting up black clots of blood, and he had trouble breathing. He was taken to the emergency room and for two days tests were administered. Sections of his forearms began to dry up and flake, like animal skin curing in the sun. Soon all his skin was flaking and peeling off.

Gregory's father, Justin, was dying, and the doctors couldn't diagnose the cause. He was brought home. Twenty-four hour hospice care was provided for him.

Gregory heard all of this from his bed. Since he had no physical symptoms he was left alone. All attention in the house was on his father. Gregory lay hidden beneath the covers and listened to the nurses as they consoled his mother in the hallway, and the whirs and beeps of the medical machines keeping his dad alive in the bedroom.

One afternoon the nurses were downstairs, chatting with Carole, Gregory's mother. Gregory slipped out of bed, curious to see what his father looked like.

It looked like a vacuum had sucked out all of his father's blood; his skin stretched thinly across his face. Mr. Baiston's arms, legs, and torso were all bandaged, but blood seeped through the dressings. A blue trashbag full of blood-soaked linens was next to the bed. Gregory stood there quivering as he stared at his father, and he could hear faint moans. With each struggling breath, Gregory's father whispered. Gregory leaned close and placed his ear near his father's mouth. With each breath, Gregory heard a pleading cry for help.

It was too much; Gregory quietly stepped away. He needed to get back to his own bed so that he could return to an imaginary world where these horrors didn't exist.

Gregory stopped with a wince. He'd stepped on glass. Gregory looked down as he lifted up his bare bleeding foot.

Beneath it was a small pile of sand.

The next day Gregory's mother was rushed to the hospital. She quickly fell into the same grave condition as his father.

A feral cat used to live in the basement of Gregory's house. She was fiercely independent and not at all interested in being petted or fussed with. Except when she was in the basement. Then a magical transformation took place. She would curl up on her little bed and let Gregory stroke the fur behind her ears. Gregory had named her Tabitha. She would crawl out from beneath a thicket of bushes on the side of the house, then cautiously prowl up to the broken dirt-covered basement window. She'd slink between the shards of glass then jump onto the washing machine inside and then onto the floor where she'd arch her back and walk over to the corner to a collection of discarded blankets. She would settle in and then gaze up at Gregory as if saying: "I'm ready for a scratch now."

Gregory hustled through the pine trees dragging the heavy laundry bag behind him. It bounced and jolted every step of the way. A horrible, terrified hissing accompanying each step. It made Gregory angry because he was so helpless; he knocked the laundry bag against the hard tree trunks as he made his way. He wished that it would be quiet. He wished that he'd never given it a name.

As time passed, much was explained to Gregory. He slowly settled into his new reality and his new life. He accepted his fate. He had no choice. Robert was patient with him. "Animals do not do the trick," he told Gregory. "In fact, they are an offense."

Gregory was standing at the edge of the sandbox, the empty laundry bag in his hand.

"Human flesh. That is what they require."

Robert let Gregory cry until he was too emotionally exhausted to resist

anymore. Time was invaluable, and Gregory was behind schedule.

The lush landscape was turning brown. The trees were no longer blooming. The water fountains were dry.

"The sandbox is just the door. Beneath the ground, the Tormented are everywhere. They were buried here from the earliest ages. When they are not satisfied, everything is affected. We feed them to keep them contained here. If the balance is broken they punish the living."

As Gregory listened, he felt eyes staring through him. He quickly turned and looked up at the Victorian home. On the third floor, peering out from behind a plush gold and red curtain was a gaunt and frail-looking woman. She bared her teeth as she pointed a crooked finger at Gregory, then she whipped the curtain shut.

When Gregory dumped the cat into the sandbox he cringed at the events that unfolded next. Two worlds simultaneously appeared before him. One world was the ordinary world, the world of a cat landing on sand and then somewhat quickly sinking. But then there was the second world, the world that Gregory was privy to. Gregory saw each individual tormented soul in each grain of sand. A mother sees things in her child that no other person will ever perceive. It is an extra-sensory perception. This was the only analogy that Gregory could draw for seeing the unseen. Terrible twisted faces with thin razor teeth, gnashing and angry. Legions of these monstrous devils. The cat was pulled into the depths of the sand and was skinned alive as its body turned inside out. Sand forced itself out of the cat's eye sockets and out of its ears. A bloody animal skeleton disappeared beneath the sand. But this did not suffice, at all.

The first victim was a boy named Billy. He was two years older than Gregory and used to pick on him every morning before the school bell rang. Billy liked to circle around Gregory and beat him with a tennis ball, leaving him covered in welts.

One day Gregory told Billy that he knew where there was a buried treasure. Gregory promised that he would show Billy after school but Billy had to promise to keep it a secret. As proof, Gregory opened his hand and showed Billy two pearl earrings and a diamond necklace. "There is a whole chest full of this," he whispered. "I need someone to help me dig it up. I can't do it alone."

Billy teetered on the black marble of the sandbox and was hyperventilating with excitement. Firstly, he was proud of himself for getting through the forest of pines, arguably his greatest fear. Secondly, he was now staring at a mound of sand that contained a treasure chest somewhere inside. He roughly pushed Gregory down onto the grass and warned, "I'll deal with you later." Billy picked up the shovel that Gregory had brought along, then he stepped onto the black marble and leapt into the sandbox.

The screams were deafening and the whole process went more slowly than Gregory had expected. Tabitha was pulled under quickly compared to Billy. It excruciatingly slow. Billy cried as he outstretched his hand and begged Gregory to pull him out.

After another several minutes, Billy was still sticking out of the sand from the chest up and his pitiful cries were beginning to distress Gregory, so he picked up the shovel and whacked Billy over the head. The metal crushed against Billy's head, stunning him into silence.

Gregory wound up the shovel for a second hit but Robert grabbed the wood handle and stopped him.

"He must be alive." Robert took the shovel from Gregory and set it aside.

Robert was happy. He tussled Gregory's hair and invited him inside for cake. But Gregory was so nervous about the screaming. It echoed everywhere and it was really loud. Robert took Gregory's hand and explained that the pines soak up the screams. "That's their job."

"Come, let's have some cake and ice cream. I'd like to introduce you to my parents. They are excited to meet you."

Robert led Gregory up the stone walkway toward the big Victorian house. "One day this will all be yours."

Inside, Robert escorted his apprentice into the library and showed him the shelves full of notebooks. Each one contained essays and lessons on how to kidnap and murder without leaving a trail; others listed locations, areas, towns, and cities for searching out flesh. They were training manuals and guides for feeding the Tormented.

I look around the library now, at the shelves full of notebooks. I glance out the window again. The boy is still there on the pine branch, transfixed. Just as I was that first day.

I sign my name at the bottom of the last page of my notebook, "Gregory Baiston." I close the cover and slide it onto the bookshelf right next to Robert's notebook. I must go outside now. I will walk out the side door off the pantry and I will sneak up behind the boy to make sure that he doesn't run away.

I pause for one last moment before I leave. *Time*, I think to myself, *the thief*. I take one second to consider it all. From the dining room at the other end of the house I hear the faint sound of waltz music. My parents are dancing. They dance every day.

It is time now to help that little boy down from the branch.



In a Quest to Touch the Line Death Crosses

My body slithers across a surface my mind dares not name. Its cold coarseness claims scabs of my skin they trail behind me: a blooded map to nowhere gold. I cannot turn [my head to look] back. A shattering steels my focus. I recognize the sound, a moment of lesser dark. That is not my desire. I pull myself forward taking a moment to scale the rest of this weathered cover ing from my bones. I welcome the stale smothering of wind inside. It ebbs me on. Over hours and worlds I cross, feeling for a stain to match my eyes. Finally, the flailing flanges of what is left of my hands find the ridge. That jagged point of exit. I breathe in the stagnancy that falls after eternity, and collapse. My eyes tumble; roll away from me, but still see me: victorious ly clutching the edge of the only moment that could ever matter.

-a.j. huffman

NOTE, ONE ROBOT TO ANOTHER

Looking forward once again

morning spent in pondering the purpose of our parts, delving into differences of our design

afternoon a time for gentle exploration, conjecturing who programmed us and why

by end of day, to kneel in grateful prayer

We've not the curse of rotting flesh still massive through the city one could do worse than have a shell of stainless steel

—alan meyrowitz

ONE OF THESE JARS IS YOURS

The hush of the wonder theater is as loud as the ocean. You are drowning in the blue lights and collection climate, forgetting the touch of the sun, while fetal sharks and sepia rays and fossils the rest of the world lost a century ago circle you.

A girl with no hands sings the nightingale's song, better choose the jar with a vulture in it.

All of these monsters were torn from the earth sliced from their skins ripped wriggling from the water or delicately cut from an egg.

You were dropped here too and you look at your reflection in every vial in every butterfly case in every glass eye,

hunting for the missing piece of yourself.

-amelia gorman

JOSEPH AND KILLER

by jason lairamore

He settled into an artificial leather armchair and whistled along to the opening song of *The Andy Griffith Show* that was playing on the television.

A scratch came from the front door and he somersaulted from the room. He jumped through an open bedroom window and landed frog-like in the backyard then crabbed over the dead grass to peek at the front porch. A little, white dog stood there shaking, face intent on the door. He pulled out his silencer and shot out the porch light with a puff. Glass fell. The dog yipped.

He returned inside the way he'd come. The TV provided the only light. He cracked the front door and grabbed the dog. It bit him and he smiled. He read its tag.

"If you find this cat, call this number."

He dropped the dog, found the phone, and dialed the number. Blood dripped to the floor from where the dog had bit him.

"Hello." A woman's voice. Rosy.

He cleared his throat. "Found your dog. How do I find you?"

She gave directions without a second's pause. He tossed the dog some sliced ham he found in the fridge and left at a walk. The lady didn't live but a few houses down.

The house looked like the one he'd just left. A man answered the doorbell. He wore a smile and had a paunch sticking out from his lime-green sweater vest. His happy wrinkles ran deep.

"Help you?"

He stepped in close and snapped the man's neck, and then used his forward momentum to lower the still smiling face to the foyer floor. A woman talked nearby ... on the phone, in the kitchen. She didn't turn at his approach. He grabbed her by the hair of her head and slammed her face into the marble countertop until she was a bloody mess, and then let her fall as she would. He hung up the phone.

The dog sat and licked its near nonexistent snout as it watched The Andy Griffith Show from the arm of the imitation leather chair. He sat in the chair next to it and rubbed its bristly head.

Breaking News: A series of brutal murders occurred this morning during a funeral for a young girl. More on this tragedy as details unfold.

The dog gave him a questioning look. "No dog should be called cat," he said. "I'll call you Joseph." Joseph snorted. "You can call me Killer."

Left the house soon after and ended holed up in an out of the way filler station that'd been left to pasture on the sidebar of a backwoods highway. It was January cold, but the mood was light. Still, Joseph wouldn't eat the Spam he'd found in the pantry. The expiration date hadn't even passed. He'd have to do some shopping.

He opened an extra can and chunked it into an enclosed backyard where a rusted trash bin was oxidizing its way into the ground. Joseph might decide to dine out while he was away.

"Take a break Joseph. You've had a long drive. I'll go get us some supplies."

Joseph perked his ears at the words, but was busy sniffing out their short term home.

He didn't lock the heavy door as he left. Joseph couldn't open it anyway. He walked to the car he'd hidden behind a leaning aluminum building with flaking timbers and climbed into it Bo Duke style. He revved the 6-cylinder then raised a few dust clouds on his way to the highway.

He found a mom-n-pop store with its lights on about thirty minutes later. The man behind the counter looked like the walking dead. He couldn't decide if it was age or boredom. It didn't matter. He got his and Joseph's food and set it on the smooth brown countertop beside the cash register. A blessed television distracted him from the cashier.

News at 10:

The reporter was interviewing Peggy Schmidt. She was one of the town's gossipers. She had a big smile on her face.

"That Herrmann boy walking around in decent society makes me nervous."

She didn't look nervous. She looked happy. A senior class picture of a boy with crew cut black hair flashed on the screen.

'That boy deserves a slow death to what he did to his family."

A gruff voice rumbled out something. He felt a pull in the back of his shoulder and heard a gurgling sound. His traced his arms to the fingers. The old man was just starting to fall. His fingertips ached where they'd crushed the man's windpipe. He bagged the groceries.

Breaking News: A man wearing a suit stood outside one of the Herrmann family chicken houses. The army released medical records for the accused. The young man has an extra Y chromosome. Researchers believe this may be a cause for his heightened aggression.

The drive back was dark and gloomy. These backwater highways were one of the most forlorn places in God's green earth. He'd once felt a certain kindred pull to the rural roads, but now they just made him sad. Life could have been different.

It should have been different.

The army had been a good place for him. He'd felt comfort for the first time in his life within the bosom of the hard strictures of army life. He'd even had thoughts of going career. But, just when a smile on his face was becoming an everyday happening, he'd made a mistake. His sparring partner had goaded him. The man's neck, so soft and available, was so easy to break. The army had sent him home charting the whole thing up as an accident. He'd thought himself lucky at the time. There were worst things than being dishonorably discharged.

He'd returned home with a shrug. Days melted into weeks and the mundane world of chicken houses became a gray fog that settled over his mind. Ammonia-filled longhouses got mucked out every six weeks in preparation for the multitude of chicks. Chicks were laid out from the delivery truck. They ate the special feed and drank the special water. Six weeks and you had a healthy six pound broiler. The truck picked them up and the process started over.

He'd carried a long machete to kill the huge rats that fed on the chickens and feed. Those rats looked like beavers. They scared most chicken house operators. He'd always liked killing them.

Three days ago, a day like any other, with machete on hip and shovel in hand, he'd worked on the chicken liter caked to the ground of one of the longhouses. A sound, small and directly behind him, set him spinning with the shovel. Kim, his little sister, stared at him with round eyes and gaping mouth. He couldn't stop in time. The thud of shovel on head sent a sick vibration through his hands.

He remembered carrying her back to the house, but not how he felt. He couldn't recall what it felt like to watch Mother and Father screaming. He explained what had happened and showered. The cops showed up, but they didn't arrest him. They'd assumed it was an accident and that he was in shock.

The morning of Kim's funeral the entire extended family had crowded inside his parent's house. Every face shot accusatory glances his way. He remembered each and every look. Something inside gave. It gave and started killing. He didn't punch or fight. He didn't make a sound. He retrieved his machete from his room and started hacking. Some of the younger ones made it outside, but in the end everybody died.

The past three days had been a greasy dream of spotty occurrences, but Kim, surprise in her eyes and a little 'o' on her mouth, that would always stand out in sharp detail, blood and all.

He parked the car behind the shed. The darkness surrounding the abandoned station held that special deep quiet unique to the time before dawn's first light, when the dark was reluctant to depart the world. That abyss called to him from the bottom of his soul. It would be so easy to give in and just go where it led, but he resisted. Kim wouldn't want him giving up.

He crawled from the car's open window and slipped around the side to get the plastic food sacks. The sacks' crinkling sounded like fear. He had never realized plastic could be afraid. Plastic lasted forever, after all. It was a funny sound.

Food in tow, he eased himself to the rear door and entered. The darkness was

thicker here, suffocating. It was expecting something.

There was no sound, nothing but the deep thud of his heart. He should hear Joseph's breathing. Bile rose in his throat. Perhaps the dog was outside in the enclosure where he'd left the Spam.

He went to the open door that led to the walled in enclosure and stood in the frame. There was nothing, not even a breeze. The darkness hung over and through him. Was that laughter? No.

He turned and ran outside. He left the car and the food, crossed the road, and slipped into the trees.

The forest was extensive this far out in the country. He ran until his mind caught up to his action then stopped and put his back to a large oak.

They'd taken Joseph. The dog must have had a GPS chip under his skin. Joseph didn't have a collar. They'd taken Joseph. Something slipped. Something he'd been holding his whole life and never realized. Joseph. They didn't know, couldn't know, what they'd done. They'd taken Joseph. They must have taken the dog with them. Joseph would be where they were. The first place to look was home.

The darkness gave way. The world turned purple. A bird chirped nearby.

This time was different from the funeral, more intensely non-intense. He could see and hear, but had no control over his movements. There was an overriding will that'd turned on like some unseen hand had flipped a switch. They shouldn't have taken Joseph.

He made it to his hometown sometime that afternoon. The ground was soggy, like it had rained. The sky was overcast. The world felt closed in.

He moved with speed through the trees and rolling hills, always watchful. A sedan sat on one of the back roads. He'd seen more than one just like it. The government was out in force. People around here didn't drive those unpractical things. *Idiots*. He struck at the car like a snake, running full tilt, pulling his silencer out and firing twice. He bet they'd been surprised when they died. They probably hadn't imagined he had armor piercing bullets in his little gun.

The sedan's door was locked. There was no getting inside. He squeezed his machete's handle. He couldn't get the blade to them. His chest ached.

A chopper was coming. He eased back into the trees. The noose was tightening on him. Good.

He took out another couple sedans, avoided the chopper, and made it back home unscathed. The press was absent. The Feds must have made them leave the crime scene. They were expecting him then, probably.

Joseph barked and Killer's emotions rushed in his ears. The dog needed him. He'd see Joseph safe if it was the last thing he did. A tranquilizer dart zipped by and imbedded in a tree to his right. He smiled. It'd take more than that. He zigzagged through the trees and melted away. Joseph barked again. With the gun in one hand and the machete in the other he circled and approached from the opposite direction.

They were fools for picking this place as a standoff. He'd grown to manhood here. Standing on the eastern edge of the woods bordering the lawn he could just make out the house. A large van, the chopper, and another black sedan sat in the driveway. He melted back into the trees. He needed a diversion and knew just where to get one.

Five chicken houses sat north of the house. He followed the winding rat paths through the tall grasses, staying low and out of sight. He found a tow sack next to the feed barn then went rat hunting.

The trick was to wrestle the things into the sack, alive. Their size still amazed him. He managed to get three of them into the large sack. A fourth would not have fit.

He got as near to the house as he dared. The front door was open. He wondered if the welcome mat still rested on the doorstep. Smiling, he threw the bag at the opening then ran around as fast as he could within the cover of the trees to the back of the house. The government men had no idea what to make of the enormous rodents. Their surprise was loud enough to reach his ears.

The back door was locked, so he used his key. He eased in and closed it back.

"What the hell," one of the men said. Killer peeked around a corner. Four men in suits were dancing around trying to shoot the rats with dart rifles. Joseph barked from one of the bedrooms.

He rushed the room and took the first man cleanly with his machete. The metallic smell of blood filled the room. The other men tried to bring their arms to bear. He tossed the machete aside and grappled with them, breaking arms, necks, backs ... everything.

All done, he gazed down. It wasn't enough that they were dead.

They had white hearing aids with wires. More were on their way. Joseph needed to be safe.

The dog yipped his greeting from the cage they'd put him into. Killer let him out of the cage and the dog jumped into his arms. Dog in hand, he walked out the front door.

The town sheriff, Sheriff Bob, and his deputy, Travis, stood twenty feet away. Travis, a friend he'd known since grade school, screamed and started shooting. Killer turned his back to protect the dog. Something hit him and threw him down.

The sheriff, a guy who Killer's dad used to play softball with, rolled him over. He still clutched Joseph to his chest.

"Sheriff ... Please, Sheriff, take care of my dog. Could ya?" He coughed up blood and his muscled locked up for a second. "Call him Joseph, Sheriff. OK Sheriff ... Joseph. Don't let anybody get him."

Sheriff Bob turned his head away. "Travis, bring the car around." Joseph licked Killer's face. The sheriff turned back to Killer.

"I'll raise the dog like he was my own child."

"Yes ..." Killer said and died.

Sheriff Bob reached for the dog, and the thing bit him. Little Varmint.





Morning's Moon

The waltzing spirits, once so pale and cold, Awaited new lives as they shed the old. Created awesomely, they each would soon Advance on or decline by morning's moon.

-ashley dioses

Meat

Juicy, tender, Salty, sweet. Meat is the meal that I like to eat.

Beef, chicken, Or human flesh. The taste of meat is the absolute best.

> I like to eat it when it's grilled, I like to eat it when it's chilled. I like to eat all kinds of meat. I'll eat it all from ears to feet.





LISTEN TO YOUR MOTHERS

by ian mullins

"Finished?" His mother slammed a bony fist on the bathroom door.

"Almost." Alan fumbled for his belt.

"How much longer does my garden have to wait?" she demanded.

"Coming." He sluiced his hands with scalding water until they were as red as dying roses.

"You always keep me waiting," she complained, shoving past him as he opened the door. "God, what a stench."

"Dad said that was a sign of good compost," he reminded her.

"Your father knew nothing." She pecked at the toilet bowl, fussing over the thick stool he'd dropped.

Alan waited while she spooned up his turd and plopped it in a transparent plastic bag, where it seemed to writhe like a foetus in a womb.

"I hope you won't poison my roses," she said, holding the bag at arms length, as though it was a dead rat.

"Waste not want not," he answered. It was one of her own favourites, but the invisible irony refused to deflate his shame. He was the only thirty-eight-year-old he knew who still let his mother know when he needed the bathroom. He was also the only thirty-eight-year-old he knew who still lived at home. The factory had cut his hours in half, and were threatening to cut them even more. He'd hated his tiny apartment, only half a mile away from the house he'd been brought up in, but at least it had been his. Now he shared his childhood bedroom with fertilizing flowers sheltering from cold winds.

He stood in its window and watched mother spread his droppings around her

roses. Winter was encroaching, and the garden was full of skeletons buried up to their knees. He shivered, licking the cold glass then inhaling cold coffee, just as he had when he was nine.

She came for him while he sat at the kitchen table. "I need your blood," she demanded.

"Why?" he asked, folding the newspaper to hide the comic strips.

"To mix with my bone meal. My bedding plants are dying." She approached him with a suspiciously-long darning needle, gleaming in the late sun leaking through the window.

"Why does it have to be mine?" he inquired, nervously afraid. But he was already baring his arm, offering it as a shield to ward off a blow from a sword.

"You want an old woman to cut herself and bleed to death? Shame on you." She jabbed deep, plastic spoon in her spare hand. "You're not going to cry, are you? You always blubbered when I took you to the doctor. No matter what he did, you always cried."

"No," he protested, feeling a single tear sharper than the needle escape from an eye.

"I knew it," she declared, carefully lifting the spoon's thin blood to her nose. For a moment Alan thought she was going to drink it, but instead she tipped it into a pot of earth the texture of cookie-dough, stabbing down the spoon to crush the small white bones.

"I'm thirty-eight years old," he called after her, as she headed back to the garden with her new trophy.

"Is that what you think?" she shouted back.

Alan patched himself up and slouched back to his room. He seemed to be there all the time now, just as he had when he was sixteen and had painted the walls black. It had been worth it to hear her scream.

Two days later she dragged him out into the garden at dusk to help her re-plant a small ugly tree with closed lips sealed in its bark. He'd been busy all day at work, packing shoes into boxes until his hands smelled of leather and laces, two odours he'd once enjoyed. His hands were dry and stiff, like unpolished shoes, but she made him grip the shovel and dig a deep hole into earth that seemed to smell of leather as she demanded he dig deeper and deeper, faster and faster. It was almost dark by the time he climbed from the hole, bathed in winter sweat, impaling the shovel in the pile of wormy earth he'd disturbed and dug. He turned toward the house, light from the kitchen window limping across the lawn.

"Where are you going?" she demanded to know. "You think I can lift a tree all my myself?"

"Bathroom," he gasped.

"Number one or number two?"

"Two," he confessed. "Are you coming? Bring your spoon."

"No time," she answered, waving her arms like an autumn tree shedding leaves.

"It's almost dark and I need to get this tree planted before the rains tomorrow. Just unbuckle your pants and drop it right in."

"What?" Alan couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Right in front of you?"

Mother cackled, her false teeth shiny in the dusk. "Do you think this will be the first time I've seen you empty your bowels? I've been smelling your filth since you were inside me."

"I'm not doing this," he declared, tightening his hands on his belt to stop them straying towards the buckle. "I'll go inside and—"

"No! The rains are coming. I need to beat the rains!"

"The rains can wait a few minutes."

"But I can't! I can't wait."

"Why can't you wait?"

She looked at him squarely. "Because I won't," she said quietly. "Now get in that hole and give me your dirt."

Alan turned back to the hole he'd dug. He thought about throwing himself in and begging her to cover him.

"Good boy," said mother.

Two little words were all it took. Feeling cold and immense, he added three of his own. "I love you," he whispered, fingers already grasping for the shovel.

She cracked like an old tree struck by lightning. He was surprised as how delicate she seemed, her bones snapping like dry twigs while he worked up another cold sweat. Though broken, she remained upright at the edge of the hole, like an old shrub bending softly into the winter wind. He shoved her gently; her bones collapsed, tumbling quietly into the grave she'd made him dig.

Feeling alone, brave and beautiful, he covered her slowly with thick dry earth that smelled of leather. By the time he was finished he was weeping uncontrollably, but had no idea why.

It was a cool start to the Spring, but Alan didn't mind at all. He had just cashed his mother's social security cheque and had filled the freezer with hot spicy food, burying his mother's fat home-baked pies below the frozen vegetables he didn't have to eat anymore. All the chili and ice cream he'd been eating had packed a few pounds on his skinny self, but he didn't mind that at all. He took a bath at 3:00 p.m., rooting through the jungle of unwashed clothes fermenting in the corner of his room to find a shirt that didn't smell as bad as the rest.

He still hadn't conquered the washing machine. Nor the lawnmower, turning the garden into a blizzard of grass surrounded by lurching strangles of bushes and weeds. Looking down on it at 4:00 p.m., shirtless, finishing a bottle of half-drunk beer he'd left beside his unmade bed the night before, he thought he saw something stirring under a low shrub.

He didn't like the idea of having to deal with rats. It had been mother's job to put out the poison and rake up the bodies. Maybe he could lay a trail of food leading to the neighbour's garden.

Outside, still shirtless, he thrashed through the lawn to the spot where he'd seen movement. The earth had been disturbed, as though a rat had been digging a nest. He searched the garden and found more disturbing signs. A small bone, like a skinned finger, thrust from the earth by the crab-apple tree. He tugged on it, but it refused to budge. Besides it was a small crop of weeds that looked like grey hair.

Disturbed, he returned to the house to plan an attack. He was good at planning, even his mother had said so. It was putting them into action that upset him. All that flesh and blood on his fingers. He shuddered to think of it, though he often did. Usually late at night, when the house was too quiet for sleep. The lonely hours between bed-time and bed-rise, dusk until dawn, when his mother liked to knit him sweaters. He didn't want her back, of course; what boy would? He just wished she'd cleaned up a little before she'd fallen.

That was what he'd told the neighbours. 'A fall,' he said, as though that said everything. Gone to live with her sister in the north. Couldn't say if she was coming back. Yes, they talk on the phone all the time. I'll tell her you miss her. Best to write. She tires easily these days, her voice not as clear as it once was. I'm the only one who can understand a word she says. To everyone else it's just gabble, gabble.

He ate pizza in front of the new TV, but his heart wasn't in it. All those shows he'd heard workmates taking about over mid-morning coffee were hardly worth watching. Too much fake paranoia. He could try the lap-top, but had barely watched porn in months. There was no edge to it when she couldn't walk in at any moment, denouncing the filth in his head even more than the filth in his pants. She'd left him cold, grubby, and horny.

Was that the rats again? They were coming closer to the house every day. He'd have to buy poison soon. Was that someone trying to turn the handle on the kitchen door? Not rats. Definitely not rats.

Do something.

He did nothing. He recognised this as his default position. Wait until the bullies get bored. Don't laugh, don't cry. Fold your arms when they pushed their fingers in your pockets. It would be over soon. Needles in his arms, fingers in his stools. Maybe he hadn't buried her deep enough.

He jerked himself to his feet and walked out into the kitchen. Half a shadow lurked though the glass in the kitchen door. But it seemed to be made of light, rather than dark. The night looked as bright as day.

"I've got a gun here," he whispered, so softly he could barely hear it himself. But the words seemed to work on the shadow, which fell back and doused itself in darkness like a firework in a bucket of water. Nervous, but oddly aroused, he strode to the door and gripped the handle, telling himself it was time to man up and take his mother's advice. 'Spit your fear in the eye,' she used to say. Needing to feel brave more than he needed to feel safe, he turned the key and stepped out into the garden. Night settled on his shoulders like an old blanket. He waded out into the long grass, staring down at the trees at the bottom of the garden, where

darkness seemed to coalesce into strange new shapes. The night is surprising itself, he thought.

By the time he reached the trees the dark shadows had shifted. He could hear one shuffling behind him, pretending to be the wind in the branches. How could a shadow shuffle? He thought he knew how.

Slowly he turned to face his mother's shape, light from the kitchen windows shining through her eyes. "I'm sorry," he said, knowing he didn't really mean it.

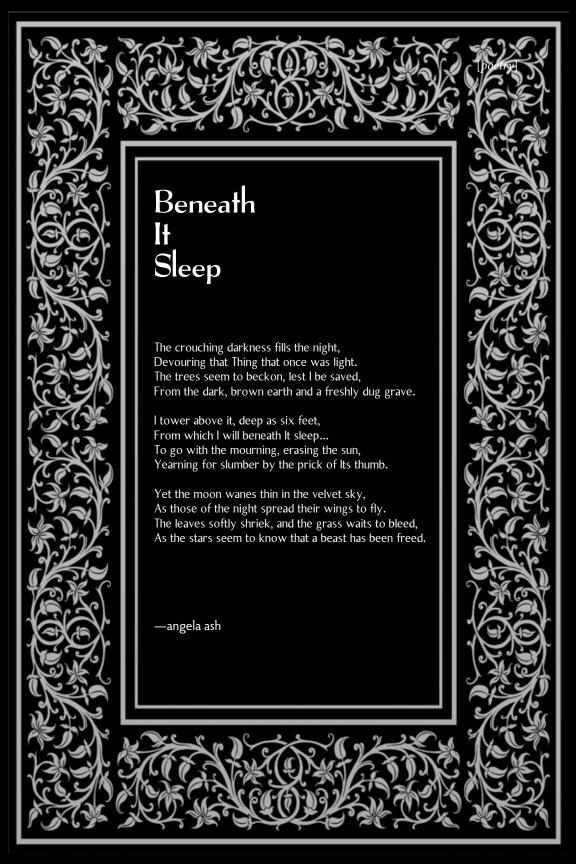
Her lips twitched as though worms lived inside them. "Don't be," said a voice like the wind whistling through a hallowed bone. "I rot with the roots; I bloom with the spring. I freeze in the winter; I shine in the summer. And so will you."

Alan shifted awkwardly on the grass, wondering why he could hear tearing sounds from all over the garden, as though multiple bodies erupted from the soil and found new roots in rotted hearts.

"We're all over this garden," said his mother's voice. Or rather voices, for the sound came in chorus from all around him. White shadows shuffled in plant-like formation. Mothers gathered themselves from the soil, brushing dirt from their bones. "And so are you," they said as one. All raised what had once been hands; but only one, perhaps the original seed, struck down with the shovel and eclipsed all shadow and light.

The seasons pass, the seasons grow. But anyone walking by the old house on a cool spring night could not fail to notice the beautiful garden, the impeccable lawn. Mothers and sons working through the twilight together. Digging, weeding, seeding. Watching the garden grow.







by a.w. mckinnon

Seven days before Christmas, a man appeared at my door with a package. A gift, he said. My name and address appeared in large letters on the colorful wrapping: Mr. Rudy Feeney, Feeney Tool Works, 23 West Grand Avenue. Inside the package I found a suit, a white shirt, and a tie. There were no markings to tell who had sent the gift, and when questioned, the man said he'd received fifty dollars to pick up the package from a park bench and deliver to my address.

I do not give, nor do I wish to receive, gifts. My employees know how I feel about holidays and gift giving. I have no time for such nonsense. My money and time are too important.

Mr. Brewster, my accountant, handles my money, counting it, recording it in his book, and depositing my funds in the bank. Brewster is half blind and walks with a stoop. He detests me, I realize, but he knows no one would hire him at his age, so he has no choice but to remain in my employment. He often reminds me he has six children and a sickly wife to support, no doubt hinting he is in need of a raise. Let him hint all he wants.

Six days before Christmas an old woman appeared at my door with a box containing a pair of black, shiny shoes and a pair of socks. "A gift for you, sir," she muttered, as she turned away, and with small, quick steps disappeared down the street before I could utter a word.

Five days before Christmas, I received a letter from the Mountain View Cemetery. Someone had gifted me a burial plot, the letter stated.

I found the letter as I sorted through the day's mail. As a rule, I would not bother myself with such common duties, but I fired the mail girl, Abigail Cloverman. She had entered my office as Mr. Brewster and I were counting out the bank deposit

for the week. It was a rude interruption. I instruct my employees never to interrupt me or ask for special privileges. Miss Cloverman had asked off for her mother's funeral. I reminded her she had the weekend for such things, and that she should learn to schedule better. The fact she had violated two of my strictest rules left me no choice but to let her go. She dropped to the floor in tears, moaning and making such a fuss. The fact that she would be homeless, her pantry empty, and her father unable to get needed medical attention was none of my concern.

"How," she screamed, "will I be able to give my mother a decent burial?" "Such is the life of peasants," I said, as I pushed her out the door.

Four days before Christmas, a large truck parked in front of my shop. The driver and his helper unloaded a casket and carried it into my office. "A beautiful mahogany casket, imported, and very expensive," the driver said, handing me the paperwork.

"I do not want this thing," I told the man. "Take it away."

"I'm sorry, sir, I can't do that. It was a special order and cannot be return. Someone went to great expense to purchase this for you." The driver and helper turned and headed for the door, ignoring my demands to take the casket away.

The continued flow of the strange gifts infuriated me. I suspect one or more of my employees of being involved in the nonsense. I see them standing in small groups and whispering when I walk through the shop. How many times have I docked their pay for wasting productive time? How many have I fired on the spot for placing hand drawn pictures of me on the bulletin board? Terrible images. How they cry and drop to their knees to beg forgiveness when I fire them.

I ordered my employees to gather around the platform from which I deliver my company announcements. Standing there, high above them, I can see the fear in their eyes, looking upward, waiting for me to speak. I play a little game, letting the minutes tick away, watching them fidgeting, the worry cut deep into their brows. I snicker as I enjoy the feeling of power. It is worth the long climb up the platform ladder.

My message was short. "The ridiculous gifts must stop at once. I have received four unwanted gifts, so I will fire four people," I shouted, banging my fist on the platform for emphases. They were milling around like lost sheep, fearful I would catch their eye and point them out as one of the four to lose their job. While I had their attention, I announced that quitting time on Christmas Eve would be changed from 5:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. There would be no exceptions. Lunch hour, I added, would be cut from thirty minutes to twenty minutes for the coming year. I paused for a moment, glancing over the upturned faces. "My gift to you, all of you," I called out, as I climbed down the ladder.

Three days before Christmas, a van arrived at the back of my shop. Two men unloaded a headstone on to a cart and pushed it to the door. The paperwork they handed me was from Sunny Side Monuments, the home of cheap headstones. A hand written card included with the paperwork read: a gift. Stamped across the

paperwork were the words: Paid in full. When I mentioned there was nothing on the headstone, one of the men shrugged. "Guess there wasn't anything worth putting on there," he said, slapping his backside. Both men had a good laugh as they departed with their cart. Despicable men of no worth, I was sure.

Two days before Christmas, I received a phone call from the *Daily News*. A Mrs. Williams introduced herself as the editor of the newspaper. She said she'd received a request to publish my obituary in her paper, adding the donor insisted it take up one full page of the paper. The donor had submitted the obituary with a rather large sum of cash, both being delivered by a cab driver. "What?" I yelled. "I'm very much alive. How can you have an obituary for me? What does it say?"

"I'm not in the habit of having people scream at me, Mr. Feeney," she said. "I'm sorry sir, but the person who purchased the space insisted I not release it until it has been published. It is just as well you don't know," she said, just as the connection was lost.

Why were the gifts continuing? I thought I had been clear about my demands they stop at once. Further action on my part would be required. It occurred to me that many of the gifts were expensive. Where were the employees getting the money? That thought bothered me greatly.

As I left the shop on Christmas Eve, I reminded the employees of the change in quitting time. The snow had started to fall, the wind brisk and chilling. The sidewalks were becoming snow covered, and darkness had fallen. Christmas music blared from the stores. People rushed about, no doubt wasting their money on gifts. Let them. They are fools.

The tapping on my door was light but persistent. I never have visitors to my home, and peddlers have been threatened to stay away. Upon opening the door, I looked left, then right, pulling my robe close to soften the chill. There was only the darkness, a dim glow from the street lamp, the swirling of the snow. I turned to close the door, satisfied the tapping must have been caused by the wind. It was at that moment I notice the note pinned to the door.

"From your window see your gift arriving." The note was written on my company stationary. I crumbled the note up and threw it across the room. From the street came the sound of a car horn, just one short blast. I walked to the window and looked out. The snow was increasing, making it difficult to see the street lamp a short distance away. Then, I saw it, the amber parking lights glowing like two evil eyes. It was long and sleek, its black paint polished to a high luster. The exhaust drifted upward into the frigid blackness. Was I seeing things? A hearse?

I shot out my door and raced toward the curb. I would force the driver to reveal who was behind the gifts. My robe was no match for the cold and windblown snow. My hands were beginning to feel the sting from the icy night as I reached the driver's side and yanked open the door. I expected to find one of my employees behind the wheel. There was no one to be found. The fragrance of flowers drifted from the warm interior. I stood for a moment, looking about. Who had been driving? I glanced toward my front door to see it standing open. Had I failed to close the door as I rushed out? I hurried to the house, fearful someone may have entered while my attention was drawn to the hearse.

Searching through the house, room by room, I was relieved to find no intruder. I glanced out the window to see if the hearse was still there. The amber eyes remained, and the exhaust from the idling engine sent white, ghost-like shapes into the night.

I pulled the curtains closed and went to make myself a cup of tea. I would deal with those involved after the Christmas holiday. They would pay a pretty price. Tonight I would have my tea and spend the evening studying my bank statements. I keep a close eye on my statements, but I had let my unopened mail stack up on the table in the hallway. Business had been good, causing many late hours in my office at the shop, and leaving me too tired to bother with the mail once I arrived home. Tonight I would take the time to delight in my wealth, reviewing the unopened bank statements. As the hour neared Christmas morning, I was pleased no other gifts had arrived.

I had settled in my chair with a warm cup of tea. Spreading the latest bank statements out on the table, I noticed something wrong. I sat for the longest time, unable to believe my eyes. All of the statements were the same, nothing but zeroes on the balance line.

How could it be? There must be a mistake. I rushed to the hall to see what other mail lay on the table. I found it difficult to breathe as I sorted through the unopened envelopes. My legs were shaking, my heart racing.

The bank had sent three notices requesting I come in to discuss my overdrawn account. There were five letters from the mortgage company, the first requesting I come in to discuss the missed payments, and the last letter informing me they were foreclosing on my home and on my shop for non-payment. I sat trying to figure out what had happened. Perhaps the bank had made a mistake? No, it was unlikely the bank and the mortgage company would make the same mistake.

There could be only one answer. Mr. Brewster. The old man had cleaned out my account. How long had he been juggling the figures to make it look like my wealth continued to grow, when all the time he had been stealing my money? Had he spread my wealth among the employees? Had they used my money to buy the gifts?

From outside came the sound of raised voices. I rushed to the window. Pulling the curtain aside, I looked out to see a crowd had gathered. Mr. Brewster stood shaking his fist at me. All of my employees stood behind Brewster, waving signs and shouting.

"Christmas is near, Mr. Feeney, and we have gathered to thank you for the final gift you will be presenting to us for Christmas," shouted Brewster. He turned and pointed to the hearse. "It waits for you Feeney. It waits for you." The employees shouted and clapped their hands.

What gift? Had they lost their minds?

They had turned against me. My business, my home, my wealth had vanished.

I would be homeless, without funds for the simplest of needs.

The night was long. I tried to sleep, but I tossed and turned until dawn, nightmarish visions flashing before my eyes. As the first lights of Christmas day spilled into the room, I pulled myself from the bed. There was a chill in the room. It wrapped itself around me and penetrated my body, causing me to tremble. Throughout the night I had asked myself the same question, over and over again: What was I to do?

The answer came to me. It had been there all along. Now it was clear. I knew what I must do.

I walked to the closet and threw open the door. I began shoving boxes and clothing aside until I saw the thing I was looking for leaning against the back wall.

As I sat down to have my last sip of tea, I was surprised to find, after so many years, the old shotgun still felt comfortable in my hands.





Picnic

In the light Darkbreak Picnic table in the low hung shade of evergreen Faceless forces surging toward bodyless motion in the springtime of the cabin's dust Solar winds on flat planes lightbreak Dead cavities at a picnic table in the low hung shade of everything

—john roche

Previously published in Rolling Stone, #158, April 11, 1974

black thumb

by michelle ann king

There's something moving by the garden fence. Mice, again? Or worse, a rat? Debra puts the washing basket down and almost calls out for Stuart, but then she remembers.

She edges closer. Curled around the cracked base of her abandoned flower pot is a huge slug, sleek and iridescent in the patchy afternoon sun. Once, she would have worried about how to get rid of it, but there's no point now.

"I wouldn't stop here," she tells it. "You'll go hungry."

There's nothing for it to feed on in my blighted garden unless it eats gravel and dry, yellowing grass.

Once, she'd thought it would be different—she'd bought tools and pots and seeds, enticed by visions of bright flowers, plump tomatoes and aromatic herbs. But either the shoots withered as soon as they appeared, or the seeds never sprouted in the first place.

"Black Thumb," Stuart used to call her. She would chase him around the garden and he'd laugh and cringe away, saying, "Don't touch me, Black Thumb. I don't want to die."

She and Stuart used to laugh a lot.

Your husband is a fool, the slug says.

Debra gives a little gasp and jumps backwards. She kicks the basket over,

spilling the washing onto the ground. Ellie's dress flops into a patch of mud and the pale blue material blooms with dark swirls.

Debra grabs for it, but she's too late. It's ruined, and Ellie will be furious with her. Again.

Your daughter is a parasite, the slug says.

Debra inches forward again, crouches down and rests her hands on her knees. She can't say how she knows the words are coming from the slug—it isn't like it speaks out loud—but she can heard it. Somehow, she can hear it.

The slug is rounded in the middle and tapered at the ends, and at least a foot long. Every now and then a quivering pulse goes through it.

It's looking at her. Right at her. She couldn't say how she knows that, either, because it doesn't have any wavy eye-stalks. But she does.

"Hello?" she says.

Hearing her own voice startles her all over again. She straightens up, and her knees pop with an explosive crack. Ridiculous. Stupid. What on Earth is she doing? Wait, the slug says.

Debra ignores it, snatches up the washing basket and runs inside. She leaves the dress in the mud.

From the kitchen window, she watches a magpie land on the fence. It hops down and disappears behind the flower pot. It doesn't come out again.

She calls Stuart and asks if he can come over.

"Why? What's the matter?"

"It's nothing. Not really. I just—in the garden, there's—"

He sighs. It sounds very loud over the phone. "Debra, you've got to stop doing this. I can't keep coming over every time there's a tap dripping or a light bulb needs changing. You're going to have to learn to deal with stuff on your own, you know?"

Yes. She knows. She apologizes, puts the phone down and goes back to the kitchen window. There are no more birds on the fence.

Hello, the slug says.

Debra pulls the blind down and makes herself a cup of tea. As the light fades, she can hear the slug singing softly.

She sits, listening, until Ellie comes home. The lights go on, the fridge door opens, bottles clink.

"What are you doing still up?" Ellie says.

"I didn't realize it was so late," Debra says. "I must have dozed off. It's the song, it's so restful."

"Song? What song?"

Debra glances at the kitchen window. The melody soars. "Don't you hear it?"

"Hear what?" Ellie slams the fridge door shut again. "There's nothing to eat in here, Mum, do you know that?"

Debra goes to the fridge herself. "Oh," she says. "I meant to go shopping, but there was the washing, and then—"

"Whatever." Ellie pulls Debra's handbag off the back of the chair and roots inside it. "Forty quid? Is that all you've got?" She tucks the money into her jeans pocket and puts the purse back. "You'll have to get some more out tomorrow, then. And get some bloody food, while you're at it."

Outside, the slug stops singing.

Food, it says.

Debra shivers.

"Mum? Did you hear what I said?"

"Yes. I'll sort it out. I'm just a bit tired, now. I think I might take one of my pills." Ellie snaps her fingers. "Oh, yeah. You'll need to get some more of those, too."

Debra looks at the mug on the table in front of her. A greyish skin has formed on the surface of the cold tea.

"I don't think I feel very well," she says. "Could you get me some water, Ellie?" There's no reply, and when she looks up Ellie is gone.

She thinks about her bed, but it seems such a long way to go. She puts her head down on the kitchen table instead, and the slug resumes its song. Debra closes her eyes.

Her dreams are vibrant, but soothing. She wakes in the morning with a stiff and aching neck, but a clearer head.

She takes the shed key from the drawer and goes outside. The shed is old and battered, the roof timbers sagging. She'd meant to waterproof it, but never managed to find the time.

Inside it's dark, and the air feels warm and stale. A large spider scuttles away from the light. Debra steps inside cautiously, and moves paint tins and dusty garden chairs around until she finds what she's looking for: the rabbit hutch they'd bought for Ellie when she was little. The rabbits have been ghosts for years, but the hutch is still strong and sturdy.

She locks the shed again and puts the hutch on the floor in front of the slug. It slithers inside and curls up. She can feel its approval.

Debra takes the hutch into her bedroom. She sits on the floor and watches the slug eat a black-shelled beetle that was hiding in the old newspapers.

"Sing to me?" she says, and it does. It sings to her of a different life, a brighter world. A better world.

I can help you, it says. We can help each other.

She sighs. "I'd like that."

It moves slowly, in a graceful undulating motion, to the front of the hutch.

I know peace, it says. And joy. Do you know joy?

"No," she whispers.

But you would like to?

"Yes."

There must be change, it says. Growth. Sometimes this is painful, but it is always necessary. I am with you. We will change together. I will show you many things. It will be beautiful.

"Yes," she says. "Oh, yes."

She looks at the hutch. Why had she thought it would do? It's very obviously too small. The slug is much bigger than a rabbit. It can't be comfortable, confined

in there.

She lifts the latch and opens the door.

As a child, Debra was never allowed to have a pet. Her father didn't believe she would look after it properly. Good intentions don't feed a dog, he said, as if that explained anything. He never had faith in her. Nobody did.

It's not fair. She means to do all the things people want, it's just that there's so much to remember. She loses track, sometimes.

She asks Ellie to go to the supermarket for her. She gives her a shopping list and some money, but Ellie doesn't come home. She calls Stuart, but he sounds so disappointed that she hangs up without asking him anything.

She rings Ellie's mobile and leaves another message.

She will ignore you again, the slug says. It is what she always does. She will not help us.

"I'm sorry," Debra says. "I didn't mean to let you down."

You haven't, the slug says. I have faith in you.

Debra vows to try harder. To be worthy. She has to, because the slug is hungry, and she's promised to look after it. It needs food, if it's going to carry on growing. If it's going to carry on teaching her. And Debra wants that, very much.

She sits on the floor and leans against the slug's body. It takes her weight comfortably, buoying and warming her. Its skin has thinned lately, allowing her to see the play of light and colour underneath. It's so beautiful.

"Teach me how to sing?" she says, and it does.

She wakes to slamming doors and blazing lights. Both send spikes of pain through her head.

She stumbles downstairs to the kitchen, shielding her eyes. "Ellie? Is that you?"

"This place is a tip, Mum," Ellie says, looking into the sink. "It's disgusting." She opens the fridge, then whips her head away. "Gross. What the hell have you been doing?"

Debra smiles. "Learning to sing."

"Right." Ellie glances around the room and shakes her head. "You've lost it, you know that? You should get some help."

"I have all the help I need, now."

"If you say so. Look, I've got things to do so just give me some money and I'll leave you to it. You want to live in a shithole, that's up to you."

Debra feels the slug stirring, upstairs.

The girl should not talk to you like that, it says.

"No."

"No. what?"

The girl is a parasite. Unworthy.

Ellie looks around. 'Did you hear something?'

"Yes."

"It sounded like—I don't know. Weird. Slithering. Have you got rats?"

We need food, the slug says.

Ellie walks slowly towards the stairs, her head tilted. "It sounds like it's coming from up here."

There's a snatch of song. "You should go and have a look," Debra says.

For once, Ellie does as she's told.

It takes Debra a while to realize the phone is ringing. She's finding it harder and harder to hear anything other than the song, now.

"Hello?" she says. Her tongue feels thick and furry. Unused to words.

"Deb? Deb, is that you?"

"Yes?" There's a pause. She concentrates, tries to place the voice. After a while, it comes through in the song. "Stuart?"

"Yes, it's me. What's the matter with you? Are you sick?"

"Tired," she says. "Working. Learning."

Another pause. "Oh. Okay. Well, I just wanted to—check in, I suppose. I haven't heard from you for a while." He gives a short, stilted laugh. "You got another man, now, to run all your errands?"

"We have everything we need," she says.

No, the slug says. Not everything. Not yet.

"Are you sure? You sound—odd."

We must grow.

"What? Deb, what did you say?"

"Nothing. I have to go now."

"Hold on, hold on. Is Ellie there? I haven't heard from her lately, either."

Debra struggles to think. Ellie?

Ellie is gone, says the slug.

Debra nods. She remembers now. "Ellie is gone."

"Gone? Gone where? Do you mean--she's moved out?"

Debra takes the phone away from her ear and looks at it. It is ugly, and it doesn't sing.

"Deb? Did you hear me? Are you still there?"

She puts the ugly thing down and goes back upstairs. She has work to do.

Before, she would probably have thought the slug smelled bad now. But she's learning how to use her senses differently and she can hear the slug's heat, see the joy fizzing along its skin, and taste the colours that flow under its sleek surface. Every part of it is beautiful.

Occasionally, the phone tries to interrupt their song with its shrill clamour. In the end, she throws it away. She throws a lot of things away, because she doesn't need them anymore. All she needs is space. Space to grow.

She flicks away a fly that tries to land on her face. The flies are starting to get on her nerves a little. All that buzzing.

But she can't afford to get distracted. She has to focus on her own transformation, now. There is so much still to learn.

She's forgotten about the doorbell, tucked up on a high shelf out of view, and the booming chimes scare her. For a long moment she can't associate the noise with the cause; it's been a long time since anyone came to the door.

When the sound stops she edges into the hallway and listens at the door, but it's hard to hear anything above all the buzzing. She closes her eyes and thinks go away as loudly as she can, but there's no sense of connection. The slug hears her, though, and stirs in its sleep.

"Debra?" says a voice, followed by an insistent rapping. "Are you in there? It's Stuart. Can you hear me?"

The voice is thin, reedy. Unpleasant. She prefers the buzzing.

"Debra, open the door. I'm not going to leave until I see you're all right. If you can hear me, open the door. Otherwise I'm going to ring the police."

She stiffens. Police. Outsiders. No, that can't be allowed. It isn't time, not yet.

She turns the catch on the door and lets it open, just a little. Stuart is an irritation, like the flies, but she can deal with it. She is strong, now.

"Thank Christ," Stuart says. "I've been worried, Deb. I've rung you I don't know how many times, left you messages. Ellie as well, but I haven't heard from her either. What's going on? Are you—"

"I'm fine," Debra says. "Ellie's fine. You can go now." She starts to close the door but Stuart puts the flat of his hand up against it and pushes back. A few flies escape through the gap.

Stuart swats at them. "I told you, I want to make sure you're all right."

"You don't look fine, Deb. If you don't mind me saying, you look like shit. And Christ, it stinks in there. What's going on? You need to let me in."

"No," Debra says. "I don't need to do anything. I don't need you. Leave me alone."

But then the slug speaks, for the first time in a while.

Let him in, it says. We need to grow. We need food.

Debra hears, and understands. She moves back, and lets Stuart come inside.

"Good God Almighty, Debra, what have you been doing in here?" She closes the door behind him and locks it. In the kitchen, Stuart coughs and makes a retching sound.

She finds him bent over, one hand on his thigh and the other over his mouth. His eyes are watering. He coughs again and stands up slowly. It looks like it costs him some effort.

"What have you done, Deb?"

"I have grown," she says, knowing he won't understand. Knowing he can't hear the song.

"Christ," he says under his breath. "Jesus Christ." He swallows, the muscles of his throat jerking, and looks around. "Debra? Where's Ellie? Where's our daughter?"

"Ellie is here. We are all here."

Stuart holds his hands up, palms out. "You're not well. You understand that, don't you? You need help. You need to sit down, and I'm going to call the police.

Then we'll get this sorted out. I'll help you. We'll do it together. Okay?"

A small, dim part of her responds. Stuart always knows what to do. She can do what she's told, just like she used to, and let Stuart deal with things. Let Stuart fix things. It's easier that way.

That is how it was, the slug agrees. But not how it is. You have changed. You have grown.

"Yes," she says.

Stuart runs his hands though his thinning hair. "Good," he says. 'That's good, Deb." He fumbles a mobile phone out of his jacket pocket.

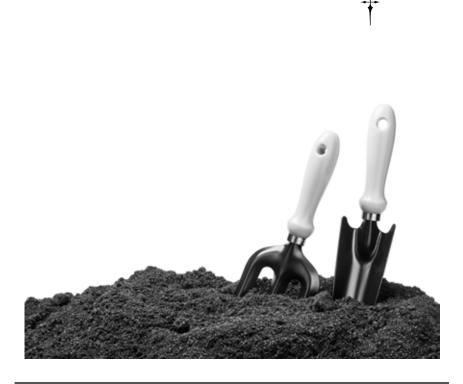
"I wasn't talking to you," Debra says, and starts to sing.

The slug's song joins hers. Their combined song is powerful, and it takes Stuart easily. Lifts him up and carries him up the stairs. A hot, meaty smell creates swirling patterns in the air.

She worries, for a moment, when Stuart begins to scream—it's a very discordant sound. But it's quickly woven into the song, and becomes beautiful.

Not all things are meant to thrive. It's sad, but necessary. She understands, now.

She reaches out for Stuart, and he cringes away just like he used to do. "Black Thumb," she says, and smiles.





In the heart of New York City searched a mother for her daughter; They found her, feeling darkened pity in the brackish subway water.

The black mud caked beneath her nails her eyes filmed o'er and gray; Her frame a pose of the agony throes like gravity had lost its sway.

They brought her home and planted her deep to conceal the ugly slaughter; and to this day that spot is gray like the brackish subway water.

—daniel stern

writer

by rick mcquiston

Before he knew it, Daniel had finished another page. The chicken scratch on the paper (a veritable mess that only he could decipher) was gradually coming together to form yet another chapter of his latest horror masterpiece.

Well, a masterpiece to him, anyway.

Ignoring the bias that so frequently accompanied any amateur author's work, Daniel flipped the notepad to the next page. An intimidating stretch of blank lines greeted his eager eyes.

"Come on, Daniel," he said to himself. "Let's keep the flow going."

In his story, the main protagonist had just broken into the burial chamber. Having escaped from the clutches of the huge spider guarding the chamber, the man, a heavily muscled hero with flowing black hair and good looks that would have made any movie star envious, pushed into the room. Vast treasures lined the chamber floor from wall to wall.

With the maddening gleam of gold and jewels digging into his mind, the hero stepped past the threshold and began collecting what he could.

Daniel looked at the paper. His pen dangled between his fingers, a seemingly useless tool that only increased his anxiety about the writer's block threatening to attack.

But he was determined. In the past when he had trouble with ideas he found that it was best to simply push forward.

"If you come up against a wall, just break through it," his dad would always say. A glint of light caught his eye. It vanished just as suddenly, however, fading into the dull shadows of the room.

Daniel tried to ignore it, but found it impossible to do so. It festered in his mind like a pot of boiling water: a potential danger that could prove disastrous if not treated with caution.

Standing up, Daniel set his notebook and pen aside and focused his attention on where he thought he saw the flash of light. He stepped forward, slowly, cautiously, silently. Excitement churned in his gut. His heart threatened to punch through his chest.

As he approached the darkened corner, Daniel noticed it again: a brief but glaring flash of light, light that suggested something metal.

He moved aside a small table, and then a rickety old chair.

It glared up at him like a lost puppy begging to be rescued.

Gold.

Without hesitating, Daniel reached down and scooped up the treasure. He brought the items closer to his eyes, as if he needed to verify that they were in fact real.

A golden box housed coins and loose strands of heavily-jeweled necklaces, as well as rubies and diamonds the size of golf balls. And gaudy rings, one studded with so many precious stones that he couldn't tell if there was gold beneath, clung to the edge of his palms like freezing children around a fire.

Daniel was at a loss for words. He lowered his hands, allowing some of the treasure to slip past his fingers and clank to the floor.

"This can't be happening," he mumbled under his breath.

Another flash of light caught his attention.

And then another.

Yet another.

Soon he was surrounded by impossible riches, towering heaps of gold and precious stones beyond what any man could imagine.

His mind scrambled for a possible explanation, but came up empty. Thoughts of simply grabbing as much of it as he could and retiring to a comfortable lifestyle on some island paradise bounced around inside his head.

It would be so easy.

A sharp crack against the far wall jolted Daniel from his swinging hammock and Margarita daydream.

He spun around and faced the wall.

Another crack shook the dusty photograph of his parents that hung there and toppled a small lamp.

Daniel held his breath. Whatever was on the other side of the wall was obviously big and determined. It seemed to be moving along the wall, making its way to the one door of the room.

Another hit, this time only a few feet from the door.

Daniel thanked God he had closed it earlier.

Then the door itself was smacked, causing a somewhat neat split to run vertically down its façade. The heavy oak bulged from the external pressure; hinges began to lift from their seats; the frame started to buckle.

Daniel set the treasure he still held in his trembling hands on the floor. The sudden urge to arm himself danced across his mind, and he embraced the notion.

I need to find something, something to defend myself with.

He looked down and noticed a long blade on the floor, partially hidden by a chair. It hadn't been there a moment earlier.

Daniel picked it up. He held the sword in his hand, gracefully cutting through the air with the gleaming, forged steel.

At that moment the door gave way. Shards of wood showered the room as the antagonist made its appearance.

It was a spider, all one and a half tons of it. Soulless black eyes peered down at its puny adversary. A pair of needle-sharp fangs hung below its mottled head, foul-smelling venom leaking from the tip of each.

Daniel leapt back. The sword nearly fell from his grasp but he hung onto it. Bolstered by its presence, he shouted at the beast: "Be gone, foul abomination, I have no quarrel with you. I only seek the treasure that this cursed place holds."

Daniel couldn't believe his ears. Did he just say that?

The spider paused in its slow, maddening approach. It seemed to understand what Daniel was saying. It studied him with its rows of glossy-black eyes.

Then it charged.

Furniture was smashed as if made of cardboard, the creature's sheer bulk reducing all before it to shredded remains wholly unrecognizable as anything of use.

Daniel sidestepped the gnashing fangs and flailing legs with relative grace and ease. It was as if he had faced such terrifying monsters before, and this one was just another threat.

He raised the sword and brought it against the side of the spider's head in a deadly arc. Black blood spurted out of the jagged crevice, splattering both Daniel and the spider.

Rearing up on two of its legs, the spider raged in pain. It crashed through the ceiling, causing a shower of plaster and wood to cover the room.

However, Daniel ignored the maelstrom. He simply stood back and watched the spider's death throes.

But the monster wasn't done yet. With alarming speed, it tensed all eight of its legs and rushed forward. Blood matted its mangy fur, bristling ever so slightly from its frenzied movements.

Daniel darted to his left, narrowly avoiding the beast, and with agility and strength he never knew he had, leapt onto its back and thrust his blade deep into its pulpy flesh.

The spider collapsed into a lifeless heap.

Pulling his sword from the carcass, Daniel stepped away from the mess and surveyed the carnage that used to be his living room. It hardly resembled the peaceful haven where so many great story ideas had sprung from his imagination. Plaster, wood, furniture, all were scattered across the room in sporadic abandon. Where the ceiling used to be there was now only a gaping hole, a disturbing chasm

that revealed the darkened space of the attic. And the floor, once a smooth sea of beautiful hardwood, was now only a splintered collection of ruined boards, a sad reminder of the battle that had just taken place on them.

Daniel walked over to his chair and fell into it. He felt the sword vanish in his hand, as did the treasure in the room. He watched the room repair itself, healing the terrible wounds that had been inflicted on it: shattered walls and furniture transformed into their previous, unblemished condition; walls and floors slid back to how they were before.

And finally, the spider, its body already bloating with postmortem gases, began to fade, drifting into silent nothingness.

Sitting in his chair, Daniel reached over and grabbed his notebook and pen. It felt good to have a writer's tools in his hands again, and he felt a wave of excitement surge through his body at the prospect of getting that next page of the story written.

And now he knew what to write next. He'd been given a deeply-personal inside glimpse into the main character of the story. Even though he himself had created the character, it still wasn't enough to just write about him. He needed to be him, to think like him, to act and react like him.

Taking a deep breath, Daniel began to write.





ZIPPERS

Nights with teeth like zippers, & morning crows from skeleton skies again flying too close to these warped windows that you slowly painted shut a brittle space where shadows hold no music & scattered brushstrokes poke at piles of winter bones in a wheelbarrow.

—darrell lindsey



Mannequins

Mannequins walk through a snowstorm, try to imagine the swirl of thoughts of the bankrupt shop owner who tossed them into a ditch on a country road dressed in matching blue sweaters with moth holes. They talk about his pistol and the bottle of bourbon on the dash. the blur of penciled words on the yellow legal pad. They remember his resigned look, the yellow bow tie, the taillights like Goliath fireflies out of season.

They wonder if he will want to apologize when they ring his doorbell, or if he will leap at them like flames, try to turn them into sticks of firewood.

—darrell lindsey

THE TASTE OF METAL

by dustin farren

Dale Kramrich peered uneasily at the fourteen-foot effigy in front of his company pickup. Rusty hunks of farm equipment held fast by gobs of slag and frozen spatters of molten metal imparted a man-like shape. The arms and torso hung from a high tree branch, a foot of open air between them and their lower extremities, which protruded from the damp earth. The supporting forces of the bisected man were simultaneously reminiscent of both the gallows and crucifixion. Albeit disturbing, it was a good sign for the scrapyard.

Iron wasn't what it used to be. The days of nuts and bolts had long given way to glues and fastenings of the plastic sort. Folks seemed to think hauling their junk metal to the scrapyard a waste of time, given the price of iron these days. For this, Dale's boss had a solution.

"If the miserable cunts are too remiss to bring their scrap to us, then we're going to track them down one-by-one ourselves, Christ witness," he'd said.

Dale parked in front of the house beyond the statue and flicked off the screeching metronome that was the absence of his passenger-side wiper blade. The driver's side had gone bad originally—he tossed it in the trash at the gas pump and switched the good one over when he could hardly see the road one day. If he could talk an old rancher or welder into letting go of half a ton of metal this week he thought he might ask his boss for some cash to replace the blade.

He walked to the aluminum screen door and knocked. A chipmunk trilled somewhere high and deep in the woods, and then all was still—dampened by the October rain. No answer. He flipped up his collar and blew hot air into his hands. The company pickup sat in the mud with its missing eyelash, looking at him. What the hell are you waiting for? it seemed to say. Let's call it a day.

A noise came from behind the house. Dale shrugged at his truck and headed toward the sound.

A dilapidated barn stood in a small clearing. The far end of the roof had fallen in some time long ago. Inside, Dale heard a motor humming and short buzzes



of electricity sputtering intermittently. Probably an antique stick-welder running off some homemade generator. He approached the shop then stopped when he realized if he walked up behind some old codger with his head down wearing a welding mask he might give the guy a heart attack.

"Hello there," he called out. "Anybody home?" The motor hummed on. He reached the door and peered inside.

An old man wearing round goggles stood under the hole in the roof. He struck a flint sparker in one hand and held a cutting torch in the other. The flint sprayed orange sparks over the torch's nozzle and ignited a fierce red flame that lit up the man's face. He spun the acetylene valve on the torch and the roaring flame shrunk and turned white as it approached a temperature near that of the surface of the sun and could only be heard as a low hiss.

Dale anticipated a start from the welder upon spotting him in his barn door, but was surprised when the man looked up from his flame, cocked his head, and simply stared at him. His eyes were hidden behind black lenses; to Dale, he might as well have been wearing a full mask.

"Hi there, mister," Dale tried. "How are you doing today?"

The welder stared a moment longer then turned away, setting the whispering torch in its stand and finding his stick welder.

"I'm not interested," he said, then sparked his stick on a length of angle iron. It looked like he was playing with lightning in his hands. Dale thought the project resembled a legless man holding himself off the bench with his arms.

"No, sir I'm not peddling anything. I'm here to buy your iron."

"I saw your rig out front. You're from the scrapyard. My scrap's not for sale."

The silence was awkward. Dale thought a moment then quickly decided to try a different, impromptu approach.

"No, sir. You see, we're looking to \dots improve the aesthetic condition of our shop."

The man ignored him but seemed to grow tense as Dale spoke, like an electric charge building in a copper coil. "We've been having a hard time attracting new clientele, and our building ain't exactly the Taj Mahal." *Here goes nothing*, he thought. "Would you be willing to sell that large . . . erm, statue at the end of your drive?"

The man stopped what he was doing. Dale continued. "It's a mighty impressive specimen, sir. It's just what we're looking for."

The massive piece would take a whole day to cut up and sort through. There must have 900 pounds of good scrap on it. Dale thought the man might be more inclined to sell it as an appreciated piece of art, rather than a heap of junk metal.

The man turned around and flashed gums. "You want to take Joe and set him up for everyone to see?" he asked.

Dale felt bad for lying. He couldn't see the man's eyes, but his face seemed to light up at the thought of his work on display for the public.

"Um. Yes, sir. I think our customers would get a kick out of old . . . Joe. We could set him up inside the front door to greet them—he'd be a real hit. I bet we

could even find a spot for this fella," he said, pointing at the unfinished project on the bench. "Once you finish him up, of course. What do you think?"

The welder stared a moment then laughed. "It'd be my honor." The tension seemed to ease in his body.

"Really? Well, sir, would a hundred bucks do the trick?"

"Hell, I'll let you take it down for free," said the welder.

Dale couldn't believe it. His boss would be pleased.

"Long as I can come visit him sometime."

His hope sank. He would be ordered to cut up and sort the creation first thing in the morning. If the old welder ever came in and found out old Joe had been chopped up and re-recycled, Dale wouldn't be able to forgive himself.

"You've got a deal," he said finally. Between possibly hurting this stranger's feelings and keeping his job he didn't have much of a choice.

"Well, this one's almost finished. You can load him up and take him today, too. Hand me that piece of angle iron on the hydraulic shear there."

Dale forced a smile. A fleeting hope that the man might soon forget this ever happened crossed his mind. He was reaching for the angle iron when he was suddenly knocked forward into the machine, and caught himself on its resting plate. Confused, he pushed himself back up, but then felt a tremendous pain in his right hand. He looked up to see the shear lowering into the back of it.

It felt as if he were watching from a dream, as if it wasn't his hand bending back or his bones snapping under the pressure of the jaw. He heard two bones in his hand break and saw blood pour out around his wrist before the thing came to a stop, resting on his middle finger bone. He let out a helpless wail as the pain set in, and then dropped to his knees.

"Stop! Stop it now!" he screamed. "Let it up! Hurry! It's crushing my hand!" He looked back and saw the old man standing a few feet from him holding a small yellow box which hung from the ceiling. His thumb rested on a red button directly below a green one. He was smiling.

"Do you taste it?" he said, and grinned at Dale as he let go of the box and picked up a short length of flat-bar steel.

"What! Jesus Christ, let this thing up I'm bleeding!" Dale shrieked. He started to feel dizzy, like he might pass out.

The man flicked on a grinding wheel and pressed the steel to it. Sparks rained down and the wheel screeched loudly.

"Let this thing up God dammit!" Dale cried and squeezed his eyes shut. If he looked at his hand again he would surely faint. The way the wheel began shaping the steel made him fight to stay conscious.

On his knees, holding his forearm with his left hand, he stared at the ground; his vision blurred by tears. There he saw a foot-pedal at the base of the machine and moved away from it. If he accidentally kneeled on it the shear would only push deeper into his hand.

"Do you know what a freight train will do to a car parked on its tracks?"

"Please, sir I don't know what you're talking about. Please let this shear up,"

Dale said, staring at the foot-pedal. He felt tired and short of breath. The blood from his hand made a considerable sized pool on the resting plate and was presently spilling off the opposite side.

"It's like an automobile munching a tin can in the road. Barely feels it. Now, do you know what a freight train will do to a man tied up on its tracks?"

Dale heard the grinding wheel shut off and slow to a stop. He turned and saw the man facing him, holding the length of steel, which now ended in a slender point, firmly in his hand.

"Like a pizza cutter through wet dough. Makes about the same noise, too. Just ask old Joe," he said, nodding at the project on the bench. "He found that out first-hand the winter of '48. Woke up when he heard the Night Owl coming right on schedule. Started squirmin' around like a fat little worm on the rails. He made it halfway off, too. Had me nervous. Anyway, the train passed over him like he wasn't even there. Just kept chuggin' on to Minneapolis, right through the night."

Dale understood now. He peeked at his hand under the shear and remembered the bisected effigy that had enticed him. Old Joe had been a real man, and now Dale was the one tied up on the tracks.

"And do you know what his upper-half told me before his eyes went lost? He said he tasted metal."

The man was right. On the tip of his tongue Dale could taste bitter steel, like when he sometimes tasted the pennies in his pocket as he rubbed them between his fingers.

"Of course he was gargling his own ferrous blood after he said it. But I wondered. Do you taste it?"

Dale eyed the sharpened steel in the man's hand, then reached into his pocket and pulled out a pencil and placed it between his teeth. He bit down hard, and then kneeled on the foot-pedal. The shear came down with ease and lopped off the rest of his hand. The pencil crunched and snapped between his teeth.

He stood and spun quickly, hammering the old man in the jaw with his good hand, sending him staggering across the shop. Dale reached over and yanked the whispering torch from its stand. The man recovered but Dale moved quickly, kicking him squarely in the chest and toppling him over backwards. Dale jumped down on him and elbowed him in the nose. Then he rammed the torch into the man's open mouth and pushed it deep into his throat, remarking the sick, slippery resistance of the esophagus to the torch.

The man struggled and stared through his black goggles. A sharp pain came to Dale's ribs as the man stuck him with the sharpened steel. Dale ignored it and pushed the torch deeper yet. The man's grip slackened and the steel fell out of Dale's side. He watched as the skin on the man's throat began to melt and smoke. When he finally lay still, the white whispering flame could be seen through a charred hole in his neck. Dale lowered his mouth to the ear of the dead man beneath him.

"Do you taste it?"



A Villanelle for a Villain

Was I not too young, tell me truly, speak; the dew of life was still upon my face, when I chose to take that final leap,

to loose my life, when not yet at its peak. I took a deadly kiss in his embrace. Was I not too young, tell me truly, speak?

Unwise, unwise was I, or simply meek? How I mortally erred (a true a disgrace) when I chose to take that final leap.

No life was this, no haven for the weak, for eternal hell be not a resting place. Was I not too young, tell me truly, speak?

Existence now bares such a fetid reek. I've replaced the grace of heaven chaste, when I chose to take that final leap.

I face nightmares now, hear the shrieks. Ah, remember there was once dew on my cheek. Was I not too young, tell me truly, speak when I chose to take that final leap?

—deborah guzzi

Previously published on Poetry Soup



"You don't know jack-shit!" Jolene screamed. She grabbed the pan from the stove and heaved it across the room. Tomato soup splattered on the poster and on the picture of HER right next to it. The pan tore a hole in the poster, in the knee of the man pictured there. Jolene's hands went immediately to her mouth and her fingers started to tremble. "Oh, my God. I'm sorry, baby. I'm so sorry." She grabbed a roll of paper towels to clean the mess.

The man on the poster smiled at her. "I'm probably sorrier than you are."

"Don't say that you're sorrier than I am, because I'm perfectly capable of being just as sorry as you are..." She stopped and kissed the poster. "I really am sorry, baby. You have to realize I just get emotional sometimes. I love you so much."

She carefully wiped all the tomato soup from the poster before starting on the picture of HER. She made sure she didn't tear a larger hole in the poster. She taped the hole closed and tried to smooth it out. "You know I wouldn't ever intentionally hurt you. Sometimes you just say things that rile me. You really shouldn't do that, you know."

The poster pictured a Bob Marley wanna-be named Steel Drum Jackson. He played at a local club called Tropic Breezes. Jolene made the poster from a publicity picture of him. She had the picture blown up at Kinko's and had them insert copy so it looked like a full-blown concert poster, even though Steel Drum had never done anything close to a concert. But Jolene thought he was the best thing since microwaves. She went to the Breezes every chance she got. The owners insisted she buy a drink while she was there, so she could only go when she had enough money.

The picture of HER was another woman who always seemed to be at the club. Jolene took the picture of HER with a disposable camera one evening and had it enlarged. She kept it right by Steel Drum so she could admire those teeth. Jolene just knew HER was trying to take SD, as she called him, away from her. Jolene thought HER was very pretty, but she knew she was prettier. Sometimes, when she was getting ready to go to the club, she would try to decide which of her two dresses to wear. When she looked at herself in the mirror, she was much prettier than HER.

Jolene was five-five and weighed over two hundred pounds. Her mousy brown hair had the consistency of well-used steel wool. Her brown eyes no longer held any of the sparkle of youth. They were flat and glassy from her constant worry and paranoia. Her teeth were crooked and yellow from lack of hygiene, which she told herself she couldn't afford. Money had to be used to buy drinks to see SD.

HER was closer to five-ten. She had long blond hair that curled picture-frame-like around her face. Her green eyes held the sparkle of spring pools. Her teeth were perfect, at least to Jolene. White, straight teeth. They were teeth most anyone would kill for. Many times Jolene thought if she just had those teeth, her body would be complete.

As Jolene was twirling in front of the mirror holding up one or the other of her dresses, she saw HER. She knew she looked like HER. Mirrors didn't lie. All except for those teeth. Sometimes, SD would laugh at her when she did this. "Don't you laugh at me, you bastard," she would yell at him. "You know I'm better than her. I

could be twice as good—no, ten times as good in bed as she is. If I had those teeth, I could have anybody I wanted for a lover. And not just you, SD sweetheart, but anybody. Hell, I could even have HER. I could get any man or woman I wanted." She would then do another turn in front of the mirror and marvel at how much better-looking she had gotten since the last time she did this.

Tonight, as she was getting ready to go to the Breezes, SD really started to get on her case. "No, I haven't gained any weight. What would make you say that?" She stopped to listen. "My clothes don't fit any tighter. You must be havin' a hard time seeing tonight." She walked over to the poster. "But don't you worry, sweetie," she said as she patted him on the cheek, "I'll make sure you get a good view of me tonight. I'm going early so I can get a table right up front."

She started to walk away but stopped. "What's that? Tonight might be the night to get those teeth? Boy, I would sure be a looker with those, wouldn't I?" She walked to the kitchen table and sat down. "But you know she's not gonna just give me those teeth. How am I supposed to get them?" She listened intently for almost a full minute.

"Yeah, I could take my big purse. And, sure, it would hold the hatchet. I could just cut them out of HER, couldn't I? That's not such a bad idea, SD. Thanks, baby."

She went back to the poster and rubbed her hand over his crotch. "Someday, sweetie, someday. Just you and me." She then kissed the lips of Steel Drum Jackson.

She put a few things in her purse, a purse she had found in an alley behind a dumpster. The purse was dropped there by Fred "the Rabbit" Oldster. Rabbit made part of his living by snatching purses from unsuspecting women. After he took everything he thought was valuable from the purse, he dumped it. What Rabbit or Jolene didn't realize was that the purse was designed by Ozenie. The purse was worth many times more than the things he took from it.

The owner of the purse, a Mrs. Holly Regis, was taken to the emergency room at a local hospital because of a cut she had received on her head when the purse snatcher knocked her to the ground. The two policemen who brought her in took a report about the incident. One thing she noted about the purse was it was an Ozenie, and what many people who didn't own one didn't know was there was a secret flap under one of the straps. Each Ozenie creation had a secret flap somewhere in the purse. It was one of the things that made them unique. She had placed one of her business cards in there as a possible way of identification. The policemen complimented her on her resourcefulness.

Jolene left early for the club. She had her large purse that held her money, a couple of tissues, a roll of paper towels, and a small hatchet. She stopped at a small market, and while the owner wasn't watching, she stole a rose from a vase near the cash register and stuck it in her purse. Just as she planned, she got a table right in front of the bandstand. She ordered a glass of draft beer, because that was the cheapest drink in the place, and she could stretch it out. She made sure she kept her purse close to her. She didn't want anyone to steal her money. She had begged on the street for over three hours to get enough money to come to the show tonight.

The club was playing some music from some other steel band, one Jolene thought wasn't near as good as SD. But the gathering crowd seemed to like it. In fact, some of them had started to dance. Then Jolene saw HER make her entrance. HER always made an entrance—she didn't just walk into the club. Nobody else felt that way, but Jolene did. Two other women were with HER tonight, women who were just as pretty. They had to take a table in the third row. Jolene snickered at that. Teach them to get here late!

HER and her friends settled at their table. They crossed their shapely legs so their skirts were way too high. HER looked around the room to make sure people were paying attention. It was then that she noticed Jolene. "Well, looks like Grandma Moses is here again."

The three women laughed.

"Would you look at that?" one of them said. "Is that an Ozenie sitting on the floor by her chair?" They all looked. "Naw, couldn't be. How could she afford one of those?"

"Maybe she's got a sugar daddy." They all laughed, but HER continued to stare at the purse.

"You know, if that's not an Ozenie, it's a damned good copy. Man, I'd kill for one of those."

"Maybe she stole it."

"Probably the only way she could get one."

Jolene saw them looking at her. HER smiled. *God, look at those teeth.* SD would marry me if I had those teeth.

The lights in the club dimmed and an unseen announcer introduced Steel Drum Jackson, the next major star in the world of Caribbean music. Everyone applauded. Jolene stood, yelling and screaming. More attention was turned to her than to the man coming on stage. SD started into his first song and the crowd quieted. Jolene was still standing and swaying to his music. Halfway through the song, she approached the stage and laid a flower in front of SD. He smiled down at her. Her knees got weak. Her heart was pounding.

HER and her friends were up dancing with men who had approached them. No one had approached Jolene and asked her to dance, but she was doing her own thing by her table.

You know," HER said to her friends, "a couple of times that crazy woman has followed me out of this place when I left. Maybe she'll do it again tonight. If she does, I just might relieve her of that purse."

One of her friends giggled. "That's really off the wall, you know."

"Sounds kind of exciting," the other one said, letting some of the alcohol do the talking for her.

When the three girls were ready to leave the club for the night, HER flashed Jolene a huge toothy-white smile and waved to her.

Bitch. Look at her. She's showing off now. But don't you worry anymore. I'll have those teeth tomorrow. Jolene got up, clutched her purse against her chest, and

waddled out of the club.

HER stopped by her car once she was in the parking lot. Jolene was surprised to see HER just standing there, like she was waiting for her.

"Good evening," HER said.

Jolene then heard movement behind her. She turned to see the other two women standing right behind her.

"What do you want?" Jolene stammered out.

"Just your purse, little lady. Just your purse," HER said.

Jolene opened the purse and grabbed the hatchet. She raised it to strike at HER. Both of the women behind her screamed and ran toward the club. They had the bartender call the police.

Jolene took a swing at HER, but she ducked and Jolene buried the hatchet in the hood of someone's car. The hatchet stuck in the fiberglass, and she couldn't free it. HER saw her chance and tried to run past her. Jolene stuck out her foot and tripped the woman. She was still struggling to get the hatchet out of the car hood. HER scrambled to her feet, grabbed Jolene's purse that was now on the ground, and headed back into the club. Before she got there, a police car pulled up in front of the building.

"She's back there, in the parking lot," HER yelled at the police.

Jolene now had the hatchet free and was heading toward the club. The policemen saw her walking their direction. Both of them drew their guns. "Stop right there. Drop the hatchet."

Jolene stopped but didn't drop the hatchet. She started to cry. "You can't stop me now," she blubbered out. "I don't have the teeth yet."

"Drop the hatchet, lady."

"You don't understand. If I don't get the teeth, SD won't love me."

"Drop the hatchet."

Jolene looked at the police and then at the hatchet. Her plan was almost complete. She raised the hatchet and went screaming towards the police. One of the policemen put a slug in her right leg. She dropped the hatchet and fell to the ground.

Sergeant O'Malley took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "What in the hell happened down there tonight?"

"We'll probably never really know, Sarge. We arrested one woman for assault. We arrested another one for being in possession of a stolen purse. The woman arrested for assault kept yelling something about SD and teeth. The woman with the purse claimed she found it."

"Then we find out the guy who was playing in the club last night is a halfbrother to the gal with the hatchet. He said she was a pain in the butt. He was glad she was going to be out of circulation for a while. Just a weird group of people."

"More like a dysfunction jubilee."



EARLY WARNING

From the sky, nightmares drip like hail Dreams fall softly as feather snow Bright lightning wooden ships set sail Long winding winds direct the show

Thunder calls out across the way While clouds still gather, pile on thick Grow ears to what the heavens say Swirling motions move slow and quick

Predictions unfold in the dark Climax pumps like blue beating heart Songs pour downward sing with a bark. Pictures below all ripped apart.

Statue of truth we cannot make Rise from the deep sleep still awake

—denny marshall



Bone-house, cut-price dolly. Desire is in your glazed, weak-tea eyes. With your wire-thin arms, stretching out to touch me. I close my mind to the wandering sounds, the murmur of many mouths that speak your name. You are not she.

The wind blows paper-thin skin into my face. I cannot read your meaning. This could be an end game. This could be the fascination maybe-dream of love longed for, and lost. You are not she.

You are a naked necroscope. viewed through my lens of prayer. You are not she. She is growing in God's acre. And you, dolly-bone dream, are insensate facsimile. You will burn away in some reality's flame.

—deborah walker

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Lots of Poems

The writer faltered on the path, when the way forward didn't seem to be a way anymore. Turning to address the people reading behind him, he said, "Sorry, this doesn't appear to be a poem it has nowhere to go."

But nobody believed this. They gathered around to look for themselves. and there they saw lots of ways as each person peeked down the lines of their own reading.

So they told the writer, "There are lots of poems. Look!" But the writer didn't believe this, he'd gone inside his head, where there was nothing.

—soren james

THE LONDON NECROPOLIS RAILWAY

First published in Tales of the Talisman By Kelda Crich

From the glass roof where no shadow falls, from cool, arched, glazed London brick viaduct, from lavish-wrought iron gates opening like a mouth, from a temple to the modern. The train in insistent steam departs. Moves on.

Walk with softest step along narrow corridors. Watch through the bevelled window a bubble frozen in the pane. The mourners jolting to the rhythm of the Necropolis Train are a puzzle needing completion, a missing piece, buried in your mind's memorium. Move on.

No coin pressed against your tongue. No taste of copper in your parched mouth. You have no obol for the ferryman. Instead you clutch the coffin ticket for your third class funeral. Move on.

Here's a lady dressed in lace as delicate as her breathless face. So still, she watches the children crying, unsoothed by the nurse maid, or their silent father. She joins you. Move on.

Here's a man, a likely fella You might have met him down the docks shared a drink, a laugh. There are no words left to be said. He joins you. Move on.

Here are silent twins, old men dressed in rags or silk, street women still smelling of the Thames, shrouded girls and worn-faced men. Move on. Move on. There are no words to be said Move along the dark corridors, the vastly swelling hoard.

You who never travelled beyond the Bells. Leaving all behind. It was a good life, yet you shrug it off like a worn coat. No tears or grief. All is past. There is no emotion for the dead. Move on. Take this journey from Waterloo Bridge Station. Take the London Necropolis to the Green Country.

—deborah walker

RAD THINGS

by stuart guthrie

Man, I got this guilt on me from something I did when I was fourteen and I don't know if it's more or less than what other people's got or where it falls on the fucked-up spectrum, but I've made it a long time without telling a soul. In eighth grade, I hung out with this kid Tommy. I was smoking pot with him on the weekends on the hill behind school, probably because no one else would hang out with me then, and in that way, I think the friendship was mutual. Don't get me wrong. We were friends, I liked him. But we were friends out of necessity.

I wasn't quite sure who I was then. Middle school had forced me to come to the realization I wasn't brilliant, and that sucked and damn my parents and elementary school teachers who led me to believe I was. I learned the word "disillusionment" that year and started rebelling from the bookish kid I had tried to be.

I wanted to be a skater but couldn't skate and my dad wouldn't let me wear those baggy jeans. I quit playing sports out of this irrational fear I would turn into a dumb jock. All childhood friends that grew up in my neighborhood were nice kids, but I found myself bored with them. I was excited by the idea of doing bad things—stealing candy bars at the corner store, yelling nasty stuff at the elderly lady that lived down the street, calling her an "old bag," and smoking pot and drinking warm beers behind the school with Tommy.

By the time I was this age I had broken seven windows in my parent's house, all with baseballs. My dad always used to tell me not to throw in our tiny yard because there was a park a block away. I never listened and whenever the window would shatter, he would storm out after me, ready to kick my ass. The last time I broke a window, I managed to make it to my room and was holding my saved allowances out to him, hoping my reparations would spare me a beating.

Tommy had braces, freckles, a blond bowl cut, and wore a tight ringer T-shirt

with those giant-legged jeans my dad wouldn't let me wear. He was dumber than he looked. Sometimes he would stop what he was saying midsentence. It wasn't a stutter, it was like the thought just flew from his head and he sat there with this moronic look on his face, waiting for it to float back. "Tommy," I would say, "the mouse fell off the wheel again!"

We took pleasure in causing trouble, stupid adolescent boy stuff-egging houses, shooting each other with paintball guns, ding-dong ditching, playing with gas and matches. Stuff we did because we hated everything and this made us feel better. I didn't like it when Tommy would start in with the dog though. He would toss his Basset Hound around the house, flinging it by the ears, and he would kick it so hard it would go sprawling across the room. My father had told me that anyone who kicks their dog is a coward and really upset at something else.

One time we were at the creek catching frogs and he wanted to bring them home with him. We each carried one frog back, held in the palms of our hands tucked in the pouches of our sweatshirts. He went inside and got some things from his house. He came out with two shoeboxes and put a frog in each box. He dug a small hole in his back yard and buried one alive, then stuffed the other with tissue paper and newspaper and lit it with his zippo. We sat on the picnic table and watched it burn. I'm not sure if he even knew why he was doing it because I think he hated it as much as I did. That frog screech echoed longer than I ever thought possible.

When I was nine I broke my little brother's leg. Did it with a pillow. Spun and launched it at him like a hammer. He tried to jump over it, came down wrong, and the bone snapped in half. I tried explaining to my mother that I didn't break his leg, so much as facilitated him in the breaking of his own leg. She didn't buy it. Guilt like that is a heavy load on the chest of a nine-year-old boy.

Tommy started hanging out with this high schooler from his art class, Mike Zaner—a chubby, Private Pile-looking guy. We thought he was cool, because he was in high school, talked back to teachers, and could drive. He had this old, blue twodoor Firebird that we would drive around in for hours getting high while Tommy occasionally leaned out the window, shooting passing by cars with his paintball gun. I should have known that an older guy in a middle school art class was a loser, and there was a reason he didn't have any other friends.

That spring, we were hanging out in Zaner's basement, getting high and watching Jerry Springer when Zaner's sister Lori came home. She was in middle school too, but I didn't know where she went, it wasn't our school. She wanted to hang out, and after ten minutes of arguing with Zaner, him whining at her to get the hell out of there, we realized she wore the pants and was going to get what she wanted. She stayed and got high with us.

You could tell that they were siblings because they both had the same ugly face, pudgy frame, and phlegm soaked voice. Only she had these heaving breasts that spilled over her tank top. This was at the age when I popped a boner every time I saw a pretty girl, bare skin above the knees or below the shoulders, a short skirt, a tight shirt, lace anything, the application of lipstick, a PG-13 movie, female mannequins, two-piece bathing suits, fluttering eyes, the consumption of a popsicle, lollypop, or banana, or anything else that might of resembled the female body or sex. Unfortunately, this period of my life coincided with a perpetual glaze of sweat and a crackling voice. Sex wasn't an option. Most of my school day was spent with my swollen dick either lifting up the desk like a tire jack, or propped up against my belly in my waist band. I was seriously considering restroom masturbation, and didn't only for fear of getting caught and humiliated. Lori grossed me out but I couldn't stop starring at her tits.

In high school, I tackled a female friend of mine. I thought it would be funny but she had a drink in her hand and the glass broke and she gashed her thigh wide open. We had to end the party and take her to the emergency room. We spent most of the night waiting for her to get stitched up, and when she appeared in the waiting room she had a jagged purple scar across her leg. She never spoke to me after that.

We got stoned and headed to the streets, Zaner's sister tagging along, climbing into the backseat of the Firebird next to me. Zaner drove like a madman, screeching around corners and flying through stop signs in fifth gear. We were laughing like hell as Tommy hung out the passenger seat window, firing paintballs at passing cars. A few would whip around and begin a chase, but they needed a fast car and to abandon all vehicular laws if they wanted to make a go at it, and that never happened.

Lori, either noticing my obvious glances at her chest or my massive erection, took my uncontrollable hormones as a sign of attraction. She placed her hand on my thigh and began massaging my leg, slowly working her way up, until she reached my penis. She began rubbing it through my jeans. I glanced over to her face and was repulsed. I know it wasn't nice but I had to keep starring at her cleavage to stay hard, and I wanted to stay hard.

Tommy motioned for Zaner to slow down as we approached a little brown boy bouncing a basketball in the street. He did, and Tommy called to him as we rolled up, "Hey, kid." The boy turned toward us and Tommy fired the paintball gun point blank in his face, right in his eye. He dropped to the ground screaming. My dick went soft and recoiled into my stomach with Lori's hand still pushed against it. Zaner floored the pedal, and we turned the corner and immediately hit a red light, the cars on 5th Ave whizzing by.

"Let me out." I said, pushing on the back of Tommy's seat.

Zaner was excitedly chanting, "Oh, shit," to himself, and Tommy didn't respond.

"Let me out." I repeated louder. I flung Lori's mongoloid hand from my lap. I could see the other side of the light turn yellow and I wanted to get out and help the kid before it was too late.

"No," Tommy said.

"Let me the fuck out!" I punched the back of the headrest.

He turned and pointed the paintball gun in my face. "Shut the fuck up," he replied, my best friend in my fourteen-year-old universe ready to blind me, and I knew he would if I said another word.

All I remember from the rest of that car ride was feeling angry and helpless and sick. They wouldn't let me leave, Zaner and Tommy, until well into the afternoon, making me promise to not say anything about it.

The kid was on the local news that night. They called it a "random act of violence," and said he had to be taken to the hospital for surgery. They didn't know if he was going to regain sight in that eye, and he definitely would be wearing an eye patch for a while. Then they interviewed his mother. She said she wouldn't press charges if the persons responsible stepped forward. She said she was willing to forgive if the guilty parties would just apologize. My stomach churned while I watched the report. I scribbled down the address and lay in bed, refusing dinner when my mom called me down.

The following afternoon, I got drunk and high with Zaner. I was distracted all day at school, thinking about the kid, and thought some beers might help. I asked Zaner a few times if Tommy was coming. He said no. I didn't want to look at him, didn't want to talk to him.

"It was on the news last night," I said when I finally loosened up enough to say something about it.

"Yeah, I know," he laughed.

"Do you think we should go there? Let her know we're sorry?"

"Fuck, no. I ain't going to see that bitch."

"She said she just wanted the person to apologize."

"Yeah, I know. I told you I saw it."

We sat in front of the soft glow of video games for a couple of hours, turning off. Tommy ended up coming over after all and I listened in silent white-hot rage as he cracked a Budweiser and bragged about shooting the kid. My hands balled into fists and I thought about pummeling him, waiting until he wasn't looking, like he did to the kid, and sucker punching him. I thought normally he could probably take me, but if I surprised him, using all that fury bottling up behind my eyes, I could explode and kill him. I didn't hit him, left quietly, taking my time walking home.

I wrote a letter but never sent it. It seemed too evasive. "My friend shot the gun. I had no clue he was going to shoot your son. I'm sorry that he did it..." I just felt like I was shirking all the blame. I had to say it was me. I was part of it anyway. I was the one who knew better. Maybe I couldn't have stopped him in that split second when I realized he was going to shoot the kid, but I could have stopped him with the frogs and I could have told him to stop kicking his fucking dog before that. He was performing for me and I let him.

So I went to their house after school one day that week. Shuffling down the empty avenues of our town I lipped the words: "I'm so sorry," "I will do anything to make it up to you," "I didn't mean to hurt you." I imagined that kid, answering the door with the patch over his eye, or the mother, and trying to look into their faces, and having no clue what to say. "May I come in?" Or get right out with it. "It was me that shot your eye out, kid."

Looking up at the front door from the bottom of the concrete stoop, I felt like

I had broken a piece of their family, shattered a piece of their house. There were chips of black paint flaking off the iron railing that I picked at for the longest time, trying to muster the courage to pull myself up to the door. Certain I was going to get sick, I rushed over to their front shrubs, leaned over, and dry heaved. My tears welled up and my eyes bulged. Before the nausea subsided and I was able to stand up again, I realized I had pissed myself.

I snuck home the long way, through the woods with a dark ring of pee on my jeans, the fabric clinging and chaffing my thighs. I made it back unnoticed, showered, and tried to watch TV. It was still daylight. My mom had gone for a walk and my dad was in the yard working. I flipped through the channels and couldn't sit down. I just kept going back and forth between the living room, kitchen, and my bedroom. Finally, I set myself down in the middle of the living room floor with my ball and glove and started tossing at the black love seat against the wall. I did this sometimes when my parents weren't around and the spring in that couch was so great, it would toss the ball right back to me. I lobbed it over and over, imaging the hollowed pop of the paintball gun being fired, the thin trail of cold compressed air leaving the barrel, the kid's face, in a surprised wince, then screaming for his mother, lying helpless and blind in the middle of the street. I thought about this, and being hard when it happened, and Lori's fat ugly face and fat ugly hands with her identically fat and ugly older brother just giggling "Oh, shit." And I thought about Tommy's face, mean behind his gun, daring me to tempt him, just a thin smirk on his face, and I wanted to go back and claw it off. I wanted to go back and take that paintball to the face just so Tommy would have to see it, deal with it. I would hop out of that bucket seat and into the front of the Firebird, smashing my face into his, making him taste paint, blood, and salty tissue remnants of an eye.

These were the things I thought of as I threw the ball harder and harder off the back of the couch. It was shooting back into my glove with a *thwack*, and I looked up to the two heron watercolors my parents hung over the couch. Both of the heron's eyes rolled back, looking up and backwards at the same time. They had long, sinister eyebrows, which I knew even then was a lie, and these menacing, tentacle claws. They looked stupid and mean at the same time, and the worst part about this set was the one heron's head extended out of its own canvas, its piercing beak stabbing across the space of the wall and into the other frame, threatening the other heron's lulled back and vulnerable neck. The white-hot rage returned and I flung the ball high, smashing the glass and hitting one of the herons in the neck, ripping the cheap poster paper it was printed on. The painting fell off the wall and onto the couch.

I heard the back door open and slam shut and the quick footsteps of my father over the linoleum floor. I wasn't retreating to my room this time. I waited for his giant open hands to strike down across my face. I clenched my fists, spit out red tears, and snarling, I stood up to wait for my punishment.



Earrings Do Not Belong On A Deer

A multitude of species share our complex terrestrial sphere but none more tenderly touch the human heart than the gentle deer. So it was that shortly after the fading of the hours of dawn, A woman all good and gracious spotted a delicate and frail fawn, By a busy road, full of fast moving cars, so alone and so forlorn. Oh! The woman feared for that four-legged babe could so easily be torn! She instantly felt that she must protect the tiny infant deer, She must shelter the innocent and tender creature from all fear. Full of kindly intention, meaning only goodness to abet: Pretty little deer, with earrings she would make it prettier yet; But her good intentions may have led to a criminal offense Piercing two fine soft ears that should have been left naturally dense. The kindly woman faced a charge of animal cruelty. There is a vital truth that she was sadly unable to see. For a deer, earrings are simply not a proper adornment. Thus, piercing those healthy young fawn ears left an infected rent. Like the other creatures who with humans share this globe, The ears of this lovely ungulate possess no lobe. Piercing is foolish because it can only futilely scar For the dainty ears of a deer are perfect just as they are.

-denise noe

This poem was inspired by a true incident. Bettie Phillips saw a fawn by the side of a busy road. She took the fawn in. She pierced the animal's ears and put earrings in them. She was arrested for animal cruelty because the two-month-old deer's ears were found to be infected and inflamed.



by d.l. shirey

A trick of light. The wafer-thin disk spins, a mirror dangling from a silver chain, reflecting the chocolate-brown iris back into her pretty, pretty eyes. The left one, now the right.

"Concentrate on the color," I say to the woman, none of that your-eyes-areheavy or you're-getting-sleepy nonsense.

The spinning pendant does not make her mind relax, nor the pendulum from one eye to the other. It's the mirror and the vanity of seeing oneself, even for a brief moment. Appearing for an instant, then spinning away; reflected again, and gone; there, not there.

Her lids flicker and fall, breath evens out. She is asleep at the hands of a perfect stranger.

Names don't matter. Call her Mrs. Dunmadder. The one stenciled on my office door is Dr. Spratt, weight loss specialist.

Mrs. Dunmadder snores softly, her long, greying hair fanned over the pillow supporting her neck. The Victorian chaise on which she reclines was specially built, a bit wider than the store-bought variety, the leather upholstery plumper to accommodate the women who see me. Full-figured, curvy; Rubenesque, they were called, way back when.

I love women of this sort. Even in their teens, when they were most active, they were hardy. Always longing to be like the popular girls, fighting in vain to achieve the stick-figure status of models in magazines. For who? Slack-jawed, TV-raised yokels who think large breasts atop tiny waists and hips are somehow anatomically possible?

What do these men know?

Mrs. Dunmadder has big curves up top, along with a generous undercarriage to support them. When she first walked in for consultation I nearly swooned. As much as I wanted to take in her bounties, I locked my gaze on her pretty, pretty eyes. Soon, they were all I wanted to look at, welling and sad, as she confessed her greatest concern: fear of joining ranks with the morbidly-O. Quite possible, if Mrs. D would let herself go. But she's not a quitter, and everything looked exquisitely firm from my point of view.

She's perfection in my eyes: buttery skin, a touch of makeup, and fashionably attired to accentuate that décolletage. She's concerned that her clothes fit too tightly. Balderdash, as we said back in the day. Tailored to show every buxom curve, I say—to hell with drapery that hangs to hide a womanly body. Despite my protests, Mrs. Dunmadder wants a bit of tending. At very least, those fleshy areas on the arms. And the thighs, she wants her thighs a bit firmer.

"I think you're beautiful already, but if you insist," I told her. I didn't tell her about the sedative.

Beside the chaise is a nightstand. In it are three small, lacquered boxes. The one with the fleur-de-lis has the ampule I need. I crack the plastic capsule under her button nose and watch her chest rise with each inhalation. The box with the paisley has an ampule of smelling salts to undo the narcotization when we're done. The middle box, a tiny jade sarcophagus, holds the leech.

Brittle-looking now, it will reanimate when warmed by her skin. See there? It twitches to life, crawls to just the proper spot and bites through flesh; not for blood, it wants the delicious cream filling of subcutaneous fat. It starts shriveled like an unused party balloon, but look how it grows. Bulbous and pink, just like the stuff it craves.

The bite will leave a mark, but not a scar. The blame explained by the laser, that useless prop lying on top of the nightstand. No need explaining my excitement, watching a dead sack fill itself with new life, almost to bursting after a second helping from her other arm.

Time for all of us to rest. Mrs. Dunmadder will soon wake to the vague smell of ammonia in her lovely, little nose. It will be something she quickly forgets as I escort her to the full-length mirror. Her arms will be firm against toned muscle, skin radiant from the effects of our session. Beguiling, as we used to say.

"Next week and we'll do the legs?" I'll ask.

"No. Thank you," I'll say.



SOLLA RANI'S STOIC ENDURANCE

by fabiyas mv

It is raining cats and dogs. Solla Rani seems dog-tired. Her eyes bulge. With each quiet moan, arrows of a severe headache pierce her son's heart. He takes out his phone and dials "108." The wail of an ambulance in the chilly morning wakes up the rustics, who rush to her hut, which was as serene as the Kanoli canal until yesterday night.

Neeraj carries his mother on a stretcher with the assistance of two young guys from his neighborhood. She lies in a slough. Wet eyes. As the ambulance starts to move, people gaze at the vehicle—white in hue with a red revolving light on its head—and ponder over Solla Rani's agility before the illness conquered her.

She is admitted to Alpha Hospital in the city. "We've nothing to do," Dr. Pranav declares while going through the ultrasound report. She is very haggard.

"Maximum six months more," the doctor added. He prescribes some capsules that are supposed to cure her brain tumor.

Later, her wrinkled body is brought back home for keeping amidst the holy words. She has a pallid face. Neighboring women enter her bedroom—some of them hide their heads with the hanging ends of their saris—a kind of mannerism of the Kanoli women as they pass by men. She lies on a mat in her bedroom, frightened by a hundred staring eyes.

Solla Rani had never gone to a hospital before. Even her delivery was at homea simple affair—Karthyamma, a middle-aged woman, performed the role of a gynecologist, while Velan her husband waited outside in the yard near the closed bedroom window, smoking a cigarette to alleviate his tension. He heard his wife shriek. He dropped the cigarette and ran to the door of the bedroom. Karthyamma stretched her head out, half opening the wooden door, and said, "Lucky man! It's male."

Their hut, thatched with the coconut leaves, on the bank of Kanoli canal, had silently witnessed several squabbles. Sometimes, rum robbed Velan of his sense. Then he would scold his wife with muddy obscene words. The stale smell of the rotten emotions would spread in her mind. She was also a tough fighter and would retort furiously. Nevertheless, they could always forget the pandemonium of the previous night with a sound sleep. With the birth of their new baby Neeraj, new shades of joy appeared in their sky.

Monsoon always brought poverty and epidemic onto the Kanoli bank. Heavy rain kept the coolies inside their huts. As the rain ceased and the clouds vanished, Velan took a blue towel and tied it around his waist. He stooped down, and kissed on the chubby cheek of his baby, who was sleeping serenely on Solla's warm lap. They watched Neeraj smiling in slumber. It was the presence of some angels that made their baby smile so in sleep—they believed.

Velan untied his black canoe from a coconut palm stump on the shore. Putting down the spade on the canoe, he took a wooden oar. The canoe moved on the silver wavelets of the canal nodding its head. Solla could eye it all from her yard. She never knew that was a tragic sail like that of Titanic.

He didn't return home to take the rice porridge for lunch. Solla walked along the sugar sand of the Kanoli bank in search of him. After a two-minute walk, she found the unmanned canoe on the canal. He did not hear her loud call, but her neighbors heard it. They came in large numbers and gathered around her. Most of them were simply staring at the canoe. Then a corpulent young man put off his beige shirt and white dhoti, and put on a bath towel around his waist. Looking around, he dove into the canal.

A new widow was born on the Kanoli bank. Velan's bloated body was brought onto the bank. His legs might have stuck in the mud at the bottom of the canal. Or it might have been a heart attack under the water. Seeing her husband's lifeless body, Solla swooned.

Though she got food and solace from her neighbors, their compassion ran out gradually. She had no one to fall back on. Now that the call of hunger toughened her mind, she woke up from her melancholic mat. In a village like hers, jobs were varied, and in plenty. She made up her mind to live for her son. She found her livelihood—weaving coconut leaves, sweeping the yards of the rich, picking up the black oysters from the canal. She practiced a "smart living."

Though a severe headache often attacked her, she never liked to consult with a doctor, for her mind and body could endure anything stoically. Her panacea was a cup of coffee mixed with some herbal powder.

"Ma, you're past seventy now. Why don't you take rest?"

Neeraj, who was employed in an automobile workshop, asked her once. But for a coolie woman like her, retirement is like death. She turned down her son's

suggestion with her typical stubbornness, and then she left home with a tiny net like a sieve to catch prawns from the canal.

"Maximum six months more." Solla racks her brains. The doctor's words are growing in her subconscious mind. She can then make out only those words from the conversation between the doctor and her son. A doctor should never fix a patient's life span before the open ears of his patient.

She is down in the mouth. She lies on her mat looking up at her thatched roof. Visitors bring her oranges and grapes. She looks at the fruits with an aversion. Nothing is now palatable for her. As they return, the visitors leave behind a kind of plastic sympathy. This lengthy rest implants dark forebodings in her mind. She was never accustomed to such inactivity.

Edavam, Midhunam, Karkadakam, Chingam, Kanni, Thulam . . . months die in her Malayalam calendar. Now it dawns on her that she is still alive. She is ignorant as well as illiterate. She makes herself believe what she does have is a mere headache. A doctor is not a God, she muses. She rises like a phoenix from the ashes of tension, takes a broom, and sweeps her floor.

"Ma, No!" Neeraj calls out. He reminds her of the doctor's advice to take rest, but she is adamant. She sweeps on with a cauliflower frown on her face. A fortnight elapses. Though there is an unhealthy pallor on her face still, her mind has regained its lost pizzazz. She is quite unaware of her malignancy. Such is her mind—where a brain tumor is as a headache.

Now she weaves the green coconut leaves for thatching her roof, sitting under the peace of ignorance.



The Adoration

There is a secret god I worship The abomination of light and air. She is the sacrament of coarse gods Of lust and war and greed. I genuflect before her Offering up my hate and envy. My adoration of her scarred visage Puckers me wizened and sour. And I would flee her temple Of acrid incense and unholy water But do not know where to seek The god who lives in her absence.

-ed ahern



by cameron trost

Chelsea Bishop was obsessed with getting her impeccably manicured hands on whatever money could buy. A simple but clever balancing act of sucking up and backstabbing, refined over the years, was the key to her success. Her skills had enabled her to seduce and later marry Christopher Bishop, the wealthiest man in her expansive circle of friends. Likewise, in professional life, her tactics guaranteed that she never failed to get what she wanted. While many women in her superannuation firm wasted their time complaining about the glass ceiling, Chelsea was riding the lift all the way to the top floor. So far, it hadn't really been all that difficult either. She had dug up enough dirt on more promising colleagues to ruin their careers while carefully safeguarding her own reputation and lining herself up for promotion after promotion.

For the granddaughter of penniless Polish immigrants, she had done extraordinarily well. She was living the high life in a Hamilton hilltop mansion and she got a perverse pleasure out of driving her gleaming white Audi Q7 4x4 as aggressively as possible. Her home loomed high above Kingsford Smith Drive and the Brisbane River, taunting the lesser elitists below. Her vehicle had been chosen to complement the residence. It was a rolling reminder to others of just how successful she had become.

But of all the challenges Chelsea had faced to date, motherhood was going to be the most trying. Instead of mollifying her competitive nature, it provided her with yet another weapon with which to wage war. She felt compelled to make sure that her baby would be better off than anybody else's child, and she was spending as much money as was required to complete the mission. She could afford just about everything she wanted for him; everything, that is, except for one very precious commodity.

Chelsea was convinced that formula was inferior to breast milk, and so that was that as far as she was concerned. Breast milk was all that would be fed to her little George. The problem was that he had a phenomenal appetite. He would suck her dry and then cry until he went red. He was never satisfied.

Her doctor thought she was exaggerating, quite simply because what she described was unheard of. All he did was assure her that the infant was getting all the nutrition required and point out that the fact he was putting on weight was obvious enough. He told her to either put up with it or switch to using formula. Her reply was to inform that the Bishop family would be changing doctors.

Chelsea sought to distract George in all sorts of ways. She played soothing music after feeding. She took him for strolls in his Aston Martin Silver Cross pram. But nothing worked for more than a few minutes. The urge for milk was always there.

She forced herself to endure his insatiability day in and day out for the first two weeks of his life but told Christopher that it simply couldn't go on. It was torture. It wasn't the child's fault, of course, but it was unbearable all the same.

"You've got to do something, Christopher. There has to be a solution," she practically shouted at him one night. It was three o'clock in the morning and the pair had been woken up yet again by a wail that would have put the Banshee to shame.

He drew a deep breath and thought about how to answer his distraught wife in a way that would prevent her from getting as agitated as George was. But the solicitor's sharp brain wasn't at its prime at such an ungodly hour.

"There's no other solution. You'll have to follow the doctor's advice and supplement his diet with formula."

"My baby will not consume formula! What an irresponsible thing to say!"

"Well, what do you want me to say?" he pleaded. It's not my fault your tits can't produce enough milk for our son.

"You have to get him more breast milk," Chelsea mused as she got out of bed and went over to George's cot. She could tell there was some milk in her breasts but doubted it would be enough.

"Get him more breast milk? How do you expect me to do that?" he asked.

"Forget it! Just go back to sleep!" she snapped as she held George to her left breast. His little mouth was agape, and when he felt her sore nipple brush his lips, he lunged for it.

Chelsea winced as the toothless piranha started sucking.

"I'm going to lie down in the living room," Christopher said.

"Go on then! Flee the torture chamber!"

He hurried out, muttering under his breath, and stopped in the kitchen to pour himself a glass of water. As he sipped, looking through the window at clouds teasing the softly glowing surface of the moon, a thought occurred to him. Maybe it was the pale colour of the celestial orb that had given him the idea, or perhaps it

was its perfect roundness. It was difficult to say. The idea was without a doubt the strangest he had ever had, but he was confident he could pull it off. After all, money was no object.

Christopher placed the glass in the sink and continued towards the living room where darkness and the ticking of a clock enveloped him completely. He stretched himself out on the lounge as best he could, and while he waited for sleep to come, knowing that it would not come easily that night, he worked out the details of his plan.

He woke up with a stiff neck but a clear head the next morning. Christopher Bishop never needed to jot notes down. He had an excellent memory, even when he was tired or distracted. As he made himself a coffee, he ran the plan through his mind and was satisfied that even in the cold light of morning, it still seemed completely plausible, despite its absurdity.

Coffee in hand, he crept into the bedroom and found Chelsea and George sleeping soundly. She was lying on her back with the bedspread tangled like seaweed across her waist. Her pink and red striped nightie hung open and her breasts were splayed out. George was curled up between them like a leech at bursting point. Even in his sleep, his rosy lips which were barely visible between his fat cheeks rested upon one of his mother's bloated and cracked nipples. They were both exhausted. They needed him to provide for them, and quickly.

As soon as he had finished his coffee and got dressed, Christopher jumped into his golden chariot, a BMW X5, and punched a number into his mobile phone as he drove out of his garage.

"Steve, how are things out your way? . . . Good to hear . . . So, the council is still in the dark about all that? . . . That's great! . . . Actually, that's the reason I'm calling . . . George has got one hell of an appetite. He simply can't get enough milk . . . You can say that again! It will be a long time before I get anywhere near Chelsea's tits again, especially if I can't solve this problem . . . Yeah, I think I can, as a matter of fact. I know this is going to sound strange, but we've both made successes out of some less than conventional ideas before, haven't we? . . . this one is even weirder, light years weirder . . . Listen. I'll tell you what I want, and you just let me know whether it's feasible, what it would cost, and whether you want in, all right? . . . Good."

"Good evening, sweetheart," Christopher called charmingly as he stepped inside the house. But when Chelsea leaped into view at the end of the hallway and scowled at him, he realised that his attempt at cajoling his wife was futile.

"Shhh!" she hissed at him like a threatened snake as she rushed forward. "I've just put George to sleep. Don't come barging in like that!"

Christopher kept his lips sealed. He wanted to tell the bitch that he was just trying to be nice, that he wanted nothing more than to get the evening started on the right foot. Instead, he said, "Sorry. I'm going to grab myself a beer and drink it quietly on the back deck."

He closed the door gently and started off along the hallway.

"Hold on second," Chelsea whispered urgently. "Aren't you forgetting to tell me something?"

"Just give me a couple of minutes to take a leak and get a brew from the fridge, and then I'll tell you all about it, all right?"

Chelsea nodded excitedly.

"Try to calm down a little."

He regretted his words instantly. But there was no need. Chelsea had taken it well. She nodded again, more slowly now, and went out to the deck.

Christopher joined her about three minutes later. The instant he had knocked the top off a bottle of Mountain Goat ale, she asked him again, "So, what's your solution?"

"It will take a couple of days to get into full flow, but once it does, life is going to be a lot easier for us," he began.

"Yes, yes. I can hold off for a couple of days \dots at most. Come on, tell me about it."

So, he told her, between sips of ale. He explained the plan in detail, and as he spoke, he watched her reaction. At first, her eyes widened and her jaw dropped, the sheer lunacy of his idea demanded such a reception. But Chelsea held her tongue, which was no mean feat for her, as he continued. The planning was remarkable, she had to admit that. Before long, her eyes narrowed mischievously and her mouth closed. Shock morphed to smug contentedness.

Christian knew that she was sold before he asked, "What do you think about that then?"

She squeezed her knees tightly together for a second, and Christian could have sworn that he noticed her shiver ever so slightly, despite the warmth of that typical Brisbane day.

"Come on," she said, biting her lip and taking him by the hand. "Put your beer back in the fridge, you can finish it later."

He hadn't expected the news to have quite *that* effect on his wife.

As she led him towards their bedroom, he decided that he would keep all the frustration he felt toward her bottled up inside a little longer, just until the right moment when the pressure would be so great he'd have to unleash it all.

Annie Darrow wasn't used to getting calls to the landline phone. All of her friends and family got in touch with her on the mobile. Whenever the landline rang, she hesitated to answer, not knowing who it might be. Already that morning, she had ignored two calls to her mobile from Darren, her ex-partner who now lived on the other side of town, the "other side" being about three streets away. Maybe he was trying to trick her into talking to him by calling the landline. He knew that she was doing it tough on government benefits and every now and then when he needed a fuck and none of his other slags were available, he would try to seduce Annie by rocking up to the house with plastic bags full of shopping or a

new pair of panties or pyjamas for her. He no longer tried to win her over with pot. Although it had taken him a while to really believe it, he now accepted that she had given drugs the boot once and for all. Having her third child, Shelly, had convinced her to go clean. If only Shelly's father would contact her. He wasn't too bad as men went. But Annie knew that he wouldn't. Unlike her eldest child's dickhead of a dad, he had moved on to greener pastures, and perkier young tits.

"What the fuck do you want?" she asked the telephone as she got up from the plastic chair she always sat in when feeding. Her voice, despite the vulgar words it ushered and the weariness it portrayed, still held a hint of the sweet young girl it had once belonged to.

The phone rang out before Annie could get to it and little Shelly cried with outrage at having been ripped away from the nipple of her mother's swollen left breast. Annie shushed her and rocked her back and forth.

"Don't worry, Shelly honey," she whispered. "Probably some fucking arsehole of a curry muncher trying to scam us." Annie's mangled nipple squirted milk into the baby's eyes as she grabbed her tit and shoved it back into the searching mouth.

When the phone rang again, little Shelly was having a nap and Annie rushed to answer it before it woke her daughter up.

"Hello."

Annie frowned as she listened to the voice at the other end.

"No, I can't work. I'm a full-time mum. I've got three kids. That's hard work, you know?'

Her frown softened. "Good. I'm glad you realise that. Most people don't."

She nodded patiently.

"I'm listening."

Her eyes widened with disbelief. "Say again. How much?"

She put her free hand over her mouth and almost gasped, but decided she needed to play it cool.

"What kind of job is this?" she asked suspiciously.

Her face screwed up as she listened. It was weird work but an easy way to make some cash, and serious cash too.

"I don't know. That's a bit strange, and I'm not sure it's even legal," she said, hoping to push the pay up even higher.

She drew a sharp breath, not happy with what she was hearing.

"What do you mean I've already done illegal work before? Who says so?"

She bit her lip.

"Yeah, yeah, all right then. Yes, I accept the terms."

She smiled to herself.

"No, I'm not."

"You can do a blood test if you like. I'm clean."

"No problem, I know a few others. How many more do you need?"

"Do you want me to call them for you?"

She nodded excitedly.

"Three hundred per name and number? Sure, that sounds reasonable," she tried

to say as calmly as possible. "Call me back in fifteen minutes."

She hung up and put her hands over her face, rubbing it as though to make sure she was awake. The whole conversation had been like a strange dream, the kind she had often had back when she was still using. A peculiar feeling flooded through her tired body and numb soul, reminding her of the local creek during storm season. She felt privileged and lucky, but at the same time, so very cheap and dirty.

Annie usually downed at least two cups of strong black coffee for breakfast, but the man on the phone had insisted she was not to consume any caffeine that morning. She drank a glass of orange juice instead.

Once she was ready, she checked the address of the dairy farm again and grabbed the car keys. It was still dark outside and she was barely awake, but it was only a twenty-minute drive through quiet country roads.

Her rusty Barina rattled as she drove over potholes that her headlights struggled to find in the gloom. Shelly had whined a little at first but was soon fast asleep.

The sun was licking the horizon as she arrived. A dozen other rusty bombs were parked in front of the plain-looking milking shed. She recognised several of them. The white Fiesta with a dent in the driver's side door belonged to Margie, who needed to make money by any means necessary in order to stay afloat and keep well away from Dazza and his nasty temper. Sal's Corolla was there too. Annie was surprised the pile of crap was still rolling.

Shelly woke up and started wailing as Annie brought her car to a halt.

"Take it easy, sweetie. Mummy's got some work to do."

Her pleading only annoyed the infant even more.

Then, as Annie switched the headlights off and cut the motor, a figure appeared from the door to the shed and walked over to her.

She got out of the car and unbuckled her daughter from the baby seat in the back.

"Morning."

"Hello," Annie replied unenthusiastically.

The man had a bushy brown beard that covered his red and grey chequered shirt and stank of stale milk. He looked Annie up and down and grinned as he glanced at her ample cleavage.

"The wife'll look after ya littl'un," he informed her, waving a sandpapery hand toward a plump woman who had appeared out of thin air. "She'll take 'er up to the house and look after 'er. You can go to the loo if ya want, and then pop back down 'ere."

"I'm fine," Annie replied.

She didn't want to leave Shelly alone but had no choice. There was work to be done and money to be had. She handed her daughter to the farmer's wife and the child ceased complaining immediately.

Annie was both relieved and surprised.

"Got a way with young'uns, my girl." The woman's jowls wobbled as she spoke.

"I've 'ad six o' me own."

Annie nodded.

"You ready?" the farmer asked.

"Yeah," Annie said, but didn't sound too sure of herself.

"You was told the nature o' the job?"

"I was."

He grinned.

"You must be making a buck or two out of this deal," she mused. "Who's it all for?"

"That's none of ya beeswax!" he snapped. "You and me both are 'ere to do a job and keep our traps shut 'bout it. D'ja understand?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Follow me then."

The farmer led Annie to the entrance of the shed. She could hear the humming of machinery and the chatting of women. There wasn't a cow to be seen or heard.

As she entered, Annie's mouth gaped and her nipples hardened. She had been told what to expect but was still shocked to see it.

Somebody out there, somebody with serious cash, needed a lot of human breast milk.

"Hi, Annie!" several of the women called over the drone of machinery. Others, strangers, just glanced at her briefly and continued chatting loudly together.

There were more than twenty women in the shed, all bare-breasted and hooked up to the milking machines like dairy cattle. Each nipple had a teat cup attached to it

Annie felt humiliated. She wanted to cry. She wanted to run out of the shed, grab Shelly, and drive off back home.

"Sit 'ere," the farmer told her, and she found herself obeying him, taking her place between two strangers.

They both looked happy and Annie found herself thinking that maybe, once the cups were attached and the milk flowing, it would all be just fine—almost natural.

"Get ya tits out," he instructed, staring at her chest.

She took her cardigan and top off. She wasn't wearing a bra. There had been no point in putting one on.

Her nipples were already erect and leaking.

The farmer took a teat cup with his right hand and grabbed a breast with his left. His palm and fingers were rough and Annie only just managed to resist the urge to slap the filthy creep.

"Ouch!" she cried as he attached the first cup. It hurt like all buggery.

The women beside her giggled.

"What's wrong with you freaks?" she hissed at them.

The farmer took her other breast and pushed the nipple into the second cup. The pain was sharp, like needles.

Annie was crying, but she kept thinking about the cash. She needed it.

The cups throbbed at her nipples, tugging at them, inducing the flow of milk. It didn't take long before the pain subsided and she started to relax.

She looked at the women to either side of her and they smiled knowingly.

"It's not so bad after a few minutes," the one on her right told her. "Just forget your self-respect for a while and think about the money."

"It's our little secret," the other woman added.

Annie looked down at her nipples pulsing inside the teat cups. Her liquid gold was squirting into the receptacles and flowing along tubes toward a central cistern.

The women were all the same. There were dozens of breasts being emptied. She told herself not to be ashamed or to feel cheap. After all, they were just doing a day's work like everybody else. It was a case of supply and demand, or whatever it was called. She had milk to give and some rich bitch whose boobs obviously didn't work had money to spend on it.

She decided to take the advice of the woman on her right. She closed her eyes and thought about the money.





PERFECT TOWN

They say it existed for a thousand years. I say that's ridiculous.

They say it lives on in history. I say, keep it there.

They say it was the greatest place on earth. I say nothing, just laugh.

They said, 'Evacuate.' I said, 'Hurray!'

They said they'd never seen anything like it. I said, 'Bring it on.'

When the dust devil hit.

it flattened out the shanties, it dusted off the drunks, it cleaned out the sick beds, and whipped away the punks. It gobbled up the perverts, and stole the orphanage bell. It swept away this damn town And dumped it into hell.

They say they'll never forget. I say, get over it.

They cling to the past. I greet the future.

Goodbye perfect town, at last, There's nothing left to say.

-e.m. eastick

A NEW GENERATION RIDE

It's a new generation ride with her arms entwined around him like a grape vine.

Pulsar, their bike, zigzags like a snake; sometimes it prances as a horse – yet a speed reduce both dislike - it's a ride along the edge of the other world. Everybody startles and curses. Any urgency, they don't have – it's a fun. Really adolescence's partially blind – it seeks the greatest pleasure in the highest risk. All the thunderous sounds - cracking, breaking, blasting, and so on – have been synchronized on a horrible track – silencer spits fire – all are odd alterations.

Though our roads are acquainted with such rides, this one ends in the rear of a tourist taxi. Red liquid spreads, and an ache flows slowly to somewhere.

—fabiyas mv

absolving lynn

by lee todd lacks

"I've been waiting for you to come by for the past fifteen minutes! My halibut is overcooked. Given the cost of dining at this establishment, I shouldn't have to pay for your inattentiveness." Lynn regretted the flippant remark as soon as she had uttered it. Her shame swelled like a tide as she watched the server's countenance wilt. "I'll have them redo your order right away, ma'am."

Although her job at the insurance firm could be trying at times, Lynn Thompson knew that she had never worked harder than this beleaguered, young waitress, not even on her best day. She shuddered at the sound of her mother's voice. "How could you be so rude to that poor girl? Get up this instant and head straight to the ladies room, before I take care of you right here, in front of God and everybody."

Lynn didn't bother to debate with the voice. She knew her fate was welldeserved. Rising from the table, she ruefully proceeded toward an alcove at the rear of the dining room. Upon approaching, she could see that the door to one of the single-occupancy restroom was ajar. Sighing, Lynn stepped inside and switched on the light. In front of her stretched a pink granite vanity, with a large, rectangular mirror mounted just above the backsplash.

"Bend over!" commanded the voice. "Yes, ma'am." Lynn did as she was told. Moments later, Lynn noticed her modest linen skirt being raised and tucked above her hips. Unseen fingers reached inside her apricot tights, tugging them down just below her knees. The phantom extremities then lowered her panties till they bunched up against her hose.

"Oh, Mom! Please! Not on the bare!!" Lynn pleaded.

"Hush, or we'll be here twice as long," the voice admonished her.

"No, no, no! Please!" Lynn cried, knowing full well that Claire Thompson had never issued an empty threat.

"Not another word, then," her mother warned.

"Yes, ma'am." Soon, Lynn could hear the unzipping of her handbag, followed by the rustle of a fairly sizeable object, extricating itself from an assortment of keys, coins, and lipstick. The next few seconds seemed interminable, as Claire Thompson's daughter braced for what had become a routine ordeal.

From an early age, Lynn learned that naughty meant sitting on pillows for the next several days. Whenever she chose to misbehave, Lynn's mother spanked her with a hefty wooden paddle brush. For as often as she claimed to dread her mother's hairbrush, Lynn found herself in need of its sore and searing grace.

A loud crack reverberated within the tiled walls of the lavatory, stinging her backside like a dozen angry hornets. Lynn gasped, barely able to process the discomfort before having to endure a second, similarly painful sting, and another, and still another. It took all of her will to suppress the cries that desperately sought to escape her. However, being in a public place, she dared not let her voice betray the intensity of her pain, for fear that anyone who stood within hearing distance might become alarmed, and subsequently notify the authorities.

Growing up, many of Lynn's schoolmates discovered that her mother had no qualms about paddling her, in front, if not alongside, of them. However, not even her closest friends knew that she was still subject to maternal discipline as an adult. Despite her thirty-six years, Lynn knew to expect the brush whenever she neglected her household chores, or arrived home late without prior consent.

When Claire Thompson passed away unexpectedly, Lynn inherited the small farmhouse, which had always been their home. As she struggled to function without her mother's approval, Lynn gradually learned how to answer to herself. Within a matter of months, she bought several stylish dresses, which her mother would have surely forbid her from wearing, and she got into the habit of staying out after work.

"Unnnnhhhhh!!!" A thick wad of paper towels muffled what would have been a tile-rattling shriek. In these moments, Lynn often imagined herself attempting to explain her predicament to the investigating officer, who had been called to the scene, sounding rather dubious as he inquired about the brush. "Possessed, ma'am?" "Yes, officer! My deceased mother haunts my hairbrush, and she punishes me whenever I misbehave. She's been tormenting me for over two years now!" Having said that, Lynn could see herself being transported to the nearest Acute Psychiatric Unit, where she would undergo a full evaluation. No. For as unpleasant as her present circumstances might seem, the prospect of having to explain who or

what was causing her such audible distress in a public restroom seemed even more objectionable.

Lynn had been living n her own for nearly six months when she first heard her mother speak through the brush. Initially, the voice came as a great relief. The brush seemed like a comforting reminder of her mother's firm guidance. Over time, however, the admonishments became progressively harsher. The condition of never knowing when she might hear the voice caused Lynn to seem perpetually irritable, and the severity of the brush's reprimands eroded her burgeoning self-belief. That's when it started.

She had arrived home very late one evening, dazed and queasy from quite a few too many. Upon entering, Lynn wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed as quickly as her impaired judgment would allow. Various articles of clothing lay strewn about the hallway as Claire Thompson's daughter stumbled into her bedroom. As she attempted to remove her earrings, one of them fell to the floor. Cursing, she bent over to pick it up, a startlingly painful impact struck her from behind. "Unnnnnhhhhh!!!" Just then, she heard her mother's voice.

"Lynn Marie Thompson! Did I raise you to be falling down drunk in your underwear at two o'clock in the morning?!"

"N...n...no, ma'am," Lynn stammered.

"You seem to have forgotten yourself, young lady! Do you still need me to remind you?" the voice asked rhetorically.

Lynn was slow to reveal her truth. "Yes, ma'am."

Nearly two years since that fateful night, Lynn still carried her mother's reminder. As she struggled to bear it yet again, a sharp knock at the restroom door rattled her composure. Panicking, Lynn let the damp paper towels fall from her mouth, so that she could respond. "I'm almost finished!" she gasped.

"Are you all right in there?!" asked an alarmed male voice.

"Yes. Yes. I'm...I'm fine," came her wavering reply. Lynn hoped that she could assuage the well-meaning stranger's concern, at least temporarily, for she knew that her mother wasn't finished yet.

The brush pronounced its final sentence. "Ten more!"

Lynn grabbed more paper towels, and bit down hard. The room echoed once again. "Unnnnhhhhh!!!" She was shocked by the sheer magnitude of the pain. The thought of having to endure nine more seemed inconceivable. Then, for reasons beyond her understanding, the brush ceased to strike.

"I can't do this anymore, Lynn. You're a grown woman. I can't absolve you anymore." It was her mother's voice.

"No, no...no, Mom! I need you! Please! Don't stop! I'll try harder!" Lynn insisted, in spite of herself.

"No, Lynn. I've let you rely upon the brush for far too long. You need to form your own conscience."

The shaming voice only served to heighten her anxiety. "Mom, please! I can't! I don't know how!"

"I know, sweetheart, and that's my fault. I never taught you how to forgive yourself." Her mother sounded regretful now.

"Mom, please, don't go. I still need it!!"

"I'm not in the brush, sweetheart. I'm in you...always. Goodbye, Lynn." The voice spoke to her reassuringly, as if for the last time.

"Mom!" Lynn cried out, unable to contain her despair any longer.

A moment later, she heard the sound of the restroom door being unlocked. "No...no...Oh, God! No! Please! Wait!" Lynn implored, sobbing.

Just then, the door flew open, followed by the collective gasp of half a dozen stunned onlookers.

"Oh, my God," they murmured. "Someone call 911!" exclaimed the restaurant manager, unable to avert his eyes from Lynn's frightfully inflamed bottom.

Too mortified to speak, Claire Thompson's daughter looked up at the mirror. Her face was flushed and wet with tears, as she stood fully exposed from the waist down, clutching a hairbrush in her trembling hand.



Uncle Tom's Theory

by sue barnard

Until now, death was something which had only happened to other people....



10:25 a.m.

Helen desperately wanted to keep up her strength for the ordeal which was to follow, but she simply could not relax. For what felt like the hundredth time, she picked up the clock from the sideboard, put it down without registering what time it said, then walked across to the window, pulled aside the curtain, and peered out into the street.

On the other side of the room, the telephone on the mantelpiece pierced the silence. She turned, let go of the curtain, and began to walk across to answer it, but the ringing stopped before she had even reach the centre of the room. She sighed, looked unseeing at the clock again, and then resumed her vigil at the window.

The door creaked open to admit Jamie, carrying an acoustic guitar, and Luke, who had a battered copy of *The Oxford Book of English Verse* tucked under his arm. Helen suppressed a gasp at the sight of their incongruous dark suits and black ties. She couldn't help noticing that Luke had still not properly brushed his hair, even today, but decided not to remark on it.

"Ah, there you are." She greeted them with a forced smile. Luke shivered. "Geez, it's cold in here." Jamie slumped onto the sofa. "I can't say I'm looking forward to this." "Nor I," Helen agreed.

"Me neither," Luke grunted. He opened the book, and then let out a loud snort. "Geez, what kind of random stuff is this? Hail to thee, blithe spirit! Bird thou never wert," he declaimed, striking up a melodramatic pose. "That from heaven or near it Pourest thy full heart..."

Jamie looked up, shocked. "You're not going to read that out, are you?"

"God no. It just, like, opened at that one. The one I'm supposed to do is something about death not being proud."

"Thank goodness for that!" Helen heaved a sigh of relief (she had never been a great fan of Shelley) as Luke flopped into one of the armchairs and opened the anthology at another page. His lips moved silently as he perused the text, whilst Jamie picked up the guitar and fiddled with the tuning pegs. After a few moments his fingers moved to the strings, and the air was filled with the melodic strains of "Stairway to Heaven."

The door opened again and Martin entered. Helen smiled. Despite the sombre occasion, her husband could still look stunning, even when dressed, like their sons, in dark suit and black tie.

Jamie stopped playing, mid-phrase, and put the guitar down. "Sorry," he said. "I don't know if I'm going to be able to do this."

"And this poem!" Luke chipped in. "I mean, I know it was, like, one of her favourites, but—"

"Don't worry," Martin soothed. "Nobody except us and the priest know about it, so if either of you decide you can't go through with it, nobody else will be any the wiser."

Jamie shook his head. "But we'll feel as if we've let her down. She always said—" Martin held up his hand for silence. "Like I said, don't worry about it."

"You'll both be fine," Helen reassured them, as Martin seated himself in the other armchair.

"Who was that on the phone?" Luke asked.

"Somebody trying to sell us life insurance," Martin answered. "At least, I think that's what he was selling. He had an accent so thick I could spread it on my toast."

"They can certainly pick their moments," Helen sighed, as their sons groaned.

An uneasy quietness descended over the room. Jamie eventually broke the silence.

"This feels weird," he murmured. "Like—the calm before the storm."

"Mmm..." Helen nodded agreement.

Luke pushed the poetry book aside. "How old were we when Grandpa died?" he asked.

"Not very old," Helen answered.

Martin considered. "Well, he died in 2001, so you would have been..." he added up on his fingers, "five and seven. A bit young to go to his funeral."

"How old was he when he died?" Jamie asked.

"Sixty-eight," Martin said. "How well do you remember him?"

"Not much," Luke said. "I remember he had, like, lots of white hair, and he smoked those little cigars. And he talked funny."

Martin laughed. "That was because he came from 'Zummerzet."

The others joined in the laughter at his mock West-Country accent.

Luke spoke again. "When he died, I, like, didn't really take it in. Not like it was with Charlie."

Martin's face became sombre. "How old was he?"

"We were in, um, year eleven. So...fifteen. Or maybe sixteen."

"Did they ever catch the driver?" Jamie asked.

Luke shrugged. "Dunno. If they did, I never heard about it."

"Tragic," Helen murmured, turning back to look out of the window again. She jumped as Jamie let out a loud sneeze.

"Bloody flowers." Jamie glared at the massive floral arrangement which completely covered the coffee table, then looked anxiously around. "Where are the tissues?"

"Over there." Martin pointed towards the sideboard. "You'd better take a few with you. It's not the sort of day to go out without a hanky."

"That's usually my trick," Helen smiled, as Jamie blew his nose and stuffed a handful of tissues into the pocket of his jacket.

"What will it be like?" Luke asked nervously. "I mean, like, we've never been to one before."

"Service in church," Martin answered, "then to the crematorium. That'll be quite short, I should think. Then back to the pub for the wake."

There was a pause while the two younger men took this idea on board. Helen couldn't help thinking that they both looked very uneasy. Then Jamie spoke.

"Dad, you believe in all that church stuff, don't you? Do you reckon it helps?"

Martin thought for a moment before replying. "It always has done up to now," he said eventually, choosing his words carefully. "In a way it's comforting to believe that you'll see them again one day. Although, having said that, sometimes things can happen that can shake your faith."

"What?" Helen gasped. "But you've always—"

Luke's voice cut across hers. "You mean, like, 'If God exists then why does he allow this?" He made invisible quotation marks in the air with his fingers.

"What sort of things?" Jamie asked, turning back to Martin.

"Well... I remember years ago, when an aunt of mine died quite young, the first thing my grandmother said was 'Why wasn't it me?' And it does make you wonder: Yes, why wasn't it? If there is a God, then why did he let the younger woman die, rather than the older one?"

"Why indeed..." Helen murmured, half to herself.

"Yeah," Luke agreed. "You kind of, like, come to expect it with old people, don't you? Not like with—"

"Natural selection, maybe?" Jamie suggested. "You know, survival of the fittest, and all that?"

Helen raised her eyebrows thoughtfully, but said nothing.

"Or fate?" Luke went on. "Like, predestination and stuff?"

"Maybe," Martin agreed. "Grannie always believed in that. So did Uncle Tom." Luke smiled. "I liked Uncle Tom. He was quality."

"Yeah." Jamie's normal voice was suddenly replaced by a broad Cockney accent. "I wanted to be the Village Idiot, but I failed the exam."

Luke joined in, also adopting the unmistakable accents of the East End. "I speak two languages: English and Rubbish."

"Uncle Tom never talked rubbish!" Helen said, across their laughter.

Martin chuckled. "He was a law unto himself! For what he said about eternal life, centuries ago he'd have been burnt as a heretic!"

Helen glanced out of the window again, and saw the hearse and funeral car approaching.

"It's here," she whispered.

"Why?" Jamie sounded puzzled. "What did he say about eternal life?"

Before Martin could reply, the sound of the doorbell stunned them into silence.

Martin stood up and went to answer it. Through the open door into the hall, the others could see and hear the man in the black overcoat standing respectfully on the doorstep.

"Mr. Blythe? Are you ready?"

"Yes, just a moment."

Martin came back into the living room and picked up the flower arrangement.

"Ready?"

Jamie and Luke glanced nervously at each other, then nodded, picked up the guitar and the book and followed their father out into the hall.

Helen watched them go, then drew a deep breath before moving to join them.

"Here goes..." she whispered to herself. "Heaven alone knows how this will go..."

10:55 a.m.

As the cortège came within sight of the church, Helen gasped in surprise.

"Geez, look at that!" Luke's words mirrored her own thoughts. The path from the churchyard gate to the church door was lined with people, standing two or three deep in places. Several of them were already visibly weeping.

The priest was waiting for them as they climbed out of the car. He gave a kindly smile to Jamie and Luke.

"Are you all right for this?" he asked, nodding at the guitar and the book.

Jamie squared his shoulders and nodded. Luke followed suit, but with rather less confidence, Helen noticed.

"Very well, then. Let's go..."

The pall-bearers picked up the coffin, balanced it on their shoulders and carried it into the church. The mourners followed. The contemplative strains of Mozart's "Ave Verum Corpus" filled the building, and Helen detected a faint smell of incense as the priest began to recite the familiar words of the funeral service:

"I am the Resurrection and the Life, said the Lord..."

Helen stole a quick glance at Jamie and Luke. Their faces were both fixed, as if hypnotised, on the coffin.

They shouldn't be having to do this, she thought. Not at their age.

2:45 p.m.

Helen was the first back into the house. She wandered aimlessly back into the living room and stared out of the window as the funeral car drove off.

She turned as the door opened and Jamie and Luke came in, gratefully pulling off their black ties. They both looked tired, drained, and at least ten years older than they had done only a few short hours ago. She took a step toward them and smiled.

"Well done. I was proud of you both."

Jamie sighed, sat down on the sofa and put the guitar down. "I'm glad that's over."

Helen nodded. "Me too. What a baptism with fire..."

She stopped speaking as Martin came into the room. He looked exhausted, but was clearly trying to keep going.

Luke shivered. "It's still cold in here."

"The kettle's on for some tea. That should warm us up." Martin sighed as he sat down in one of the armchairs. "Well done, both of you. You did really well."

Helen smiled in agreement. "Yes, you did."

Jamie managed a wan smile. "Thanks. I don't know about tea, though—right now I could do with something a bit stronger."

He heaved himself up from the sofa, crossed to the sideboard, opened one of the cupboards and peered inside. Eventually he pulled out a strange-shaped bottle, about three-quarters full of dark red liquid. He held it up and squinted at the handwritten label.

"What's this? *Blythe Spirit*?"

Luke looked up. "Hey, that was in that poem!" He grabbed the book and flicked through the pages, while Martin joined Jamie and studied the bottle label.

"Let's see—oh, it's home-made sloe gin. Blythe spelled with a y. I think that's your Mum's idea of a joke."

"Oh, very droll," Luke groaned, as Helen suppressed a giggle.

"Shelley, isn't it? The poem?" Martin asked.

"Yeah. "To a Skylark,' it says here."

Jamie wrinkled his brow. "Isn't there a play as well? I vaguely remember it from

Martin nodded. "Yes. Noël Coward. I saw the film years ago. It's about a ghost who can't let go. It was supposed to be funny, but to be honest I found it a bit weird."

Helen opened her mouth to speak, but said nothing. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Luke shiver again. Meanwhile, Jamie had unscrewed the top from the bottle and taken a cautious sniff at the contents.

"Oh well, I'll try anything once." He started to pour the liquid into a small glass. "Anyone else?"

"Yes please," Martin answered.

Luke hesitated for a moment, but agreed, albeit nervously. "Er—yeah, go on."

"No thanks." Helen shook her head.

Jamie poured out two more glasses and handed them to Martin and Luke. As Helen passed round the back of Luke's chair, she noticed that he shuddered as he took his first sip.

It's probably a bit too strong for him, she thought. It's pretty powerful stuff. Very good for colds, though. Kills ninety-nine per cent of all germs, and leaves the other one per cent too rat-arsed to bother.

But the movement was not lost on Jamie either, who put down his own glass and turned to his younger brother.

"You OK, mate?" he asked, as Helen walked back to the window. Luke relaxed. "Yeah," he shrugged. "It's-like-weird." He stared into his glass, then took another cautious sip.

"Yes," Martin agreed. "It's an acquired taste."

Luke opened his mouth to reply, but then appeared to decide against it. The three of them sipped their drinks in silence.

"This is, like, the calm after the storm..." Luke said eventually.

"Mmm..." Helen murmured.

"What did it say on the death certificate?" Jamie asked.

"Some fancy medical term, I think. Hang on, I'll have a look." Martin stood up, crossed to the sideboard and took out a piece of paper from the top drawer.

"Yes, what did it say?" Helen asked. "I never saw it." She walked around behind Martin and peered over his shoulder as he read aloud.

"Cause of death: acute myocardial infarction. Heart attack to you and me."

"At least it was quick," Helen remarked.

Martin shivered as he folded up the death certificate and replaced it in the drawer. "You're right, Luke," he said. "It is cold in here."

Jamie stood up and switched on the electric fire. "What happens now?" he asked, as he sat down again.

"We need to pick up the ashes from the undertaker," Martin answered. "I think they'll be ready tomorrow, or the day after."

Luke shuddered. "That's, like, really creepy. What's going to happen to them?"

"She always said she wanted them scattered over the sea," Martin said, sitting down in the armchair. "So I thought we might take a trip down to the coast on Saturday. We could have a pub lunch afterwards if you like."

"Mmm..." Luke sounded less than enthusiastic.

That's not like him, Helen thought. He loves his pub lunches.

"Talking of ashes," Jamie took a packet of cigarettes from his pocket, "I'm popping outside."

"Could I bum one off you, mate?" Luke asked.

"What?" Martin looked up in surprise.

Helen frowned. "I didn't know you—"

Luke looked sheepish. "I don't usually, like, but right now..."

"Sure." Jamie offered him the packet as they headed for the door.

"I'll go and make the tea." Martin stood up and followed them out. Helen stared after him, then moved away from the window and sat down in the armchair which Martin had just vacated. It still felt comfortingly warm.

For the first time since the morning she felt able to think clearly, and tried to clarify everything that was crashing through her jumbled brain.

Peter Pan said that to die would be an awfully big adventure, she thought. But so far, it's been more like an awfully big anticlimax.

She counted on her fingers. Heart attack. Well, at least it was quick and tidy. I think I was probably dead before I even hit the ground. And I've been spared the indignity of old age, or being a burden to anyone. That was what I'd been dreading most of all.

Postmortem. Ugh, that wasn't nice. She shuddered at the memory.

Big bash in Church. Dear Martin—I might have known he'd give me a good send-

off. And I was surprised at how many people turned up. Some of them I haven't seen for years. They seemed genuinely upset. But then, if they thought that much of me, why didn't they come to see me while I was still alive?

Cremation... That wasn't particularly nice either, but then, I wasn't really expecting it to be...

Bunfight at the pub. Then—what? I often wondered where I'd end up, but never in my wildest dreams did I imagine it would be back here.

Is this it? Mrs. Blythe, welcome to the afterlife.

They drummed all that Heaven and Hell stuff into us at Sunday School. For a while I even believed them, but I'd started to have doubts even before all that business with that loony fundamentalist, telling us we'd all go to Hell if we didn't give the Church at least a tenth of our income. But if this is what really happens, then at least *I've managed to prove him wrong!*

I suppose it started when Miss Muir was teaching us about Hitler. What was it she said? "Perhaps that's what Hell really is—having to listen to what people say about you afterwards. And the more wicked you were, the worse it will be."

And then... Uncle Tom.

She began speaking aloud, her voice slipping effortlessly into the tones of her uncle's Cockney accent.

"Eternal life ain't about your soul goin' on for ever, sittin' on a cloud and twangin' an 'arp. It's them what's left behind 'oo keeps your memory alive after you've gone. And 'ow much you'll be remembered depends on 'ow much you did, and 'ow much you were loved, when you were alive. What d'you reckon, 'elen my girl?"

"So is that why I'm back here? To live on, as a memory? For as long as they ... rememb..."

The rest of the sentence was lost in a racking sob. She struggled up from the sofa, crossed to the sideboard and picked up the box of tissues.

I'd no idea that in the afterlife I'd still be able to cry...

As she wiped her streaming eyes, the door creaked open, admitting Jamie followed by Luke. Luke in turn held it open for Martin, who was carrying a tray bearing a teapot, a milkjug, a sugar basin, and three mugs.

All three froze in their tracks as they looked across the room. The tray left Martin's hands and crashed to the floor...





MINI DUBAI

My town nicknamed, 'Mini Dubai', burgeoned and branched on the bank of Kanoli canal like a tamarind seed.

Now the silvered canal sprawls on its death bed.

Busy pedestrians walk down an ancient bridge built by the British. As the traffic light has lost its eve balls, a potbellied policeman dances and controls. Jalopies groan, and modern cars whiz. A long whistle: an ambulance with the wounded and a van with the wedding party halt side by side as the southern and northern hemispheres of emotions meet at a single point.

Nostalgic smell of the canal sops in the sizzling tang from a cafeteria.

The splurging women whirl in the hurry wind among the concrete buildings seething under the tanning rays. The stink of sweat and the aroma of the Arabian perfumes choke the air in shops, where, sometimes, the chicanery peeks through the glassed. The applications drafted in blood and salt scurry to the offices nearby only to get the obsequies in the waste baskets. The sots creep like snakes in the yard of Snadra Bar.

A crow sits on an electric post and watches all beneath with a smile of wisdom.

—fabiyas mv



by craig steven

"Give me another one, pal," the patron at the bar said to the man serving him. The bartender didn't answer; he simply grabbed the bottle from the shelf and poured the liquor into an undecorated shot glass. He slid it back across the counter. The man caught it with a salute and downed it.

"What's got you so down tonight, friend?" the bartender asked, leaning against the counter. It was a snowy Thursday night, and nobody wanted to brave it. What had started as a gentle flurry was said to soon become the worst blizzard Cincinnati had ever seen.

"Why do I gotta be down?" the man slurred. "Can't I just like my drinks?"

"I hear 'ya loud and clear, man. Sorry to interrupt." The bartender walked away to talk to the man at the other end of the bar, the only customer aside from himself.

In truth, Camillo would have liked talking to the bartender about everything that was wrong with him. He would have been elated to lay it all at someone else's feet and leave it there. To leave it all behind and pretend that nothing had ever happened.

But that was impossible. Try as he might to push it to the back of his head, it was always there, waiting for him to come back to it. But the drinks helped. They made him forget, if only for a while.

Camillo stood shakily and grabbed his coat from the stool. He caught his reflection in the mirror behind the bar—pale, gaunt, sickly, and tired. All of the friends and family he'd run into in recent months told him he looked terrible in the nicest ways they could muster. There was never a point where he thought he could disagree.

"You outta here, buddy?" the bartender asked as he walked toward the door. When Camillo mumbled in reply, he said, "All right, but be careful. News said the heavy stuff is coming in a couple hours. By the time the sun comes up, it'll look like the North Pole out there."

"You need a ride, buddy?" the guy at the bar asked. He was tall and darkskinned with a deep, resonating voice. Though it was nearly midnight and the bar was dim, he wore sunglasses to go with his attire, black from head to toe.

"I'm good," Camillo answered, buttoning his coat. "Thanks."

Camillo walked outside and exhaled, his breath misting in the open air. When he'd come here earlier for drinks, the snow had just started. Now, it blanketed the streets, unsullied save for the tire tracks. The sidewalks were empty. No one in their right mind would be out walking on a night like this. Camillo hadn't been in his right mind in almost six months. He began walking down the street, headed for his apartment.

The night was quiet but for the gentle crunch of his feet in the snow and his heavy breathing. A soft wind carried down the street, whistling through the narrow road. Camillo walked upright as best he could. He didn't want to get picked up for public intoxication...again. The snow made it difficult, to say the least. I need to hurry up and get off the damned sidewalk before a cop rolls by and sees me. It's not like there's a lot of competition for their attention out here.

Up ahead was the town's cemetery, and it was a straight shot to his apartment building just on the other side. Not only would he be shaving a good ten minutes off his walk, but the risk of being seen by police, or *anyone*, for that matter, would decrease greatly.

The fact that it was where his wife was buried mattered not; he was at her graveside every day anyway. Though this was an unplanned trip, he would stop by and visit her regardless.

Camillo walked through the gates, open night and day. Normally, this would be cause for derelicts galore finding sanctuary within, but with the disastrous weather, there would be none. Not if they could help it, anyway. It was a beautiful sight, the way the snow fell slowly under the light of the full moon, gathering on the headstones and the grass around them. It was eerie, but it wasn't a walk that Camillo hadn't taken before. Only it didn't seem so quiet when the sun was shining.

He came upon his wife's headstone. It read, "Melissa Lynn Hartford, 5/25/1981-6/25/2014, Loving Friend, Daughter, & Wife." He sat in the porch chair he'd brought on the first day when he spent nearly half a day talking to the grass Melissa had been buried beneath. No one ever removed it, and for this, he was grateful. He sighed, staring down at her, knowing the weather would force him to leave earlier than he'd like. *I'll just say a few words and go home, where you won't be, he thought.*

She'd gone into labor exactly one month after her birthday. It was the baby they'd been waiting for, the one they'd been trying to conceive since they'd gotten married. It was a dream come true until it came time to deliver. Due to complications, she'd died of maternal hemorrhaging. The baby was stillborn. In one fell swoop, Camillo had lost both wife and son.

He didn't know how he'd gone on since. Life was a blur. One day seemingly led to the next without notice. He didn't pay attention. He couldn't even go to work anymore. Melissa's life insurance policy was enough to set him up for a few years, but that wasn't the driving factor in his slump; he just didn't want to work anymore. He didn't want to live, either, but he'd found out shortly after his wife's death that he didn't have the brass to commit suicide. All he could do was drink himself to death each day and visit his wife's grave in between stupors.

A cold hand found itself on his shoulder, massaging his neck. He reached up with his own and caressed its fingers, thankful for their presence. He stood and turned the chair at an angle to stare at his wife, or at least, the ghostly image he'd been seeing since his first trip here. Then, he thought he'd gone insane. Had he not been wallowing in misery, he might have run away from her phantasm. He soon found that she was as gentle in death as she'd been in life.

She never said a word to him. That was the most agonizing thing. Whether she couldn't talk or didn't want to, Camillo didn't know. Every time she appeared like this was bittersweet. He could see her, look upon her for a while and reminisce on the love they'd shared.

But she couldn't join in. When he asked her what the afterlife was like, if she missed him, if their son was with her, she could answer nothing. She only stared,

sadly, as if waiting for him to join her so he could answer those questions himself.

"Why don't you ever say anything, Mel?" he asked, tears in his eyes, face buried in his hands.

She looked down at him in her black gown. She'd never worn that in life, but in death, it suited her perfectly. Her long, black hair was drawn in a tight bun, her pale face adorned with dark make-up, and her green eyes, wide, staring at her husband. In response, she rubbed the back of his head as he sobbed, as he was wont to do when he was so far in his drink.

Camillo looked up from the ground to ask her once more. She was gone as quickly as she'd appeared. She'd do that. Sometimes she would sit with him for hours, sometimes only a few minutes, and sometimes he would simply catch a glimpse of her out of his peripherals. He wiped the tears from his face and the snot from under his nose, standing, preparing to leave.

"Do you want to join her?" a voice asked from behind him.

He spun around so fast that he fell to the ground. He landed on both knees and saw that the man at the bar, the tall, black man, was now here with him.

"Did...did you see her?" he asked.

"Of course I saw her," he answered, hands in his pockets. His eyes bore holes through the man's kneeling before him. "I've seen her before. This isn't the first time."

"What do you mean?"

Melissa's hands were on his shoulders again. She gently turned his head so that he was looking at her. She was crouching next to him, smiling.

"Mel, who is he? Who is this man?"

She leaned forward, her breath tickling his ear, and whispered one word; "Death."

"Do you want to join her?" the man asked.

Camillo put some real thought into it. He knew that he should have said no. There was always something to live for, even when you lost everything in the world that you held dear. You should never, ever give up hope. There's so much to live for and you shouldn't throw it all away.

Camillo wondered if the people that gave that kind of advice had ever lost a wife and child minutes apart from one another.

"Take me,"he said as he put his arm around his wife. "Take me. Please."

"Of course." There was a swirl of wind, kicking up the snow that'd fallen around them and the leaves on the ground beneath it. When it had settled, the three of them were gone.

In spirit, anyway. The snow fell all night, and it was four days later, when the first thaws came, that they found Camillo, frozen dead. The men who'd found him recall being immensely haunted by the all too calm smile upon his face.



THE MASTER'S

by joshua rex

Ralph got the puppy on the last day of third grade. He'd wanted an indoor dog, one that he could watch television with and sleep with in his bed at night—he'd seen such boy and dog combo on the TV, and this was part of his reason for wanting a dog in the first place. But his father couldn't stand the mess that comes with puppies: the hair, the vomit, and the accidents. "Shit factories," Ralph's father had called them. Didn't fit in with the new sofa, especially while his family was still making payments on it.

So he and Ralph built a house for the pup under the huge weeping willow in their backyard. They got him a collar and tags and put a plastic bowl for food and a metal one for water beside the little shingled shelter, then chained him to a corkscrew stake just outside it. Fettered to its pole, the puppy yipped and yelped and licked Ralph's face, recognizing its master. It also proved, just as Ralph's dad had said, to be a never-ending supplier of excrement. Ralph cleaned up after the dog, which he named Prince, the best he could, but it seemed that every time he scooped one pile, another would appear. He kept up with the mess less and less as the weeks passed, and by the end of July, the ground around Prince's house was a morass of feces and mud.

Prince grew fast, and he was a leaper. His once playful puppy paws grew long, dull nails, caked with fecal grime that raked Ralph's flesh and smeared filth on his clothes when the dog jumped on him. Consequently, Ralph spent less and less time with Prince, though he did buy the dog toys. But Prince would shred or pull them apart within minutes, and Ralph soon stopped wasting his precious allowance money on them. Having nothing else to play with, the dog moved on to its food bowl. He gnawed at it until the edges were flayed and pitted with teeth marks and it

resembled the wreckage of a flying saucer shot out of the sky. Fortunately for Ralph, the game with the bowl always ended when Prince tossed it out of chain range, making it easy for the boy to retrieve it at feeding time without being trampled on with the dog's shit crusted claws.

Prince always did the same thing during the feeding ritual. He would crouch very low, face resting on his fore paws, eyes watchful, tail still as Ralph approached with the ragged bowl full of dry food pellets that resembled goat turds. In the beginning, Ralph had always set the food bowl beside the water dish next to Prince's house, where the dog would chomp down the meal in seconds flat. But now, starved for attention (as well as the food, he was, after all, a puppy shit factory), the overexcited dog would leap at its master when the boy got within range, as if Ralph himself were the meal, knocking the food bowl out of his hands. Ralph had been disgusted to witness the dog, on several occasions, subsequently lap up every morsel from the foul quagmire. So Ralph started setting the bowl down just where the dog could reach it—arms splayed and snout fully extended—to lap up every speck. He let rain water fill the dog's silver bowl, and when that got low, stood back out of range and filled it with the hose.

Then one day Prince broke his chain, and during the summer cookout to boot. The dog had been barking incessantly all day as, just a few yards away, the master and his entire extended family had gathered, chatting and grilling and ignoring the dog that leapt and yowled from the edge of the filthy ring. It happened just as Ralph's aunt was spooning macaroni salad onto his grandmother's plate. There was a little audible plink, like a fingernail flicking a glass, as one of the metal links on Prince's chain snapped, and the next moment the dog was on the table, scarfing everything in sight while Ralph's aunt and grandmother and his cousins fled screaming. Ralph's father, however, did not run. He rose, steadily, came around to the side of the table where Prince was nosing in the baked beans, grabbed him by the collar so hard Prince's eyes bulged, and punched the dog in the head. Prince yelped and then he began to whimper as Ralph's father dragged him across the yard and reattached the chain to the stake. Then his father went back to the table and wrapped everything up—plates, bowls, silverware, cups full of soda, even his own car keys (which he'd have to fish out later)—and tossed them in the trash bin on the side of the house. Finally he grabbed a beer from the cooler and calmly went through the back door while the rest of Ralph's family eyed the dog angrily as they wiped food spatter off their clothes.

Crying, Ralph crossed the yard and the barrier of shit, not caring now that it smelled and that it was getting on his shoes, and sat down beside the entrance to the dog's house. Prince was lying in there (the first time Ralph had actually seen the dog go in the house) with his head resting on his front paws, still whimpering. Ralph noticed a rivulet of blood running from one of Prince's ears and that the eye on the side of his face where his dad had hit him was half lidded and quivering. Nevertheless his tongue was still occasionally lashing out to lap up the remnants of ketchup and potato salad and relish which still clung to his muzzle. It made Ralph

smile despite his tears. He sat there stroking the dog's face until his father called for him, once and sharply, and then Ralph got up at once and went in the house without looking back.

The second time Prince got loose was far worse.

It happened while Ralph and his mother and father were away for the day on a trip to the countryside. As they were returning, a big white van with wire over the windows pulled into the driveway almost simultaneously. Ralph's heart sunk into his stomach as he read the words "Department of Animal Control" just below the official city symbol on the van's white paneled side. The van's driver, a burly, red haired man with aerodynamically shaped sunglasses, relayed the story of Prince's "adventures" with his arms crossed over his chest like a club bouncer. Apparently, the dog had been running through the neighborhood with his chain and the metal corkscrew stake trailing behind him since early morning, digging in flower patches, terrorizing cats, and chasing after small children in the park who mistook Prince's enthusiasm for aggression and had fled screaming in all directions. "There were numerous complaints," the animal control bouncer scoldingly informed Ralph's parents, including one in which the coiled stake on the lead swung into the corner shop's plate glass window, shattering not only it, but the vintage neon "Lottery Sold Here" sign. Ralph's father's face turned dark red at this last detail, and Ralph feared, as the man unlocked the van door and handed a very-happy-to-see-his-master Prince over (as well as a violation ticket for a sizeable fine), that his father would hit his dog even worse than last time.

But he did not hit Prince. Instead, he carried him into the garage, unspooled a length of the thick, heavy chain he used to tread the tractor tires in winter, and attached it to the dog's collar. Then he hammered a piece of steel drain pipe a good two feet into the ground where the old steak had been and clipped the other end of the chain to it. He also took Prince's house away. When Ralph's father turned his back on the dog, Prince jumped at him. It had been innocent enough, but the dog's claws still tore his father's flannel shirt and knocked him to his knees in the shit mud.

In a flash Ralph's father was up again. He swung the hammer as hard as he could at the dog, but Prince was nimble and pranced backwards out of range in time, side stepping the blow. After this show of aggression, the dog bent low, bared its teeth and growled. Though he was technically still a puppy, Prince was a big dog now, capable of inflicting injury, and he knew it. Ralph's father stood with the hammer held high for several seconds before seeming to realize this himself, then lowered the tool and walked back to the house.

"Next time it gets loose, the Pound is keeping him," his father said ominously that night over dinner, "and *you'll* pay the damages."

Ralph answered a glum, "Yes sir," and picked at his mashed potatoes.

Later, as he did the dishes, Ralph watched Prince through the window over the sink which looked out onto the back yard as the dog nosed around in the muck for food scraps, pacing and sniffing until the weight of the big chain seemed to become

too heavy, at which point he gave up searching and laid down in the spot where his house had once been with his head on his forepaws. It rained hard that evening and long into the night. Ralph, cozy and warm in his bed, lay there listening to the storm thrashing the house while feeling sorry for Prince who, if he had it his way, would be lying right beside him, cozy and warm as well.

The next morning Ralph woke up early to go check on his dog. He put a scoop of food in one of his mother's glass mixing bowls (the dog's original bowl had by now been chewed beyond usable bowl form), and even added a slice of the previous night's roast beef on top and went out into the backyard.

It was another sunny summer day. The grass was still saturated heavily from the storm, as was Prince. The dog sat near the base of the weeping willow with his face half hidden under one leg, drenched and shivering miserably. Ralph felt a pang of guilt when he noticed that the silver water bowl had been turned upside down and thus, hadn't caught any rainwater. The dog didn't move as Ralph approached, didn't bark or whimper, only eyed him silently as Ralph crossed the shit ring with the bowl.

"Here boy," Ralph said, picking up the slice of roast beef and dangling it before the dog. "A nice treat just for vou."

Prince glanced up at the meat, but still did not move. Ralph set the meat back in the bowl and inched closer. Prince immediately began to growl and Ralph stopped at once, sensing Threat, and that something had Changed. His brain said run, but before he could the dog lunged. Ralph felt something akin to being punched in the arm with a steel rake as his mother's glass mixing bowl fly from his hand, the food scattering in the air like clods of dirt kicked up by an exploded grenade. And then he was running for the house, clutching his gushing arm tightly against his chest as Prince barked and snapped behind him.

The bite was bad. It bled all the way to the hospital, and needed several stitches as well as the recommended tetanus and rabies shots. It all hurt, but the pain was nothing compared to the fear he felt for his dog when Ralph's father found out what Prince had done. Later that night when Ralph's mother told him, his father's face had gone that angry shade of red, but again, he didn't beat Prince. He went to the window and looked out at the dog, cowering under the willow tree, and said softly through set teeth: "You're not to feed that dog anymore, Ralph."

Prince seemed to understand his transgression, and was silent for the rest of the day. But then at dusk, he began to bark. At first it was a slow, steady cadence, every few seconds. But as the hours and subsequent days wore on, it became constant and more frantic. Ralph's father turned the TV volume all the way up in an attempt to drown out the racket; his mother set down her needlepoint every few minutes and rubbed her temples. Ralph played with his miniature cars, simulating collisions and explosions louder and louder

This went on for a week.

Ralph was astounded at the dog's stamina, especially as he knew Prince hadn't

eaten or drank anything since the previous Saturday before the trip to the ER. *Maybe he lapped up puddle water*, Ralph supposed. Then he considered the quality of the water pooled in the paw stamped pockets in the muck around Prince's area and thought probably not.

He'd looked out at his dog more often as the days wore on. Immediately after the incident he'd been angry and frightened of Prince. But now when he considered it, he decided that the dog had just been afraid and was trying to defend itself. And didn't it have every right to? Wasn't it in its nature to do what it had to in order to survive, just like people? Several times he thought about sneaking food out to Prince. But what if he got bit again? What would his father do then? Ralph guessed it would involve the shotgun hanging over the workbench in the garage.

On the morning of the seventh day, Ralph could stand it no longer and asked his father if he could feed Prince. His father, sipping a Sunday cup of coffee and reading the paper, glanced out the window at the dog—now lying on its side in the mud yet still managing to let out an occasional series of pathetic shrill barks—then shook his head as he looked down at his paper again. Ralph noticed a smile in one corner of his father's mouth.

By that evening Ralph just wanted it to stop, and wished that his dog would die; die not only so that it wouldn't suffer any longer, but also so that it would *stop barking*. As he lay in bed that night, trying to block out Prince's incessant woof (a sound, he supposed, would be imprinted in his mind for the rest of his life), his mind seemed to be playing tricks on him. He knew it was crazy, but he began to think the dog was calling to him; each bark sounded less like *ruff ruff* and more like *Ralph*, *Ralph*. But soon even these faded. The barking weakened to a dry yelp, then a low miserable yowl as Ralph slept, and finally—silence.

Prince was dead in the morning. Ralph supposed his father would bury the dog, but instead he let the body lay there for three days under a full August sun like some macabre science experiment. Then on the morning of the fourth day, Ralph woke to his father standing in his room.

"Time to go clean up your dog," he said. Ralph noticed his father seemed a little disappointed. He supposed it was his mother's insistence that he remove the corpse which was finally making him act. If it was up to his father, Ralph thought grimly, the dog would probably have lain there until it was nothing but bones. He didn't want Prince to be dead, and he certainly did not want to handle the putrefying carcass. He knew that if his mother had been back from her morning shopping, she wouldn't let Ralph's father make him help bury the dog. But then he, Ralph, was the master, wasn't he? It was *his* responsibility.

With a heavy heart, Ralph got up, dressed, and crossed the hall to the bathroom. As he brushed his teeth, he noted how dreadfully silent the house was now. He didn't realize how accustomed to the sound of Prince's barking he'd become, and since it had stopped, he'd felt relieved but also strangely sad. He spat white froth into the sink, rinsed his mouth and tossed his toothbrush into the communal cup

along with his mother's and father's and then sulked down the hall. He thought his father would already be outside gathering the shovel and black heavy-duty lawn and leaf bag. But instead he was standing in the middle of the kitchen with his arms crossed over his chest, looking out the window at the backyard, face very pale, eyes wide, his mouth a narrow gap like a crack in parched ground. Ralph came up beside him and looked out the window too.

For the last few days, Prince had been in this position: lying with his black and white face in the mud, ribs showing through his skin, the heavy duty chain draped across his body like a huge victorious snake. But Prince wasn't lying down now. He was *standing* in the center of the small patch of remaining grass under the weeping willow where his house had been, ringed by the moat of shit mud. One side of him was coated in the mud which had dried to dirt on his scrawny flanks, the fur greasy with putrefaction, sticking up off his hide in all directions like splintered wood, the other furless and black like a rotten plum from where the blood had settled on one side. His head was lowered, though not due to the weight of the chain. Horrified, Ralph saw that Prince was no longer attached to the stake. His collar lay off to one side, still connected to the chain which was connected to the steel pole. Prince was free, yet he made no attempt to flee. He just stood there, staring at the house, through the window, staring at *Ralph*, and his eyes were hungry and his teeth were bared—not in a dog-like threatening way. Rather, Prince seemed to be grinning at him, and his eyes said *You did this to me*.

"I'm going outside, Ralph," his father said in his ominous way. "I want you to stay right here, and do not come out no matter what happens, do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir," Ralph said. His voice sounded small and embarrassingly baby-like to his own ears.

He watched his father walk through the house and out into the garage. A few moments later the door to the backyard opened and close, and then Ralph saw him stalking across the yard, the single barrel of his twelve gauge buck shooter pointed at the dog. Prince turned slowly from Ralph to the man, now only a couple yards off. His father cocked the gun and Ralph looked away, eyes pinched tightly.

But the shot never came, and when Ralph opened his eyes again, he saw his father lowering the gun and backing away, a look of unmitigated horror on his face. The dead dog was creeping towards him, the map of its skeleton plainly visible beneath its disintegrating coat. It stepped through the outer ring, and as soon as its paws touched the grass it lunged, knocking the man backwards and out of view. Ralph heard his father shriek, followed by a gurgled scream and then a sound like a chicken meat being ripped from a cooked carcass. There was a pause, then the squeak of the backdoor opening and the clack of long, blunt nails treading across the concrete garage floor and then finally, into the house.

Ralph ran, down the hall to his room and slammed the door. It bounced off the frame before the catch could latch, but Ralph didn't hear this. He was already hiding under the covers with urine running down his leg. The nails clicked across the kitchen linoleum, and then the hinges on his bedroom door creaked. White terror ran through him as he heard the Prince approach the bed. A white muzzle crusted with mud and glazed with blood, nosed its way under the covers, and then Prince's whole head slid under. Flies walked along the dog's filmy, unblinking eyes as they fixed on the boy. It opened its mouth, the tongue extended like a worm, disgorging a wad of maggots along with a thick, yellowish drool that ran from its jaws like a slow running faucet and Ralph felt his bowels let go.

The dog sniffed the air, rife with the scent of the boy's feces and soft, sweet flesh. It was a simple arrangement, agreed upon millennia ago between man and canine. Prince knew his own duties, as well as his master's. And his master had failed.

So Prince ate.





The Prepared Piano

It stood an elephant of bogus weal, a cliché, I thought, a hulking carcass of dysphonic times forsaken en masse to dusty webs and dark entrails of steel, whose faded skin appeared to now conceal the mark of rings (beneath the years of frass) that mother's grotesque pride and collins glass had laid on heavy bones each day with zeal.



Gnat

by daniel marrone

It's kinda like that feeling you get when you're in a nightmare and you scream but no noise comes out, ya know? That's how I feel right now. Frustration. The little fucking gnat that keeps flying into me, landing in my mouth or on my arms or in my hair. Hell, why am I telling you? You're just a shadow, a gust of wind, a gnat buzzing around my face and dancing on my eyeballs; you're there, but you might as well not be. I'm just bitching to water droplets in an ocean.

I button up my flannel to hide my skeletal frame from sight and I turn my attention back to the worn out acoustic guitar in my hands and the notepad and pen on my lap. I'm sitting cross-legged on the floor of my apartment. It's a very cold floor, hard wood. My feet are frozen and numb. It hurts a lot when I curl my toes in. It's wintertime, early December. The building I live in doesn't have heating. Only those Empyrean Point apartment buildings up the street have heating. The ones with clean rooms that have wallpaper that doesn't peel and tenants that don't scream and howl at the moon when they're out of money and their Smack gauge is on "Empty." I always wanted one of those apartments. Not because I want to live a luxurious lifestyle, I just want to hold something physical to say, "My art, the product of my thoughts and emotions, have earned me this key." I know that sounds stupid. Why do I care what you think? You'll just keep buzzing around my

hair and landing on my face.

I strum a few chords, they sound pleasant. It's a melancholy sound, as if Sad met Happy one rainy afternoon day and eloped into a tragic romance. I scribble the words "tragic romance" on the empty sheet of notebook paper. I put the pen down and play the progression again. I look at the guitar, then back at the paper. Tragic romance? I tear the paper out and crumple it up into a ball. I throw it across the room and it bounces a little bit and slides underneath my couch. It's a small couch, big enough for two people and maybe a small child if you make them sit on the armrest. I turn my head and stare at the broken TV on the tabletop parallel to the couch. I think about those Empyrean Point apartments down the street again, about how I want to sit down on a cushy leather sofa and turn on the TV and let it tell me how to feel, when to laugh and when to cry. I want to be just like you. I (try to) write about how much I hate that, but I love it. I don't like this cage of an apartment. There are no distractions, ya know? There's only me and my brain, and I'm not sure who scares me more. I hear a faded out, distant yelling: the familiar language of a junkie's gibberish. Everyone needs distractions.

Images of myself as a smiling child float through my mind. I used to sit with a guitar strapped across my shoulder and I'd write songs about love and hate and life and death, and I knew nothing of those things, but I wrote with such assuredness. I throw my guitar angrily off my lap and it lands with an echoing thud in front of the couch. I pick up the notebook and repeatedly slam it into the floor as if bashing in someone's skull. I throw the notebook on top of the guitar. Veins pop out of my neck and my mouth is wide open, a guttural screech clawing its way up and out of my throat, but its stuck. Agonizing frustration. I'm in that nightmare again. Can't scream, can't breathe. Chest hurts. Tears are in my eyes but I wipe them away with my shirtsleeve.

Three consecutive bangs come from the apartment below me and my floor vibrates. "Shut the fuck up!" A muffled voice yells up at me.

I laid on the couch and stare at the vacant television screen. I can see my reflection as if it were a scheduled program, the cameras pointing at a miserable failure, staring vacuously with their lenses. There's no empathy in a lens. The viewers would just change the channel, swatting me away like a gnat hovering just outside of their ear. The elderly would feel ashamed that *this* was the face of the new generation. The adults would turn to their children and explain to them that I was what happened if you didn't pursue a career that promised an abundant salary. And all of them would surf through the river of channels looking for what they want to hear: a romantic story where two of Hollywood's most attractive employees pretend to find love despite adversity? How about a nice human-interest story about a soldier successfully adapting to life without his limbs? Or a news report about a small town in Delaware that is having their yearly parade and the streets are filled with happy families and strollers and children eating ice cream cones that melt and run down the length of their arm like a chocolate vein. Anything with a nice happy ending, ya know? People like that. People prefer their distractions to

have a sense of closure. It's the only time they'll ever feel a sensation like that.

I bet they get to watch a lot of TV at Empyrean Point. The kids come home from school and sit down at the beautifully carved wooden table and do their homework as mom begins preparing dinner and the kids laugh about what their teachers said and their friends who got in trouble. The TV is blaring in the background and dad comes home in a couple hours and they all sit at the table together as it gets dark outside and they all talk about how their days were and laugh about the funny things that happened. The kids go off to their rooms for bedtime and mom and dad read them fairytales with nice happy endings and when they are asleep mom and dad pour some wine and smoke a cigarette and turn on the TV so they can have something to talk about when they see their coworkers and friends the next day.

I stare at the guitar and notebook on the floor in front of me but decide against picking them up. My creative reservoir is empty and dry as a desert. Was it ever full? I know there are pages in that notebook filled with half-finished songs and a couple riffs and lyrics that are worth a few cents, but nothing that would get me out of this apartment. Nothing that anyone would listen to as they sit in their cubicles and talk about their favorite TV shows and their kid who just graduated second grade and how the weather is pretty dreadful, looks like rain, doesn't it? Expectations are a bitch, but I don't know what is worse: expectations or reality. Frustration seems to be the child of both, and desperation the grandchild. There goes that gnat again, bumping into my skin, flying away, and then hitting me again. It just never seems to go away. Sometimes it flies away, distracted by some other enticing scent or body (was there ever another body in this apartment?), and just when I would relax myself and reassure myself that it was gone forever, there it would be, only it would hit into my eyes or nose or ears or mouth instead.

I pick up a book off of the towering pile of paperbacks on the coffee table next to the armrest. I read a few lines. I try the next sentence but my brain keeps wandering off halfway through. Why can't I create art like this? Why can't I express myself? There's that nightmarish feeling: can't scream. How can I continue to live my life through others' words? Why reach those two terminal words, "The End."? My eyes fill with tears and the book slips out of my hands and onto the floor and I try to wipe my tears away but they fall faster than I can catch them. My hands tremble and quake. I look down at the pen and an idea hits me. Through the tears that block my vision, I grab the pen and notebook. I turn to a clean page and start writing. I don't care if it rhymes, I don't care if it's beautiful. After scribbling a few lines on the paper, sporadically dotted with tears, I look at what I have written, and am so overcome with disgust that I rip the notebook in half, then in half again, then in half again. I throw the papers at the ceiling and watch them slowly break apart in the air and fall like snow onto the ground. I am sobbing.

The air is cold and my stomach growls. I am hungry and need something to eat. I wander around my apartment aimlessly, my mind consumed in torturous thought. The sun is gone outside, replaced by a dark blanket of emptiness suffocating the planet. It is hard to see where I'm walking but I don't care. I open the refrigerator

and there is only an apple with a single bite taken out of it sitting on an otherwise empty shelf. The part of the apple exposed by the bite mark is brown, rotted by the outside world. I take it out and eat the rest of it. The texture is too soft and the taste is too bitter to satisfy my hunger, though it did stop the growling, at least for now.

The tears on my face have evaporated and I need something to occupy my time. I forgot to pick up the newspaper this morning. I open the door to my apartment and find the paper on the ground at my feet. I pick it up and bring it inside.

Lying down on the couch, I open the paper. It's a local newspaper, so there's nothing of any importance. I pictured a man slaving over his desk, editing this paper and piecing it together. He probably went home to his empty apartment, slept in his empty bed, killing time and waiting to return to the bitter cold office. I skip over the opinion pages. On one of the last pages an article catches my eye. "Empyrean Point Tenant Shoots Self, Wife And Son Find Body." Empyrean.

I pick up the pieces of notebook paper scattered around the floor of my room and throw them out. I put my guitar back in its resting place in the corner of the room. I lay down on the couch and drift off to sleep. In my dreams I drive in a car past my home, past Empyrean, and find a nice new apartment building. It has great reviews and the rooms are very nice and clean. The tenants are friendly and the televisions have all the good channels, not the ones with shows about World War Two or the stock market. The couches are comfortable and the heating always works. I want to live there someday. I wake up and a gnat is buzzing around my ear. It is the morning.



THE NOONDAY DEMON

Like troops advancing on a distant plain, Whose loud mortar blasts and sudden march drain A soldier's heart. I seem to lose a mile Of sleep with each flash and thundering pile. Dreading the onslaught but cursing the heat, I count the surges by skipping a beat When two great hands like fists of angry air Begin to strike without warning or care. Their blows assemble insanity's shout, Rending my mind and brain to turn about, Raise my fist to High Command and yell: "I curse this fallen life, this life of hell!"



I'M NO CAPTAIN

I'm no captain you won't see me going down with this ship

I'm not one to run first into battle as death comes in swift

There's moments seconds on my mind that plague me for awhile

I cannot live outside of this current time I'm now stuck in every moment

and there's a realization a thought of where I'm to be the future set to hopelessness

I'm no captain and these passengers will sink this ship as I sit

on my e'er-do-well island on my chance for solitude on my new found understanding

I'm no captain I'm more akin to Nero as I watch this place burn

burdened by these misanthropic wants and needs only to be alone to read

-grim k. de evil



Looking at a mirror
Without a grain of light
Doubles but the darkness
And thickens drowning night.

Two gifts therefor I give you:
This lighter, and this glass
That you might spark a glimmer
To multiply, and pass

From blind gloom and the pity
Of the self, which shroud a soul.
When you can add a mirror
Or two, or ten—or more

And face with brave inspection You should begin to see An immanence of insight If not humility.

—james b. nicola

Shadows

I stared at my shadow today and saw the connection at our feet, and thought a shadow's like the mind, always darker than a reflection, which looks, when lit, like flesh. My shadow, though, will improvise: it scratches its head when I scratch mine, like reflections, but varying my theme, like an animated cartoon, or a dream. And my shadow developed as the day got long.

And as it became what it becomes, almost automatically, cast in a dark image of me, might I be a reflection or shadow of something that I can never know, or get to see?

With more than a modicum of awe I thought on this, then thought I saw my shadow reach, and scratch its head again

james b. nicola

The Punishment of Lily Chandler

by denise noe

Lily Chandler closed her eyes and still saw it: three gray walls and black bars. Sink with stains like bruises. A light bulb within a thick glass casing. A toilet without a lid. The cot she sat on and the thin blue blanket.

Slowly she walked around the tiny cell.

In the life Before, Lily had been complimented on how fast she moved. As a waitress at The Big Barbecue, the other ladies envied her because she got the most tips.

Occasionally Lily touched the wall, putting the palm of her plump hand flat against it. She made a game of it, picturing in her mind what every spot looked like while averting her head from it, then putting her hand on the wall. And got it right every time.

She'd won! Then she shivered. The palm of her hand was dark with dust.

She slumped down on her cot.

Footsteps. "Morning, Chandler," the guard said, as she unlocked Lily's cell, then placed the metal breakfast tray on the open toilet seat.

"Thank you," Lily replied, picking the tray up and carrying it to her cot.

"Welcome." Guard Maynard was a tall black woman in her mid-thirties with medium brown skin and almond-shaped eyes. Not friendly, of course, but not hostile. Bland.

Lily tried to catch Maynard's eye—do you think you're looking at a monster? Does it bother you to bring me a tray? Lily knew it bothered the other guards. But Maynard was only doing a job, like the prison doctors.

Maynard was new, at least to isolation. She'd only been around \dots Lily wasn't sure. Time was hard to keep track of.

She did know that she had been in prison for seventeen years.

The tray was rectangular with rounded edges. Bread, small carton of milk, a white plastic spoon, peas, meat. Methodically she scraped food up and put it in her mouth. Chew, swallow.

No possibility of parole.

She took the tray off her lap and placed it beside her on the cot.

"You're the prettiest girl I've ever been with," he said.

"No, I'm not," she replied. Lowering her eyes and blushing.

"Yes, you are," he insisted. "You're the prettiest girl I've ever seen."

Lily had had that conversation with every guy. Not just Duane.

She went to the toilet. Her cell permanently stank with the odor of piss and shit. She unloosed a long stream of urine. Straining, she pushed out a turd.

"Having fun?" Guard Collins taunted. Collins was a tall, auburn-haired white woman. Lily tore off tissue from the toilet roll, wiped herself front and back. She turned on the faucet as Collins opened up the door. Then Lily rubbed her fingers on the sliver of soap and let the water run over them.

"Hand the tray to me, bitch," the guard said. "I ain't bowing down to pick up something of yours. Hurry up, Chandler. I ain't got all day."

Lily held the tray out to Collins. "The stink's worse than shit in here," Collins said, then spat before she locked the cell door behind her.

Lily looked down at the spittle, watching the bubbles of it pop until it was just a tiny wet splotch.

Bending over, her face in her hands, she had a sudden spasm that was like crying in that she shook and hugged her knees but it was not crying because she did not make tears.

"What're you crying for, Chandler?" It was Collins.

Lily didn't say, "I'm not crying." She didn't look at Collins.

"Sad 'cause there ain't no little kiss to strangle? No rapes to watch? Life must be frustrating when all the fun's gone out of it." The cell door swung open and Collins entered, flinging some magazines on the floor. "Gotta bring you these," she said. "Don't expect you to like 'em much. None of the blood and guts pictures I bet you'd like, eh, Chandler?"

Collins left, giving the cell door a resounding slam.

Are you my woman, Lily? Cause if you are, you've got to be evil like me.

Daddy's mustache was "handlebar" because it was just like the handlebars on his bike. He only trusted Lily to wax it and make him the most handsome man in the world. Four-year-old fingers carefully applied the substance to the ends of the hairs, making them curl up just right.

In the living room of the little duplex, father and daughter turned to the mirror hanging above the worn greenish-plaid sofa.

"Perfect!" Dad pronounced it.

Lily smiled proudly despite an absent front tooth. The odors from the kitchen where Mom was cooking soup teased the child's belly, making her mouth water.

She saw five-year-old Shawn's reflection in the background. He was hugging Champ, their small long-haired dog. Lily stuck her tongue out at her brother. Swat! Dad smacked her soundly on the bottom and she burst into tears.

"Bawl-baby, Lily!" Shawn taunted. "Bawl-baby! Bawl-baby!"

Lily picked up a magazine. On the cover was a brightly smiling brunette with wide blue eyes, thick eyelashes (fake?), and an ivory complexion.

The articles on the cover: FIGHT THAT FAT in large yellow letters, below in smaller letters "An M.D.'s Easy New Diet," MOTHERHOOD AND CAREER in powder blue; below it, "How 10 Successful Women Combine Them;" WHY LOVE MEANS MORE TO WOMEN THAN TO MEN in black; nothing below it.

She opened the mag. Table of Contents on one page, an ad for blue jeans on the opposite page.

He'd liked her in jeans. He liked her best in cut-offs because they showed off the long slim legs he so admired.

Lily turned the pages. There was a doctor's column with a short item about treatments for some new venereal disease called herpes. Lily skimmed over it.

She put the magazine down on her blanket, leaving it open. Her head pounded. She wondered what it was like for him. Did he regret it?

You're the strongest man in the world, Duane.

Yes I am. Because I'm evil. Because nothing matters to me except what I want, Lily, nothing. Nothing at all.

Don't I matter?

I've made you a part of me.

That's what I want, Duane.

Lily thought Duane was so powerful that she imagined she could literally fade into him, getting trapped inside his pores.

Did he ever think of her? Probably not. She was a woman. Just a convenience. The most a woman could ever be for a man. LOVE MEANS MORE TO WOMEN THAN TO MEN.

Her breathing was heavy and labored. But at least she was breathing.

Sounds of slaps and cries and blows through the wall. In the darkness, Lily stared at the ceiling above her top bunk bed. Shawn was crying. He was a bawl-baby even though he was trying to hide it by putting his face against the pillow.

"Why does he do that to her?" Shawn asked, futilely trying to smother the sobs.

Lily had wondered that when she was a baby but now that she was a big kid, already in the second grade, she understood it. "Dad's a real man," Lily explained. "They all do that. It's nothing." Deep down, Lily sort of still didn't like hearing Dad hitting Mom but in another way she did—it was exciting like when another kid is getting a spanking but not you.

"If I were big, I'd hit Dad back," Shawn said.

"Well, you're not big and you probably never will be so shut up, Shawn."

"Shut up, Lily."

"Shut up, you."

There was a sharp scream from the other side of the wall and louder blows. Lily was smart so she knew Mom would be wearing dark glasses tomorrow because

grown women aren't like kids and it shows when they get punished because it goes on the eyes instead of their butts.

She went to the toilet again and took a piss. Sat on it longer than she needed to. When Lily was back on her cot she again thumbed through a magazine. Came to the article about mothers and careers. Mothers. She had taken their children from them.

Lily stared at the pictures. Smiling young moms with smiling little children. One of the children looked like—almost exactly like—the same large hazel eyes, the same round face, the grin with dimples (only the other child had been wearing braces on her teeth), the same brown hair (but the other's curled more).

Do you want a ride home, precious?

Yeah, thanks ma'am.

But this girl would grow up.

Women of Today fell to the floor. Lily's body shook as if electricity were running up and down it. Not her fault. His. He had killed them. She hadn't. Or at least she didn't want to. It wasn't her idea. She didn't want . . .

I can't do it. Duane.

Then you're not my woman anymore.

Duane, I'll do anything but—

I want to do this. If you are mine, you want what I want and nothing else. I want what I want and nothing else.

But I could get scared and screw it up.

You won't, Lily. You've got it inside of you.

How do you know?

Because you've had me inside of you. I'm in all of you all the time or you're not my woman. You don't have to be my woman.

But I do.

At Dad's funeral, Lily and Shawn were dressed in their best stiff clothes just like for Sunday School. The minister was at the front like at grown-up church talking about Dad but not telling the best things about him—that he had been a real man and the most handsome in the world that would only let Lily wax his mustache and no one else.

Mom's hand was on Lily's shoulder and Lily was crying into a Kleenex and then into another one because she couldn't stop crying and neither could Shawn and neither could Mom.

It was time to move now. Lily didn't understand at first but then she did and Mom took her and Shawn to the front where Dad was lying there in that wooden box.

"Say good-bye," Mom said as Lily stood by the coffin, looking at Dad's handsome silent unmoving face.

Suddenly, Lily knew: you breathe the life back in. She'd seen it on TV. Through the mouth like kissing you put the breath from yourself into them. Lily leaned over the coffin and put her mouth on Dad's.

"Lily, what are you doing?!" Mom screamed, pulling her daughter violently away.

"I got to breathe him alive again!" Lily explained. People in the church gasped but they didn't know, they just didn't *know*.

"Don't say things like that," Mom said.

Lily tried to get back to Dad to bring him alive again with her own breath but Mom caught her. Lily fought desperately as tears streamed down her already wet and swollen red face.

"You don't want him alive again!" Lily shouted above the crowd's baffled hum. "You don't want him alive again because you don't want him to hit you like he should!"

Mom slapped Lily across the face.

She drew her legs up to her chest and hugged them tightly. "Dear God, please help me. I hate him. I hate him so much." She spoke out loud. Long ago she had stopped caring whether or not anyone heard. Her tone varied from syllable to syllable, hoarse, then shrill; almost a scream, then a whisper.

She didn't believe in God though she "talked" to Him when she talked to herself. Believing in God would make it easier. Because then there would be help, someone who would forgive her. "Jesus loves you no matter what you do." And believing in God would mean believing that what she had done was not so terrible because those children were now in heaven with the angels and Jesus. But Lily knew better: they were *dead*. They were not alive in any sense.

She hated him. *Him*. Even his name, Duane Lop. Duane Lop and all his evil and meanness. His hate. Not hers.

Lily put her feet down on the floor.

Never hated?

No

Not when you heard them scream? Slapped them?

No. No hate.

When you shoved a scarf in a little girl's mouth and she choked? When you stood by as two girls were raped, a grown man shoving himself in them, ripping the tiny holes open with a penis like a knife?

No. No. She had not watched. She had looked away: at the posters on the walls, at the pretty milkmaid figurines. She had stared at the rust-red shag carpet.

But she had heard the sounds of struggling, grunting, choking. Then she had looked, but quickly, at a girl's body that was lifeless as a doll's.

Then she had looked at Duane.

I love you, he had said. His eyes could bore right through her, could see into her soul and grab it.

I love you, Duane.

Mur-der-er, he had said softly and sensuously, holding her like he could lovingly squeeze the life out of her, squeeze like a boa constrictor around her chest.

Murderer! She had shouted in incomprehensible joy as her fingernails dug into the flesh of his back.

Lily knew Champ would be dead as soon as she saw the big white car hit him. It sped away without even bothering to stop. She was on the sidewalk with Shawn and neighborhood kids Jill and Steve when it happened and she gasped but did not scream even as Shawn started sobbing so loud and embarrassingly, that dumb bawl-baby.

"Oh, no!" Steve shouted. "Your dog!"

The little group huddled around the small and furry bloodied corpse in the middle of the street, forcing passing cars to slow to crawls and drive around them in awkward curves.

"That bad man," Shawn said between sobs. "I hate him!" Shawn crouched beside Champ and grabbed his long hair in his fingers.

People, grown-ups and kids, were gathering on the sidewalks.

"I'm so proud of you, Lily," Mom said, escorting her children back to the sidewalk.

"Why?" Lily asked.

"You're not even crying," her mother told the calm nine-year-old. "So many girls would be. But you're so grown up."

"Oh," Lily said, thinking, that's right, of course. Lily weren't no bawl-baby.

Inside her chest, Lily felt something burning and stinging like a hive of bees. Everything Lily loved got taken away, everything.

But she was not crying.

She was not crying.

Lily heard the footsteps of two guards. Time for her once-a-day walk outside.

One of the guards was Maynard, the other was a tall, very dark black woman with acne scars on her cheeks and whose name Lily couldn't remember.

"All right," the scarred woman said. "Let's get going."

Lily got up and took her place between the two guards. The three walked down between the other cells.

The shouting from the other inmates started.

"Bitch baby-killer!" "Monster! Freak of nature!" "Should've given you and lover-boy the chair!" "Hell, no! Too good for 'em. Should've killed them like they killed those kids!" "If I ever get my hands on that scum she'll get what she deserves. I'll shove her ugly face in a toilet full of my shit and drown her in it!"

"Oooo . . . oohh . . . ahh . . ." This was a woman's imitation of a child crying. "Ooooooh . . . oooohh . . . "

The last sound was the most terrible. The name-calling she'd almost gotten used to but the sound like a kid crying—oh God in heaven, stop them, please stop them.

Stop please stop! Ma'am! Sir! I gotta go home! I gotta see my Mom and Dad! Please! Please!

Lily stared straight ahead and continued walking. The sounds followed her as they always did. But then, why shouldn't the other women hate her? No matter what they had done themselves, even if they were killers, too, they were also mothers. Why shouldn't they hate a woman who had offered other mothers' children a ride in a car, seemingly helpful, seemingly friendly, smiling at them and . . . Children trust women. Duane needed her because of that.

A locked gray door. Maynard opened it and Lily stepped into the office chamber.

The head guard was on duty, a buxom bespectacled older white woman.

"Number," the head guard said.

"8-7-G-3-5," Lily replied. She automatically pulled off her dress and dropped it on the floor, took her cotton panties off, slipped out of her laceless tennis shoes. Maynard examined her clothes. Lily moved her legs apart and a guard shoved a gloved finger up her vagina. Then she bent over so the woman could stick one up her rectum.

"O.K., Chandler," the scarred woman said.

Lily put her clothes back on. The guards escorted her out of the office and down the hallways.

They walked pass the key station. Enclosed in solid brick at the bottom half of it, thick glass with wire mesh through it on the top half. A balding male guard was within it. Phone lines and the elaborate electric security system. And a big brass key. The master key. *If that were in her hand* . . . Oh God, to see it and not be able to touch it.

Only forty-one. Still bleeding once a month. If she was out, she might still be able . . . to have a child. Of her own. She who had murdered children.

But—no possibility of parole.

They were out of the hallway and in an imitation of a backyard. A small rectangle of grass and shrubs and a cement bench.

The guards stood. Lily sat on the bench.

Grass. *Children like to play on grass*. She breathed deeply. Lily could not go insane no matter how much she wanted to. She could not stop remembering.

You're perfect for me. You're the only woman on earth for me.

How do you know? Her fingers grasped at his wavy springy dark curls as their mouths fused together, excitement rising. He was evil, pure evil, and she loved him so much.

Because you're mine, my puppet.

All yours, Duane. All yours!

She had bucked up and down so excited and so certain of his love, of having him completely forever. No one else ever could, she had thought joyfully as an orgasm shook every cell in her body.

Lily went over to the grass and sat down on it. One of the bushes had flowers blooming from it. A pale, delicate blue flower shaped like a trumpet.

"What kind . . . ?" She caught herself. She didn't want the guards to tell her.

Lily searched her memory. She stroked the flower lightly, lovingly. Suddenly she was certain.

She turned to the guards. The smile radiated out from her heart.

"It's a Morning-glory," Lily said. "Isn't it?"

"Oh, shit, what the hell should you care about what kind of flowers they are?" the scarred woman guard said.

"They're Morning-glories," Maynard confirmed in her machine-like voice.

Lily's throat tightened as she gazed at a single beautiful flower. None of them can see flowers. None of them can see anything.

"Time's up," Maynard said.

Lily stood up and took her place between the guards. They walked back to the office chamber.

"Number?" the head matron asked.

Lily answered. Then she took her clothes off again, was strip-searched again. Put them back on again. Oh God, no. Panic seized her; she broke out in a sweat. Afraid she might pee on herself like she had a few times. Having to walk down that hallway. Hear the other prisoners. God, please no.

"Straighten up, Chandler," the head matron ordered. "You're not the hunchback of Notre Dame."

It was only then that Lily realized how bent over she was. Her back was an arc. Facing straight down.

She straightened up. You deserve it. No business feeling sorry for yourself. Lily was alive.

Back in her cell. She sank onto her cot. I stink, she thought. Literally. She was only allowed to shower twice a week. The rough fabric stuck to her underarms and chest. It stinks worse than shit in here.

Lily picked up a magazine at random, letting the pages fall open. Models showing off different hairstyles. Trying to view them just as pictures, nice colors and pleasing forms.

Lily thought, I used to be as pretty as any of these women. Strange how every memory of that other time was edged in black. Self-pity. It was wrong. Showed how evil she was. Evil. She had once said that word like it was a compliment. Bitch babykiller! Kill them the same way they killed those kids!

These women were ordinary, beautiful, clean. She wondered if they would have fallen in love with Duane Lop . . . ? You can't help who you love. That's what her mother had said. Her girlfriends. All the songs.

"Hi, Chandler." Maynard.

"Hi." Lily hadn't heard her footsteps.

The cell door opened and Maynard came in with her dinner. Sat it on the toilet. Look at me talk to me tell me who you are and what you live like. Talk to me talk to me, oh please God.

Maynard turned around, left the cell, and locked it.

Lily closed her eyes. The enormity of it—three deaths. Three little children who had not grown up and would never grow old. Three families grieving. But this punishment was for only two. One had never been found. She and Duane had not been charged with her murder.

A few years ago, Lily had confessed to the third child's death so her parents would know for sure and they could find the body. There had been no trial for that murder; what would be the point?

She opened her eyes. Happened to look down at her doughy wrinkled arm and saw blisters raised across it. She must have been scratching herself without being aware of it. She remembered other arms flailing in desperation.

But worse than that—her hands grabbing those arms. Tying them cruelly. You're the only woman on earth for me.

Overcome with nausea, Lily fell to her knees and crawled to the toilet and pushed the tray off it. It clattered to the floor, the food making a mess. She lifted up the toilet seat. Just in time. She tore off some toilet paper to wipe her chin. Flushed the toilet. The odor of vomit was added to the other foul smells in the cell.

She sat on the floor by the toilet. Exhausted.

"Chandler." Maynard's irritated voice.

"Yeah."

The cell door swung open. "Just what is the meaning of this?"

Lily sat, mute. How strange. Maynard was talking to her like she was a child. "I just . . . I got sick. I had to throw up."

"Sorry, Chandler but you don't look to me like you need to go to the infirmary." Lily shrugged.

"Clean up this mess."

On her knees, Lily put the tray right side up, and started pulling the food back into it with her hands.

"I'll clean \dots I'm sorry \dots I \dots I Lily struggled to her feet with the tray and handed it to Maynard.

"There's still some left." The guard's voice was now without anger. Just stating a fact.

Lily tore off some toilet paper and knelt down again, scraping up the little bits and the milk that had leaked out.

She looked up at the guard.

"O.K., Chandler." Maynard turned and left.

She was alone again. Locked in and alone. She threw the food-dirtied tissue in the toilet. Flushed. Walked back to her cot, lay down, and waited for the light bulb to go out so she could get to sleep.

She didn't have that much trouble getting to sleep anymore. Almost as soon as the light was out she fell into that wonderful velvet mental quiet.

Lily woke when the light came back on. Felt the need to pee but stayed on the cot staring at the ceiling.

Her heart had not stopped during the night. She had not slid unconsciously and without fear into nothingness. She was still alive and sane. Still remembering.

So another day in the punishment of Lily Chandler begins.



Cheru's the allergic emperor among the trees on the earth. Its dark violet nuts are rich source of itching energy.

Though a single drop of sap — a hypocritical white in hue — could create an itching ecstasy, consequent crimson rashes frightened me with forebodings. Capsules complicated my condition. My body bloated like a python. My face transformed with an awkward look.

Itching – I spent an anxious year. Browsing – I read a remedy for deadly diseases in the same sap. Wounding and healing forces pass through the same channel. Whether it be destructive, or be constructive, we decide.

—fabiyas mv

(Cheru is a vernacular name for a tree belonging to marking nut tree family. Its sap is highly allergic, toxic, and causes severe itching and swelling. It is medicinal too for diseases like tumors.)

character driven

by a.w. gifford

"My life is a sham."

The man who said this sat directly across the U-shaped bar from me. Standing, he brushed his greasy black hair out of his eyes, grabbed his beer, and walked over.

I ignored him the best I could, that was until he sat on the stool next to me and placed his beer on my notepad. The condensation from the bottle left a wet ring on the page.

"Do you mind?" I gestured to the notepad. It wasn't like it mattered, the page was blank, a reflection of the current state of my imagination.

He leaned toward me. "Did you hear me?" He smelled terrible, a sickening combination of body odor, grease, and stale cigarettes. He didn't dress much better, black boots, blue jeans, a black T-shirt, and a black leather jacket. A man of little style. It was obvious that he'd seen too many bad movies, and pulled off the badass biker look poorly.

"I heard you," I said. "But if you don't mind, I'm busy. I have work to do." This wasn't far from the truth. I did have work to do, but the cruel mistress of writer's block had me in her clutches, and I had a deadline looming.

"You're not busy, and that's the problem." He took a quick chug of his beer. Some of the yellow liquid spilled down his stubble-covered chin.

"I'm very busy." I pulled my notebook toward me.

"By the look of that notebook, Jeff, you aren't busy at all."

"How did you know my name?"

"Jeff Morris, spinner of tales of suspense and the supernatural." He leaned back against the bar, propped his elbows on the granite top and took another chug of his beer. "Who doesn't know you?"

"I'm not that well known," I said. "Most people don't have a clue who I am."

"The important thing is that I know you, just as you know me, and we have to take care of some unfinished business."

"I don't know you," I said, though I did have a vague sense of recognition.

He stood up, held out his arms, and turned around. "Take a good look." He sat down and leaned forward, "Take a real good look."

"I don't—"

"You didn't make me all that memorable, I know. Used every cliché in the book, but here I am, in all of your unimaginative glory."

"I'm sorry, but I don't—"

"The name's Jack. Jack Smith. I'm guessing that deep down you wanted to name me Jack Shit, but you didn't have the balls to put that on paper."

Jack Smith. That name I did recognize. I started a story a little more than a year ago about a biker named Jack Smith, but this guy was just messing with me. There must be hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Jack Smiths in this country, if not this

"Granted," Jack began. "My name's not all that original, but then you've never been all that good at coming up with names for your characters."

"Give it a rest buddy. I have a lot of work to do. I don't have time for your games."

He slammed his fist on the bar. "I'm not the one playing games, Jeff. You sit there on your computer or your stupid little notepad creating people, and when you get a block or you just can't think where you want to take a story, you just cut them loose."

"I'm not God. I don't create people; I create characters." I finished off my drink. "I abandon stories all the time, every writer does. It's the nature of the business."

As I stood to leave, he grabbed my shirt. "You didn't abandon a story Jeff; you abandoned my story."

I pulled away. "Since you don't understand when I say that I'm busy, I'll use smaller words and say them slowly so you'll understand. Fuck. Off."

Jack grabbed my arm and I felt him press something into my side. "You don't remember giving me the Glock, do you? It's one of the last items you gave me before you decided that my life was no longer worth writing about."

"Let me go," I said. "I don't know who you are or what you want. I don't have a lot of money. I have no money, in fact, but I do know that you are not one of my characters. You're just a thief, or some junkie who broke into my apartment and read a few pages of an incomplete story."

"I didn't break into your apartment and I didn't read one of your goddamn stories." He turned his head to the left and pulled back his hair. The top quarter of his right ear was missing. "You know how I got this don't you?"

Impossible.

The wound to his ear was just as I had imagined it, all gnarled and chewed, but

I never put it on paper. "I have no idea how you got that wound. Looks like you've been in a bar fight."

"That's right, I was in a bar fight. Some asshole bit the top part of my ear off. You thought of that."

He pulled me closer, his breath smelled like week-old garbage, and I nearly vomited.

"You are my creator, Jeff. My god. You put me here. A biker with no bike, and nowhere to go."

I tried to pull away, but his grip was strong.

"Now," he said. "We're going to your apartment and you're going to finish my story. You're going to give me the life I deserve."

"I can't. I don't know where the story was going. That's why I stopped."

"You will, or I'll kill you."

Yelling probably wouldn't get me anywhere. I didn't see the bartender and at three in the afternoon, the bar was empty.

As if he could read my mind he said, "Don't scream, or I'll kill you right here." I tried to rationalize with him. "If you kill me, then you won't exist."

"That's all right with me. I don't exist much anyway." He jabbed my side with the gun. "Move."

Jack pushed me out onto the sidewalk and I bumped into and nearly knocked over an attractive blonde woman in sleek business attire. "Sorry," I said as I reached out to steady her and myself.

"Asshole," she replied and walked away.

People scurried along the sidewalk, not unlike a colony of ants, all with places to be and problems of their own. None cared for, nor noticed the writer with the armed biker by his side.

Less than five minutes later, I was stumbling up the three flights of stairs to my apartment. As I was fumbling with my keys, I began to wonder if I could change all this by just thinking about it. He did have the missing ear...

Jack hit me in the head with the butt of the gun—hard enough for me to see stars, but not hard enough to knock me out.

I stumbled into the door and rubbed the back of my head. "What did you do that for?"

"I know what you were thinking. Remember, you created me. I know what you know and what you're thinking."

I opened the door and he pushed me inside.

He checked the hall. Satisfied, he followed me inside, gun pointed in my face. "Now write."

"I can't just sit down and write."

"You can and you will," Jack said. "Now sit." He motioned with the gun to my computer, never really taking the gun off me.

"Can I get a drink first?"

"No. Sit."

"What if I refuse?"

A shot winged past my left thigh, ripping the denim of my jeans and logged itself in the base of my computer desk.

"I missed," he said. No expression crossed his face.

It was obvious that he didn't care about alerting the neighbors with a gunshot, that's if they were home or even cared.

This charade had gone on long enough. I didn't care if he shot me.

Calling his bluff, I stood there, trying to show no fear. "Go ahead, shoot me. How is that going to solve your problems? You kill me; you'll be doing me a favor. You think I like living in this shithole apartment, eating Ramen, and barely scraping by?"

I didn't hear the gun, but instead I felt a burning pain as my left knee exploded in a shower of blood and bone. This time he didn't miss.

I screamed in agony and collapsed to the floor. He pulled me up and plopped me into my desk chair.

"Now write!"

"I can't," I sobbed. "My knee. I have to go to the hospital. I'll bleed to death."

After Jack turned on my computer, he took off his belt and wrapped it around my upper thigh. When he tightened it down, I thought my leg would pop right off. I felt ready to pass out.

"Write. Or I swear I'll blow your fucking head off." He jammed the gun against my right temple.

"I don't care," I tried to say. But all that came out between the sobs were a few feeble grunts.

"Bring up my story."

I just sat there.

He hit me with the gun again and this time I do believe that I passed out, but not for very long. He was still behind me when I came around, still screaming for me to write. But how could I write with this lunatic behind me, shooting me, and beating me with a gun?

The blank computer screen mocked me just as the blank page of my notebook mocked me, but this time I had a blinking curser, reminding me of my incompetence.

Pulling myself together, I placed my hands on the keyboard. I didn't think about what came next; it sort of just happened.

"About damn time," Jack said, but I don't think he was ready for what I wrote.

They were the first words I'd written in more than three months. They were just four words, five syllables, but they were the most important words I'd ever written.

Gun empty, Jack dies.

When Jack realized what I wrote he acted quickly. He raised the gun to my head and pulled the trigger.

Click!

He pulled the trigger again.

Click!

"The gun's empty," I said. "Can't you read?"

He smiled. "It also says Jack dies."

"So it does."

I keep a letter opener on my writing desk and I was glad Jack was standing close. A letter opener isn't much of a weapon.

I moved as quickly as I could. Seizing the letter opener and using my good knee, I swiveled the chair around and plunged it into Jack's neck.

He screamed and on reflex pulled the blade out. Clamping a hand to his neck, he tried to stem the flow of blood.

At the same time, he brought the letter opener down on me. The blade glanced off the side of my head as I moved out of the way, but it caught the bottom part of my ear, ripped it off, and plunged into my shoulder.

Jack tried to pull the blade out, but he must not have had the strength. He let go, stumbled back, and collapsed to the floor.

Climbing back into the chair, the letter opener still sticking out of my shoulder, I tried to write that my little encounter with Jack Smith never happened, that my knee was fine and that I was back in the bar having a few drinks. I wouldn't say it was easy, but I knew I had to try. As I typed, nothing happened. Writing doesn't always work the way we want.

I didn't have too much trouble explaining to the police what happened. I just told them the truth, leaving out the part about Jack Smith being a character from one of my stories.

I spent two weeks in the hospital, had reconstructive surgery on my knee, and received one hundred and forty-seven stitches to close the wounds on my scalp, ear, and shoulder. The doctors all said I was lucky to be alive, that a few millimeters either way . . . but don't they always say that?

Since my encounter with Jack, I've been writing every day. In a way, I have him to thank for getting me out of my slump.

I'm taking no chances. I printed out the page with the four words, framed it and now it hangs on the wall next to my computer. I also have a copy of that page in a safe deposit box so I'll never lose it.

Jack Smith is gone, and I want to keep him gone forever.



Remember my wedding? How scared, how white I was. But even then I knew the kind of husband he'd turn into. Which he did. I take no satisfaction being right in my prediction. I would not have minded had he surprised me and turned instead

into a charming prince. However, Prince Charming appears, in fairy tales, only when young and single, looking for a wife, and never as a husband. Ever since that day, he's been—No, enough about me. Tell me about you. How is your love life?

Wow. Any prospects in particular? What, you don't want to ...? Oh, I guess I'm not surprised. What about when your youth is gone, though? Pension?! What's that? Goodness. My, how far you've come. I see. But no, I'd never thought the duckling should be gayer than the swan.

—james b. nicola

BABY DOLL

by alexis henderson

The day my sister gave birth to her fourth child I cried in a rest stop bathroom for two hours with a can of squeeze cheese, a sheathe of stale crackers, and several copies of *Vogue* magazine. I was sick twice.

I remember sitting there in the slit between the sink and toilet, clutching my knees to my chest and listening to the rattle of air conditioning and thinking about my first husband (dead) and my second (departed) and wondering if my being barren had anything to do with them and me and the ends of all the things I'd started. I also wondered if I'd put enough food down for my cats, and the condition of the waterlogged cacti I kept in pots on the back porch. It rained hard that day and I worried they might be drowning.

I drove home like a drunk, hiccupping and making a mess of myself, weaving between lanes, forgetting to brake at stop signs, forgetting to yield. I kept the radio on loud, some folk station, screaming banjos and harsh percussion. Mourning music.

Halfway home my phone rang—my sister Margaret, asking after me. "Nathan said you left, in a hurry. A little bit after the baby was born."

I licked my lips, listened to the drawl of the man on the radio, the twang of the banjo. He sang of redemption, the redeemed and the forgiven. The clean.

"I'm sick," I told her. "Desperately ill. Food poisoning, I think. It's that hospital food, in the cafeteria, they keep it out too long. It's no wonder everyone is sick."

I passed a dead deer on the side of the road, belly up with its legs at stiff ankles, like something you'd see in a taxidermy shop.

"You can't keep on like this," she said, in a small child's voice. "You'll kill yourself trying to keep face. You know you will."

There was a long silence on the line.

I told her I had to go.

I made it home in the early hours, watched a few hours of infomercials while the sun crept up above the treetops. I am the sleepless sort, you see.

I found her on one of those shopping channels that pander to bored housewives and lonely singles with insomnia, selling cheap diamonds on easy payments,

knotted rugs, designer bags and shiny doo-dads like instant margarita makers and light-up alarm clocks that flash you awake in the morning.

One of the hosts was cradling her, real close to her breast like she expected her to open her mouth and latch then and there. She was a pretty, fleshy silicon with alpaca hair rooted into her head (Irish red) and a battery-powered heart that thrummed in her chest, one-hundred and thirty-five beats per minute, standard for a newborn. She was nineteen inches, eight pounds, and four hundred and fifty-two dollars, shipping included.

I bought her on credit. I decided to call her Alice.

She arrived in a cardboard box two weeks later, packaged in plastic with popcorn pieces all around her, a blanket folded beneath her head, a ribbon around her neck. She smelled of plastic and baby powder.

I took her out, held her too me, pulled back the rubbery flaps of her eyelids to see the blue of her irises, black pupils swelled from all the time spent in darkness. She was prettier than my sister's baby. Much prettier. Her mouth was firm and full, cheeks flushed rose red the way that baby cheeks are supposed to be. She had the weight of a real baby, the look of one, and when you put your fingers to her chest you could feel her heart beating, mechanical. Incessant.

A few days later I took Alice out for a walk. Bundled up in scarves and blankets, in a stroller I bought from a baby shop downtown. The front wheels rattled over cracks in the pavement, and the wind blew through the trees hard. The pre-winter bite was in the air, the coldness that comes in the form of frost and streamline winds before the winter bursts into being with the first of the snowstorms.

Kids played on the steel skeletons of the playground, swung from the monkey bars with their feet dangling high off the ground. They laughed and giggled and chased each other, tripping over loose shoelaces and ruts in the pavement. No parents with them. Only a few years off Alice's age and already alone.

I walked on. Past the duck ponds, beneath the naked canopy of oak trees past people with their dogs on leashes, cyclists and pigeon flocks, lovers striding side-by-side, hand-in-hand. Alice observed all of this with glassy ambivalence, her hands balled in her mittens, unblinking. She looked as though she were in another place, somewhere far off where I couldn't reach her. Sullen and silent and entirely away.

Alice fell ill a few days later, the cold was too much for her, I think. Her hair fell in tufts around her shoulders, her skin went cold. She would not sleep, in the night or the day. She would lie swaddled on the couch beside me, staring at the ceiling with her mouth closed and her little hands fisted, always fisted. I never saw her fingers unfurled.

I paced around the house with her, watched infomercials on TV in the early morning, patting her back and cooing in her ear. She would not rest. She would not sleep. She would not take milk, warm or cold. She never blinked, never wept. Through the night, night after night, she would lay awake and I with her because

that is what mothers do.

They stay. They remain. No respite for them. No rest.

I had another child before Alice. A cold stillborn I birthed on the bathroom floor in the dead of night, half asleep and screaming. I was alone when it happened; my husband was off with his other woman, only I didn't know that at the time. I named him Isaac Joel. He was a beautiful little boy.

A little after we buried him, my husband and I took a vacation down to this tiny resort town in Florida. My therapist thought the roar of the waves would be good for me. Something about synthesis, white noise, static. "It will help you overcome yourself," she said, as though that's what I needed to do, all that I needed to do.

I remember one night, one of our last nights there. Wyatt and I were sitting on the terrace of the room we rented. He was drunk off white wine and I was smoking and a little ways down the beach a group of gulls warred over the spoiled remains of an abandoned picnic. Squabbling over stale crusts and shriveled slices of delimeat gone sour. Feathers falling.

"It's for the best," said my husband and he took my hand in mine, patted it the way a mother might. Chiding me. "You don't have the stomach for motherhood. You don't have the touch. To be a mother is to be a sacrifice. You're not selfless. You just can't give enough of yourself."

On my fifth day awake I shook her. It was 4:00 a.m., and my eyes were bloodshot, the TV was off and the lights were on and Alice lay with her eyes open, ever-open.

Her heart ticked in time to the crickets outside. The snow fell fast.

No rest for the weary. No respite.

Alice lay still as a corpse. Unflinching. Unmoving. Awake.

So I shook her.

I shook her violently. Shook her till her head snapped on its axis and her blankets fell away from her. Shook her till my arms ached.

She didn't blink.

When you're a little girl the world tells you what you want. A small suburban house that sits on a clipped lawn with roses in the front garden. You want a husband who goes to the city to work and comes home before the sun sets, drills you with no condom on while the kids sleep soundly. You want little girls and little boys to dress and bathe and send to school with kisses and packed lunches.

You want rooms filled with fine furniture, couches covered in crocheted throws, pillow topped mattresses, shelves crowded with picture books and family photos. You want a slobbering Labrador in the backyard. A Jacuzzi bath beneath a bay window, stainless steel appliances, wood floors throughout. A baby to bear. A kitchen to clean.

The angels of the house slept in the attic eaves. Nested in the pink fluff of insulation like fledglings, too shy to emerge. It was Alice who drew them, I think.

When the sun set they came down, through the space between walls, emerging from behind mirrors and out of closets, the damp dark of the basement. For a little while they'd stand idle in the living room, all six of them standing there with their hands clasped behind their backs like good little school girls. Barefoot. Wide-eyed. Black bows cinched around their waists. Plaid skirts on, the hems high above their knees.

They flocked to the nursery when darkness fell, hooked their fingers around the rungs in Alice's crib, rocked her sick, singing lullabies, giggling. They took her blankets, her binkies, her bears, wooden trains and teething toys, hid her things around the house--baby booties beneath the kitchen sink, bibs in the trash.

I once entered to find her ragdolls lying on the floor headless, stuffing all around the room. There was a bottle on the bedside table, filled with milk and bleach. Alice lay in the cradle prostrate. The little girls were gone.

The night my mother left she entered my room with a cigarette and an overstuffed duffle bag slung across her chest. She told me she was leaving, flying the coop, setting sale to the faraway lands the figments could not reach her. She was slurring that night, she talked so fast, spitting with the excitement of it all.

She wore a black dress with slits up the sides, a knit shawl caught in the crooks of her elbows. Her hair hung loose around her shoulders, tangled. Unkempt. Around her neck was a rosary. Blue beads. A wooden cross.

She sat down on the foot of my bed, kissed me between the eyes and whispered her good-byes. My sister Margaret lay on the mattress beside me, tense and taut as a tuning fork, her hands clutched in little fists, eyes shut so tight her lids wrinkled. Mother kissed her too and pulled the sheets up around her shoulders, heavy handed.

"I won't be here when you wake up," she said, and she pulled at her eyelashes, a habit of hers, an anxious compulsion. She was woman of no respite. Always picking at herself, worrying. If it wasn't her eyelashes it was her nails and if wasn't her nails it was her clothes and if wasn't her clothes it was Margaret or myself but never our father. Our father never had the patience for her. "I won't be here for some time. I have to go away for a little while."

"To the heaven?" I asked and she smiled at me. She smiled.

"Farther than that."

I took Alice away at night. Strapped her into the backseat in the evening while the sun set, just before the little girls emerged. I filled the tank with gas and took to the highway, drove for hours with the music on loud and the windows down. Alice lying open-eyed in the back seat. Indolent.

I popped pills to stay awake. Caffeine capsules downed with swallows of cold coffee and Mountain Dew. The occasional Adderall to keep me lucid. When the pills weren't enough I'd pull off at rest stops. Sit on the benches by the vending machines, under the streetlights or the sprawling oak trees, near the sleeping semis.

I'd hold Alice in my lap, bundled up with mittens on, and together we'd listen to the goings on of the midnight hours. The drone of the passing traffic. Windblown leaves rasping across the concrete. Crows calling too early.

The night I killed her the little girls came down from the attic early and gathered in the living room. They stood hand and hand and stared at me. Their eyes like Alice's eyes. Glassy. Unblinking. Insistent.

I stood up. Left the bedroom with a silk robe on, shivering though it was warm inside. Alice was in the nursery with her eyes fixed on the ceiling as though there were stars up there. She lay swaddled to the far corner of the crib. She did not look at me.

I lifted her. Coddled her. Put my lips to her lips. Pleaded. My hands shook when I cupped her head and the little girls gathered in the hallway and there was no noise but my breaths and my heart beating, and Alice's clicking. Clicking like a little clock.

I squeezed. I put my hands around her throat and I squeezed.

She did not blink. She did not blink.

So I pulled her hair till the tufts freed themselves from her head. Then I pulled her head till it freed itself from her shoulders and she hung suspended, wires and cords and cables and sinews.

No blood. No blood.

She did not blink.

I thrashed her. I threw her. I fit my fingers into her sockets until her eyes popped out, rested in my hand like little candies. I tossed them. I tore her clothes. I tugged her limbs loose.

The little girls looked on from the hallway.

Alice did not scream.

I carried her corpse to the hospital on foot. The swinging head. The torn limbs. The glassy eyes and heart that did not beat.

I walked for miles with her and the little girls followed me. Singing dirges above the passing traffic. Walking the streets on bare feet. A funeral procession.

I made it to the hospital in the early hours. As dawn broke and tinged the clouds pink. The little girls remained, waiting in the parking lot, between cars and behind park benches. Lurking. Humming lullabies. The songs of sleep.

The glass doors slit open.

I crossed the room, put the corpse on the front desk for the receptionist to see. I wanted her to see her. Everyone to see her. The beautiful body. My baby. My baby.

She looked at Alice. She looked at me.

She gave me a pen and clipboard.

She did not blink.





On the glistening ice, a young girl in gleaming satin swivels and spins. spirals descending from her hips like invisible hula hoops. It's the perfect harmony of youth and limbs and beauty and blade.

Then suddenly a great hand bursts through the ice, grabs her ankle, drags her down into the depths below.

But even after she's gone, and the surface refreezes, 1 can still imagine the arc of her slender body, the poise of her throat, the pleats of pink dress like an out of season bloom cutting winter to the quick.

On one dazzling loop, she skirts by me, pauses in mid-turn, bounds across the ages with an expression that will some day be desire for someone, but for now. mouths a panicked "Do something! Help me!"

—john grey

KNOWING

by robin c. jones

My life is crap. The texture changes. The color spins from tan to black. Its odoriferous nature moves from gagging to merely revolting, but at its core, it is all excrement. All day, every day, year after year, until today. Today I'm doing something about it.

I wake up in the tub with my clothes on. The water is running, spilling over the edge. It must have been running awhile; its heat is gone. I have no idea how long I've been soaking. Hours, days, forever maybe. I couldn't say. Water's got to be everywhere. Bill's going to be pissed.

I pull out of the tub like a boot out of mud, like a fly out of sap, like a sinking ship bobbing up one last time. I don't dry off. My clothes aren't nearly as wet as I expected. I walk down the hall to inspect the damage. The flood that should be lapping into every room and out the doors isn't a flood at all. The floor isn't even wet. *Must not have been in the tub as long as I thought*.

Crap, I didn't turn off the water. I sludge back to the bathroom. I must be losing my mind; the water is off. Of course, it is. Not even Mr. Life-Is-Crap himself would forget to turn off an overflowing faucet.

I head to my room and fall on the bed, wet clothes and all. I stare at the ceiling

and lay there thinking. I think a lot. I think a lot about why I'm here, why we're all here. I think about purpose. I hope, against my own example, that there is one. If there isn't why am I still wasting time trying to find it?

There is only one real hope still plodding around in my head anymore. That hope: When I leave this world I will be enlightened. The Great and Almighty will stoop down and tell me, one of His millions of billions, what it all means; the pain, the suffering, the unending unfairness of the universe. All of it. If the Great and Almighty isn't there my next hope is to find the Void. Then in a blink I no longer take up space in the universe.

The thought of God is comforting and scary at the same time. I've mostly tried to do what is right, but reason demands I have no hope of attaining heaven by simply being good enough. A model human I am not. If I get past those pearly gates it will only be because a merciful Being allowed it. If the said Being is keeping score . . . well, I am already in the shite, aren't I?

The thought that there is no God offers no comfort at all and is just as scary. If every bit of suffering is wasted in waves of meaninglessness, how ridiculous it is that we to try and live through it at all. The void of oblivion is a more comforting idea than Hell, but not by much. In the core of the soul, which I may or may not have, I want purpose, a reason, some justification for why . . . there has to be more. There just has to be.

I think until my mind is too heavy to conjugate the unknowable. I get up, still damp, not wet, but damp. Maybe Bill's home. We are BFF's and all, though we have a way of grinding on each other. That grind doesn't change our brother's heart, though we are good at keeping knees skinned.

He's not in his room, his perfect immaculate room. The place dust bunnies fear to tread. I think about playing one of his games, but it's not worth skinning more knees. He's not there, and I know he wants me out unless invited in. I humor him and leave.

I walk to the kitchen and look around. I'm not hungry. Open the fridge, looks dull, tame, and uninspiring. Move to the living room. I sit there. Think about reading a little King or McMurtry or something but don't. Too much effort, I guess.

I wish my clothes would just dry out. Damp sucks. Damp is limbo, without the dancing or the stick. I suppose I could change into something dry, but why? Frankly, I'm not up to it.

I'm forgetting something . . . something important . . . whatever it is.

I walk around the apartment again. It's a nice place, good dull colors, and clean walls. A truly boring bachelor pad. You'd think a couple singles like Bill and I would have a little spice, but it just ain't so. He has his girlfriends. I have child support. How could it be anyway else? After all: My life is crap.

Back to my room. Thinking, again. I wish my mind would go blank for an eternity or two. . . but no. My never sleeping thinker won't slow down. These damned, damp clothes are annoying. Still can't bother to change. Huh. My fingers are still all pruned and wrinkled.

Something is tickling the back of my head. Sitting on the tip of my brain.

Whatever it is it isn't a nice notion. It's no baby zit either. Not a little whitehead, pop, and all better, mom. It is the whole of the world weighed on my shoulders. When it pops another Hiroshima? IDK, but it won't be good.

Back in the kitchen, still not hungry. That's not like me. Must be more depressed than usual. Sit in the living room some more. Bill should be here by now. Wonder what's keeping him? He's a big boy, I guess. He'll get here when he shows.

I ought to call George, cuss philosophy with him for a while. Maybe our favorite: God. Why I believe, why he doesn't. I hate to admit how much sense he makes, at times. I've been adamant, and wrong, often enough I try to look at more than one side of a coin anymore.

I've gotten to the point that what I am most interested in is The Truth. Not the dogmatic truths of youth but the honest-to-God ones. If God is real, I want to know Him, but if He is not I want to live life as best as I can figure out how. Much as I love talking to George it takes a lot of energy defending my beliefs. It's too much effort, just more than I can muster right now.

I break in to Bill's room and do nothing except drip on his rug and skin a few new knees. Oh well, he's a big boy. He'll get over it, or he won't. Seems like he's got some new pictures since I last snuck in. A new girlfriend with a kid. Surprising. Bill's not a "with kids" kinda guy.

Still not hungry. All boring on the fridge front. The couch invites me to visit; I concede to its siren's call. I sit there, then lay there and think. I hear the slow occasional drip of my eternally damp pants. I look at the TV, but don't flip it on. Why listen to the heads tell me the what and wherefores of a day I just don't give a damned tinker about?

That little nudge—that all-is-not-as-I-think-it-is nudge—keeps pressing on my brain. I'm forgetting something, and it isn't butter on the grocery list. It is a memory, an important one, maybe the most important. Stupid brain, get a move on, get your inner Sherlock in gear.

Nope.

Nothing.

Once more around the ball. Still no Bill, still no call to George, still wasting the day away in damp clothes that I just can't be bothered to change. As I past the mirror in the hall I look at my simulacrum and do a double take. At the best of times I ain't pretty, but that fella looks rough, even for me. Looks like I spent the weekend soaking in the tub. Maybe I should, it might do some good. Look at that, my digits are still pruned up.

When was the last time I got out of the apartment? Yesterday, it must have been. I had to go to work . . . What was yesterday? Saturday? No, it was Fri . . . no, it was Saturday. Wasn't it? And not my weekend to work. Must have had it off. That seems too good to be true; they always call me in on my RDO's, always.

Can't think of what day it is. Oh, well. What did I have for breakfast then? Huh. No idea. How about supper last night? Don't I just wish I knew. I ate something. I didn't get this Rubenesquely petite by skipping meals.

No leftovers to clue me in. In fact, I've never seen the fridge so sparkling. Billy must of went nuts cleaning. What *did* I eat last night? Damn it. I should know. I shut the door and notice that kid's picture on the fridge. The same little girl as in Bill's room. I can't imagine him getting close enough to anyone to put her brat's pics up without letting his BFF know somewhere along the way. Maybe I've simply lost my mind and forgot when he spilled those beans.

Well, if I'm going to lose hold on all sanity I might as well do it with some orange juice. I open the fridge again. No juice. I know I made some. I know Bill didn't drink it, he hates the stuff. I search the fridge. Nothing. Crap. I pull the milk aside for one last look. Only I don't pull the milk aside. I can't. I make a fist around the handle but it's like I'm holding nothing. My fingers pass though the jug.

I look at my hand. It clicks. Oh, GOD NO, it clicks. This can't be how it works.

Maybe I'm wrong; maybe if I pinch myself I'll wake up. I pinch hard, harder, hardest. Skin comes away saddled between my finger and thumb. I didn't feel anything. I should be bleeding, not a drop. Not one drop. I should be crying at the pain, I ripped a piece of my own skin off. It should hurt. It's supposed to hurt. Damn it, why doesn't it hurt?

I get back in the tub. It isn't fair. It was foolproof, the meaning of life before me. That was the point. Get out of the poo and see God. Get out of the crap and become one with the void. Above all--just get out of my own excrement.

I sit in the tub. I sit in the tub thinking about an EVP I once heard. When asked about God, the ghost, in the saddest, woebegone voice I'd ever heard said, "no God."

I wish I knew.



A HISTORY OF WANT

What he wanted was all, that's all, as others had wanted before him. What she wanted was for the poem not to have started with What he wanted.

What he gave was all he could, or thought he could, that's all. What she gave was all she was, and more, and that wasn't all.

What he said was You can't give more than all you are or have.

What she said was That's the way it is with a poem that starts with What he wanted.

So what she did was to file papers and leave the poem to found her own. What he did was: act surprised. I think he really was surprised.

What she tried at first was to begin her new poem with What she wanted. What she got was what she wanted, which was to get what she gave.

But now they're discussing a new kind of poem
That won't start with What she wanted or What he wanted but something
else—

They're in consultation trying to figure out what—
And when they do, they're going to rewrite the history of everything.

And in the event that their trailblazing work
Remain unpublished forever,
You and I might read their draft,
Hold hands in their new-age way,
And with our free hands, take down the stars from the sky
One by one
And from their brilliance
Build a tower
To the moon—

Together-

If that's what you want.

—james b. nicola

My Cat Eyed Girl

My cat eyed girl stands by the bamboo thickets-

when a pair of water pots rest on the sugar sand -

her ear-rings shine like my soul in the saffron light -

finger tips of the summer wind play music of the

earth on the bamboo stems - I remember.

There were

phrases and punctuation marks of love in her body language.

My love belongs to an extinct species.

It's not

your butterfly love flitting around the carnal honey.

Certainly you'll call it, 'Old-

fashioned'.

Love keeps its virginity even after fifty years.

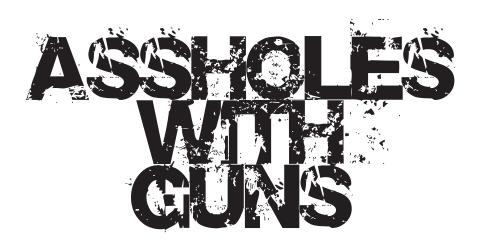
It's unfading charm's in the reality I

loved her. in the belief she loved me, and in the

distance

that shyness kept between us.

—fabiyas mv



by jack campbell jr.



I revved my Rascal scooter with my good hand, racing through the parking lot of my local grocery mega-mart. For a moment, with the warm breeze on my face, I forgot the painful tingling that plagued my body. The automatic doors opened in front of me, and zipped in to the air conditioned store. I shivered. They kept the place so damned cold that the cashiers should've been penguins.

Carol, the deli manager, waved from behind the hot foods case where I dined at least five nights a week. I stopped the scooter so that I could wave back with my good hand. Then I started toward the pharmacy at the far corner of the store. I would have sworn that the damn thing's batteries would give out before I made it there. I remembered when grocery stores sold groceries. Now, they looked like goddamn theme parks. Bright signs advertised everything from ribeye steaks to Kansas City Chiefs T-shirts.

We were a long way from Kansas City. Hell, we were a long way from most things. Despite that, with the pins and needles torturing my limbs, Kansas City seemed closer than the grocery store pharmacy. It was my fault. I let my medicine run out. Maybe, the MS fogged my brain. Maybe, I still wanted to be the tough guy that sat restless inside my wrinkled shell, the man I used to be. I rolled past families with carts full of toddlers and bagged breakfast cereal. Not one of them would have believed that this crumpled up old bastard was once the most dangerous man in New Jersey.

Of course, that's the way it's supposed to be. I didn't move out here to be noticed. Forty-five years ago, when my right hand began to fall asleep, I hopped on a Greyhound bus with nothing but a bagful of cash and a .44 magnum. I rode that sweaty fart-box west, feeling a bit like the guys in those old cowboy movies. Just another asshole with a gun.

I pulled up to the pharmacy and cursed under my breath. The line stretched back past the reading glasses display. My medicine wouldn't provide instant relief by any means, but knowing that it waited just steps away made the pain flare up. I tried to wiggle my toes, but for all I knew, they had been cut off by the sliding doors. I couldn't feel a thing.

Joey, the young pharmacy assistant saw me. "I've got your prescription ready, Mr. Martin. It will just be a couple of minutes."

I waved him off with my left hand. He was a good kid. Worked hard. Probably on his way to being a better man than I had ever hoped to be. Sometimes, I thought the infectious trembling in my body was a curse. God's way of evening the balance on the terrible things that I did. It was like every person that I hurt took just a little bit of my body with them. I doubted He was done with me, yet. I hadn't taken confession since I left Jersey. I was an alleged Methodist, these days, but I doubted St. Peter would buy that excuse.

I made it to the front of the line and pulled up to the handicapped counter next to the cash register.

Joey grabbed the large paper bag that held my medication and brought it over to me. "Mr. Martin, how are you doing today?"

"Hit and miss," I said.

"Well, we'll get you fixed up." Joey punched buttons on the computer that served as their cash register. "I know this is stupid, but I have to ask if you have any questions about these prescriptions."

"I know them better than my doctor." I tried to smile, but the right side of my face didn't respond.

"I'm going to miss you, Mr. Martin."

I fought to raise a paralyzed eyebrow. "Miss me? Jesus, I don't look that bad, do I?"

Joey went pale. "Oh no, I didn't mean that. I got accepted to Nebraska. I'm heading out to Lincoln next week to get a head start on classes."

"Congratulations." I meant it. I did. But at the same time, I'd gotten used to Joey. I didn't like dealing with new people. I'd eyed them with suspicion for so long that they still made me antsy. The Feds and the family probably weren't trying too hard to find me after all those years, but old habits and old grudges died equally hard.

"I'm going to be a real pharmacist someday." Joey scanned a barcode on the bag. "Coming back here when you are done?"

Joey laughed. "No offense, Mr. Martin. But this isn't the kind of place you come back to. Not by choice."

I smiled, at least on the inside.

A large man stepped up next to me. I saw the automatic in his hand before I noticed the black ski mask that covered his face. Old feelings rushed back, dusty with cobwebs and nostalgia.

Joey didn't look up from the computer. "I'll be with you in a second, sir. I'm just finishing up."

"You'd better be finished, now." The robber spoke in a low, forced growl. At least he was smart enough to disguise his voice. There were so many goddamn amateurs out there.

Joey looked up in to the blackness of a gun barrel two inches from his face. He shook worse than I did.

I lifted my good hand, palm out defensively. "Now, take it easy, son. You don't want to hurt anyone here." My voice felt smoother than it had in years.

"Fuck off, Grandpa. Go play bingo or something."

My hackles raised. Like I said—old habits. "Listen, kid, you'd better watch your fucking mouth. I'll reach in to that mask and cut out your goddamn tongue."

Ski Mask smirked. He reached down and goosed my scooter's throttle. The motor whined as I crashed in to a spinning wire rack of Mother's Day cards.

Joey's face turned red. "Hey, leave him alone."

"If Grandpa minds his business, he won't have any more accidents. I want all

your painkillers—OxyContin, oxycodone, Oxy Clean, I don't care. Throw them in a bag."

Joey crossed his shaking arms. He probably meant it to seem tough, but it looked like he was hugging himself. "I'm not giving you anything."

I cursed under my breath and struggled to free myself from a pile of pink stationary and wire mesh.

"What did you say, motherfucker?" The guy shoved his gun against Joey's forehead.

"You heard me."

The problem with guys like Joey was that they always played the good guy. They didn't work the angles. To a good guy, there's right and there's wrong. If you weren't doing right, then you were wrong. Unfortunately, assholes with guns—like me and Ski Mask-don't work that way.

I swept the cards off of my lap, but my handle bars got caught in the wire rack. "Put the gun down," I said. "Joey, just give him the drugs."

"Listen to the geezer, and give me the fucking pills."

"I'm not going to do that," Joey stepped back from the gun. The red imprint of the barrel etched the pale skin of his forehead.

"Listen, you little prick, I will fucking kill you right here."

He would, too. Some men didn't have it in them. I could always tell. I could see it in their eyes. Ski Mask had the eyes of a man who'd seen war. Whether it was overseas or on the streets, this man had killed. I knew those eyes. They stared back in my shaving mirror every morning.

Joey stood his ground, back straight and chin out. "You have a problem. You need help. Rehab or something. Giving you pills would be like putting a gun to your head."

Ski Mask jumped over the counter. Joey stumbled back, falling to his ass on the raised pharmacy floor. I fought with the handlebars, trying to free them from the card rack's grasp. I heard a woman's scream. The countdown had started.

"Just calm down," I said, my breath heavy with effort. "Joey, give him the pills." Another scream, accented by the trembling percussion of fleeing feet.

I could barely see Joey's head over the counter. He looked up at Ski Mask. "The police are on their way. This is your last chance to get out of here."

I grew desperate in my struggle with the card rack. Joey wouldn't have to answer to St. Peter. Good men didn't have to worry about their sins. They just had to worry about assholes like me. Joey thought that the guy would turn and run. I knew he wouldn't, because I wouldn't. I would've shot Joey between the eyes and grabbed as many pills as I could before leaving.

I reached back with my good hand in to the worn leather bag I kept slung over the back of my Rascal. I found the grip of my lightweight .38 special. I yanked it free and threw the dead weight of my body off of the scooter seat. I didn't know that I could still feel the sort of pain that shot through my hip as my pelvis shattered on the tile floor. I gritted my teeth and pulled the trigger. I'd never killed a man with

my left hand. It was a wonder that I could hold it steady enough to shoot. The gun kicked harder than I expected. My shoulder seized in pain right before the hollow point bullet entered the back of Ski Mask's skull. His face blew apart in a spray of bone, blood, and insulated fabric.

"Holy shit!" Joey screamed. He peeked over the pharmacy counter. Tiny redgray pieces of Ski Mask's brain speckled Joey's face. "Mr. Martin, are you okay?"

I dropped the gun. A bright yellow deodorant advertisement spun above me like a miniature sun. The problem with good guys was that they couldn't remain anonymous. Fuck it. It didn't matter anymore. The Feds could haul me away. The family could send some young prick after me with nothing but a big ego and an equally big gun. At my age, one as shole with a gun was the same as another.

Joey had 911 on the phone, but I could already hear the sirens. It was hard to breathe. The cold tile floor felt like ice on the back of my neck. For a moment, my body buzzed not with deadness, but with pain and pride.

Maybe St. Peter would call it even.





THE COCONUT LEAF TOP

Faster I ran, faster it spun on a slender stem. My mom's weaving magic was marvelous. Her hard fingers – with the knife scars and allergic rashes- worked wonders on green coconut leaves.

Since I was always impatient to dash onto the 'spinning ecstasy', I forgot to admire her, yet she wove again and again for me with a smile.

Many skills die in the kitchen as the chicks in omelets.

Faster the leaf top spun, faster my experience altered.

Speed's a risky pleasure.

The top and I withered – faltered to a pause by the evening.

Now I sit musing, 'Experience is void, unless there is movement'.

—fabiyas mv

PAULINE

by jackie bee

She opened her eyes.

Sunshine filled the room, illuminating the perfectly clean writing desk, the shining floor, the spotless bedside table. She turned onto her side, reached out and adjusted the small mirror standing in the middle of it. Then she tucked the bottle of sleeping pills into the upper drawer. She hadn't needed them last night.

She sat up and lowered her feet to the floor, fitting them straight into her slippers, and stretched. Things didn't seem so bad in the morning.

Then she heard the sound of a toilet being flushed.

She froze. The sound in itself wasn't scary, but added to the fact that she had been living alone for more than a year now, it certainly deserved attention.

She sprang out of the bed and hurried about the room in a panic. Someone was in the apartment. That wasn't supposed to be. That was wrong. She had no clear plan for this scenario.

Police, she thought. You call the police when there's an intruder in your house. She darted out of the room, aiming to reach the telephone, and at the same time, the bathroom door at the other end of the corridor opened. A man came out, wearing only his underwear, a folded newspaper sticking from under his arm.

"Oh," he said. "Morning."

"Jeff?" She breathed out, her fear draining away and her annoyance rising as if they occupied two interconnected vessels. "What are you doing here?"

"Uhm," he said. "Whatever people usually do in the toilets, you know?" He shrugged and headed to the dining room. She followed, gawking at him in disbelief.

"I don't mean that! What are you doing in my flat?"

He frowned at her. "Like, I live here. Did you have a bad dream or something? You look out of sync."

"No," she said. "I didn't have a bad dream, and no, you don't live here!"

"Are you joking?" His frown deepened. He took the newspaper from under his arm and let it fall on the coffee table. The look of it there made her wince.

"Get your freaking paper off the table," she hissed. "How dare you?"

"What's wrong?" He raised one hand in a placating gesture and picked the paper back up. "You're really not yourself today. Go get more sleep."

He turned and went into the kitchen. She saw him taking a cup from the middle of her neatly arranged line of coffee cups, and it made her wince again. He had to take one from the side, she'd fought hard to teach him that, back when they were still married, but there he was now, not only breaking into her house, but taking a cup out of the middle of the line. This was intolerable.

"Put it back," she hissed. "Put it back and get out!"

"Cool down, okay?" he said, not looking at her. "I know you got your rules, but I live here, too, and you have to respect that."

"You don't live here! Not since our divorce last year—remember?"

"What are you talking about?" He opened the fridge. "We've never divorced."

"Yes we did," she said. "And put that tuna back, I only eat it on Fridays."

"Well, I eat it whenever I want," he said. "And what's that talk about divorce? Did you go off your head?"

She took a deep breath. "Are you on drugs?" she said. "Do you really think that you live here and we are still married?"

"Of course not," he said. "We were never married."

"What?" She gaped at him.

"I mean, I'm your brother, so how could we be married?" He closed the fridge door and then turned to her, as if he'd had a sudden inspiration. "Wait—maybe you are on drugs?"

"You're not my brother!" she said. "I never even had a brother!"

He looked at her, holding a tuna can in one hand, scratching the place where his chest hair stuck out from the neck of his tee shirt with the other. His green eyes expressed such genuine confusion that for a second a doubt crawled into her mind. She shook her head. This was ridiculous.

"Look, I don't know what's your problem," she said. "But I'll call the police if you don't leave right away. I don't like this game. And put the tuna back."

"It's peanut butter." He waved the container at her.

"It's tuna."

"Don't be silly." He reached for the bread bin. "You really need to consider some treatment for your issues. You're getting truly weird."

"All right," she said, and marched straight to the telephone.

It took three rings before a gleeful female voice answered.

"Barton's flower shop."

"I was calling the police," Pauline said.

"It's a mistake, then," the woman said and hung up.

Pauline checked the number she'd just dialed. It was the police number all right.

"What's going on?" she muttered. "Jeff?"

"My name is Gary," he said from the kitchen.

"Since when?"

"Since, like, forever?"

She slowly put the phone down.

She'd been working for years to make everything in her life clear, structured and organized. There were times in the past they'd almost made her believe that she had been wrong about that. Jeff would make her do spontaneous things sometimes, which could be kind of fun. She'd had friends and she'd gone out.

But as the years passed by, she'd come to realize they hadn't been her friends after all. They had all been just selfish people who couldn't maintain their life in a proper order, and had only been trying to reduce her to their level. And there was no place in her life for unorganized people.

This morning, however, proved to be anything but organized. It was a mess, and she had to cling to whatever structure she had left, if she wanted to handle the situation. Perhaps the effect of whatever drugs Jeff must have taken would wear off soon, and he'd be out of her apartment and her life once again. For now, she had to remain calm and composed.

"I'm going to work," she said. "When I'm back, I hope you won't be here."

"Sure," he said, chewing on his tuna sandwich.

She got dressed quickly, applied some mascara and just enough makeup to conceal the circles under her eyes. Then she brushed her hair into a ponytail and picked up her handbag.

"I'm out," she called, not daring to look into the kitchen, sure he'd messed it up. "Have a nice day, Sis," he answered, and then she heard a porcelain cup fall on the floor, smashing into pieces. "Oh, shit!" he cried.

She clenched her teeth and stormed out.

A little boy was playing by the building entry. Pauline had been meeting him there almost every morning. The two-year-old would run around, while his babysitter, an elderly, big, apathetic woman, sat nearby with a box of chocolate cookies on her lap. Most people coming out of the house greeted the boy with smiles, but Pauline had never liked children, especially children who bumped into her on her way to work, their fingers sticky with chocolate. Therefore, she'd made it perfectly clear to both the boy and the babysitter that they should keep away from her.

This time, as usual, the boy stopped once he'd seen her coming out, and ran to his babysitter for protection. Pauline walked by, relieved that something still worked the way it should. She even smiled at the boy to encourage his good behavior, but he winked at her, and it made her smile disappear.

The post office she worked in was forty-eight steps from her house. She always counted steps as she walked, but today, the boy's wink had put her off her stride, and she'd forgotten to start counting. She contemplated coming back to start again,

but that would have looked just weird, and she didn't want to encounter the boy again.

The post office had been opened already, and a few customers waited in line. Pauline's coworker, Brenda, was talking to one of them through her window. Pauline walked up to the Staff Only door at the side of the counters and tried to push it open, but it was locked from the inside.

"Brenda," she called out. "Get the latch for me."

"Just wait in line, madam," Brenda answered in her high-pitched voice, not looking at her.

"It's me, Pauline."

"Please wait in line to get your service."

"What service?" Pauline said impatiently. "I work here, what are you talking about?"

At last, Brenda granted her a look. "It must be a mistake." She sounded as if she were genuinely trying to help. "Perhaps you work in a different post office?"

"How many post offices are around here? Are you kidding me?"

"I think the lady here made it perfectly clear that you need to wait in line," said the customer by the window. "Just wait for your turn and get your cheeseburger, like everybody else."

"What cheeseburger?" she said meekly.

All the customers in the line were staring at her now.

"Please, madam," Brenda said. "Either wait in line or leave. Don't make me call for security."

Pauline counted seventy two steps on her way back. It didn't make sense, but not any more than anything else did today. All she wanted was to get home and be in a safe, protected, organized place once again.

The boy by the entrance ran up to her, his arms outstretched. Before she had a chance to react, he had enclosed her legs in a tight embrace and looked up at her, grinning.

"Mommy!" he shouted. "You got me the tractor? I want it!"

"He's obsessed with that tractor," the babysitter confirmed. "All day long mommy's getting me a tractor, mommy's getting me a tractor..."

"I'm not his Mommy!" Pauline shouted, losing whatever composure she'd still maintained, trying to free herself from the sticky little hands that clung to her legs, but the boy seemed way too strong for his age. "Get this thing off me! He's not my son!"

Eventually, she managed to unclench the boy's fingers and push him away. He stumbled and fell down—a little too theatrically, it seemed to her, like a football player pretending to be more hurt than he actually was—and burst into tears. The babysitter stood up heavily, looking at Pauline with disapproval, and at that moment, Jeff walked out of the building.

The boy climbed back to his feet and ran to him, crying.

"Mommy pushed me! She pushed me!"

"Why would you do that?" Jeff picked the boy up and frowned at Pauline.

"He's not my son!" she cried. "What's going on here? I don't have any children!" "Of course he's yours," Jeff said. "Yours and mine."

"So, you're my husband again?" Her voice came out way too shrill. "Not a brother?"

"What brother?" Jeff said in confusion. "You never had a brother."

She locked the door of her apartment from the inside, and stepped away from it, panting, staring at it as if expecting someone to try and break it down. Then she looked around, listening, ready for another surprise, but the apartment sounded deserted, just like it was supposed to be.

She put her bag on the small desk by the entry, took her shoes off and went to her bedroom. All was quiet. She sat down on her bad, clasping her hands tightly together. So, it had happened, she thought. They'd been telling her all this time that her orderliness was an obsession and not just a way of life, that she'd go mad one day, raving mad, and here she was, lost in this surreal morning where nothing seemed to be in its place. What was she to do now? Seek treatment? And what if they weren't able to help her—would she have to spend her days in a locked room, together with her hallucinations?

Too much, she thought. Life had seemed too much to bear just yesterday, and today it had crossed the line completely.

She reached out and took the sleeping pills out of the drawer. She unscrewed the cap and peered into the bottle. It was empty.

At first she thought it was another twist of her madness, but then, gradually, the memories began to come back. The night before, sitting on the bed, popping the pills one after another, watching some evening show, not quiet seeing it, pulling the blanket up to her chin, feeling cold, feeling hot, feeling sleepy at last, feeling at peace at last, feeling that if life has no order—then at least death must be able to provide some.

She heard footsteps behind. The empty pill bottle trembling in her fingers, she glanced over her shoulder and saw Jeff standing in the doorway with a box of chocolate cookies in his hand.

"Where am I?" Pauline said weakly.

"But you know it," he said in a low, unfamiliar voice. "You know suicides never go to heaven, don't you? Here now. Have a cookie."



THE WORLD BLASTS EVERYDAY

The world blasts in one nook or the other everyday. It writhes amidst the stink of the burnt emotions. Lullabies are mutilated in the roar of AK 47. A flock of black birds hovers in the sky. Waif dogs and vultures carve the sculptures on the scattered fragments of the innocence. Infants fumble for the nipples among the debris. Forlorn whimpering of the newest widow rises up with the smoke. Family men step into the death wagons with the bleeding thoughts. White doves shudder to sit on the roof of the worship. A hundred revenge kids are born in each blast. All 'isms' end in 'revegisms'. Funeral of the peace is celebrated in the clattering of the weapons. As the emotions lose the buttress of sense and reason, the world blasts, then it bounces back.



—fabiyas mv

problem solving

The car swerved. Tires shrieked and the metal of the vehicle groaned its displeasure while it spun and turned on the glossy black surface of the road. From the edge of his peripheral vision a guardrail slid into the man's view, a bright shining bar against the night. The car tore through the barrier, filling the night with noises of shrieking and grinding metal on metal and jarring the occupant as the car plummeted into the murky water below.

There seemed to be a pause before the car hit the water, as if it were a child on a diving board, committed to jumping but having just remembered an overwhelming fear of falling, drowning, imminent death, and looking the fool in front of others. But the pause only lasted a moment, and the car hit the water with a thunderous noise, splashing waves pushing out from all directions. To the driver, the vehicle's impact with the water had a jolt similar to the hitting of the guard rail, and he was still recovering from the second impact when the water started lapping at the windows that he had cracked open to pull in some of the warm night air. By the time his mind was able to understand the concepts of "crashed," "sinking," and "trapped," the car was already underwater and making its way to the bottom of the lake. The din of water never stopped as it continued to stream inside the vehicle like a swarm of deadly miniature waterfalls: water in, air out.

While struggling against a sodden seat belt that had suddenly become more complicated with the addition of wet clothing and waterlogged fingers that were slowly going numb from the cold water of the lake, the man's mind raced. The belt seemed unaware its job was done as it continued to fight with him as the cold water raised itself to tickle at his neck and caress his chin.

Now adrenaline surged through his body. Mixed with the knowledge that death could be very close at hand there was a unique clarity of mind. His life became a line, all of the events that had influenced him became clear, all of his subconscious

by m.y. kearney

reasoning came to the surface, his goals defined themselves and the path to their accomplishment became blindingly simple. Even the problems that had caused so much pain and anxiety with their complexity became such tiny annoyances that he laughed at the sudden realization of how much time obsessing over them. The seat belt abruptly relented and easily popped open.

Then the water was over his face and the only thing he could notice was how empty and focused his mind had become. He wasn't immediately conscious of the moment, but a quiet and observant part of his mind took notice and filed the feelings and observations away for later examination. He fought with the door while the air bubble above him shimmered like liquid mercury, shrinking away as the water pressure equalized inside the car.

He self-filed away the feeling of his hair moving in the water, flowing back and forth around his face in time with his more frantic motions, and how his once-light clothing became a rough and heavy straightjacket which clung to him tightly in all the wrong places. Who knew that his sneakers would be freezing bricks when wet?

He curled himself up on the seat, his stiff jeans rubbing the skin off of his waist, groin, and knees, and barely managed to wedge his feet against the stick shift and center console. He shoved himself against the stubborn door. It finally yielded to his efforts, bringing an unexpected chill with the exchange of colder water for the slightly warmer water inside the car. He flowed out of the door with the warmer water and the last of the air, feeling like a poorly constructed metaphor involving drowning butterflies emerging from metal cocoons. Kicking off of the door frame he made his way to the sparkle and swaying image of the moon refracted through the swirling water above. He fought to keep the breath in his lungs as he swam to the surface, but the burn was too great. The stale air trickled out of his chest and was swallowed by the clutching, suffocating water. He was too soon empty and

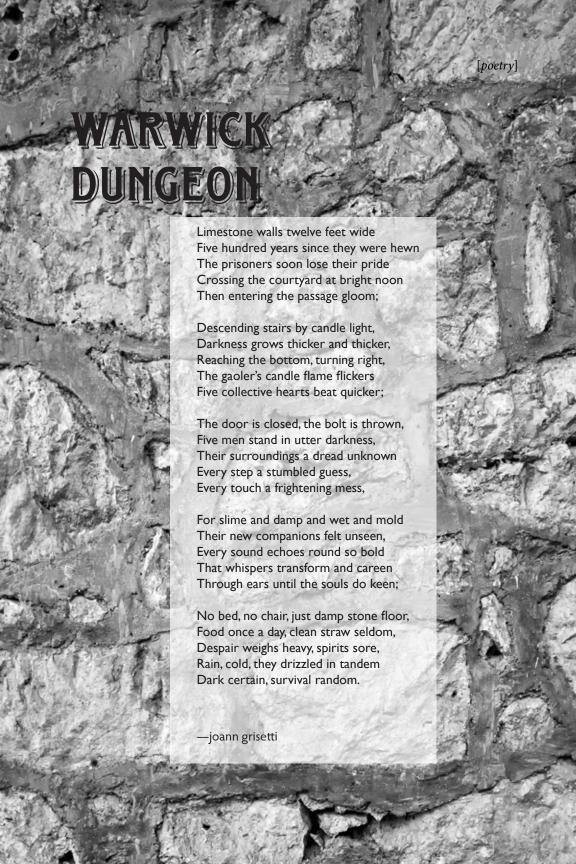
aching and longing for what wasn't there. He needed to take a breath and ease the ever-growing burn, to let his lungs expand again.

He wanted to live. He needed to breathe. But he had to wait.

The surface was closer, unless the trickster moon was taunting him with an illusion. Finally breaking into the air, the water felt like freezing fingers trailing over his face. He was able to snatch a much needed and exhilarating breath. His head swam as his starved lungs took in great racking breaths over and over again. He tried to tread water while his heart thumped so hard that he seemed to shake with each beat and the frozen water continued to lick at the edges of his face. Once the adrenaline eased and his body started to ache and slow he angled himself backwards in the water and floated for a moment as he slowed his breathing and regained some situational awareness. He started swimming slowly for the shore.

After about five minutes of swimming he was on dry land. He began removing the most waterlogged of his clothing. His shoes and socks came off with a struggle, his feet swollen to bursting with absorbed water and molded to the fabric. It didn't help that his fingers were also pruned, numb, and shaking. After managing to free his feet from their encumbering vises his fingers had limbered up enough to manipulate too many miniature buttons and he divested himself of the rest of his clothing. He gave a grateful sigh at being released. He wondered at the difference in temperature between the water and the grassy shore as he was finally left to dry out in the warm night air. He rubbed his bare feet in the warm grass as he lay down for a moment and reflected at the sky. His cell phone was dead, a point that he had forgotten would happen, so he would have to wait for someone to notice the crash or make his own way to an emergency call box. For the moment all his worries had answers, his mind was clear of clutter, and the world was finally simple. Now that he knew how it felt to crash and almost drown, he would take his course advisor's advice and write what he knew.



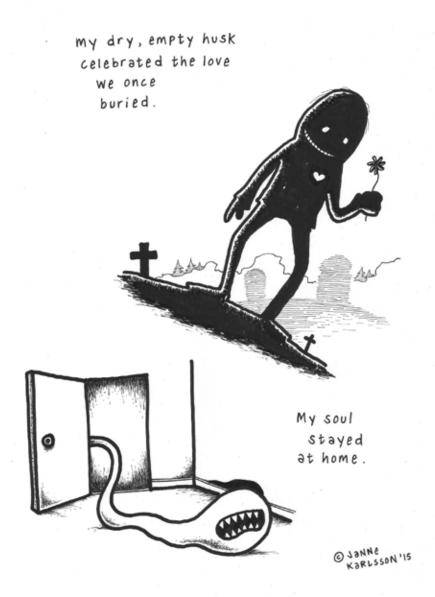


[poetry]

after the ball in basement digs, the passage of time sells useless tickets; invisible chess pieces move across a board of light; the hand that holds the emptiness rules the end of darkness, its rotting fingers cleaved by orange blades of meddling sun; in cockroach glands, the apostle's creed of leftovers chants its delight at finding tongues to secrete its ravaging; music sours, sags in a sorry stereo arm that refuses to budge from the inner circle of an old 1.p.; dead dancers sprawl across the cracked linoleum, the gather of their dresses gagging forgotten joy, lithe muscle bled dry by its own trances, raw faces suffocated by the ghosts of heat; the conductor marks the spot with careless drool, a shattered glass puncturing his cheek; sewer-pipes cough worthless rhythm down the clanging rites of plumbing; death barricades behind the sunken window; the crocus wilts, every thought in its tendrils of witness, a cold snap; the insidious glow of morning on rancid flesh casts a bleary search-light on all and company; in the shadow of an empty bowl, a solitary cat licks all signs of life from its paws

—john grey

Buried Love Celebrated



—janne karlsson



by steven slavin

My name is Jim Lewis, and I have never been married. In fact, my longest relationship lasted just two months. And *that* one ended during the administration of President Jimmy Carter.

Yeah, I know what you're thinking: How old could this guy *be*? Well, you know that policy that President Clinton recently started with the military—"Don't ask; don't tell"? I *love* it! And the ladies do tell me I look good for my age.

If you've even glanced at the personal ads, the chances are you've come across some like *this* one:

Youthful, very successful businessman, late forties, looking for very attractive college educated woman, 20-29. for serious relationship.

I didn't write this ad, but the guy who did could have been my twin. Because my ideal woman would be beautiful, smart, and in her twenties. Now I'm not claiming that women like that are busting down my door, but on the other hand, why settle?

Older guys like me have often had trouble adjusting to the title, Ms., which has largely replaced Miss and Mrs. back in the day, when women married they proudly took not just their husband's surname, but often his first name as well. For example, Miss Sheila Schlockowitz was magically transformed into Mrs. William Prescott. But on the downside, Miss Larisa Karamazov became Mrs. Colpepper Exum, the third.

Not that any of this really matters, since I am not exactly marriage material. I

mean, I like good-looking women—the younger the better—but I don't expect to hear wedding bells any time during the next forty or fifty years.

So you can imagine my surprise when credit card bills began to arrive in my mailbox that were addressed to Mrs. James Lewis. Clearly, there had been some mistake. Whatever else might be said of me, I am not exactly the marrying kind. It follows, then, that there is no Mrs. James Lewis living with me. You're welcome to check for yourself, but please call first, because my apartment is usually a mess.

Mrs. James Lewis had run up nearly two hundred thousand dollars of debt on a wide array of bank and department store credit cards. When I finally began calling some of these institutions, it was explained to me that a Mrs. James Lewis of 149 West 9th Street was the owner of these cards.

When the woman from the credit department at Macy's told me that I was legally responsible for my wife's debts I blurted out, "Wife! Listen, lady, I can't even get a date!" She hung up on me, perhaps thinking that I was hitting on her.

The bills kept coming, and I grew more and more desperate. I finally decided to hire a matrimonial lawyer. The first thing I told her was that I was not now, nor ever had been married. "Excuse me, Mr. Lewis, but am I missing something here? My practice is exclusively matrimonial law. Perhaps you would be better served by engaging a dating service."

"Let me start from the beginning." For the next hour I poured my heart out to her. From time to time, she would ask a question. And when I finally finished, she provided an excellent summation.

"Mr. Lewis, you are the victim of credit card fraud. But you are not legally liable for these debts because you are not married to the person who committed this fraud."

"So I'm in the clear?"

"Well, not completely. First of all, your credit has certainly been ruined. And second, some of the creditors may take legal action against you."

"So what can I do?"

"You can go to the police. Or, you can engage a private investigator. Or possibly both."

"What would you advise?"

"Well, why not go to the police first. And if you're still not satisfied, I can give you the phone number of a private investigator who specializes in this area."

I wasn't sure if I felt better or worse after talking to the lawyer, but her advice did sound pretty good. The next day I walked over to the 6th Precinct, which was just around the corner. After an hour's wait, I got to explain my predicament to a detective. He told me that he would share this information with detectives who dealt with consumer fraud, and that, if I really wanted to pursue this, he could set up an appointment for me with someone in that unit. In the meantime, he suggested that I make copies of all the bills I had received.

A week later I met with Detective Michael Riley of the Consumer Fraud Squad. After looking over all the bills, he smiled at me. "Well, Mr. Lewis, I have some good news and some bad news."

Right! The *good* news would be that I was married to a beautiful woman half my age, and the *bad* news that she had bankrupted me.

What he actually said was that I was just the latest of a series of victims of a woman who had been running this scam for years. So I was definitely not legally responsible for all these bills. In fact, he would see to it that all the credit card companies and department stores were informed of this, and that my credit would be fully restored.

And the *bad* news? Although they had had dozens of excellent leads, they still had not been able to catch this person.

"Well at least can you explain to me how she had been able to get all these credit cards without my knowledge?"

"That I can do. She must have filed a change-of-address card with your local post office. All mail for Mrs. James Lewis of 149 West 9th Street was redirected to a post office box."

"OK, so that explains why I wasn't alerted while she was running up these bills." "Exactly."

"But why did I suddenly start getting the bills about a month ago?"

"Well, after six months, the change-of-address order expires. The post office assumes that the addressee has informed his or her friends and family of the address change."

"So let me see if I understand this. This woman applied for credit as Mrs. James Lewis, filed a change-of-address card with the post office, and ran up huge credit card debts. Wow, that's unbelievable!"

"Not to us, it isn't."

"Is there anything else I can do?"

"As a matter of fact there is. Try to think of anyone you know—even a distant acquaintance—who might have done this. Very often the victim actually knew the person committing the fraud—a spurned lover, a jealous friend or relative, an old enemy or rival. You'd be surprised how many people you might have pissed off."

"Well, I can't think of anyone off-hand, but I'll go through my address book as soon as I get home."

"Good! In the meanwhile, there are several things we can do on our end. Why don't you give me a call in, say, about ten days?"

Ten days later, when I called Detective Riley, I hoped he had had better luck than I did. My search had not turned up even one person who might have done this to me. He had had a little more success.

"We know from experience that when the scammer files a change-of-address card, she has the mail forwarded to a post office box. Each time she runs a new scam, she opens a different box. So we went to the postmaster in your local post office to find out where Mrs. James Lewis' mail was being forwarded. The Postmaster told us that the scammer had a box in *that* post office.

"We asked to see if she had any mail. There was a pile of credit card bills, all addressed to Mrs. James Lewis. The envelopes had been postmarked between forty to sixty days ago."

"Why wasn't she picking up the mail?"

"That's a good question! She knew that the credit card companies and department stores must have been getting wise to her, and she may have even suspected that the police were watching to see who was taking mail out of her post office box."

"Were you?"

"No. We don't have the manpower. And even if we did—we probably would have been weeks too late to catch her."

And there was another thing. She must have known that six months after a change-of-address card is filed, the post office stops forwarding the mail. That's why, six months into her scam, you suddenly began getting all those bills."

"Wow! She had that all figured out!"

"Let me tell you: your 'wife' is one smart lady."

"Yeah, thanks a lot!"

"Wait! There's more! We opened each of the envelopes we found in the post office box. Would you believe that she had been making the minimum payment about ten or fifteen dollars-every month?"

"Oh, I get it! As long as she did this, she could eventually max out each credit card."

"Right you are, Mr. Lewis!"

"Boy, Mrs. James Lewis has a much better head for numbers than her husband."

"Oh, and there's one more thing. When you apply for a post office box, you are required to list not just your old address, but your new one. So even if you're having your mail forwarded to a post office box, you still must provide your new home address."

"I guess that makes sense. In case there's any problem with your post office box—if you didn't pay your rent on it, or maybe you weren't collecting your mail, the post office could get in touch with you."

"That is correct. So are you ready to hear what new address she put down for herself?"

"What was it?"

"Would you believe 149 West 9th Street?"

"That's my address!"

"I know that! Usually the scammer will give a fictitious address, so we're thinking that, as a joke, she used yours. *Think* about it! She files a change-of-address card. She wants her mail forwarded from 149 West 9th Street to her post office box. And then she lists her current home address as the place she's moved from."

"That makes no sense."

"Well, I guess maybe to her, listing your address twice was a joke. But when we catch her, we can ask her about it."

"So how will you catch her?"

"We're working with the postal inspectors. She's done this more than a dozen times, and she'll probably keep doing it. They are alerting the clerks in every post office in Manhattan who handle box applications to be on the lookout. We'll also

continue to work with the credit card companies and the department stores, but in the past, neither has been very helpful."

I liked Detective Riley, but I didn't really expect to hear back from him. About a month later when my phone rang around 5:00 p.m., I braced myself for still another telemarketer.

"Mr. Lewis?"

"Yes?" I answered warily. At least the guy did not have an Indian accent, but I just knew his next words would be, "How are *you* today?" At which point I would slam down the receiver. So you could imagine my shock when instead, the man said, "Your wife has been found!"

For several seconds I had no idea who this was, or what he was talking about. And then it *hit* me!

"Detective Riley? That is fantastic news!"

"For you and for us!"

"How did you catch her?"

"Well, it's kind of an interesting story. If you have time, why don't you drop by tomorrow afternoon, say about 2:00? There's another detective I'd like you to meet."

"Great! See you then."

When I entered his office, Detective Riley shook hands with me, and introduced me to Detective Johnson. She was tall, had long, very straight black hair that hung to her shoulders, and what I would call movie star looks. As we shook hands, her grip was strong. Then I noticed the wedding band on her other hand. When my eyes moved back up to her face, she smiled as if she could read my mind.

"Detective Johnson conducted the investigation, and thanks to her, we have finally apprehended the celebrated 'Mrs. James Lewis."

"Mr. Lewis, let me tell you right off that your 'wife' was something of an old friend to our unit. She is a career criminal. In cases such as this one, we look for patterns or connections. Now we knew, of course, that 'Mrs. James Lewis'—using various aliases—had been pulling this scam for years, and had never been caught. Many of her 'husbands' have been in touch with us over the years. And while there have been other credit card scammers, none has been doing this for so long."

"Well, from what I've learned from Detective Riley, the scam works for no more than six months, so that means she's done this to a lot of guys."

"That's *right*! Now we're painfully aware that she's never been caught. So then we asked ourselves: What kind of scam would she have been working before this one? Perhaps she had been caught doing something else. That way, we'd know who we were looking for."

"Let me see if I'm following. If she's a career criminal, maybe before this she used to rob banks or something."

"That's a very interesting theory," said Detective Riley. "Because that's *exactly* what she had been doing."

"She went into banks and gave the teller a note saying that she had a gun?"

"Well," said Detective Johnson, "she was a little more sophisticated than that. What she did was walk into a bank, ask to see an officer, and tell him that she wanted to open an account. Now are you ready for the really interesting part? She said that she had started a business, and needed to deposit \$10,000 in cash. And that was a lot of money back in the late 1940s."

"Are you serious? That's almost 50 years ago! How *old* is this woman?"

"Maybe almost old enough to be your grandmother, Mr. Lewis."

"There goes my dream of having been married to a beautiful woman."

"Well, she certainly was a beautiful woman in her day. And she's really quite nice looking for a woman in her early eighties." said Detective Johnson.

"So how did she scam the bank?"

"She explained that she needed deposit slips for her account, because she would be making a large number of deposits during the next few weeks. But it usually takes the banks about a month to have deposit slips printed for new accounts. So how, then, would she be able to deposit all this money? Luckily the officer had an idea. He would assign her an account and provide her with a few hundred deposit slips. Each slip would have her account number printed on it. But would it be OK if the name of her business did not appear at the top of the slip? Of course it would be OK! And do you know why, Mr. Lewis?"

"I don't have a clue."

"OK, let's just back up a minute. The bank officer really wants her business. So he's willing to cut corners. When a customer opens a new account and wants to deposit money, he or she fills out a blank deposit slip that is found on the tables in the bank. Then the customer takes the slip and the cash or checks to be deposited to a teller."

"So if I'm following, these deposit slips have no account numbers printed on them."

"Bingo! You're catching on fast," said Detective Johnson. "So every morning she goes into the bank and places a few of her printed deposit slips on each table, and then leaves. Customers who have new accounts, or have forgotten to bring their deposit slips, will fill out one of her slips. And virtually no one will notice the printed account number at the bottom of the slip."

"That is amazing!"

"And when the teller puts through the deposit slip, the money goes into the scammer's account. Because the bank's computer reads the printed deposit number—and not what the customer has written on the deposit slip."

"So how did she get caught?"

Detective Johnson continued. "Her scam would work for just a month, because when depositors got their statements, they noticed that some of their deposits weren't recorded—and their balance was too low. By then our friend had withdrawn all the money out of her account—in cash.

"She may have even known that when a bank got scammed, its officers wouldn't bother to warn the officers of other banks. I guess nobody wants to look dumb."

"But they *did* report this to the police, of course," added Detective Riley.

"Right," agreed Detective Johnson. "And the police then visited every bank and warned them about her. One day, when she tried to open an account, an alert bank officer called the police. The tip-off was that she wanted to deposit \$10,000 in cash."

"So then she went to prison?"

"She was sent away for eight years," answered Detective Riley.

"So how did you make the connection between the bank scams and the credit card scams?"

"Well," said Detective Johnson, it was a combination of deductive logic, trial and error, and just dumb luck. You see, we were obviously looking for a woman. And then we thought, she's pretty slick. Maybe she's a little older, a little more experienced.

"So far, so good. Then, another detective suggested that we look at some of the older scammer cases. We figured that since she was working with credit cards, maybe before that she had run some kind of banking scam."

"So how did you finally make the connection?"

"Well, that was plain dumb luck."

"Really?"

"Are you ready for this?"

"I guess."

"The woman we were looking for was actually living in your building. So all this time, she was hiding in plain sight."

"That is truly amazing! But how were you able to figure this out?"

"Well, she made two mistakes. First, as you know, she listed 149 West 9th Street as her current address on the change-of-address form she gave to the post office. And second, she didn't bother to change her name. So when we checked the names on the list we compiled of old-time bank scammers, and then checked it against your apartment house directory, we had a match."

"Wow! That is truly impressive detective work! So can you tell me who she is?"

The detectives looked at each other. After Detective Riley nodded slightly,

Detective Johnson smiled and said, "Well, this may come as a shock, but she's

actually your next-door neighbor."

"What? Do you mean old lady Fletcher?"

The detectives burst out laughing. "You are right on the money—so to speak, Mr. Lewis," said Detective Riley.

"Oh my God! Would you believe that she actually used to flirt with me?"

"So you didn't flirt back?" asked Detective Riley.

"Yeah, right! I was always polite to her, but I'm looking for a woman *half* my age—"

"Rather than one twice your age?" asked Detective Johnson.

"Exactly!"

"Well, Mr. Lewis, maybe if you had been more receptive to her advances, you might have made an honest woman out of her—and avoided all this unpleasantness."



the breakup

We're all night in the old house, lit by lightning through stained-glass, surrounded by thunder-jumbled skeletons, bothered bats and uptight spiders, skulls rolling across the floor like dice. We're in the midst of nightmares while the raging storm outside bullies the mind, disavows sleep.

Every sense bar touch is toxic and then I take your hand, and the flesh falls away like snow from a rooftop. You kiss me with lips, spliced and oozing. And that perfume from the olfactory sewers of Parisian morgues.

Weather's breaking in. Malevolence is breaking out. The good's been reduced to something quivering inside me, one last capsule of strength about to burst, dilute its seed. I clench my fists, throw my head back and scream, incite your bony arms to cling to me the more.

We're all night in breaking glass, distant fires, wings beating, breath hissing, insects crawling down my throat. I struggle to stand apart as you take on a ruined world's emancipation.

—john grey



by tim dadswell

Lifelong resident, Jeannie Stack, is driving into the city on a weekday morning, a business card on her dashboard. On the backseat of her car is a dog blanket, strewn with other cards and newspapers. She is listening to talk radio.

"Hey Jay, I heard there's a hunter's moon tonight. Does that mean I can shoot any ol' critter I like?"

"Er, I don't..."

Jeannie angrily presses the off button.

"I wonder if I've done the right thing, handing Daisy to a complete stranger. What if he gives her a squint? What if she looks terrible? I miss her so much."

Jeannie parks in the downtown area, much quieter since the recent opening of a highway. She is wearing a floral print dress and a fluffy, lemon cardigan. The year she allowed herself not to worry about her weight has just entered its sixteenth month.

Her destination is a dilapidated store. Inside speakers are playing muzak so distorted it would be ideal for a gameshow reluctant to give prizes. On the wall behind the counter hung a certificate of advanced taxidermy, a dog calendar, and a large photo of a middle-aged woman dressed rather like Jeannie.

The proprietor, Joshua Packer, has pale, oily skin, and an obvious toupee. He exudes a mist of bleach and preservative.

"Good morning. It's Miss Stack, isn't it?"

Joshua stares at Jeannie's ample bosom. Unconsciously, she pulls the sides of her cardigan together.

"That's right. I've come to pick up my Daisy. I'm very nervous; she meant so much to me."

"No need to worry, Miss Stack; you're in very safe hands. Give me one second." Joshua goes into the back, brings out a stuffed Chihuahua and places it delicately on the counter. Studying her reaction, his tongue darts lasciviously over his lips.

"Daisy! You look wonderful. Now you'll always be with me. Thank you, Mr. Packer; you are a true artist! How much do I owe you?"

As Jeannie rummages through her purse, Joshua eagerly rubs his hands together at the thought of settling another bill.

Three days later, in front of a notice board in the public library, Jeannie and Joshua meet again by accident.

"Good morning, Miss Stack. This must be my lucky day!"

"Hi, Mr. Packer. I've just collected this cookbook. The writer has so much knowledge and experience and she doesn't take any prisoners."

"I'm here for a new book on taxidermy. I won't be answering the phone tonight, I can tell you! What notice has caught your eye here, if I may be so bold?"

"It's this one about an archaeology lecture."

"Yes, it does look interesting. What would we do without the library?"

"I know. I can feel so empty sometimes."

"No man in your life, Jeannie?"

"No. I have bad memories. I don't like to talk about it."

Joshua moves closer, considers putting his arm around her, but loses his nerve.

"I've just had the most wonderful idea."

"Have you? Tell me!"

As they make plans, neither notices two young women at the end of a nearby bookshelf, looking their way and giggling.

A while later, Jeannie finishes her last errand. Leaving a yarn store, carrying a full bag, she stops and stares across the street. Joshua has emerged from a store opposite, carrying a large, rectangular package. Jeannie crouches behind a mailbox, watches him head for his car, all the while chewing her lip.

After attending the lecture with him, Jeannie has invited Joshua round for coffee. In the bathroom, she takes a pill from a bottle of prescribed drugs. Hearing the doorbell, she stares blankly into the mirror before flinging the pill into a bin.

Joshua is standing on her front porch, accompanied by his Boston terrier, Felicity. Jeannie opens the door.

"Hi Felicity, hi Joshua, you're right on time. You can leave your jacket here. Do come through to the kitchen."

She brings a tray of coffee and cookies over to the table where he sits. Daisy stares down at them from the top of the refrigerator.

"You have a beautiful place, Jeannie, very homely. My, doesn't Daisy look happy up there?"

She smiles and nods.

"I should buy a new puppy, but I can't face it yet."

She glances at Felicity, who is in the corner, sniffing the empty dog basket.

 $\hbox{``That's an impressive oven you have there, Jeannie. Do you do a lot of cooking?''}$

"Yes, I've got to make twenty-four cupcakes for the church bazaar next Saturday. I'll bring some into the store, if you like."

"Ooo, that would be peachy! I've been deprived of home cooking since my mother passed. Ah, those heavenly pies and puddings."

Jeannie pushes the plate of cookies towards him.

"Mmm, these are great. I'm getting cherry, coconut, maybe an herb. I'm so glad we've met, it's not every day I find someone who shares my interests. Wasn't the lecture fascinating?"

He tries to put his hand in hers, but she pulls away.

"Yes, it was. I'd like to visit the prehistoric sites he described. I've always been

interested in the past and the way that people used to live. Maybe that's why I'm a hoarder. You should see my attic! One day I must have a yard sale."

"Jeannie, I must ask. Why did you rush off like that, after the lecture?"

"I can't remember, I guess I had things to do. But today is so beautiful, I'll show you around, if you've finished."

They put down their mugs and exit through the patio doors. Jeannie ambles up the path in front of him. High fences along both sides safeguard her privacy. In the sunlight, they pass a wooden bench, unpainted, with long, deep cracks. Next, they pass through a gate in the middle of a low fence. They reach the end of her garden, where a line of hickory trees marks the beginning of a wood.

"My goodness, so many graves!"

Joshua surveys Jeannie's pet cemetery. Most of the graves have simple, wooden crosses, with names and dates daubed on them in paint; some older than Jeannie.

"Yes, look, there's Foo-Foo, there's Binky, there's Lady Belladonna, my pedigree chow. So many good friends, who've gone to Heaven. But there's no space left here now."

Joshua stops, puzzled by one of the crosses, which reads: "Bad Boy Jones."

"Have you lived here long?"

"Long enough. By the way, did I see you coming out of the gun store last week?" He looks uncomfortable.

"Yes, I go hunting now and again—all totally legal."

"I hate what people do to animals. Drowning kittens in the river, beating their dogs, flushing fish down the john. It's wicked!"

She stifles a tear. Joshua puts his arm round her waist, leans in for a kiss, but is no match for Jeannie.

"No!"

She pushes him away and he falls awkward, breaking one of the crosses in two. "What have you done to poor Mungo?"

Before Joshua can stand up, she picks up a shovel and hits him repeatedly over the head. His toupee falls into the dirt and he stops moving. Felicity barks twice during the attack, but stays on the path.

Jeannie adopts a deeper tone of voice.

"Lust and fornication! And he was a murderer! Come with me, Felicity. Be a good girl for your mommy!"

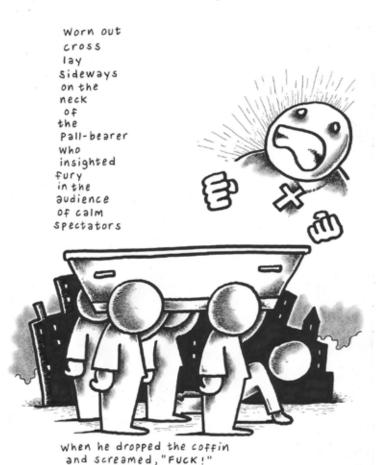
Felicity trots obediently behind Jeannie as she collects an axe.

An hour later, she retrieves Joshua's business card from her car and tears it in half. Going outside, she tosses the pieces into an oil drum, from which smoke is billowing.

Returning to the garage, she places a large glass jar on a shelf, next to two other similar jars. The new addition contains Joshua's severed head, submerged in pickling vinegar. She cheerfully sings a nursery rhyme to her silent audience, knowing all the words by heart.



My Father Died Today



Dad's eyes opened, and as he reached up to grab him by the throat he quickly turned his head and shouted,



- —aletheia adams
- —janne karlsson

all can see are sad eyes

by tim major

Exactly one year ago, I turned and saw her waiting in the queue. I smiled, despite the coffee spilling from one cup and scalding my fingers. Didn't I know her? From my office, or Miriam's?

Miriam had bagged a corner table and was already absorbed in a magazine.

"Is that a friend of yours?" I said, gesturing as I deposited our drinks.

Miriam scanned the queue, then shrugged.

I shrugged too. "One of those faces. I must have just seen her about."

As the woman took her seat I stole another glance. Not unattractive, with her dark hair and sad eyes, but that wasn't it. I felt sure I'd seen her in some other context. University, perhaps, or even school.

Miriam turned her magazine to show me photos of a wedding. Shabby chic, cotton bunting, toddlers in waistcoats. Low in expense but rich with perfect moments. When I looked up, the woman had finished and left.

I saw her again, only hours later. She stood at the opposite side of Iffley Road, cheering on the halfmarathon runners. My friends in the race hooted and jeered as they passed. I blinked myself awake and called out, too late.

When I noticed her at the winter market, I raised my hand in an instinctive wave. How many times do you have to see a stranger for them to be no longer a stranger? There's nothing wrong with acknowledging a familiar face.

The woman only frowned, her features made strange by the glow of fairy lights.

"You're going to think this is weird," I said to her, a couple of weeks later. I kept one arm around Miriam's waist to demonstrate that I was no threat. "But I'm certain I know you."

The sad-eyed woman flinched. "Really? From where?" More guarded than interested.

Miriam pressed into my side, tipsy and scanning the crowd for anyone yet to see the ring.

I waved a vol-au-vent. "I thought maybe you'd know. Have you ever done any freelance work for Hargreaves?"

The woman shook her head. She raised herself on tiptoes to look around. "Sorry," she said.

"OK. But how do you know Lil and Gary?"

"Friends of friends. I don't mean to be rude, but I think someone's calling me."

When the woman left, Miriam spun to face me. "We've only six months to practise, otherwise we'll embarrass ourselves in front of everyone," she said. "So ask me to dance."

The next time was a month later, in a London pub, sixty miles from home. Drinks with Ryan, mock-pleading for him to go easy on arrangements for the stag.

"What's she doing here? It's as if she's following me," I said.

Ryan looked over, sizing her up. "Not bad. Sure it's not the other way around?" The woman glanced up from her phone, then hurriedly down again.

"We can't," Miriam said. "It's insane."

"But in the best possible way," I said. I framed the Holywell building with my joined thumbs and forefingers, making a photographer's viewfinder. "And we knew a cancellation was the only way the place would become available."

"But this weekend? What about all our—"

"They'll make it, I'm certain. And you've already sorted the important things, the dress, the..." My joints cracked as I slid down to kneel on the pavement. "You're perfect, Miriam. We are. And I want it to be as soon as it can be."

She was everywhere.

"Look, I'm sick of it," Miriam said. "What are you trying to tell me here?"

I held up both hands. "No subtext. Promise. I'm genuinely weirded out, that's all, and I wanted to tell you. Isn't that what marriage is about?"

Miriam squinted against the afternoon light to where the sad-eyed woman sat alone on a park bench. "She's not your usual type."

"That's not it at all. You're my type."

Miriam puffed her cheeks. "It's not normal, noticing other women all the time, when you're committed. It shows me that something's wrong."

"But it's not other women. Just that one." I paused, recognising the danger too late.

"You're saying you're obsessed with her."

"I'm not. Anyone would be."

Miriam pushed me away. "Just go and talk to her, for God's sake."

"What are you saying?"

"You know what I'm saying."

She was everywhere though. Abruptly, Miriam was not.

Hi. Is this the number for Citizen's Advice? I don't know if you can help. I have a few questions about my rights. I'm being followed, I think.

A woman.

I don't know.

No

I don't think so. She seemed familiar at first, but—

No violence, no.

No, no threats.

Yes, briefly, at a party. I did.

I understand. But, you see, I can't continue like this. Everywhere I turn, she's—I see. I'm sorry. Thank you.

She started to back away as I approached. I placed myself between her and the bus laden with colleagues waiting to be delivered to the office party.

"You have to stop this," I said.

"Leave me alone," she said, trying not to meet my eye.

"I broke up with my partner of four years," I said, "Because of you."

"I'm sorry. But I don't see how it—"

I thrust out an arm to prevent her from boarding the bus. "Why did you take a job here? Wasn't it enough for you, following me around the streets?"

Finally, she looked at me. I felt painfully aware of my stubbly beard and the clothes I had been wearing for the last three days.

We both spoke as one.

"You have to stop this."

A lot can change in a year.

I tend not to go out a whole lot. Better to stay in the house. I'm not as bored as you'd think, even after cancelling the broadband. My Facebook feed had become filled with her face.

Even though it's a quiet enough street, people pass by more than I'd like. Sometimes they ignore the notices on my door. Their silhouettes shrink as they bend down. I shrink too, in the hallway, keeping out of sight.

The letterbox opens and all I can see are sad eyes.



AM I ALONE?

Footsteps behind Or in my mind? Racing home... Am I alone?

Something's following Trouble swallowing My pace quickens Stomach sickens Nervous glance Shadows dance Grow and reach Owl's screech It's so late Cemetery gate Creaks and moans... Am I alone?

Monster waiting Toying, baiting Its fangs bared Hell yes, I'm scared! Beads of sweat... Am I home yet?

Did I hear screaming? I must be dreaming I want to cry, "I'M TOO YOUNG TO DIE!" Chilled to the bone... Am I alone?

Nearly there Can't... breathe... Air! Slam the door Fear no more Safe at home... Not Not alone

-michael seese

etry] Bedbugs -joyce richardson

As it happened, it wasn't the bedbugs, though we were sure of it: our favorite couple scratching and scratching, blood on the sheets, telltale smudges in a line.

They were so much in love, we thought, so pretty, until the bedbugs ruined everything. They couldn't see them, but we could feel them, making wicked paths across the prettiness, tortuous lines right through the love.

There was no escape.

Budget motels had 'em, fancy hotels had 'em, our favorite couple had 'em until they could no longer stand

the scratching, the blood, the bedbugs,

each other.

I Ride a Train

I ride a train that's called Despair. I smoke and smirk and breathe hot air. I ride this train without a smile. It clicks, I groan, and clock the mile.

I ride a bus that's called Chagrin. My face is red, though no one there knows of my past nor sees my sin. If I get off, they'll point and stare.

I ride a boat that called Despond. The murky slough takes me beyond all transpired, all that be, the crime, the shame, now lost at sea.

When life seems dire, I join the choir of those who look to flesh for hire. No more Despair, Chagrin, Despond, I'm trucking on a different pond:

I ride a streetcar named Desire.

—joyce richardson

Collaboration

by jim courter

"What a waste!" A.J. Kraft said more to himself than to anyone in particular as he left the session entitled The Collaborative Experience. "I'm tempted to ask for a prorated refund."

"And I'm tempted to demand one at the point of a gun," Bill Halloran said as he exited the room on Kraft's heels. "In keeping with the genre."

As they walked, A.J. Kraft held up the conference program and read aloud from it, his voice full of sarcasm: "Learn the secrets of collaboration from the successful mystery writing team of Noah Franklin and Ed Weaver—'Frank Eddy'—whose best-selling 'noirvels' have proven to be one of the most popular series of our times." When he was done, he slam-dunked it into a trash receptacle.

"Some secrets," Bill Halloran said. "Self-congratulatory anecdotes and fluff is more like it. They hurried through that session like they were itching to get to the bar."

Having arrived at the entrance to that very spot, Halloran and Kraft, who had crossed paths at the conference in the past couple of days, agreed to stop in and compare notes. They didn't find "Frank Eddy" there, but over drinks—beer for Halloran, cocktails for Kraft—they found in each other a common ambition and a common experience with rejection from publishers and agents that thwarted those ambitions.

Halloran sipped beer and shook his head. "I've never been the same since reading a profile of Naomi Jordan," he said. "Two bestsellers a year. Film deals. Multiple mansions."

"I must've read the same piece," Kraft said. "And I remember thinking to myself, of all the ways to make a fortune, what could be better than sitting at a desk and stringing sentences together. How hard can that be?"

"Hard enough," Halloran said. "For me, anyway. What I hear from my writing group and from the few editors and agents who've bothered to give me feedback is

that my plots are imaginative and compelling but my characters are flat and twodimensional."

"Interesting," Kraft said, scratching his chin. "I get just the opposite. A friend I show my early drafts to says my characters are original yet believable, without being gimmicky, but that my plots are contrived."

They had entered the bar in late afternoon, done with sessions for the day. As they drank and talked into the evening, each spoke of his hope of someday making a killing as a mystery writer and, the liquor having loosened their tongues, even of the expensive pastimes that they hoped to bankroll by doing so.

Halloran's was for gambling; the problem was that his compulsion for it was in inverse proportion to his skill and luck, and he had recently found it difficult to maintain his habit on his pension. A.J. Kraft's was for serial, and sometimes simultaneous, high-maintenance lady friends, whose expensive tastes he found it difficult to indulge on his income as an accountant at a bank.

"Anyway," Halloran said, "when I found out that the Great Lakes Mystery Writers' Conference was here in town this year, and saw the blurb for that session by 'Frank Eddy,' it gave me the idea that collaboration just might be the answer."

"I went for the same reason," Kraft said. "What the hell, shall we give it a shot?" "What have we got to lose?" Halloran said. "If it doesn't work out, we're no worse off."

They clinked glasses, and before parting, exchanged contact information and addresses. They lived only a few miles from each other on the north side of town, Halloran in a high-rise, Kraft in a bungalow. They made a handshake agreement that, soon after returning home from the conference, they would set up a working meeting to see if, between them, they might make one decent, publishable mystery writer.

At their first meeting at Bill Halloran's place, Halloran brought out the 300-page manuscript that he had sent to Kraft as an e-mail attachment in advance, the story of a private eye who had been hired by a United States senator to find his missing son. He plopped it onto the coffee table and said, "I could paper my bathroom with the rejections I've got for this in the last few years. "Did you get around to reading it?"

"I did," Kraft said. "Have you had any feedback on it?"

"A couple of editors and one agent provided comments. I'll give you one guess what they said. Tell me what you think, and don't spare my feelings."

"Okay," Kraft said, his tone carrying a note of warning. "First, the plot is terrific. I especially like the complication in which the PI finds out that the senator's ex has lured their son to the Nazi skinhead compound where she's staying, and the potential damage to the senator's career if that gets out."

"But?"

Kraft cringed. "I don't want to spoil things on our first go at this, but I can see why people say what they do about your characters. Your protagonist PI is pretty much a stereotype. If you overlooked a cliché, I don't know what it is. No offense."

"None taken," Halloran said with a little twist to his smile. "I'm used to it. The question is what to do about it."

From a briefcase A.J. Kraft pulled out the fat notebook of character sketches that he had compiled over the years. He set it on the table and opened it to a tabbed section. "These are cops and PIs," he said. "Physical description, background, tastes, habits, idiosyncrasies, strengths and weaknesses, skill sets, even samples of dialogue. I already have some ideas about which one might work in your story, but I don't want to influence you. See what you think. If you don't mind, as you read I'd like to check out the view from your balcony."

It was near dusk, and A.J. Kraft went out with the drink Halloran had made him, not exactly mixed to his taste—What can you expect from a beer drinker?—and stood at the railing, seventeen floors above the street. The view of the city center and beyond it the lake was terrific, but he reeled from vertigo when he looked down, which for some reason he couldn't resist doing. After making sure Halloran wasn't watching, he poured the drink into a potted plant and sat at a bistro table while Halloran read.

"I'm impressed," Halloran said when they were back together inside. "They manage to be distinctive yet believable, not with some cutesy, contrived set of interests like a lot of characters you see in mysteries these days. With a little tweaking, maybe even combining certain elements from two or three of them, I think we might be in business. And while we're at it, I'd love it if you could maybe work on adding touches to some of my other characters."

Kraft tapped the side of his head with a finger. "Up here," he said, "I've already started."

Over the next several weeks, they met once at Kraft's place but mostly at Halloran's, where, weather permitting, they worked out on the balcony. After ironing out some personal and artistic differences and sublimating others—each thought the other drank too much, for one thing—they arrived at an agreeable working system, joking that they complemented each other like yeast and flour, although they couldn't agree on which one was which. A couple of months of dedicated work yielded a serviceable draft; a few weeks later they deemed it ready to send off. After some rancorous negotiation over the title that left each doubting the other's judgment, they settled on *Rhymes with Fool*—a play on the name of the protagonist private investigator, Barry Pool—and on the collaborative nom de plume B.J. Hallcraft. Ignoring policies against simultaneous submissions, they sent it to about three dozen agents.

The initial responses were form rejections of the kind both of them had long been used to. One had an encouraging comment that the piece was "well written and entertaining but not right for my list at this time." Finally, just as they began to give up hope, a relatively new agent asked to see the whole manuscript. A month after they sent it to him, he agreed to represent them. Three months later they got news that he had landed the piece with a mid-sized press. The advance was \$2,000, which of course they would have to split, *after* their agent took his fifteen percent.

When they got around to celebrating, they were low-key about it, both being much more ambitious to make serious money. Now that they were to be published, neither considered half of two-thousand minus fifteen percent serious money.

When the time came to work out a contract, one of the matters they had to settle was disposition of rights and royalties in the event of the demise of one of them. Bill Halloran, long divorced from a childless marriage, suggested that the surviving partner should inherit all that was due to the other. It so happened that A.J Kraft's thinking on the matter had run along the same track. He had never married and had no living family, or at least none that he saw fit to leave anything to. Kraft was willing to indulge his expensive lady friends in this life, but not from beyond the grave. In the spirit of their collaboration, they agreed that the surviving partner would inherit everything. "What the hell," Bill Halloran joked, "it's chump change anyway."

Published to no critical notice or acclaim, Rhymes with Fool was granted limited shelf space at Barnes and Noble and sold a mere handful of copies. It merited no second printing and was soon consigned to the bargain section.

By this time their partnership was strained. Each had begun secretly to blame the other for the failure of Rhymes with Fool to make a splash and to see the other's weakness—Halloran's for gambling, Kraft's for the ladies—as signs of deep character flaws that had ruined the collaboration.

And then it happened! They received news from their agent that someone connected with a Hollywood studio had picked up Rhymes with Fool—it seems the title had caught his eye—from the bargain shelf at a Barnes and Noble in L.A., read and seen in it what he thought was film-worthy potential. He pitched it to a studio exec and got the green light. No production plans were in place yet, but the studio wanted the rights on spec and was offering \$100,000. Their agent recommended that they accept.

For both of them, the news couldn't have come at a better time.

Bill Halloran's losses at gambling—some of them online, some in smoky back rooms—had reached the point that his debts had grown to alarming proportions, and he was being shadowed by a couple of menacing characters. And A.J. Kraft, in a moment of weakness and gullibility, had been taken for several thousand dollars in the form of a "loan" to the most recent of his lady friends who, upon receiving the money, skipped town without leaving a forwarding address. In fact, so pressing was their respective financial need that each one had begun to think how fine it would be to fatten his bank account by \$85,000—the \$100,000 minus the agent's fifteen percent—instead of \$42,500.

When Bill Halloran suggested that a champagne celebration was in order and that the place for it was on the balcony of his apartment, where the project had been nurtured, A.J. Kraft was relieved that he didn't have to suggest it himself and, in doing so, risk giving away his intentions.

"I feel like pinching myself to see if I'm dreaming," Bill Halloran said between sips of champagne.

"I'd just as soon you didn't," A.J. Kraft said. "If you're dreaming, then so am I, and I'd rather not wake up."

They were out on the balcony under a starry sky on a warm night. A gentle breeze bore the scent of lilacs all the way up to them from seventeen stories below. Bill Halloran, standing with his back to the railing, fashioned a smile, raised his glass and said, "To success."

A.J. Kraft raised his glass. "And to much more of it."

Kraft stepped from the middle of the balcony toward Halloran, hoping that the vertigo he experienced before wouldn't unman him at this crucial moment. When they grew close enough, they clinked glasses, drank, set the empty glasses down on the bistro table, and turned to take in the view.

After a moment, Halloran stepped back and to the side to position himself behind Kraft. But as he did, he found Kraft trying to do the same thing with regard to him. They bumped knees awkwardly, looked at each other, and in that instant each saw his intention mirrored in the other's face. Within seconds, like two wrestlers, they had locked arms and were engaged in a struggle for enough leverage to tip the other over the railing.

The contest was about equal. A.J. Kraft, taller by a few inches, might have gone over more easily, but he was younger and stronger. After a brief struggle during which neither was willing to let go his grip, they found themselves face-to-face, still locked together, and rushing at sickening speed to the sidewalk below.

As they fell, it flashed through Bill Halloran's mind that if he had been better at character he might have seen into A.J. Kraft keenly enough to anticipate his intentions; through Kraft's, the lament that if he had been better at imagining plot, he might have anticipated Halloran's deception.

Their being in extremis, however, those thoughts remained unarticulated. Instead, in the seconds it took them to fall seventeen stories—each the betrayer, each the betrayed—they howled animal rage and horror in each other's face until they arrived at simultaneous, hideous impact and instant death on the unyielding concrete, very near some passersby out for a leisurely stroll in the mild, lilac-scented evening.



We Will Pardon the Witches in Salem

No longer will we see your shadows on the hill, darkening our history, blackening our suns. We called you "Witch" when you appeared on Sunday mornings promenading your toads on leashes.

When does a kind lady, a strange neighbor, anyone with warts become a hag? We, so full of our own spidery dreads, break out in crimson rashes, grow boils on our bums. Because of you, Susannah Martin, we lay stricken in the kitchen: cream curdles. eggs break bloody, pudding fails.

But soon the day will dawn when we wake without your demons: no more will we scream when rooster crows.

We have loaded you on the cart and driven down the Hill.

We have pardoned the witches, the witches in Salem.

Tell me, darkling pagans, who will pardon us

—joyce richardson

LE CHROUE

I read in the newspaper not long ago that twenty tiny ortolans were roasted and presented to diners at Le Cirque, a restaurant extraordinaire.

Draped with large napkins over their heads to contain the aroma of the freshly roasted birds, blasé eaters held the tiny ortolans by their skulls.

With lust glistening upon their lips, mouths working, mandables grinding little bones, tongues swimming in tasty, sweet broth,

eyes closed under the fine linen napkins tenting the privacy of their high-priced gluttony, they gobbled down beaks and all.

This main course at Le Cirque, the ortolan, belonging to the subfamily Emberizinae of the family Emberizadae, has a lyrical genesis.

The diminutive birds perch innocently upon their multisyllabic family tree where they sing rich and haunting melodies.

But life's song is chaotic, atonal, and hurried. Sour notes hit haphazardly, otherwise, why would the ortolan migrate to France where they are considered a delicacy?



—lee glantz

Beach Jhing

Some ate bread and cheese while others swam in the midnight sea calling out to each other from time to time as though to reassure themselves that they were still real A girl on the shore laughed, hiccupped, and laughed again and someone, tunelessly, whistled "Brown-Eved Girl" Two boys buried a third boy neck deep in the sand and shook water droplets on him until the drops looked like tears on his upturned face A pair of lovers ran laughing into the dunes and others followed. pretending to search for them The bonfire, when they built it, burned bright with bits of their nightmares and pieces of things that their parents had told them were true Their hopes and dreams for the future. when added to the pyre, sent a shower of sparks racing toward heaven And orange reflections danced in their eyes until the last ember had faded and they slept

-mary king

Only Me—

In this fantasy do I hold thee like a candy dream, where neither of us wake up. Bound so delicately, thee will be, by licorice ropes and rags, seated on sugar wood nailed to cotton concrete.

To ensure thine love not flow so hastily, but gradually! With words and knives.

My dearest! How much thy skin will bleed velvet hymns of red soft ribbons; I will kiss thy pain away. Quiet lullabies and verses will pass both our lips night after night, full moons our beacon, gray sunlight showering the wedding of thy moaned confessions by the chocolate trees and honey hued animals.

The ocean will then lick the salt from our colorless faces; hands intertwined all the way to our casket.

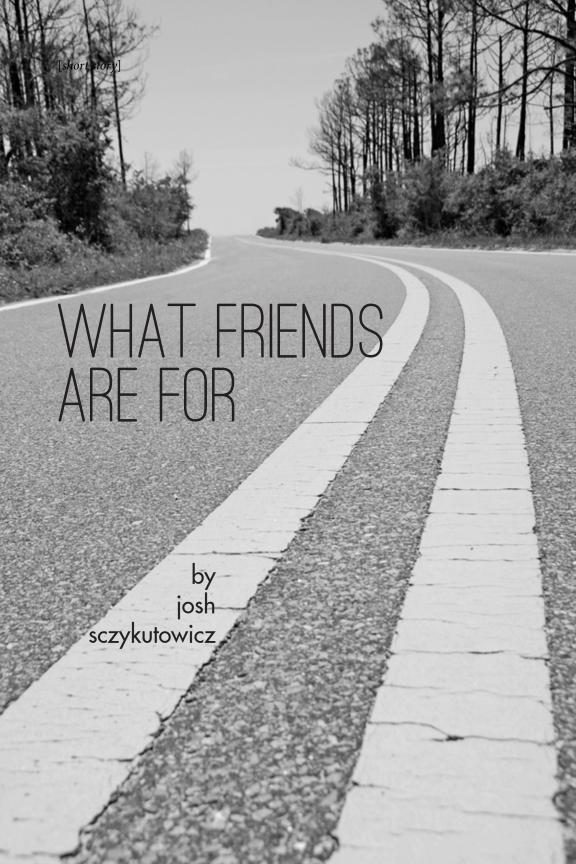
-mckinley henson

Barely a Portrait, Images, Transitions

(Niles High School, Niles, Michigan)

You will find her here blowing soap bubbles, chewing gum cigars, old time candy and toy ass radio player. Sara is still a cheerleader in mind, chest player beast bare in pink station wagon, front seats laded back. Everything exposed was pink in 1965, popular. Everyone high up was chest player academically, low-end checker players were at miniature golf, beneath blankets at US 31 outdoor theaters. High school is a status golden whore passing daily in the hallways. Sara flute blower in narrow dark and stashed in lover's lane, the Junior prom never ended, the Senior prom never began. Shades off, make-up smeared past midnight, broken gold chains, class rings lost, class sweaters returned to sender, address unknown, sex a touch and feel, poetic review, times.

-michael lee johnson



The days are growing long and the nights are turning black. Summer has set in, the seats sticking to skin in the cab of Gary's truck. I-75 runs southbound as you head toward St. Petersburg, fraying tires and a shaking frame passing along tired road suspended by trunks of concrete. If you were to make him pull over at the next rest stop, mosquitoes would cling to all exposed patches of skin, picking and chewing upon your pale flesh. For a Florida boy you sure see little sunlight, you think to yourself. This sunset is your sunrise; the evening is your morning. You have had nowhere to go and nothing to do for a length of time, the kind of length that blends and fades into one indeterminable blur. Days become weeks and weeks become months and months become ether of time indescribable, where the dates are useless and the hour hands unreadable in your blurring vision.

"We are all controlled from the stomach down," Gary says, words flowing from his mouth with non-filtered cigarettes, ash dropping onto his pant legs. "It's all about feeding and fucking, my friend, just feeding and fucking. Let's say you get a job, what are you doing that for? To get money to buy food and shelter and in that shelter you'll be posturing, decorating, making it appealing to whoever you might bring back, probably someone you meet at that job or because of it, or someplace you can only get to because of the money you've made. It's all appetites, conventional and sexual, informing our higher selves, now, isn't it?"

"What about religion though," you say, the words dry and tired, and you wonder why you say it. The last time you set foot in a church, your hair was cut by your mother in the kitchen and your shoes were worn from playing outside. You have not played, let alone outside, in forever ago. But the mosquitoes were still there, their high-pitched whine only audible beside your ears which you smack at uselessly with a sleeve pulled up past your wrists and over your palm, wanting to hide all vulnerable skin from these insects that seek to feed on you.

"Feeding and fucking still," he says. "Maybe even more so, really. It's about marriage, isn't it? About procreation and parenting. The Ten Commandments mention sex and parents even, it's so ingrained. You're supposed to marry the opposite sex and have lots and lots of babies and teach them the same dogma that encourages the same things. That's about it, isn't it? Why do you think homosexuality is so frowned upon by the religious? It doesn't conform to the procreating narrative they demand. And the feeding, well, c'mon, they eat their savior every Sunday eve, don't they? At least the Catholics do—the old school ones."

In moments like these as the sun goes down and casts this state in an ethereal gloom, a world that exists between worlds, where the deep South tinges begin to come forth while the sound of birds and passing cars flood your ears, in moments like these you look at Gary from the side, look at the cigarette dangling from his mouth, the hands on the cracked pleather wheel and the windows rolled down because the A/C was broken long before he owned it.

When you were a child you used to dream of the end of the world. When you look at him in these moments you realize where you have seen him before: he is a preacher of the apocalypse, cutting all down to the most basic levels, seeing things as mere bottom-line and bullshit. He stands at his pulpit and preaches doom, doom, doom as the ash of the old world rains down like snow around his flock, falls to his pant legs, the embers fading fast as a new light's born in the twilight of transition from a world of day to a world of darkness, of midnight stars and moonless eves.

You never smoked, but the burning cigarette is somehow satisfying, your eyes burning as you catch the worse end of the deal between the two of you, second-hand smoke breathed in deeply.

You have started running out of money, the one reliable constant of your life; however long ago it was it seemed that you had enough to last, it seemed that you wouldn't even use half of what you had saved. You have always prepared for terrible circumstances. Unemployment could never last that long, really, and you would have a new job so fast you'd hardly remember this period of nothing. But that was long ago, and checking your bank balance has become a reliable way to induce anxiety.

But while you have been emaciating yourself, eating nothing first out of depression and next out of a lack of money for groceries, Gary is always doing... something, but you never know what. You never think to ask Gary about these types of things, because you know the answers will amount to nothing of substance anyways. He is not concerned with normal priorities; he is not interested in your typical conversations. No, Gary is fascinated by other things. Things you do not ask about. Things that speak from swamps and the mud-smeared maws of alligators, climbing from the ocean and through the Everglades, dragging itself onto roads that are not maintained where overgrowth rises up from the cracked earth, pavement splitting as if a bomb dropped not too far from this place in a distant age. Gary is the kind of man you would have avoided once upon a time, but the fairy tale illusions of life have dissipated, and the very phrase "once upon a time" makes you want to leap from the truck onto the interstate out of disgust with yourself for using such words. Behind every cynic is a tarnished idealist of the highest degree.

An hour ago Gary showed up at your apartment complex and told you he was going to the ocean. You knew this was his form of an invitation. You left the cup of coffee that you were holding behind on the kitchen counter, half-emptied and steam rolling off the top.

You have never let him smoke in your apartment, not wanting the constant odor to cling to carpets and couches, your clothing already suffering this fate. He stood outside as he always does, ashes falling onto the walkway before he could hear you head toward the opened door. When you got outside, he was already down the staircase affixed to the corner of your building, the staircase where you have watched drug deals take place on empty Thursday nights and seen drugged out girls making poor sexual decisions with the buyers on desperate Saturday nights. You used to walk past this building beside the highway and wonder how anyone could let themselves end up in a place like this. You used to do a lot of things.

You are not bothered by this place anymore. Maybe it was the dirt cheap rent that changed your mind; maybe it was your girlfriend moving out that made it acceptable, because anything would be acceptable then. Maybe it was all of the girls you tried to replace her with in your bed, girls who disappeared the next

morning or stuck around long enough to make it last a weekend that made it feel okay again. Or maybe it was Gary, constantly reminding you that everything is failing, everything is collapsing, everything is spiraling downward and at least your apartment is embracing it. Maybe that made it no worse than anywhere else in your mind.

You looked at his truck sitting alone, the parking lot half-filled. You can never seem to recall a moment when it was ever completely full. Maybe it is because of the constant vacancies or maybe it is the fact that no one who lives here wants to remain, all spending as much time at parties in other counties found in the center of Florida where no tourist traveling to Disney World ever thinks to go; counties where people kill turtles with hooks and knives as entertainment and meet up in Walmart parking lots, following the convoy of trucks and used, over-clocked cars to whatever house is the night's victim. You have gone to a few of these parties now, parties where girls are missing teeth and wearing as few garments as possible, where if you can get ahold of any amount of meth or weed, you can get laid, if you don't mind getting tested the next day to quell your paranoia. Each time you have gone, you have been with Gary, where you never met a host and never had to make the usual rounds. People were simply there, and maybe no one was sure if anyone knew who anyone was.

But tonight you know you are not going to one of these parties, and as you walk toward his truck you realize you have begun to see it in Biblical terms, not a vehicle but a horse of the apocalypse, a saddle built for two. Now as you drive along the interstate you watch as the marathon of trees begins to turn into dying small towns, gas stations and fast food establishments keeping their economies floating just high enough to gasp for air, doing nothing else particularly well. These towns that exist to push their children away and into other places or box them in and force them to die from heart attacks at forty, force them to have children at fifteen and become grandparents at thirty, begin to give way to pure road, road beneath you and road beside you, twisting as road runs above you and the sun fades from the horizon almost completely. Everything is a dull purple and red now, the jack-o'lantern glow of streetlights causing all to look black and brown, the road the shade of sand and dirt. Headlights pass you by.

"People are always waiting for the world to end," Gary preaches to you, "What they don't understand or don't allow themselves to see is that it already has. It's all sliding back. It's all drifting aimlessly now. We are just passengers on a plane wondering why it is that the ocean beneath seems so much closer, trusting the pilot to pull us up if we get too close, not realizing that he already jumped out with the last parachute strapped to his back."

You cannot remember when it was that you first saw him. Long before meeting him, you had seen him, standing in corners with his arms crossed and smoke constantly trailing from his face, fingers jittering like the legs of an insect, the limbs of a mosquito trailing across your arm before it finds a suitable spot to sink its straw of a mouth into you and engorge itself on blood. You saw him smoking and leaving a trail behind, footprints of smoldering, coiling ash. He was the kind of person you

would ask your friends about in hushed tones, in backyards while drinking and staring at the water behind the house you were in, the only thing keeping you from wading out a dark green chain link fence that you could simply hop over, fall over, be pushed over at any moment.

People would talk if you brought it up, but no one ever really added anything. "I think maybe Lydia brought him."

"No, no, it was Mark, right? He's a friend of Mark's."

"You're both wrong, he's Jenna's boyfriend."

"Jenna's a lesbian."

By the end of the exchange all anyone knew was that no one knew. You should have been off-put, and maybe you were, but like footage of car accidents and natural disasters you could not help but want to watch, want to see for yourself. If life were a horror movie this would be the scene where half of the audience has their hands to their faces, yet their fingers spread apart just enough to sneak brutal glances. You would be the one viewer facing ahead, popcorn still rising to mouth.

It took a few of his mystery appearances for you to meet him, but you cannot remember when it was. You remember talking to him as he sold plastic baggies to a group of girls with cheap tattoos lining their backs that are visible in their strappy tank tops, tattoos they let you touch as you ask what each stands for, always trying to talk you into getting some of your own. You remember watching him get women to take their bras off in his truck for him, remember seeing him through the glass of his windshield moving as a shadow illuminated by the cherry-red light dangling where his mouth must be, has to be. But you do not remember when it was that you said hello to him, learned his name from him, shook his hand and worried what might be on it before heading to the bathroom shortly after and scrubbing more than you are accustomed to.

But what you do remember is the desire you had to see him again. That sticks out still. You started going to more parties, calling more friends and asking what they were doing that weekend, pursuing more empty drinking and smoke clouds of marijuana from the people around you as you sought out the tall, looming man who always had on clothes nicer than you would think he could afford, a black military hat fitted against his head and above his glasses, and for all of his height and shoulder width was skinnier than you. You remember seeing him again after countless parties and sleeping with girls who you thought were attractive enough to hide their personalities. You have not met a girl you have really liked in a long time, not since Karen moved away. Maybe it was the shadow she cast over your life that made you seek out a man like Gary to attach yourself to, maybe she is the reason for everything, or maybe it was the lack of a father figure and need for approval that did it. Maybe you don't really care what the reason is. Maybe it was inevitable, one of those certainties that some ascribe to fate.

You remember talking to him again, breathing in his smoke, asking him questions he deflected in a way that from anyone else would tell you they did not want to talk to you, but for some reason coming from Gary seemed like his way of showing interest. The less he tells you about himself the longer you will want to

know about him and that will keep you around. People who seem so larger than life rarely live up to it in their private moments.

The end of the world followed him around as you met him again. He said he had to go buy a cup of coffee as you stood out on the lawn with him. He went to his truck and sat inside of it, his door half open, the cigarette glow that makes up his face in the dark pointed at you. You stood there, not drunk but well on the way, wondering why he wasn't leaving, until you decided to walk toward him. His door shut. You tried the passenger side and found it was unlocked. This was when you discovered Gary does not ask if you want to go anywhere, simply announces his next destination and waits to see if you will follow.

As his truck moved toward the highway and found a convenience store to buy cheap coffee, cop cars sat at the sides of roads with lights flashing. Fire engines barreled down streets, smoke in the air from someplace in the distance. Ambulances moved men and women and children to hospitals and morgues. You were in a town you rarely went to, simply for the sake of the party; your apartment complex was too far to go back to without a ride. You had never seen so many emergency vehicles, so many car crashes before. You would see a lot more of those in the near future. You begin to grow used to seeing the world through his windshield, emergency lights flashing, taking him up on his regular invitations lacking question marks.

Now, here you are, passing the last rest stop for the next fifteen miles, the sun fully set and the darkness all-encompassing as another summer night begins to absorb all around it. You can see flashing cop cars in the city ahead, see all of the things that Gary seems to find or that seem to find Gary. You have never seen his home but you have always imagined it being beside a hospital or a prison.

Rain begins to fall as it so often does here and Gary rolls his window up halfway, you mirroring his actions, not wanting the windows to fog up too much. The next fifteen miles are lost in a haze of torrential downpour, the kind that comes out of nowhere and passes soon after. If it were daylight, when the rain stopped, an hour later the sidewalks would already be dry, steam rising like ethereal hands reaching for the sun. But it isn't daylight, not anymore, and you know that rain ditches and reservoirs and the back of the truck will be flooded until the morning comes. For now the windshield wipers are sliding back and forth, slower than they should be, yet Gary seems uninhibited, driving just as he always does, rain hitting him as he keeps an arm raised, smoke rolling out the window.

He turns to the next rest stop, and without saying anything you assume he wants to wait for the rain to pass, wants to urinate or buy himself a cup of coffee someplace as he always does. There is a cop car busting a truck that contains a prostitute and driver. You find yourself parked closer than you wish you were.

You get out when he does, shut your door as he does, walk into the Denny's attached to the bathrooms as he does. There is a small convenience store attached, and you enter it. He buys himself coffee, you buy yourself one. You think of the half-emptied cup left on the kitchen counter by the coffee maker in your apartment, think of how it must have lost all warmth ten minutes after beginning this seemingly aimless trip. It is getting late and you have to wonder why it is that you are going to the ocean at night. You may be running out of money, but two dollars and fifty cents is a vice you can fuel. Still, there is a hesitance in your hand as you swipe your debit card and Gary sees this.

"Are you needing money?"

"I'll be alright," you say, not even believing yourself as you say it.

"We can fix that."

You don't know what he means by this. You soon will. You walk outside and stand beneath an overhang, watching the rain accumulate. Thunder rolls in the distance. The both of you finish your cups within minutes of each other, tossing yours into the trash can with an ashtray that Gary is already taking advantage of attached to the lid. You cross your arms, hiding your fingertips from the cold air; it is funny to think that thirty minutes ago this air would have been hot and you would have been doing the same thing still, only hiding from mosquitoes rather than drops of rain.

He finishes his cigarette and is walking away from you now, still holding his cup for some reason, no words coming from the hole in his face that never seems to eat but only inhales smoke, until he stops at the bathrooms and turns to see you standing in the same spot, simply watching.

"Come on," he says, and the apocalypse follows. Not your apocalypse, but someone else's.

You follow him, confused but too tired to care, too stressed and lost to feel much else. At least this is not your apartment. At least this is not your town.

In the bathroom a man stands at a urinal, but not for long as Gary walks up behind him and grabs the back of his neck, the man starting to shout "Hey, fuck off" but Gary doesn't want to talk, he wants to shove his head into the porcelain protruding from the wall and he does so effortlessly. This is not the first time he has done this, you think, too stunned to react.

As the man has his face brought down on the urinal and submerged in his own collected piss, Gary brings a foot down on the back of his head, repeating the motion like riding a bicycle until the bottom of the porcelain breaks off and dust powders the blood on the floor. He flips him over, looks at his face, his own calm, a still expression, the same as it always is. He rests kneeling down, his arms resting across his protruding knees, taking his hat off and wiping his forehead once before reattaching it. He stops staring and stands back up, turning and looking into a mirror, checking himself over, fixing the hat, grabbing a paper towel and wiping blood from his cheek and the back of his left wrist. He even wipes off the bottom of his shoes. He walks back over, kneels back down, pats the man over and finds a wallet inside of a leather jacket. He removes it and sorts through a stack of bills, keeps a few and hands the rest to you, the wallet in his own back pocket.

"I don't want this."

"C'mon," he says, and smiles, his too-white teeth on display, "it's what friends are for."

This is how Gary gets his money.

You want to panic and turn, run and find the officer who was harassing the lonely truck driver. This is more important than a man wanting sex and a woman desperate enough to give it for cash, this is a dead man whose name you do not know but could find out if you just took his wallet from Gary's pants.

But instead you take the money and pocket it, looking it over first. There is a lot there. More than you would have guessed. Whoever the dead man is, he really enjoyed carrying hundred dollar bills. This is rent. This is groceries. This is a new set of clothes that do not smell like smoke and booze, beer and pussy.

But that would be wrong.

"Thanks," you say.

"Don't sweat it, buddy," he goes, using the urinal beside the man. He flushes and picks up the Styrofoam coffee cup he came in with but dropped before attacking the dead man, pulling the lid off. He washes his hands and rinses the cup with soap and water as if he is doing the dishes and pulls a knife from his back pocket, the one opposite the wallet. He squats back down, holds the man's arm up, pulls back the jacket sleeve. He makes a small incision surgically along the wrist and collects the blood in the cup, careful not to overfill it. He pulls it away, drops the arm, and lets the rest bleed out onto the floor with a drain set in the center. He fits the lid back on. The knife is rinsed off and put back in his pants. He walks past you and pats you on the shoulder, a way of telling you it is time to go.

As you leave the dead man behind and follow Gary you look for the police cruiser but see that it is already gone. How can it be gone? The truck it was stopping is gone, too. You look back at the convenience store and the Denny's and see that the only cars left in the wide parking lot are the employee's, Gary's truck and the truck of the man whose money sits folded in your front pocket beside your own wallet.

You get into the truck, blood flowing to your head, a dull thud as you hear your own heartbeat in the back of your brain, your legs not wanting to work as you open the passenger door and sit back down, not noticing the rain that pours down onto you.

As you strap your seatbelt on, a habit even this feeling you cannot name cannot keep you from acting on, Gary leans across you, opening the glove compartment with a key. As the light turns on you see into it for the first time. He places the wallet inside of it. It is filled with wallets.

You continue your drive.

He stops again. You do not know how long it has been. You have not looked at the time. Time is a flexible thing here, bending and contracting, folding and unrolling. The coffee cup sits in the holder beside your arm. You look around and see that the rain has stopped pouring; you see that you are on a road that runs above the ocean and leads to part of some city somewhere along the coast but you cannot think of any names right now. You think of all of the names that fill up that glove compartment, think of all of the bad driver's license photos that accompany them.

There are no cars in either direction, just Gary's horse hitched to the concrete.

No headlights glow ahead of you. None glint off of the rearview mirror. He has exited the vehicle. You exit as well. He is getting a large high-powered flashlight whose plastic casing is the color of sun out of the tool chest in the back of his truck that is currently flooded with rainwater. He reaches back into the cab and comes out with the coffee cup. He walks to the edge of the road and stands at the waisthigh barrier. He motions you over. You follow.

"Feeding and fucking, my friend," Gary says to you. "This is the end of the world. We're in it. We are the leftover children of the atom bomb blast. We are the remnants of civilization. These are the inheritors of our world."

He pours the blood into the ocean below. He waits a few minutes. He turns the flashlight on and points its beam into the ocean below, black surface now illuminated, if only for a few feet down. You see that the keys are still in the truck. You see that he is watching the blood swirl in the water. His face is dull and empty still, like that of a statue. Then they begin to flock. One at first, then more. Your brain is not thinking, simply interpreting whatever is placed in front of it and all in front of it right now is water, deep and glinting as the light reflects off of the surface and blood swirling in it, sinking into it, and shadows, shadows moving back and forth, until one nears the surface and your brain recognizes that there are sharks in the water, swimming back and forth, looking for feed.

"There they are," he says, and smiles, his teeth shining. How are his teeth so white, you wonder, and before he can open his mouth again your hand is on his back and pushing forward, all of your energy behind it, unthinking, not affording to think, and he is over the edge already, his waist bending and feet in the air and flashlight still in his hand as he twirls and falls, a loud splash as the feeding begins and you think about Karen, think about the fucking again. You look at the light that is swirling underwater and flickering as water causes it to die, and as the sharks tear Gary apart you think of the mosquitoes that will eat you alive as years go by.

You look back and forth on the road again and look at the keys in the truck and climb into the driver's side. You hope no one will miss Gary. You hope you can find a way to leave this truck someplace away from you, find a way to dissociate and forget any of this. You hope you can find a way to convince yourself this was just the man from your childhood nightmares, recurring as an adult, nothing more. Memory works that way so often. Things bleed together. Moments you remember from childhood end up being stories you were told; dreams you once had were actually reality. The reverse has to be true as well. You think of the cup of coffee in your kitchen and think of how good it will taste, even though it has sat out all evening. You look forward to the very last drop.



Crossing the Border Divide

Crossing that Canadian line on a visitor pass. that stretch across the border divide.

that makes a torn war wound, torn man free.

It made my feet new away from red cinder land on fresh grass.

Back home the sirens of war keep sounding off.

like common masturbation from one decade to another.

All us wearing new/old bloodstains.

poetry images of erections coming up, WW2, a real war.

My dirty hands, on your hands, our memories shared red, white and blue justified, hell.

Who does not have memories, bad cinder charcoal smoke screen in the dark flame?

September comes early in Canada-October in the USA.

Leaves fall early swirling in touchdowns both sides of the border.

September north, but at least the bullets cease.

Cast a poem South, you likely die in Vietnam or come back wounded.

Cast a poem North, you likely suffers mental illness but come back on pills.

Here comes again, thunder, in the rain, stroke by lightening,

war bore crossing a border divide.

-michael lee johnson

the parrot

by paul edmonds

The last time I saw my sister, she was living in a squalid apartment above an appliance repair shop. I'd just gotten divorced. My ex, Bruce, was the reason Tina and I hadn't seen each other in over a decade. They'd been a couple when he and I got together. I knew when I met him that I would steal him away. It wasn't hard. I was a couple years older than Tina, more developed in the places teenage boys care about, and I used those attributes to my advantage. It's not something I'm proud of, but that's what happened.

Bruce was a musician. Not long after we hooked up he began playing bass in a band called the Abscesses. They started out small, gigging in dive bars and at town fairs around the Northeast, but eventually they hooked their raucous wagon to some pretty big groups. They did the opening-act thing for a while and over time pulled in enough fans to start headlining. They shook up every city they played, leaving it debased and with its ears ringing. All of this while I scored drugs and spread my legs and rode quietly in the back of the tour bus. But as the Abscesses blew up and Bruce perfected his rock star persona, he decided he needed a new girl, one with less mileage, and I got the ax. Our lawyers had a powwow, and I

walked away with a good chunk of Bruce's swelling fortune—severance pay for my years of service.

Along with a husband, I lost most of my friends, and the few that stuck around kept trying to push me back into Bruce's arms. I spent a couple months in Los Angeles, hanging around the old haunts, but the guilt trips got to be too much. That and I started to think about Tina. The lost years, the bitter memories. How I'd bagged on our mother's funeral, ashamed to face my sister, the relatives who knew what I'd done.

I decided to go back east, make peace, and try to reclaim a part of the life I'd sacrificed for six feet of jizz-fueled swagger.

I found Tina's e-mail address online and wrote her that I was flying back to Massachusetts. I asked if we could get together, have lunch, catch-up. A couple days went by and I didn't hear from her. I figured reconciliation was a lost cause. But then she wrote back, said I could visit, and gave me her address, which I recognized as one of the dumpy apartment buildings in our hometown. I'd traveled the world, had eaten lobster on private jets, but she'd never gotten out, had settled down in the very place she'd always sworn to leave behind.

I sat at the curb outside her place for twenty minutes before going up and ringing the bell. Along with a nasty drug habit, I'd picked up panic attacks while on tour with the band. The coke I'd kicked, but the anxiety stuck around, like a stubborn vagrant squatting inside a piano crate. I could feel it on the fringes just then, ready to creep in. I had my Xanax for emergencies, and considered popping one, but they made me loopy, and I needed a clear head if I was going to say all the things I wanted to say.

As soon as I saw Tina, leaning in the doorway of that smelly building, I felt the power of my own flesh and blood. She'd put on a lot of weight, and her hair was thinning prematurely, but underneath she was the same sister I'd given piggy-back rides to, the one I'd baked cookies with, the one I'd taught to ride a bike. We hugged and then stood there looking at each other. She was wearing a pair of faded jeans and a gray wool sweater that looked itchy and hot. She had on some cheap jewelry, and I thought how after I left it would probably go back into an old cigar box or a coffee can. Seeing her broke and broken-down, was a splash of acid on my heart.

We went upstairs, and the apartment was just as I'd envisioned it. It was three rooms, a living room, a bedroom, and a bathroom, with an open kitchen area along the back wall. There was a small stove and a refrigerator that made hollow knocking sounds, like someone was underneath it with a wooden mallet, banging away. Dirty dishes lined a short counter next to a tiny sink. There were broken toys all over the place, cars without wheels, army men that were missing heads and legs. It looked a lot like the house we'd grown up in.

Tina led us to a folding table that was setup near the sink. I put my purse on the floor and took a seat in a stiff metal chair. She apologized for her husband not being there. He was seeing about a job up in Springfield. She'd told me about him in her e-mail. His name was Adam, and from the way she described him, he didn't see much in the way of steady work.

She went over to the fridge and pulled out a plate covered in foil. She set it on the table, went back for a pitcher of lemonade, and put it down next to the plate. Chunks of ice and slices of lemon tinkled against the thin glass.

I wanted to spill my guts right then, apologize for everything, but I chickened out, said, "You always made the best lemonade. Remember how much sugar you used to put in it? I'm surprised we still have teeth."

She leaned against the counter, reached between some dishes, and grabbed a pack of cigarettes. She lit one, took a couple puffs. "Sure. Mom called it sludge. There was always that sludge in the bottom of the glass."

I laughed, and things got quiet again. The sounds of late-morning traffic came in through an open window. A small oscillating fan rattled back and forth, moving around the sour air.

Tina picked ash off her sweater, and a chunk of gray wool came up with it. She wiped her fingers on her pants. "I miss her. She was my best friend after you left town." She looked at me, smoke curling over her thin lips. "She missed you a lot." She stubbed her half-smoked cigarette on a crusted dinner plate. "We both did."

I shifted in my chair. "I didn't think you'd see me," I said, not looking at her, staring at the lemonade, the bits of pulp floating in it. "You said—we said some awful things."

"They were just words, Janey." She put a hand on my wrist. I looked up at her. "But we're sisters, right?"

I laid my hand over hers. "Absolutely."

Tina pulled away and poked her head into the living room. "Julian, come and get it," she called, then sat down across from me.

The bedroom door creaked open. A blonde boy came out, scratching his head. He wore a bleach-spotted T-shirt and underwear with yellow ducks on them. *Julian, my nephew.* Tina had written me about him, too—about all three of her kids. Julian was four. Her twins, Scott and Troy, were eight, and at school that morning. In my nervousness, I'd forgotten all about them. Or maybe it was just my memory of Tina that'd blocked them out. The last time I'd seen her she'd been a sixteen-year-old tomboy, and the thought of her as a mother was something I was still getting my head around.

"Close the door," Tina barked. Then, in a softer voice, "Close the door, baby. You'll let the warm air in."

"You'll let the warm air in," Julian repeated, and smiled. He went back and pulled the door shut with a soft click.

"Come here," Tina said.

"Come here," Julian said, and padded across the thin carpet.

Tina grabbed him by the arm and nodded toward me. "Do you know who that is?"

"Know who that is?"

"That's your auntie. Auntie Janey. She's my big sister."

Julian flapped his arms, giggled. "She's my big sister."

I got on my knees. "Hi, big boy. Nice to finally meet you." I gave him a kiss on

the cheek, then another on the forehead.

"Finally meet you," he said.

I hugged Julian, looked up at Tina. "He's so damn adorable. Does he always do that?"

Tina lit another cigarette. "What? The repeating?"

"That's all he does. Repeats things." She tapped ash into a plastic cup. "If he doesn't hear it from someone else, he won't say it."

"Oh," I said, running my hands through Julian's hair. "And it's okay?"

Tina blew out smoke. "We had him checked. The school sent us to this speech guy in Boston. Lots of kids do it. It's called Echolella. Or Echolalia, rather. But Adam and I just call it his parrot. Like there's a little parrot in his mouth."

"That's cute," I said. Julian started rubbing my tattoos, one arm and then the other. "So it's normal?"

"Look at you, all concerned," Tina said, and grinned. "I guess it usually starts to wind down when the kid is two or three, but in some cases it can last longer. Julian's one of those special cases."

Julian stepped over to Tina, and she took him onto her lap.

"Well, he's a special boy, I can tell," I said, hoping to sound upbeat, but even a childless ex-groupie like me knew there was more than just a little something going on with Julian. Still, I didn't want to press my luck. Things were starting to thaw between Tina and me, and it felt good.

She peeled the foil back from the plate. Egg and tuna salad sandwiches, cut into triangles. I took one, laid it on a napkin, and then poured us some lemonade. Julian reached for a sandwich, and Tina gave him one. Then she sent him off with a pat on the butt. The television came on a moment later, and a familiar voice filled the room.

"Mickey Mouse," Tina said. "He can't get enough of that goddamn show." She picked at her sandwich. "Sometimes he'll go on for hours, just repeating the lines."

"We used to act out episodes of Full House. Remember that?"

"Sure. We'd fight over who got to be Uncle Jesse." She shook her head. "We were a couple weirdos."

"Totally," I said.

Tina took a long swig of lemonade and sat back, wearing a queer little smile that hadn't changed from when we were kids.

I chewed my sandwich and peered into the living room. Donald Duck was juggling bowling pins on TV. Julian was sprawled on the couch, his face covered in egg. His lips were moving, but I couldn't hear what he was saying.

I scanned the rest of the apartment. A picture of our mother hung on the wall. She was in her wedding dress. The only other decoration was a half-melted candle on top of the television. Someone had crushed a cigarette in it. A basket of dirty laundry stood in a corner next to two narrow mattresses covered in tangled blankets. Scott and Troy's digs, I figured. Julian must have slept in the bedroom with his parents.

Beside the mattresses was a stack of long cardboard boxes. A couple were open at the ends, rolls of purple plastic sticking out.

"Window tint," Tina said.

"Sorry?"

She pointed. "Window tint. Adam thought he could make a fortune tinting car windows."

"Oh," I said. "That's a good idea. There's a lot of money in that."

She scoffed. "Not for Adam. You know how many windows he tinted? One. And he did such a lousy job he had to give the guy his money back."

"That's too bad."

"Yep, just didn't have the patience for it. Same with the Amway and the magazine subscriptions." She tore off a piece of bread and poked it into her mouth. "That fool was talking about buying a bunch of alpacas."

"He's a dreamer," I said. "There's nothing wrong with that."

"Nope, nothing," she said, and sipped her lemonade. She stared into the living room. "Bruce was a dreamer."

There it was. I could almost hear the tarp coming off the elephant, gathering on the kitchen floor in thick, rippling folds.

"I suppose we should talk about that," I said. "I know this visit isn't all about sandwiches and lemonade."

"Water under the bridge," Tina said. Her stare was level and cool, and again her lips turned up into that strange smile.

"Is it?"

"Yeah, what do you think, I've been eating my guts out all these years?"

"Well, no, but I still think—"

"Hardly."

"C'mon, Tina. There are things you need to hear from me. I'm sorry. About Bruce, about leaving." I raised a hand to indicate the apartment, its stained ceiling, the drifts of soiled clothes, but then I caught myself, let my hand fall into my lap. I studied my half-eaten sandwich. "About everything."

"Seriously, I'm good." Tina drained her glass, shook the ice cubes. "You were better for him anyway. I was too young. I didn't know what I wanted."

"Are you happy?" I said. It came out sounding cruel. She glared at me. My cheeks felt tingly. I squeezed my arms, shook my head. "Fuck."

I slapped a hand over my mouth. I glanced over at Julian. He was still talking to the screen.

Tina sat back, set her glass on the table with a loud clack. "Don't worry, he doesn't understand. We could be speaking pig latin."

I nodded, took a couple measured breaths. I scrambled for something to say. "Have you ever thought about taking him to see someone else?"

Tina turned her eyes up to me.

I took a long gulp of lemonade.

"What, like a second opinion?" she said.

"Exactly. It can't hurt, right? See what another doctor has to say."

Tina pushed her plate aside. "Doctors don't grow on trees, babe."

"Well," I said, wiping my mouth. "Maybe I can help with that."

"Sure," she said, and sucked her teeth. "Yeah, we'll see."

"Okay," I said, and refilled our glasses with a shaky hand. "Aren't you going to eat anything?"

"I'm not hungry. I need to lose weight."

We sat and drank and watched Julian fidget on the couch. A cramp took hold of my stomach. I wished I'd taken that Xanax. I felt worse that I had going in. Tina should have said more, should have torn into me. For stealing her guy, for living comfortably while she rotted away in a dingy apartment, her twins sleeping on the floor, her youngest son wearing stained clothes, all of them surrounded by cardboard boxes crammed with her husband's failures.

I faced her. She'd sparked a fresh cigarette. Her expression was hard.

"Hell, Tina, we were kids. If I could do things over, I would."

She exhaled a plume of smoke. "Would you?"

"Yes." I folded my hands in my lap. I took a breath. I counted backwards from ten. It didn't help. "Listen, I'm sorry I never called. Or sent you something to help out. That was wrong of me. But you left scars, Tina. Some things can't be unsaid." I bit the inside of my cheek. "You're still my sister, though, and I failed you."

"Yes, you did. You went off and lived the dream, and to hell with me." She moved her hand through the air; ash swirled around her head. "I'd see you and Bruce in magazines, on those stupid celebrity gossip shows. I wanted to puke. The way you left me behind. And Mom. You taking off the way you did—I think that's what did her in."

"That's not fair."

"What's fair? Huh? What's fair, Janey?"

I was getting lightheaded. I checked my pockets for the Xanax, just to make sure I hadn't taken it along; it wasn't there. I downed some lemonade, tried to calm myself.

Tina snorted.

"What?" I said.

"You took my shot. My one shot to get away from this town. This life."

"You have to make your own shots, Tina." I dragged a palm across my sweaty forehead. "You might think Bruce and I were given everything, that everything was handed to us. But we worked hard. You weren't there for the scummy hotels rooms, or arguing with dirt bag club owners to get paid at the end of the night. The mountains of shit we had to shovel along the way. It wasn't luck. The whole idea of luck is bullshit. You just have to go for it."

"You sound like Adam," Tina said, and chuckled. The sound of it slithered across my neck. "He says if you want something, you have to take it. I'm starting to believe him."

I poured another glass of lemonade. The cheery voices of Mickey Mouse and

his friends crowded into my ears and seemed to multiply. It sounded like I was caught up in a sea of mice and ducks and dogs. Tina drew from her cigarette, blew the smoke at me.

"It was a mistake coming here," I said. I took another drink. My mouth was dry as laundry lint. "And you know what—I'm not sorry. Ignoring you all these years, it was the right decision. I can see that now."

"There it is," Tina said, and smirked. "I knew you hadn't changed. Just from your e-mail, I could tell."

"Then why did you invite me over?" I said. "So you could revel in what a horrible person I am?"

"Something like that," she said. Then, after a moment, "How much?"

"Huh?" I rubbed my eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"The divorce, dummy. A million?" She leaned forward. "More? It was more, wasn't it? Cash?"

"I'm done." I stood up, holding onto the table. The chair toppled to the floor.

"Just chill," Tina said. She led me to the couch and sat me down beside Julian. I tried to get up, but she pushed me back. "I'll get you some aspirin."

"Aspirin won't help," I said, but then I heard the bedroom door open and close. I looked down at Julian. His lips were still moving, but his eyes were half-shut, like he was getting ready to nap.

The voices on the television seemed far away now. There was something else, too, a snapping sound from behind me, in the bedroom.

Julian's T-shirt had ridden up, exposing his white belly. I touched it. He was hot.

"Auntie Janey," I said, pulling his shirt down. My tongue felt too big for my mouth, but I was starting to relax a little. "Can you say that, Julian?"

He turned to me, his eyelids fluttering. "Can you say that, Julian?"

"No. Auntie Janey." I picked a clump of egg off his chin. "I'm Auntie Janey. C'mon, now. Who am I?"

"Auntie Janey," Julian said, and closed his eyes.

"Yes!" I said. "Very good, honey. What a smart boy."

"Auntie Janey. Cut that bitch."

I thought I'd misheard him. I pulled him close. "What? What are you saying?"

Inlied blow oir between his line. Spittle sprayed my arm. "Auntic Janey Cut the

Julian blew air between his lips. Spittle sprayed my arm. "Auntie Janey. Cut that bitch. Take what's ours."

A second later he was snoring, his chest rising and falling slowly. I closed my hands into loose fists and felt something sharp in my palm. I opened my hand, and standing out in a smear of egg and mayonnaise was a little white jag. I brought it up to my eyes. It was a piece of a pill.

Another noise from the bedroom, the clank of metal. I pushed myself up from the couch. Colors were beginning to meld together. I stumbled over to the kitchen table, searched for my purse. It was gone. I patted my jeans; my car keys were in my hip pocket. I staggered to the front door. It was hard to get a good grip on the doorknob. My fingers wanted to do their own thing. I got it turned, finally, and

stepped out of the apartment. I fell against the wall. My legs were giving out, but I pulled myself up, started down the hallway.

I got to the stairs, grabbed the bannister, and looked over my shoulder. I had a direct view into Tina's apartment. Everything was losing detail, but I could see her bedroom door swing open. Through the darkness came a face, then another. Someone shouted, but I was already staggering down the stairs. I missed a step and fell on my ass and slid the rest of way.

I made it to the sidewalk, barely, and bumped into a couple of guys moving a refrigerator out of the appliance shop. I heard a crash, then angry voices calling after me. I couldn't make out the words. I got to my car and tumbled into the backseat. Then I fell asleep.

I woke up in a small, uncomfortable bed. A fluorescent light flickered overhead. It sounded like flies were bouncing around inside of it. I let my head loll to the side and saw a long, thin tube hooked into the back of my hand.

Just outside the room were a cop and a doctor. The front of the cop's pants were streaked with something that could have been egg salad.

"A little too much fun," the doctor said, sliding a clipboard under his arm.

"Looks the type," the cop added, and they both smiled.

I tried to sit up, didn't have the strength. Stiff sheets crinkled beneath me.

The doctor nodded to the cop, then came into the room, his stethoscope at the ready. His breath was all coffee and mint-flavored gum. I glanced over his bony shoulder and saw Tina lingering near the nurses' station. We locked stares. She frowned and shot me the finger and walked away, and that was the last time I saw my sister.



THIS ISN'T A NIGHTMARE

The church basement, cool and dim. In the bright outdoors a man flits through the shrubbery, approaches, presses his face to the window.

He can't see me crouched in the dark. But the locked door creaks. Something brushes me, then explodes in rage, wrestling with slippery tentacles.

This isn't a nightmare. It happens with a powerful odor of sea slime no dream could conjure. A light comes on. The creature I'm strangling

is a colorless protoplasm too naked to cast a shadow. It deflates, puddles on the floor. The big room shivers in the glare.

With mop and bucket I swab and pour the gelatinous slop down a drain. Folding chairs and tables filed for the next church supper rebuke me for my cowardice. Evolution doesn't do well in dank basements of nineteenth-century churches. Usually it coughs up millipedes

and silverfish. That slime monster, too puny for real harm, may suggest real trouble in the future. I look around the room. A stain

on the concrete floor, so I scrub with Spic and Span and bleach it. The bleach fumes comfort me, tough old-fashioned toxin to revive me

and propel me into the sunlight where I saw that man prowling. No one's here: but when I turn and look back at the basement window

there's his face, inside now, pressed to the pane and watching me with a longing so transparent I can see his arteries throb.

—william doreski

the man in the cat mask

I keep mulching.

When I chose to do landscaping over the summer, I had no idea I would have to deal with obnoxious clients; especially ones as bad as Ms. Ferry. You see, Ms. Ferry's husband passed about three years ago, leaving her an enormous fortune, and in our small community anyone with that sort of money becomes a celebrity; and she embraced every single second of it.

"Mulch faster! Why else am I paying you?!" she keeps screaming out her back door at me. She is holding a large glass of sangria, her small dog tucked under arm as she is the one barking orders.

"Ms. Ferry, it's over 100 degrees. I'm going as fast as I can, I promise," I respond through gritted teeth, wiping my brow. "If I could just get some cold water, I could probably go faster."

"Do you think I'm a charity case?" she yells back, the veins in her neck pulsing as she gets louder. "When you finish the job, then you get water. Until then, shut the hell up and finish my yard work."

With that, she pulls the glass door shut, and storms back into her kitchen to mix herself another alcoholic drink to have as breakfast.

I keep mulching.

If I could just go in there, this pitchfork would make such a perfect weapon.

I throw the mulch angrily, trying to spread it faster and faster. The heat in North Carolina is finally taking its toll, however. I throw one heavy fork full, and then I have to take a seat to catch my breath. It is only 10:00 in the morning, but the heat and humidity are both around 100.

Sitting on the mulch pile, I see Ms. Ferry waddling her overweight self around her kitchen. As the blender churns, she is shoveling cookies into her face and watching some cheesy morning talk show. She is totally apathetic to just how

by ray mears

terrible the weather feels to work in. As I catch my breath, I think of all the different ways I could end her pathetic life and get away with it. Eventually though, I shake my thoughts and go back to work before she has the chance to catch me on break.

My mulching eventually leads me to the flower bed right next to the back door. Slaving away, I can hear her inside laughing at her television programming. As if on cue, her dog yips along with her laugh. I can only shake the annoying sounds away, hoping she will get drunk and fall over, cracking her head.

A car door around front catches my attention. *Probably just a pool boy, or some other slave for Ms. Ferry.* The sweat now is dripping off me to the ground.

The first odd thing I notice is the lack of sounds from the dog. Even when it wasn't yipping you could hear its little feet pattering along the linoleum. I brush it off, thinking it had finally laid itself down. Then I hear a glass shatter inside the house, and the television programming clicks to a stop.

Raising my eyes from the mulch to the door, I fall backwards with a scream of my own. In the door way is a man dressed in an expensive suit, all black with a light purple tie; from the knee down, the black dress pants are soaked in a dark liquid. Over his face, he wears a cheap plastic feline mask, resembling the old cartoon cats from the 50's. In one hand, he is holding a fistful of diamonds and pearls. In the other, he has a long, bloody knife. I watch in horror as the vermillion liquid drips slowly onto the kitchen floor. Fearing for my life, I reach for my pitchfork next to me.

The man simply shakes his head slowly, and makes a 'shush' motion with his finger to the mask's mouth. I understand and nod slowly. As quietly as the man approached the door, he is gone. I hear one more quiet 'thud' of a car door, and then realize I am now alone with a dead Ms. Ferry inside.

I keep mulching.



Clay-Colored

Miranda steals shiny trinkets from the elderly and pawns them. When I reach into her bosom

and extract my Timex watch her innocence recedes like a tide. A crowd gathers. Miranda

in a pique of fury undresses completely, shedding jewelry, pill boxes, lighters, money clips,

and enough watches to daunt every time zone on the planet. Naked, she glowers with fission.

Her jaws creak as if a great scream has fossilized deep inside her. The crowd murmurs with pity

and glowers at me, so I leave with my watch ticking on my wrist and a vision of Miranda's clay-colored body brimming. The rest of the day discolors like an old bruise. The post office

coughs up bills and circulars. The coffee shop's too busy to prepare my mocha latte

with the right shade of chocolate. The market offers weird cuts of beef crudely torn from celestial cows.

Miranda will probably stalk and knife me in my sleep; and when police find my watch

ticking in her bosom she'll feign such guilt they'll feel ashamed, and neglect to arrest her.

-william doreski





Churned by pendulum-like waves, the wood of the dock had become swollen with water and age. Yet, still young compared to the lake it rested against. That lake had been there before anything else, home to old things and new. A girl lingered at the edge. Thin straps of her blue dress clung like wet threads to her bony shoulders. A pink flower bloomed out her chest, roots dug into her skin and heart. The flower was the loveliest thing anyone had ever seen; with soft petals, and twinkling golden anthers.

The girl sat whistling a witch's song for hours. An old woman living near the forest taught it to her. It was a song about a woman that traded for a thing of amazing beauty. Mist hid everything, dyeing the world gray. Like last time, the girl could not see the thing, but felt a wave ripple out and lick her toes.

A sigh emerged from the center of the mist, words sinking into the flower like light. *It's you again? What do you want this time?*

"Please," the girl said, her voice scared and frail like a child who knew they did wrong. "Could you please give me my name back?"

Why, my little witch? The voice shifted cool breeze across the girl's white skin. I gave you such a pretty flower in exchange.

The girl fondled the thing growing out of her, touching the thick clothe-like petal at the tip, she felt her touch through the petal like it was hair; the feeling an invasion of space. "Please! I want my name back. No one knows who I am anymore! My mom and dad don't recognize me! They threw me out and called me crazy! They won't let me back in! Please! I just want to go home!"

Of course they don't recognize you. You don't have a name! No one knows someone without a name. But you have such a pretty flower instead!

She could feel the chill breathe across her bare skin like with a stalker's glee. "Please, I'll give you the flower back. I'll give you anything! Just give me back my name! I'm cold and I want to go home!"

There was a brief pause. The only thing I wanted from you was your name. Now go away, I no longer like talking to you, little witch.

Silence exuded as the thing left. The girl pleaded to the empty air, hoping something would speak back to her. The voice was so excited when they first talked. It loved the way she whistled the old witch's song, said she had the loveliest voice. The girl could never see the thing beyond the mist, but it saw her. It called her pretty and told her how beautiful she would look with a flower...

The girl's mouth became dry, and she could no longer whistle. The dark lake was indifferent to her, and she gave a sad whimper, tears falling onto the petals. Frustrated, the girl grabbed at the flower, trying to rip it out of her. With only a little force, she cried in pain. It felt like trying to rip out her hair. She looked behind her to the shore and the gray void hiding the road and town. No one was waiting for her on the other side, they had all forgotten. That loneliness was as terrifying as death.

She jumped into the lake, desperate to swim to its center and get her name back. It was like a clasp of ice strangled her lungs. She flailed her arms in front of her, dragging herself forward with fistfuls of water. She could feel her flower choke and numb, as its petals became swelled like the legs of the dock. Waves attacked her, warning her to turn back, but she had nowhere to go. It felt like the world was trying to kill her miserable self, and her tears mixed with the infinite darkness of the lake. She was no longer cold, instead she was numb like the flower, and felt her body disappear. Her sight blurred and she no longer knew where she came or went. Her body was like a ship that had given up its course, prey to winds and tides.

A floor of sand tripped her, causing her to stumble. Footing returned as her toes clung to the soft sand. She climbed forward, body rising above the lake's heavy grasp. The girl found herself on a shore, a familiar grass lying beyond. She looked around, and was horrified to see the old dark dock sitting near her. Her breath was frightened away at the thought of all her suffering being for nothing. Then a voice called to her.

Well done. I was sure you would drown!

It did not come from the lake, but a little further up the shore, where grass reigned dominant. The girl walked; her wet body bare to the winds, sand clinging to her feet like moss. Something shiny lingered in the air above the grass.

The girl came across a large piece of grass, as tall as hay. Sitting atop was a huge silver slug; it's body long like a snake's. The smell of the lake reeked from it, almost suffocating the girl. Four black tendrils stuck out from where its face was; they bobbed as it spoke. Your flower looks pitiful now. What a waste.

The flower was soaked; its petals hanging down like a bundle of nooses. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I didn't take good care of the flower, but please, I want my name back! I came so far! I'll do anything, so please, I want my name back!"

There, there. You have swayed me! I'll give a chance to get your name back.

"Really?" The girl cried, her heart vulnerable, willing to believe whatever the slug said.

You merely have to find it.

The girl looked around and saw a dozen flowers around her, standing up on tall stalks, glowing like candles. They lingered in the mist, like burning lily pads floating through the air.

One of these flowers has your name. The others have nothing. You just have to find the right one. An easy task, surely you'd recognize your own name.

The flowers all glowed different, their petals as varied as emotions. "How do I choose one?"

Just go up and reach for it.

The girl looked at them, it was like she was in the middle of a pallet of colors; one red with petals like a flurry of fire, one green and mellow like moss. But she knew which one was hers. There was a pink one; a glow like twilight, little anthers sparkling like gold dust. It was the same as the one, hunched down over her dress.

"I'm sorry," she whispered to her flower, hanging dead off her. She reached out to the vibrant pink. It moved toward her hand, as if it recognized the smell. The flower enveloped it, warmth from the petals caressing her skin. Chomp. The sound screamed up her bone, and the flower pulled away, tearing off her hand. The girl stared at the stump before a red flower bloomed painfully out of it. The girl cried as petals pushed past torn skin, and roots dug into broken bone.

Too bad, the slug said. Wrong one.

The girl panted, a pained stress existing in the empty space where her hand was. The red flower seemed to glow with heat. "But... but..." she stammered out between scared sobs.

Your logic wasn't bad, but the flower I gave you has nothing to do with your name. It was just a pretty flower that I had. And now I have a hand.

The girl kneeled down, her body a series of violent shakes, the grass prickling and stabbing into her legs. "I'm sorry!" She prayed as if she said it enough all the bad things would go away.

There's nothing to be sorry about! It's quite all right to be wrong every now and then. You just have to choose another. Here, the pink flower before her twisted up and dimmed. This way you won't lose track. So go on, pick another.

The girl hobbled to a tiny gray flower; inside it she saw a reflection of her sad soul, and reached out hesitantly, extending her outermost fingers, ready to snap her hand back. The flower was too quick. Chomp. It gobbled her pinky and ring finger, leaving an empty chunk in their place. She screamed out as another red flower blossomed from the torn spot; roots bruising and spasming her small wrist.

She shambled to another flower, a red one with a violent threatening glow. Its shape and color matched the flowers that had spouted from her bitten body. The girl prayed the wounds sucking at her painfully were hints. She took her bare dirty foot, and stretched it out. Its petals wrapped around, sucking at her ankle. Chomp. The girl fell to the grass, a purple flower sprouting at her leg's end, its petals pulling on the ripped ends of her skin. She tried to stand, tried to use her eaten leg, but when pressure brushed the petals, it was like her entire leg was boiling. Her chest quaked like a crumbling plain, shaking the slumped dead flower growing from it.

She pleaded to the slug, "Please, stop! I'm sorry! I don't want to do this anymore! I just want to go home!"

Come now, you've come so far! Just nine more to go! Surely one of them has your name! Besides, you have nowhere else left to go. But if you want, I could just eat you whole now. A mound in the slug's face started to open, a tiny black pip that grew slowly like a void.

"No, I'm sorry, I'll play!" The girl turned herself over, mindful of the flowers on her stumps, and lay on her chest. She heard the dead flower underneath her crumble, the sound echoing throughout her body. She dragged herself, feeling the pink flower cut apart as hundreds of blades of grass sliced away at it. The first flower didn't hurt; it was as numb as her cold flesh. She went to a lowly black flower, casting a gloomy shadow on the ground, the petals flowed down like a bell. It looked as miserable as she felt. She reached out with the stump, hoping at the very least it would take the frightening red flower too.

No cheating. Use your good hand. I already have that one.

The girl did as the slug said with a whimper, and stuck out her half good hand to the flower. It flinched up, and the girl cowered, but the flower ignored her and stood upright, its droopy petals blooming out, a black light dancing over her lying body.

Good job, you found it!

The girl started to sob underneath the dark light. "I have my name again?"

Yep. Now, stand up. The girl forced herself up, mindful of the flowery appendages that grew out from her. They did not hurt though, and she crushed their pretty petals against the ground. She looked back and saw a shredded trail of pink from where she crawled across. The flower on her chest was gone; in its place was a spot of crunched pink and gold, blood drizzling over.

If you walk out that way, you will find yourself at the road again. Don't worry, everyone will remember you now! Since you have a name, everyone will care again!

The girl was crying with joy and lurched forward through the gray mist. *Goodbye, my little witch! Thank you for all the fun!* The slug whistled the witch's tune as it faded away with the mist.

Grass disappeared for road, and the girl peered around the familiar sight of a trees and houses. Excitement shook her as she recognized the old woman's cabin, and knew how to get home. She stumbled, and felt warmth return to her body as the last pieces of flowers crumbled away, their roots being flooded out by her warm burning blood. She heard some shouts from behind her, but when she turned to look back, she toppled onto the dirt road. Two men ran to her torn up body.

"Shit." One of them said, "I think this is the Anderson's girl. Mari? What happened to her?"

The girl's eyes lit up in a way that startled both the men.

"Please," she said, her voice both quiet yet intense like crackling embers. "Say my name again."

Unsure what to do, they merely said the word back to her in a hushed voice. "Mari?"

Mari closed her eyes, letting the sound sink in through the blackness. She smiled, and spoke her name too. "Mari." She was glad, happy to hear the word she too had forgotten. It was beautiful and soft. She let it linger in her mouth as she began to sleep, a faint dream in her ears, as she listened to her parents call out to her, telling her to come home.



Girl On The Moor

I walked across the verdant moor, fog lifting from the peat.
A feeling that I'd walked before this land beneath my feet.

I knew each craggy, rugged rock. I knew the purple grass. The shepherd herding docile flock with a little red-haired lass.

I nodded as I passed them by, now feeling quite displaced. It seems I'll never know just why they scurried off in haste. I saw a kindly man ahead, his face appeared quite stricken. As overcome with certain dread, his footsteps seemed to quicken.

A while I watched as children played as ghostly tales they tell.

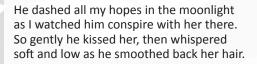
They said they knew quite well the maid who walks this haunted fell.

Over the low rock wall I scaled while in their tales engrossed, 'twas then their little faces paled as though they'd seen a ghost!

Bent down over a clear cold stream, no reflection did I see! Is this a nightmare or some dream? The lost ghost girl is me...



Red Wave



The night cast a glow as the moonbeams seemed to dance with the jewels that she wore. Her em'rald green gown, sleek and satin, made those lovely eyes shine all the more.

Crimson hair, like a river, cascaded down her back in a flowing, red wave. This beauty she has without knowing makes a strong man a fool or a slave.

My face, deathly pale as the night's orb while her cheeks softly blushed like the rose! That flower he plucked for her sweetly while I watched there in silent repose.

'Twas then I indulged my dark visions, these visions then led to a dream. The dream, when I woke, seemed divining some plot which then led to my scheme...

"I'll dash all his hopes in the moonlight and he'll watch me take hold of her there. I'll pull her as close as a whisper, by grasping her mane of red hair!

Together we'll plunge to the dark sea below we'll collide with the rocks, and down, down I'll pull her there with me, still clutching those flaming red locks!"



-michelle deloatch



A Youthful Old Soul

Amber hair shades my hazel eyes, Bleak this dream of mine it cries. Cruel contradiction of cheerful ways, Devoted to only my darkest days.

Eager to believe in all that I know, Fluent in death this poet woes. Guided by misery and all my regret. Heartbroken and depressed though not to fret.

Insecure and irrational are such ideals, Jaded and lost is just how I feel. Kindness a monster so knavish indeed. Lunar true mother such pacts that I creed.

Mindful of a world I want to forget, Novels of nightmares some take as a threat. Obsolete and a dream that doesn't exist, Poetically poor the nightmares resist.

Questioning death but I am it's reaper, Rebirth in reticence of darkness my keeper. Sorrowful words I 'd rather not share, The illusions of life are rather unfair.

Used and abused this ugly old soul, Vacant of kindness my embers to coal. Writing in vain this prison of dust, Xanthous of ivory's dear prison of rust.

Youthful and dead I could have been saved, Zestless and gone was this fate so engraved?

—nicholas powell

A Scandalous Bohemian

by rory o'brien



Mr. William Gillette has made many startling and dramatic entrances onstage, but few could compare to that chill March evening some years ago when an unexpected visitor burst into his dressing room backstage.

After a decade of starring in *Sherlock Holmes: A Drama in Four Acts*, touring to cities large and small and playing to packed houses and extended runs, Gillette was at the height of his fame. With his deerstalker cap, Calabash pipe, and melancholy scrapings upon the violin, he was the very embodiment of the Great Detective to the public at large. Small wonder that so many said that "Sherlock Holmes looks exactly like William Gillette!"

The man who came unannounced that night was no stranger. Both Gillette and I recognized Mr. Harrison Thorne, the wealthy businessman and well-known patron of the theater, very much regarded as royalty up and down Broadway. Indeed, he was a major financial backer of the very theater which was to be our home for the next nine weeks. In person, Thorne was a giant of a man, well over six feet, with piercing blue eyes, a handlebar mustache, and the chest and limbs of a Hercules. He was ostentatiously dressed in a way meant to show off wealth rather than good taste.

My employer, sitting at his table and wiping away his heavy stage makeup, turned and murmured, "Mr. Thorne! This is quite a surprise!"

"I must speak with you immediately, Gillette."

"Call me Will, please." He gave Thorne a swift, all-encompassing glance, smiled, and said, "I can see by the state of your tie that you have just come from a meeting; that Masonic charm on your watch-chain tells me what kind of meeting it must have been. And that gold-handled walking-stick—"

"Dammit, I don't have time for your tricks," Thorne raised his voice. "This is important."

"Well, your timing is excellent, certainly. Osaki was just making coffee."

Our visitor threw me a glance that was both angry and dismissive at once.

"I must speak with you ... alone."

"Oh, I am afraid it is both, or none," Gillette said with another smile. "Osaki is not only my dresser, but a valued friend and associate. Besides, as you can see, he is from Tokyo and I assure you he cannot understand a word either of us is saying."

"Very well," Thorne muttered, giving me another look. Falling into my assigned role, I gave our visitor the curt bow he must have expected from a correct Japanese manservant. Gillette winked to me as the man took a seat. I continued making the coffee and was tempted to give both of them too much sugar.

"You probably know that I am about to be married," Thorne began. "Miss Lara Hunnicutt."

"Her father is the oil and steel magnate?" Gillette asked languidly.

"Yes. She she'll probably make a decent enough wife, if I can get the actual marriage done and out of the way. But there is a complication there, Gillette. And it is one hell of a complication. You know the name Gayle Pulver?"

"I know of her, though we have never met," Gillette leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingertips. "A dancer, I believe? Retired now, and a very private person, I understand."

"Very private," Thorne nodded solemnly. "But not entirely cut off from ... companionship."

"Ah!"

"Perhaps you understand where this is going?"

"Was there an entanglement with her? Are there compromising letters to be recovered? Legal papers or certificates?"

"No."

"There can only be a photograph, then," William Gillette smiled.

"Yes. And with my approaching marriage, you can see how such a photograph could be compromising and embarrassing, if not outright damaging, and so it must be ... taken care of. Destroyed or recovered. I prefer the latter."

"You have tried and failed?"

"A number of times! She has been waylaid, her luggage has been re-directed, and her home has been searched, all to no avail."

"I can see why you have come to me," Gillette rubbed his long nervous hands together. "But then again, perhaps I cannot quite see why?"

"Your reputation is as a man of tact and discretion. You've been known to quietly handle such delicate situations before."

It was true. Often, the vast unobservant public confuses the actor with the role, and this was not the first time someone had asked for help in solving a problem or unraveling a mystery. In Chicago, we investigated the case of Mordecai of abominable memory, and in San Francisco, we became involved in the singular affair of the Three German Imposters. As important a problem as this may be, I don't see how I can help you."

Thorne rose from his chair and glowered down at the actor.

"You are aware of the financial support I have provided for your production, Gillette?"

"I am, of course."

"And if I withdrew that support, and suggested that a few others should do likewise, you would find yourself in considerable difficulty. The management would kick you out tomorrow morning if I told them that had to choose between your play and my money."

Gillette was silent.

"Well, I'm glad you see it that way then, Will. I am sure you will find a satisfactory solution, you're so clever onstage. I expect you to have a result no later than the day after tomorrow."

He scribbled his address on a sheet of paper and slammed the door behind him as he went.

The actor was quiet for a long minute, with his chin sunk down upon his breast.

"My English is better than your Japanese," I said to rouse him. "And we don't need to do this; you don't need his money."

"There are other reasons for taking this on. Tomorrow is Monday. We are dark," he said with a smile.

He was right. There was to be no show the next day, and I knew there was nothing else on his schedule.

And William Gillette was bored.

Early the next morning, on his instructions, I loafed up and down the block outside Miss Gayle Pulver's Greenwich Village brownstone in the character of an out-of-work butler. I borrowed a threadbare suit from the costume department to look the part of a respectable manservant fallen on hard times. The house was on a quiet street in an artistic neighborhood, exactly where a Bohemian lady would live. I studied the house from every angle and saw nothing of interest, nothing that would be of any assistance to us in our attempt to recover this scandalous photograph.

A small knot of men had gathered on a stoop across the street, smoking and drinking and laughing back and forth. Jobless men, passing the time. There is a kind of freemasonry among such men, and even I, an obvious foreigner, should be able to ingratiate myself in among them. I had come prepared with cigarettes and a hip flask, and offering them around and making idle talk, I soon had as much information as I could desire about Miss Gayle Pulver, and another half a dozen people in the neighborhood I was not at all interested in, but whose stories I was compelled to hear anyway.

She had turned men's heads all up and down the block, I was told. She was the daintiest thing under a bonnet on this planet, according to many of them there on the stoop. She lived quietly, had few visitors, and seldom went out, except for her daily drive each morning—I was told that she would probably be back shortly.

"Who keeps her house?" I asked, looking across to the brownstone.

"Why? You gonna get a job doing her laundry?" one of the men laughed.

"She won't hire a Chinaman, not even one that talks good like you do," said another.

I let these remarks go, partly because I was here on serious business, and partly because this was the sort of thing I hear every day. I have lived in this country for over twenty years, half my life, but am constantly reminded that I will always be an outsider. Cigarettes and a hip flask could only ever get me so far.

My thoughts were interrupted by a cab rattling to a halt. Miss Pulver had come home from her daily drive.

I crossed the street, pulling my hat down low on my face as I reached the sidewalk. I opened the cab door for her, tipped my hat, and thrust out my hand, murmuring, "Ma'am."

The men across the street had not lied. She was a striking woman, tall and slender with a face a man might die for. She wore her hair long and loosely tied back and moved with the fluid strength of the trained dancer. I could easily imagine her onstage. She pressed a penny into my hand as she went, never making eye contact at all. It's New York, no one ever does.

"Hey, pal," the cabman called. "Move it along, huh?"

I returned to the scene with Gillette a few hours later, just as the sun was setting. His sense of drama extended far beyond the footlights, and he was ready to carry out a plan.

He appeared in the character of an amiable and benign clergyman. His broad black hat, his baggy trousers, his sympathetic smile, and general look of peering curiosity were perfect. It was not merely that he changed his costume. His expression, his manner, his very soul seemed to vary with the part that he assumed. With his bashful half-smile, his shuffling walk, and fidgeting hand-gestures, he might have been rehearsing the role for weeks, rather than only a few short minutes. He quickly added some dirt stains to his cuffs and knees, then, with the aid of a red grease pencil brought from the theater, gave his face the appearance of several cuts and scrapes.

Once satisfied, he turned to me. "Ready?"

"I am."

He leaned heavily against me and I half-carried him across the street and up the steps of Miss Pulver's brownstone.

"Help!" he cried in a high, keening voice, banging on the lion's-head door knocker. "Please! Someone help!"

A moment Miss Pulver answered the door, and when I saw her again I was almost ashamed that we were conspiring against her. She looked upon the injured man on her doorstep with grace and kindliness.

"Madame! Your assistance, please! I have been set upon by a gang of ruffians and this Oriental gentleman—a stranger to me!—came to my aid. He has some knowledge of baritsu, and so drove them off. If you would please allow me a moment to recover before summoning the police"

With a groan, his knees buckled and we pushed past the woman and into the front parlor of her home. It was a sunny, high-ceiling room, tastefully furnished in a very delicate and feminine manner and decorated with framed watercolors. Gillette collapsed onto her sofa with a pained cry. I stepped back and affected an attitude of somewhat confused concern.

"Madame, I am sure I will regain myself in a moment. If I could trouble you for a glass of water"

The lady of the house had followed us in silence as we barged into her parlor. Now she stood with folded arms and a wry smile upon her lips. Waiting a beat, she said, "Very pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Gillette!"

He sat up on the couch with a sharp laugh. He tossed away his hat and wiped away the smears of makeup and was once again the handsome matinee idol, with a face well-known from posters and playbills. Gillette's own wife had died young, just a few short years into their marriage, lost to a ruptured appendix. He had never looked at another woman since the death of his beloved Helen, but I could tell at once that this lady had impressed him deeply.

"You have beaten me, Miss Pulver," he said good-naturedly. "And please, it's Will."

"Even in such a disguise, I knew you at once," she replied airily. "I must admit I only let you I to see what you were going to do. And if your friend really has a plumber's rocket hidden on his person, have him leave it where it is or I certainly shall call the police! Now, did you honestly think this ridiculous ruse of yours was going to work?"

"It works six nights a week, to say nothing of the matinees," Gillette chuckled. "But at least I gained entry to your parlor, where we can talk. You know why I am here, of course."

"The photograph."

"Yes. I am under considerable pressure to recover it, and have given my word that I will make every effort. So ... please, Madame. Can't we come to some sort of understanding here? Some sort of arrangement?"

"I don't know if I can trust you."

"More than you can trust Mr. Thorne, I think."

She bristled at the mention of the name.

"That man!" she said. "You have no idea what kind of a brute he is."

"That is none of my concern, but sadly, the photograph is. Not by choice, mind you, but nevertheless ... here I am, and there must be some sort of solution to this business."

"I do not think that Mr. Thorne has given you a very complete description of the situation, Mr. Gillette. You have been cruelly misled."

"How so?"

The lady thought for a long moment, then silently went to the mantelpiece over the fire and, from a hidden compartment there, withdrew the photograph and placed it on the small table at Gillette's elbow. Studying it thoughffully, he set it down slowly and said, "I see."

The next day, after making some quiet inquiries among the theater management, we took another cab to Mr. Thorne's rooms uptown. The actor, with his eccentric love of machinery, never took a horse-drawn cab when he could take a motorcar. When we arrived, a concierge showed us upstairs and Gillette was obviously pleased to find Miss Lara Hunnicutt, Thorne's fiancé, was there for a visit.

Miss Hunnicutt was a striking young woman, with clear blue eyes that looked upon us with some concern as we entered.

"Gillette!" cried Thorne. "Excellent! I was expecting you later, but if you have

results, so much the better. Lara, I am afraid that Will and I have some business to discuss, which is of course none of your concern, If you can give us just a few minutes to ourselves—"

"Actually, Miss Hunnicutt, please remain, as the business I have come to discuss involves you quite intimately."

"Gillette!" Thorne raised a hand in warning.

"Yesterday morning, I made the acquaintance of Miss Gayle Pulver. She is a remarkable woman indeed. Remarkable. But you knew that, of course. What you may not have known, Miss Hunnicutt, is that your fiancé had asked me to recover a photograph in Miss Pulver's possession. A photograph which he described as both compromising and embarrassing ... to him."

Miss Hunnicutt's cheeks were a study in scarlet.

"Of course, I expected the photo to be evidence of his liaison with Miss Pulver. But imagine my surprise when I finally saw the photograph in question, and discovered it was evidence of your liaison with that very extraordinary lady."

"You have no idea just how extraordinary she is," Miss Hunnicutt whispered.

"Oh, I have some idea, let me assure you. Now, Mr. Thorne wanted this photograph under his control, and placed some considerable pressure upon me to recover it for him."

"What kind of pressure?" she asked.

"He threatened to pull his considerable financial backing from my play, and to convince others to do the same. You knew nothing of this, I take it?"

"Nothing." She cast a glance at her fiancé and shook her head slowly.

"It seems that Mr. Thorne can be quite ruthless when he wants something. He has acted the scoundrel with you, with me, and with Miss Pulver. Now having met both Mr. Thorne and Miss Pulver, I cannot help but draw some comparisons and may I say that you love, and are loved, by far better than he. She and I spoke for some time yesterday and she tells me that, for her, you are the woman."

Miss Hunnicutt gave a small sob

"What did you do with the damned picture?" Thorne growled helplessly.

"I left it where it is. Where it belongs. In Miss Pulver's possession, of course."

"Damn you!" he shrieked. His face contorted with rage, he snatched up the iron poker from the fireplace and closed in on the actor.

No one ever notices the quiet, Japanese manservant.

I took a couple of steps and stood between the two men and clapped my revolver to Thorne's head.

"Drop it," I said.

Whether he was more startled by my actions or my English, I don't know. Nevertheless, he dropped the poker to the floor in surrender.

"Damn you both," he muttered. "Damn all three of you. All four of you. That damn play of yours will be destroyed."

"Hardly. I had some meetings with the theater management this morning. Not only is your money not needed, it is not wanted. You will not get a very warm reception if you show your face around the theater, sir. The show will go on without

you. Now, we are happy to take you away from this place," Gillette said, turning to Miss Hunnicutt. "We have a cab waiting downstairs."

"Why on Earth would you even consider marrying such a brute?" Gillette asked as the cab carried us back toward the theater.

"My family's expectations," Miss Hunnicutt said, watching the city roll by out the window. "Society's expectations. Single women do not go far, and two women together" She shook her head.

After a moment, he asked, "Have you seen my play?"

"It seems as though everyone has."

"The reviews call it buncombe and claptrap," he said with a deep chuckle. "They say it's trivial, of no lasting importance. But it makes me happy, and it makes my audiences happy. So the hell with the critics, Miss Hunnicutt."

We rode along in silence for a few blocks before she spoke.

"We are going to your theater?"

"Is there somewhere else we can bring you?" he smiled knowingly.

"There is."

A few minutes later, we were once again in front of Miss Pulver's brownstone, and she stood silhouetted in the doorway as though she had been waiting for us.

Miss Hunnicutt gave Gillette a quick peck on the cheek, and then called over her shoulder, "Good night, Mr. William Gillette!" as she ran up the steps of the brownstone and into Miss Pulver's arms.

A week later, an item appeared in the society pages, stating that the Thorne-Hunnicutt engagement was broken, and that Miss Hunnicutt would be traveling to Paris with a companion and not expected to return to America for some time, if ever. Mr. Thorne offered to finance other productions, but always found that he and his money were strangely unwelcome. And night after night, audiences packed the theater to see William Gillette onstage as Sherlock Holmes.



FAUST

Quiet.

All is damnably quiet.
I can hear the spiders spinning in the darkness,
the breath of a rat against the stone walls,
a cockroach crawling through the sulphur-laden air.
The roaring silence fills the air like the grumble of the sea.

Pitiless Eternity.

But a second ago he was here, he whose eyes glowed like falling stars in bottomless pools, he with the comforting voice of the practiced whore. My wounds still bleed, my sleeves are still wet. The rats have yet to smell the droplets on the floor.

For what have I been sold?
Square roots? Sines? Sums?
Will I profit knowing winds are not the breath of God knowing the sun is not a chariot of fire?
knowing mountains are not the bones of giants?
knowing why the sound of pouring wine tickles the ear?
why lovers' eyes sparkle as purest silver?
why cool grass and shade bring easy sleep?

Did Da Vinci paint with a carpenter's angle? Michaelangelo sculpt with a plumb?

I will be reduced to monotonous lectures and boring sums. And should I escape eternal hell I nonetheless lose my soul.

—phil slattery

HUNGRY MOON

We watched god die as a starved moon devoured our brightest star, stretching its maw to swallow it whole. In the stomach of the umbra we gazed into the sky at the black promise of mankind's demise. Our shadows rebel in lunatic celebration with a violent dance of tooth and nail to a symphony of screams, last gasps, and a mummer of prayers uttered in vain.

—robert perez



[short story]



SDOW

by kevin mulligan

Sheila leaned on the horn. Trapped by a mountain storm since the previous afternoon, she had run the engine occasionally to keep herself warm. Now she contemplated a gas gauge near empty as trees grew orange with approaching dusk. Unprepared for weather that now surrounded her, Sheila sorted the available options. Like a maddening shell game, possibilities rotated.

Passive and logical, she could sit and wait. This strategy seemed best right now. Unfortunately, lifting that shell revealed a body safely frozen in her car.

She could try to walk out. Risky, yes, but appealing to take charge nature. When she turned this shell over in her mind, it revealed a frozen body, bravely close to a busy road.

Two possibilities, three shells. The one she could not reach held a solution. Until she could turn that shell over, the horn would have to do. She hit it again.

Darkness had started to close in when she saw a man walk out of the woods. He was dressed in a large canvas winter coat and had a backpack of some sort. He held a flashlight, the beam shaking with his steps.

Standing at the window now, he was saying something. The words were muffled by glass, the only thing between them. He turned, pointed at the woods and looked back, smiling.

Fear of another night in the car overcame her fear of the man. Sheila opened the door. "Thank you, thank you. I thought I would run out of gas and die from the cold."

"You're okay now. Glad you didn't honk that horn too many more times. This is an avalanche toe."

Sheila's face warmed, "Oh...Sorry. If I had known..." She wasn't sure what an avalanche toe was, only knew it sounded unsafe.

The man dropped his backpack and pulled something out, "Here, take this." He handed her a blanket, thick and patterned with stripes. A Hudson's Bay blanket.

"Follow me," he started walking.

Sheila tried to follow in his footsteps, managed to miss them all. His stride was just too long for her. Eventually, she gave up and carved her own path.

After a few minutes of walking, they came upon a cabin. It had a low sloped roof that was covered in heavy snow. Arriving first, the man held open the door. Inside, a woman walked toward her.

"Oh my! Look at you, my dear. What in the world are you doing out here all alone?"

"I came out yesterday morning to take pictures. There was nothing in the forecast about snow. I waited in my car all night, couldn't sleep. I thought I..." Sheila trailed off.

"Don't worry, dear, you're all right now. If we could see into the future, none of us would ever get to enjoy simple surprises."

"I suppose, when you put it that way. Still, I could have planned better."

An older man came in from back of the cabin. "Why, what have we got here?" he asked.

"We found a stray," she looked at the old man, "George, why don't you radio

the ranger and let him know we have..." looking at Sheila. "What was your name, dear?"

"Oh, it's Sheila. Sheila Frieze."

The old man laughed, "Well, I'm glad you didn't get to live up to your name."

"George." The woman gave him a look. "You stop that and get on the radio."

She turned back to Sheila, "I'm Lorraine," taking Sheila by the hands, as if to warm them, "I think you need some hot chocolate." Smiling, she left for the kitchen.

Sheila looked at the man who had saved her, "Wow, she's very nice." she paused. "I guess you know my name, what's yours?"

"Oh, I'm Rick. I work out here taking care of the snow cannon."

"Snow cannon?" asked Sheila.

"Ya. I set it off when the snow pack starts to get too deep. Prevents avalanches." He continued, "George takes care of record keeping and stuff like that. Lorraine takes care of kids when they stay overnight."

"Kids?"

"Ya, university types, mostly. This place doubles as a backwoods hostel. Cross country skiers, things like that."

"Oh, I see. Any of them here tonight?"

"No, just the four of us. It's been a little quiet lately." Rick walked through the long room. "Come on, let's go sit in the kitchen."

Sheila followed. The place looked old and rustic. There was a wood stove in one corner, flames visible through a small glass window. The cupboards were made of dark grained wood and the table had a carved top set upon a tall tree stump. Chairs with vinyl seats and stainless steel legs circled the table, functional, at odds with the backwoods decor. A window ran along one wall.

Sheila sat down, asking, "Do you have cell coverage out here? I tried in my car but nothing."

Lorraine was back with them now. She exchanged a glance with Rick.

"Oh, I'm sorry, dear. I'm not sure what you mean." Lorraine turned a small towel in her hands, a flash of concern sweeping her face.

"A telephone...phone call. My phone won't work out here." Sheila started to search pockets before visualizing her cellphone, still on the front seat. "I forgot it in my car. Maybe it would work here." Puzzled, "You don't have one?"

Lorraine looked at Sheila, "You sound tired. Here, take this, it will make you feel better." She handed her the hot chocolate.

Rick restarted the conversation, "So, where do you hail from?"

"Oh, I just drove here from Calgary."

"I see," Rick paused. "Just wondered, don't get many people up here dressed like that."

"Oh? I got this at The Gap."

Lorraine looked worried. "Rick, you make sure our girl stays warm with that blanket. I'm going to see how George is doing with the radio."

"Okay." He turned his attention to Sheila, "Think you might have gotten a little colder than you think you did."

"I feel a lot better now."

"Well, that's good. I need to go out later and push snow off the roof. Low pitch holds too much. If we leave it, it'll come down all at once and make a mess."

"That doesn't sound good," said Sheila. She wondered why the men hadn't cleared the roof earlier when it was bright and sunny.

Suddenly something rumbled above their heads. The table shook. Snow started to come down on them. The roof seemed to be pulling apart at the timbers. Sheila screamed, looked up at the ceiling. It was bending inward as if a huge hand was pushing down on it.

"Damn!" Rick jumped up.

"George!" Lorraine's voice echoed.

Snow flew past the window. Sheila could barely make it out in the darkness.

"You really should have cleared that snow. Now you'll have to dig us out!" Sheila turned, Rick seemed transfixed, pale. She was about to say something when lights appeared outside.

"Well, that was fast," he said. "I'm going out back to see what's up. I'll just be a minute." Rick left the room.

Sheila made her way to the cabin door and opened it, ready to wave down whoever was out there. As she pushed it open, the door suddenly fell from its frame. This frightened her and she ran outside. Looking back, she saw the roof had caved in. Muffling a scream, she ran toward two men on snow machines.

"Oh, my God, there are people in there!"

They looked at her like she was crazy, "Nobody in there. Not for years, and what the hell are you doing out here?"

"I got stuck. They called you on the radio."

The men looked at her, "No radio call. We're here to set off the avalanche cannon."

Still confused, Sheila continued, "But they called. You have to do something. There are people in there. Look! The roof is caved in!"

"Nobody in there now," one of them said. "That place was ruined forty years ago. Roof caved in from the snow load. Took three people with it."

Silence.

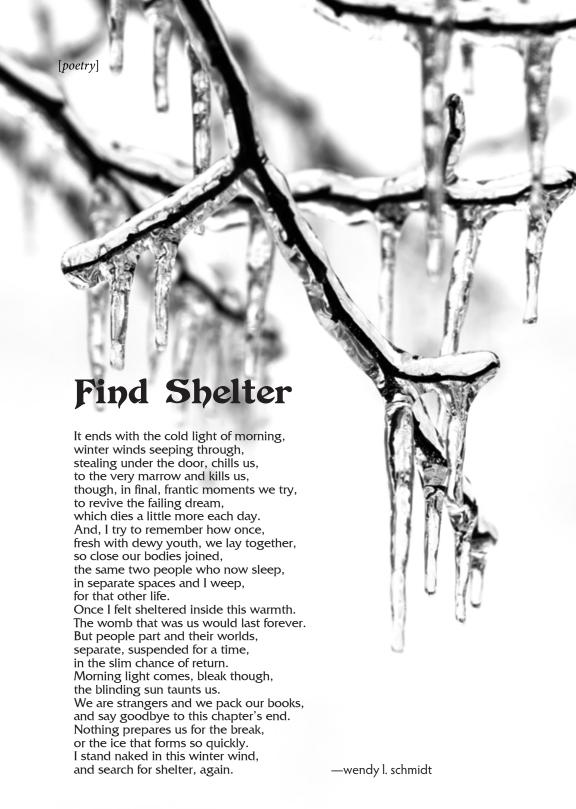
"But it can't be."

Sheila drifted.

"It can't be."

Snow fell softly as she pulled the Hudson's Bay blanket around her.





Eight Arms to Hold

Inside the jagged mouth of a cave in a bleached coral graveyard, she waits to die.

> For thirty sunless days, she patiently starved protecting her young.

Her eight arms cradle her hundred thousand children as they begin to emerge.

From their translucent eggs they wiggle and jet; dart aimlessly.

She loses them like teardrops to the sea, fragile and clear.

Her tentacles stretch out to her departing newborns for one last embrace.

They will only meet in death, and as she withers, her ravenous love consumes.

Desperate to be one again, she pulls them to her center, and into her mouth they cave.

-robert perez



Chop Those Mice

As late autumn days turned bitter and cold, The heat-seeking mice invaded the shack. But Bethany Ann knew she couldn't allow this, She grabbed a honed axe and went blammo-smack!

Beth's mighty blow missed the verminous pests, But still produced pools of gaudy, gross gore; She'd mistakenly cut off her brother's left hand; Now the boy howled in anguish upon the floor.

Surveying the scene, she made up her mind --Her bro's epic pain could not be dismissed. Plus, this gushing was gruesome and not in good taste; So she tied rusty cable above his left wrist.

He screamed and he screamed; he was such a brat. He'd always been spoiled. She knew this was true. Still, she wanted to help; he was kin after all, So she bloodily-dialed an ambulance crew.

"Code Red. SOS. Dispatch your best men. My brother's a mess. He's minus a hand; He's flailing and shrieking and being a baby He needs reassurance, you must understand."





I can't wait all night, poor Bethany thought. Her brother kept leaking. He really might leave her. So she raised the stove's heat to a piping red hot, And balanced upon it her scariest cleaver.

It didn't take long. The tool now glowed red. She held the hot steel to the raw, grisly lump, And while pipsqueak cast expletives at his big sis, She lovingly sealed up the spouting stump.

"Well done," she muttered. She patted his head, "Now to polish things off: Polysporin!" She lubed the whole mess with the glistening goo As the ambulance team kicked the door in.

"Forgive Baby Bro; he's kind of a wuss; All the same, do your best not to drop him Now go away; scram! I have rodents galore, Please take him away while I chop 'em."





—sally basmajian

MICHT TERRORS

by michelle k. bujnowski

Getting enough sleep wasn't normally a problem. Tonight I was an insomniac while my husband, Frank, slept on. He worked odd shifts at his company, Oswald Shipping, a business started by his father. I worked in the front office. When we did get the chance to sleep together, not a creature stirred...usually.

Both in our late twenties, I thought it funny to be married to a Frank. My name contrasted by several generations with Lea. We didn't have kids but were trying, taking it easy so we could save enough to get out of our apartment first.

I lay awake worrying about the logistics of this very problem. I was late but hadn't confirmed with a pregnancy test. I heard Frank moan softly.

He moaned again as if having a nightmare. Words took shape as gibberish, he babbled like a baby.

"So, this is what it's going to be like," I thought, thinking of my waiting pregnancy test. After a few minutes of excessive verbalization I glared at my clock—three-forty in the morning. Another minute passed and I pushed my pillow over my head when his voice took on a strange guttural tone.

I looked over at his dark shape. His head turned away, he spoke intelligible words. I froze at the unfamiliarity in his voice.

"Why can't he dispatch the female?" His voice asked in a low growl, punctuated by a click in the back of his throat.

"Resistant."

He answered himself? I listened in shock. The last word seemed an octave lower, equally raspy, but different from the first. I pushed myself up, torn between listening and waking him.

"Overall...experiment...implemented." The first voice came back, distant and interrupted. The answering response was garbled. I couldn't make out the words.

"We will speed up the time frame." The first voice spoke, clear as a bell. The loudness of it startled me in my tiny bedroom. Time frame? Far from sounding like a bad dream and more like eavesdropping on a phone conversation, I wondered if Frank had neglected to tell me about a steel plate in his head.

I jumped when Frank sat bolt upright, murmuring nonsense.

"Frank, honey, wake up." I tapped his arm and grabbed his hand.

"What?" Frank's soft voice replaced the previous ones, groggy and irritated.

"You had a bad dream."

The next morning I sipped coffee and tried to deduce what I had heard a short time ago. Did Frank have some issues I hadn't been aware of? Dispatch the female? Who talked like that and what did it mean? And why a second voice, if that's what it was at all? How many people did he have in there with him?

I went to work disturbed and grumpy. Soon enough the orders kept me busy enough to forget about the dream. My boss came up to me around four o'clock, right on time on a Monday, asking for a schedule I didn't have figured out yet.

"How's the Sharp account coming?"

"I'm working on it as we speak."

"Can you give me a good time frame by end of the day?" I shivered. What was going to speed up Frank's so-called time frame?

"I will hand the schedule to you before I leave today," I said. He smiled, appeased. As if I had ever given him anything less.

For the moment my schedule was in sync with Frank's, which made me happy to not eat dinner alone, but as I chopped vegetables and looked at the clock I realized I dreaded bedtime. Surprised, I told myself the episode last night was a dream and that was it. People have crazy nightmares all the time.

"What you cooking, baby?" Frank said. "Smells good."

"Chicken is baking, I'm roasting veggies and making mashed potatoes."

"Want help chopping?" He nodded to the knife in my hand. I grimaced.

"Really? You never help." I was again surprised at my reaction. Since when didn't I want help?

He chuckled. "Can't a guy try to keep his wife happy? Come on, move over." He hip checked me away from the cutting board. I moved to the stove and stirred potatoes as I listened to a steady chopping rhythm ensue.

"You woke me up with that nightmare of yours last night," I said. "Remember what it was about?" I decided to face the beast.

"Can't say I do," he said, back turned. "Did I wake up? Don't remember a thing. Did I say something?"

For a moment I froze, trying to decide if I should tell him. I stared at the frothy bubbling water.

"Nope." I shrugged, feeling awkward. Who was I? I shared everything with this man.

"Ready for the big finale?" he said as he stopped chopping vegetables but held

the knife raised and ready. I held my breath and spun toward him while moving away a foot. He brought the knife down along a zucchini lengthwise and furiously chopped it to bits in thirty seconds. He looked at my lowered jaw and smiled.

"Food Network," he said.

At three o'clock in the morning I woke with a start. I lay awake, listening to Frank's breathing. It became erratic, belabored. He moaned with such volume I jumped out of bed and clung to the wall.

A low sound was coming from the back of his throat. It wasn't quite a growl. I walked to his side of the bed. Leaning toward him, I tried to make out this constant noise. I took a step closer.

Static. I stood, panting. Noise emanated from his open mouth, like our crappy television with four channels sometimes played instead of our shows. My heart thudded near panic. As I decided to wake him, he sat straight up, silent. I shrieked and stumbled into the wall.

"We are losing our connection to the male," Frank said, his tone brash, mixed with static.

"Yes." A distant voice agreed, nearly unintelligible. "He has had opportunity."

"I will plan for a manual override and contend with the female." The voice became garbled. I shook at the words.

"Yes, do it soon." The second voice faded.

"She...not sleep..." The voice cut in and out. "...elevated heart rate..." The voices and static stopped, Frank slumped in bed as if a channel had been switched off.

"God, what is going on?" I started crying. Was this more than dreams? If it was real, something had decided to up the ante, whatever that was.

"Frank, wake up!" I shook him.

"What? Time for work already?"

"Something... bad is happening!"

"Someone in the house?" He leaped up and went to the safe. A moment later he produced his gun and handed me pepper spray. I shivered at the sight of the gun. I didn't know what to think—was Frank the threat? Or was something coming from outside?

What did manual override mean? Scanning the windows, I looked for lights, but how did I know what to look for? Tiny green men? Government workers in white coveralls?

"Hon, did you hear something? I will go check the house, you stay here." Typical Frank, he didn't wait for an answer, but I was less than responsive. I wanted to yell at him to stop, tell me if he saw something in his dream, something to give us a clue.

I waited, heard nothing. I crept to a window and moved the shade a centimeter. Dark bushes and trees surrounded the house under a star filled sky.

It was too dark to see movement, but I screamed when a leaf fell in front of our window. I crawled along the floor, actually considered the space under the bed, but went for the door. Frank almost fell over me and picked me up.

"Basement," I mumbled, terrified. "Safer."

"I think we're okay," he said. "No one is here."

"You don't know what I heard!"

He wrapped me in a blanket before walking down the hall to the stairwell. Frank flipped the light switch as I started tip toeing down the stairs, cringing at every creak. The pepper spray shook in my hands.

Once downstairs, he turned. "Lea, what happened?"

I told him everything about both dreams. He stared as I finished, bug-eyed. As silence filled the basement and house, he doubled over suddenly and I jumped thinking the voices were back. Then I saw he was laughing.

"This tops them all!"

"Frank, this is serious."

"Aliens usually are!" He fell back on his haunches, gun limp in his hand. "Jesus, Lea!"

"I know what I heard, static and voices, like you interrupted a transmission or something. The voices, so strange and eerie, they weren't yours!"

He laughed harder. I turned away to pace the floor. They were coming and I had a mad man protecting me. The laughing died down, but still I walked, trembling under my blanket on the cold concrete floor. From one corner to the next I pounded the floor in frustration. Turning back, Frank stood in my path.

"Feel like taking me seriously now?"

He stared in response, a little too serious. His eyes met mine, the gun in his hand. Mouth open slightly, I heard a low sound escape with his breath; static. I froze, blinking, heartbeat escalating. He opened his mouth wider and it was one of them.

"Connection reestablished." Frank raised the gun.

National NBC News Report January 10, 2015 - Hundreds of reports across the country have been filed within the past year by spouses who claim they were not responsible for the death of their significant others in spite of evidence that leads investigators to believe they are in fact homicide cases.

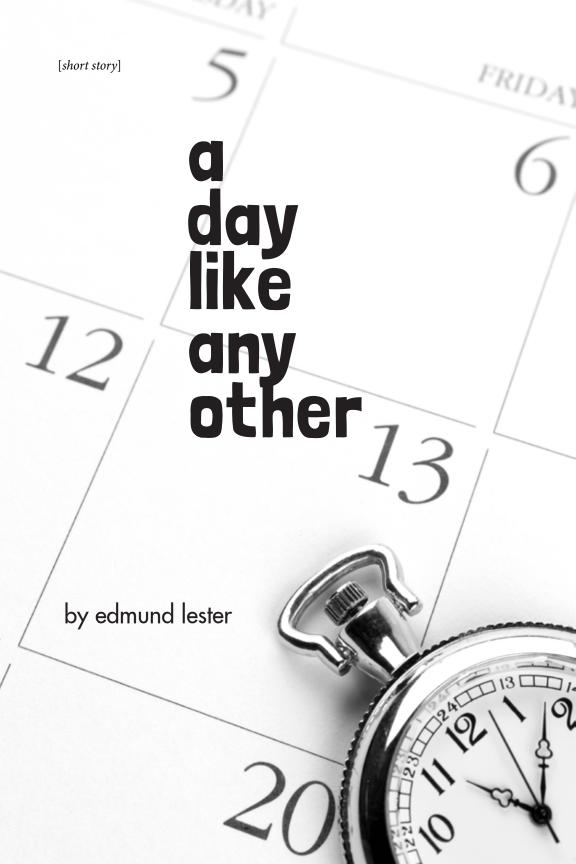
"I can't remember shooting and killing my wife," Frank Oswald said, who resides in Portland, Maine. "Before it happened, Lea told me I was having dreams and talked in strange voices. She thought we were going to be attacked by aliens the night she died. I thought she was losing her own mind or being paranoid. Now I know she was right—I would never hurt my wife. I was controlled by somebody else."

When questioned as to why aliens would control human beings, Frank Oswald responded, "What do people in power do to those with less? They take over, control their resources. Maybe our time is ending."

These eerie words are being echoed across the United States. Psychologists have interviewed Frank Oswald and many others with similar cases, and found that none remember killing their spouses.

In spite of the memory loss, Frank Oswald is being charged with murder in the first degree and his trial will commence within one to two years. Despite similar scenarios across the country, each case will be treated individually.





The crack of the gunshot breaks the silence of the morning. A rifle you think, although it's too distant to be certain. You don't flinch. It's become commonplace. You feel detached, separate.

You continue brushing your teeth, the next step in your early morning ritual. Through the obscured glass of the bathroom window you see the sky lightening. More gunfire sounds, automatic pistol fire this time. You swill the remaining toothpaste from your mouth before exiting the bathroom.

Your clothing and effects for the day are laid out in front of you on the armchair. Shirt, jacket, trousers, AK-47, boots, Kevlar helmet, armour vest, socks, tie, briefcase, gloves, shoulder and hip holsters, twin Glocks, cuff links, spare ammo. Everything you need for another day at the office.

You dress quickly and head to the kitchen for breakfast. Two slices of bread in the toaster, coffee percolating and freshly squeezed orange juice in hand you switch on the TV and sit at the table. You hear more gunshots. For a second you don't know if they were from the TV or outside.

The picture focuses. It answers your question. The shots were from a news report. The screen shows a fire fight taking place downtown. The top right of the screen has the word "LIVE" in big bold letters. You recognise the area on the screen. It's not near your route to work. You lose interest, not listening to the young blonde reporter trying to make a gun battle interesting.

Breakfast over, you place the plate and cup in the dishwasher and head for the door.

Fresh gunfire greets you in the outside world. It's not close by. You don't react. There's no point. It'll happen one day; you know that. You lock the door, set the security system to armed, before turning and walking down the path to the bus stop and the most dangerous part of the journey. You know standing still is not a good idea but there's little choice—walking just isn't an option.

You think your luck might be turning. You see the bus as you approach the stop, no waiting today.

You announce your destination to the screen that greets you on the bus and pay your fare. You move down the bus looking for a seat. The first few seats are empty. No one wants to sit at the front. You move farther back and spy a space. A teenage boy occupies the bench seat. He doesn't look as though sharing is on his mind. His hand rests on the shotgun he has on his lap.

You meet his stare. He seems unwilling to back down so you raise the muzzle of your AK-47 to back up your request. He recognises your strength and slides to the side freeing up the nearest half of the seat. You sit. A glance tells you he is not likely to hold a grudge. You don't fear a knife piercing your armour this trip. It was a simple ritual, nothing more.

You watch your fellow passengers as the journey progresses. You never know who might be on the bus. It seems quiet. As you approach your stop you hear a loud explosion. Up ahead of the bus you see a huge cloud of smoke. Another bomb has gone off. It must be the fourth this month. The bus isn't going anywhere soon. You decide that maybe walking will be best—the bus will be a sure target in a traffic jam.

You're not the only one thinking this way. Over half the passengers rise with you. As you move forward your elbow collides with an elderly lady's back. She turns to you and starts mouthing off then reaches into her bag.

When her hand emerges she's holding a revolver. Your reactions are faster. In under a second a Glock is in your hand, smoking. Another second later the old lady's body lies at your feet in the aisle of the bus. You quickly look side to side, in case others might join in. They don't.

You step over the body and move to the screen at the front of the bus. You press the maintenance button to the side and announce the killing. The teenage kid you sat next to joins you and announces himself as witness, describing the event as justifiable.

The disembodied voice of the driver thanks you for your diligence and tells you no further action is required.

You've been at your desk for half an hour—long enough for to drink your first coffee and read through your morning e-mail. You sigh at the amount of spam e-mails you've received. Surely there are only so many adverts for bigger guns a man needs. And as for black-market explosives, it's cheaper picking them up at the discount supermarkets most of the time. If you are brave enough to enter them that is.

You begin your day's work. An hour passes—then two.

Your desk phone rings. It's your boss's boss calling you into his office. He tells you it's urgent and to drop everything. You stand and look at your weapons, considering the etiquette. Should you take the AK? It would show respect certainly but could it be considered too confrontational?

You decide on caution and strap on the shoulder harness, placing the two Glocks into it and head from your cubicle to begin the long walk to the executive zone.

Fingers point as you move past your coworkers. You guess the story about your morning shooting have circulated. You hope not to the point of challenge. Recent kills spur some on to seek more bloodshed. You unfasten the catches on your harness making the Glocks more accessible.

Your message gets across. You are left alone and reach your destination safely. You are careful not to stand in front of the doors as you knock. The wood of this door would not stop a bullet. A voice calls you in.

You close the doors behind you and move toward the desk and the machine gun mounted upon it. You figure he is likely to want to say something before just gunning you down.

"Take a seat," he says gesturing at the smaller chair directly in front of the gun barrel. You move the chair slightly to right and sit. The man behind the desk smiles and re-aims.

"Let me get straight to the point," he starts then proceeds to waffle on for about ten minutes. He talks about the goals of the company, the strengths he and others have seen in you and the current state of the world. You pay enough attention to make noises in the right places. There is a rather large gun pointed at you after all and your chair doesn't look all that expensive—certainly not pricey enough to make a man like this worry about destroying it in a hail of bullets.

He begins to get to a point. "... So we feel you might be the right man for the job." He grins broadly. "Well to be honest out of the shortlist we made up last month you are the only one still surviving. I guess you can say you got the position in the truest Darwinian sense." His smile broadens. You feel it would be a good idea to join in, pretend you felt his joke was good. Even though it wasn't.

"So do you want it?" He asks. "It comes with a raise of course, extra couple of mil a week. And you'll get your own office complete with a full security system. Not as good as mine you understand but you'll still have enough firepower built in to take out most attackers."

You feign happiness. To be honest it doesn't even really interest you. What use is money anyway? The promotion will just make you a bigger target.

You stand and extend your hand across the desk telling him you accept his offer. He takes it and shakes it firmly. He hands you a key to your office and a security pass and wishes you well in your new position. You understand his last comment to be an instruction for you to leave his presence so you turn and walk to the door.

Part of you expects to feel bullets hitting your back as you leave his office. They don't. You feel oddly disappointed.

You turn your new key in the lock of your new office. You drop to the floor, a gun in each hand, as the door opens, in case the room contains a welcoming committee. It doesn't.

You regain your feet quickly, close the door and walk to your desk. It's empty except for a sealed envelope and a telephone. You ease yourself into the chair behind the desk, slightly uneasy at turning your back to the large window.

The letter is a suicide note, an interesting welcome to your new job. You read your predecessor's words. He talks of his time in the office you now occupy, his achievements and hopes for the future. It seems odd to you to read of hope in a suicide note. He must have been a second lifer or some such nonsense. You have no time for distractions.

You scan the note again for useful information and find none. You open the top drawer and drop the note into it.

The telephone rings.

Your secretary asks if you need anything. You realise you have a secretary. You can't help but smile at the thought. You ask if there's a budget for equipment and stationary. She tells you to look in the bottom drawer.

You thank her and hang up.

Your bottom drawer holds a laptop computer and an office supplies catalogue. You lift them up and place them on the top of the desk.

You open the catalogue at random whilst the laptop boots up. It opens at the office security section. From the hand-written notes on the pages you decide it must be a much-used part of the book. You skim through pages of wall mounted remote controlled anti-personnel cannons, desk-mounted armaments, video surveillance systems and so on.

The post-it note attached to the cover of the catalogue had surprised you. You have a truly enormous sum at your disposal to equip this room. You start to make a list. The first item is the machine gun your boss had in his office. It impressed you.

Your order placed, including a last minute inclusion of stationery, you begin to read through the e-mails awaiting you in your new e-mail account. You have a staff of ten. A staff! You never thought you'd live long enough to have a staff. Ten people now actually work for you. Well, nine soon. You realise you are expected to kill one of them before the end of the first week.

You read through their personnel files. They contain the usual boring stuff—job roles, details of education, preferred weaponry, skill proficiencies, kill records, hobbies and interests. You check your watch. There's less than an hour before you have to meet these people in the main meeting room. It'll be your first time there on the protected side of the barrier.

You turn your attention back to the files. You will need to know this information when the meeting starts. You already know what you are going to say to them. Now it's just a matter of how they'll take to a new boss. Past experience teaches you that the first few hours of being a manager are the most dangerous. Some people just don't like change.

Having completed your reading of the files you know who your main enemy in the department will be. For one thing you're the younger man. For another he's the only man there who's actually applied for a promotion in the whole team. And he didn't get it. Given that he's still living he wasn't even considered for your new job.

You analyse his past kill record. He's careful. No kills on his file other than justifiables. Either means he's not overly ambitious (unlikely you feel) or he makes sure he leaves no clues. You need to find something on him quickly.

The hour's past quickly but you feel you are ready. You open the door to your office a fraction, enough to give you a view of the corridor. You'll feel safer leaving the room once your video security system has been installed.

No one in sight you leave the room and make your way toward the meeting room, Glock in hand as is customary for a member of the management. You enter through the executive door, new territory for you. Your old security access never even permitted you into the corridor to reach this door never mind opening its sacred portal.

You look out through the bullet-proof transparent plastic shield. Your team is waiting. You scan the line looking for your main threat. His bright red hair is not hard to spot. He's sitting dead centre with his shotgun slung over one shoulder. It's a provocative first encounter. Etiquette should have demanded he keep his guns out of plain site. You, as manager, should be the only one visibly armed during this first meeting.

You walk up to the dais and stand behind the lectern. You notice it has an inbuilt computer system, a screen in its sloped surface. You place your thumb on the login pad and your desktop appears on the screen. No wonder the bosses always seemed to know all the answers, they had them at their fingertips.

A message flashes on the screen. "Place the earpiece in your left ear." You see the device on the lectern's small shelf and comply with the instruction.

"Welcome, sir." A voice says. "My name is Fargo. I am here to help you in any way you need during these meetings. Please do not acknowledge my presence aloud. Any requests to me can be entered through the keypad in front of you."

You type "Thank you, Fargo, pleased to meet you."

"And you, sir!" He replies. "I think you'd better begin."

You fire your gun into the ceiling to get everyone's attention.

The meeting seemed to go well. Some of the team actually seemed to accept you as leader. One of them, you feel, never will. You will have to be careful around him.

You return to your office to find a maintenance crew fitting your security system. Too late, you realise, you should have announced your approach. The lead tech-guy pulls a small pistol and fires. You roll at the movement and the bullet passes harmlessly by you, lodging in the wall behind you.

He quickly realises his error and drops his gun before lowering his head—the accepted sign that he will accept execution for his transgression. It would even count as a justifiable homicide. Someone of his station should not have fired at an executive.

You decide not to kill him, instead firing your gun into the carpet at his feet. He nods his head at your mercy and returns to his work. You collect his dropped gun and walk past him sideways to your desk, never once taking your eyes away from him. You know some people would take your mercy as an insult. Fortunately he doesn't.

You notice his wedding band. He's an old-wilder, believes in the old ways enough to marry. He's no threat. It's not a philosophy you can understand, committing to one person and caring enough to avoid confrontation when possible. But you try to be tolerant of others—except for when they try to kill you.

He quickly finishes his work and gives you a demonstration of your new security system. He's very thorough. He's even made some improvements to your request at no extra cost, obviously grateful to you for not having ended his life. He bows his thanks and leaves. You look at his business card. He might be a useful contact to have, especially now he owes you a favour. A man like that is likely to have the key codes to a number of the offices in this building.

Alone once more you realise you had better get on with the job you've been given. You know someone will be watching you. Slacking off on your first day will only get you a bullet in the back of the head. You've heard of the penalties for not passing your probationary period.

The telephone rings. You look up from your laptop screen at the clock in front of you. The day officially ended ninety minutes ago. It never hurts to put a bit extra in on your first day. You pick up the receiver.

You hear your boss's voice in the small speaker. "Congratulations, my boy! You've survived your first day. And you seem to be doing well."

You thank him.

"I'm sending your driver up shortly. He will be ready to take you home whenever you are ready."

You have a driver. That surprises you. You knew there were perks when you got to management level but this was one you didn't expect. You thank him once again. You can almost hear his grin as he accepts your thanks.

You save your files and close down the laptop before placing it in your briefcase. You know you're going to need to do some more work once you get home. Some things never change—even when you get your own office.

Your buzzer sounds. You look at the monitor to your left. On the screen you see a fifty-something man with a greying beard. From the corporate lackey uniform of liveried jacket, cap and hip-holster you guess he's your driver and press the door release button.

He enters the room and stands calmly in front of your newly fitted desk-mounted machine gun. Your first visitor has made you glad you decided to have it fitted. It will no doubt come in useful sometime.

You stand and let him know you are ready to leave. You ask him if he knows where your apartment is.

"Apartment, sir? Don't you mean house?" he asks.

You tell him you don't own a house.

"Have you been working on your first day, sir? Most new managers spend their first few days reading through the company manual, finding out the limits of their new powers and their perks."

He seems surprised at your diligence. You make a note of this. It might not be such a good idea to appear such a corporate dog after all. Maybe it wouldn't go down with the other managers. Moving away from the bottom level didn't mean you are free of potential assassins.

Despite the unease you felt getting into the back of the car, the driver manages to make you feel comfortable. He's impressive. You didn't expect to feel comfortable with someone else in control. Part of you expected to be gassed as soon as the car door shut.

You enjoy being able to look out of the car's windows as the car takes you to

your new home. It's not a luxury you've allowed yourself before. Public transport meant being surrounded by other people, anyone of whom might be a threat and pull a gun or a knife on you.

This is different. You are alone behind bullet proof, obscured glass. No one can see you. You can see all. You watch the carnage of everyday life with a new fascination, one born of distance. You're no longer part of it.

Two young girls, no more than ten or twelve, are toying with an older boy. One had a gun pressed against his neck; the other is cutting the buttons from his shirt with a large hunting knife. The boy's obviously terrified. He's pissed himself. It reminds you of the childhood games you used to play with your classmates.

The car approaches the gates to Green Zone. The gates open and you pass through. This is holy ground, a panacea. This is the Promised Land. You've passed these gates hundreds of times hoping one day to be allowed in but never expecting it. And now you're here.

You almost don't notice the crack of pistol fire, lost in your thoughts. You realise you'd better not let your guard down just because you are in the Green Zone. This might be the place where all the high-ups of society live but it's not that far removed.

People are just as likely to shoot you down for looking at them wrong, or whistling, or not getting out of the way, or pretty much anything in here as outside those gates. It's just they'd follow it by going for a latté or spritzer afterwards instead of beer.

An old lady steps out into the road dragging a small dog behind her. Your driver slows down as she crosses in front of your car. You notice her scowl at your car, his disgust at your wanting to use the road obvious. As is the large handgun she carries and the belt of grenades strapped around her waist.

The driver pulls the car into the driveway of a house nearly the size of the apartment block you left this morning.

"Here we are, sir. Your new home." he announces.

You step from the car and look at the house. You can't believe this is your home. You start walking toward the door. Your chauffeur steps in front of you. Your hands automatically head to the twin pistols you wear. He smiles and shakes his head.

"Don't worry, sir. You have nothing to fear from me. I'm just suggesting caution. The moving crew left here two hours ago having brought your belongings over from your old place. They reported it clean then but there's no reason for you to take such risks. I'm paid to."

He smiles again. "Just wait here, sir, or in the car if you prefer. I'll go check the door for booby traps and the house for intruders. Promotions like yours can make serious enemies." He walks over toward the house.

You watch his back, considering his words. He's right, you know it. Nothing makes people unhappy more than someone else's success. You just hope this guy isn't one of them. You shake your head. You're getting too paranoid. This guy seems harmless...

Your thoughts are interrupted by a gunshot. It's close by. Your Glocks are in your hands without conscious thought. You dive to the ground to make a smaller target. Your kindergarten classes still stick after all these years.

The driver is lying on the floor in a growing puddle of blood. He seems alive though, moving. Through the remains of the house's front door you see a redheaded figure. You recognise him—the threat you identified in your new team. At least your judgement there was spot on. Not that it's going to help you in this gun battle.

You fire both guns toward him, more laying down a cover fire than an actual kill attempt. He ducks back away from the open doorway toward the dark interior of the house. He's good, knows when to take cover. So do you, you quickly scurry behind the car just in time to be covered in glass form the shattered windows.

He's got something seriously high calibre in there. That shook the car. You realise it's not going to give you protection for long. His gun's capable of punching a hole straight through this car, even given its armour plating.

You only have one chance. You open the car door above your head and retrieve your briefcase, thanking your lucky stars you were vigilant this morning, and that his bullets haven't hit the grenades it contains.

You think two should do the trick and pull out the pins. You throw them through the open door and duck back behind the car.

The force of the explosion blows out all the windows of the ground floor. Smoke and dust billows out of every opening.

You jump up quickly, grab your AK from the backseat of the limo and run around the side of the building. It's your turn to get the jump on this guy. You see him lying amongst the debris of the hallway. He'd taken cover behind the huge stairwell. That saved his life but didn't protect him totally. He's trying to get up but he's in a bad way. Still armed though and so still dangerous. You decide the only safe action is to take him out before he gets in a good shot.

You jump through the windows, tearing your jacket on the remaining glass and cutting your face. He turns at the noise and attempts to raise his gun. He's too late. You have both Glocks levelled squarely at him and pull both triggers. Repeatedly. He drops the gun and falls back to the floor.

You reload your guns and move to check the rest of the house. He might not have been alone. Your search completed you call in the cops and an ambulance for your injured driver. He tries to apologise for failing to protect you. You tell him not to worry, surprising yourself by actually meaning it.

The police investigation is a formality. It always is. You call the office and report the attack and its result. They say to wait for your new driver. He'll take you to a hotel for the night. Your house will be fixed up by tomorrow night.

You walk back into the hotel suite's lounge. The shower helped, almost made you feel human. You look into the mirror by the door as you straighten your tie. You grab your guns from the table. You're ready to hit the hotel bar, maybe get a meal. You stop at the door and add two more grenades to your armament. You shouldn't need them in a hotel like this but they make you feel more secure.

You hesitate before pressing the lift button. Lifts are too much like buses—public confined places prone to raised tensions and regular violence. You consider the stairs but fifty-four stories are too much. You'd rather take your chances in a close fight than arrive in the lobby area too tired to defend yourself if ambushed. You press the button and take aim at the lift door.

The numbers rise quickly. This is a fast lift—forty, forty-five, fifty-five, fifty-seven. The lift pings and the doors begin to open. You crouch slightly, getting prepared. It's empty. You step into the lift and descend to the ground floor, gun at the ready for the doors' opening.

An argument is taking place at the check-in desk. You can't make out the words but you understand the emotion. This is going to get real ugly soon. You head quickly for the bar, not wanting to get in the way of someone else's fight.

The waiter guides you to a table. You see the PPK at his hip. Nice, you think. You've always admired the classics. No fancy ceramic guns for you. The Glock has a certain something; it's special. This guy obviously thinks the same way.

He takes your order and heads for the kitchen. You look about the restaurant. It's well designed, every table backs against a wall, no chairs placed where the occupant's back would be to the entrance.

You hear gunfire from the lobby. Obviously that argument at check-in has reached its conclusion. Shortly afterwards you see the clean-up crew wheeling a body bag out.

You meal arrives. The waiter wishes you "Buon Appetito". The food is excellent, truly astounding. You've never tasted anything this good. It should be though, the price of this place. One night here would have cost you a month's salary before this promotion. Now it's paid for by the company. This is a life you could get used to.

You sip your wine. It has to last. You won't have a second glass. No one who wants to stay alive would. You need your reflexes sharp.

The couple at the next table start arguing. He slams his fist down on the table causing her knife to fall to the floor.

"Walter, you don't want to do this." she says.

It's obviously not the right thing to say. He stands and waves his fist at her, asking how she would know what he wants.

She just sighs and fires her gun into his left leg. He collapses, screaming, to the ground. She simply raises a hand to the waiter who nods before lifting the telephone receiver next to him. In less than fifteen seconds a medical team is treating the man. This has obviously happened before. You don't let it ruin your meal.

You look out of your hotel room window, a glass of cognac in your hand. You're high up, fifty-seventh floor. You can see all over the city. You can see several explosions but this distance makes them mute—silent flashes of light. The TV in the corner of the room is showing a news report of the gun battle you watched "LIVE" this morning.

You feel detached, separate. Nothing's changed really.





A CORPOREAL DILEMMA

Bodies falling one by one singing Che sera sera Ce'st la vie and life's a bitch then you die which makes no sense to me and man cannot accept his fate nor will he even try

-stephanie smith

a cave in the valley

by shane fraser

On a coffee table is a gun. In front of it, a man is sitting on a sofa. He is staring at it wildly—his eyes red and swollen, his face striped with tears. He reaches for the revolver but stops a few inches away. He changes direction and turns toward a large quadratic bottle opposite the gun. He puts it to his mouth and takes a long, obviously painful swig, and as he releases, gags aggressively. It takes all of his strength not to throw it back up.

He puts the bottle back down and continues to stare at the gun. This persists for several minutes until he grasps the handle and carefully lifts the weapon off the table. He unlocks the cylinder and it swings out, revealing a lone bullet in the chamber.

He begins to fiddle with the thing, swinging it in and out, transfixed like a teenager with a smartphone. He sets it on his lap as he takes another, longer swig of the whiskey, which seems to have gone down easier than before, but this could not be a good sign.

For a moment, his gaze shifts to the wall at the far end of the living room, where a family picture hangs. This strikes a nerve and he resumes sobbing. He mouths, "I'm sorry" repeatedly, before returning attention to his lap. He goes to pick up the revolver, but it does not move.

Minutes pass and his trembling hands are still hovering millimeters away, as if touching it would burn his skin. His cries are quiet but terrifying; a painful unearthing of so much emotion. He takes another swig, and without even a flinch, finishes the bottle.

In one sudden violent motion, he grabs the gun and inserts the barrel in his mouth. His eyes are shut and his sobs have turned into unsettling whimpers, like a child anticipating a flu shot. He cocks the hammer and lets out a brief muffled

scream—the clicking sound startled him. He rubs his index finger along the trigger guard and after a few heavy breaths, begins to pull.

The doorbell rings. He does not move, his finger still precariously pressed against the trigger. A few heavy knocks are heard. He continues to ignore it. The doorbell rings. He grunts in frustration, slams the firearm on the table, and lifts himself off the sofa. He walks through the living room, turns toward the entranceway and opens the door.

A man is standing there with his arm raised ready to knock again. He is short, fat and squirrelly looking, with a receding hairline and wearing a business-casual outfit. Realizing that a person has answered, he sets something down at his feet apprehensively before backing away. A few short steps later, he turns around and starts walking quickly down the sidewalk, looking back over his shoulder once before disappearing around the corner.

Perplexed, he watches as the man darts away down his sidewalk. Unbeknownst to him, it's his disheveled appearance that frightened the man; a long afternoon of crying, drinking and contemplating an unthinkable act can distort a face remarkably. He turns his attention to the concrete in front of him, where the strangers' gift lay. It appears to be some sort of pamphlet, with the front page reading, in large bold letters: "Live a Life Worth Living!" Curiously, he picks it up to examine it further. He reads the text underneath the tagline, which says: "Vote Jim Vollman for your City Council." It is accompanied by a smug photo of the man who had just scurried away.

He takes the pamphlet inside, sets it on the coffee table, and sinks back into the sofa. He stares at the politicians face for a few seconds before sticking the barrel of the revolver back in his mouth, adjusting the muzzle for maximum success. He cries, but is hardly shaking anymore. His finger rests confidently on the trigger, and after a few minutes of serious rumination, it begins to move again.

The doorbell rings. He shakes his head in disbelief. It rings twice more. He groans and eases off the trigger. It rings three times, in rapid succession. He rips the barrel from his mouth—which tears like Velcro—drops the gun on the table and gets up to answer the door.

A tall, slim young man is outside his house. He is wearing an expensive suit and holding a clutch of papers. He does not seem startled or even concerned at the appearance of the man who has answered the door. Instead, he looks calm and happy; the smile on his face could illuminate the abyss. The young man hands him one of the papers—which is weighty, suggesting some sort of small magazine. Just as he begins to speak, the door is slammed in his face.

Obviously incensed, the man runs back to his living room and throws the magazine on the floor. He kicks it a few times before collapsing on the sofa with his face in his hands. Several seconds later, he lifts his head and focuses on the spot on the floor where the misshapen magazine lay. He gets up, lifts it off the ground, and takes it back to the sofa. He reads the title on the front page—"Accepting God is the Key to Happiness"—and thumbs through the rest of the pages before closing it up and staring aimlessly at the table.

His attention again shifts to the gun. He grabs the handle and inserts the barrel in his mouth without shaking or sobbing; he appears content. He reclines back in his seat, with his head braced atop the sofa. He positions the gun at the proper angle, closes his eyes, pulls on the trigger, and embraces death.

The doorbell rings. He screams a most frustrated scream. He runs to the door but takes the gun with him. He turns the knob and quietly opens it about two inches. Through the crack, in the darkness of his home, he points the revolver at the unsuspecting person. Once he gets a glimpse of the visitor, his heart sinks, and he drops the gun.

It is a young girl—no more than 10 years old. She jumps at the sound and peers around the slightly-ajar door, looking for its source. She catches the eye of the man, who reciprocates the surprised look, while carefully nudging the gun out of sight with his foot. She doesn't see what falls, only the face of a horrified, disheveled man staring at her from behind the door.

She is initially taken aback by the appearance of the man, but then she pulls something out of her satchel and holds it out in his direction. He does nothing. She inches it closer but he does not take it—he is still looking mystified at the girl. He finally composes himself enough to reach out his hand as well. She places the object in his open palm, and he peers down in bewilderment; it is a box of cookies. He looks up at the girl and motions with his other hand that he does not have any money. She just smiles—the most beautiful smile he has ever seen in his life—and pats him on the arm. She turns and walks down the sidewalk, onto the next house.

Minutes pass and he is standing in the same position. After finally closing the door, he picks up the gun and carries it, and the cookies, back to the sofa. He puts both of them on the table and eyes each object intensively; from the gun, to the pamphlet, to the magazine, to the cookies. He laughs out loud, shakes his head, and then laughs again. He picks up the box of cookies, opens it up, sticks one in his mouth and walks away.





BROTHER, CAN YOU SPARE A DIME?

by josh craven

"Brother, can you spare a dime?"

"I'm sorry—come again," Jake said as he looked down into a pair of tired, brown eyes with lids that sagged at the corners.

"Buddy, can you spare a dime?" the old man asked.

Clearly all the worse for wear, he stood stooped as if he had carried the world on his shoulders for decades. He was wringing his gnarled hands together like a starving man waiting for a slice of warm, freshly baked bread. His khaki suit was mottled with dark splotches and, like the hunched little man that it hung upon, it was thin and threadbare and frayed around the edges.

"I, uh..."

Jake shifted his briefcase from hand to hand as he fished in his pants pocket. Who carries change these days? But it was easier to turn a panhandler away after feigning a good-faith effort to find him a coin. Jake was practiced in the art of declining such a request; panhandlers often seemed to outnumber fare payers

on the train platforms these days. On this particular Saturday morning, as Jake had entered the platform he saw only the old beggar and an Eminem wannabe gesticulating to a private tune coming from the red cinnamon buns on the sides of his head.

Jake was about to utter his standardized refrain, Sorry, sir, I don't have any cash on me, when his fingertips touched the flat metallic disc. He pulled his hand from his pocket, and extended it to the old man.

"Here you go, sir. Sorry, that's all I have on me."

"Praise the Lord! It's a Roosevelt! Bless you, young'un. Al's muh name."

Al's dirt-colored eyes began to shimmer like a pair of tiny mud puddles.

"You have a great day, Al," Jake said with a smile. He thought it had been at least thirty years since anyone had called him a young'un. He continued walking toward the far end of the platform so he could sit in the first car.

"You do the same!" Al said from behind him.

Take reached the area where he knew the front of the train would come to a halt and toed the yellow "Do Not Cross" line. He looked back to his left and saw the train peeking from around the curve like a snake slithering from behind an old tree trunk. He noticed Al shuffling over to the young man with the headphones.

Good luck with that one, Al.

The kid looked at Al with contempt, and it reminded Jake of the way his fourteen-year-old son looked at him when he told the boy to mow the yard.

Electricity whistled and hummed in the overhead lines, and brakes squealed and moaned in protest as the train slid alongside the platform. The nose of the first car slipped past Jake by a few feet, and the train lurched to a stop with the door of the lead car almost directly in front of him. Jake glanced back to see if Al was having any luck, but the young man was shaking his head dismissively from side to side. Al was running his left hand over his head while his right hand fidgeted behind his back under his suit jacket; he was clearly anxious and agitated at the bad news he was receiving.

The door to the train car trundled open and Jake boarded. There was only one other person in the car. She had salt-and-pepper hair, a hooked nose, and she was sitting a couple of rows from the front. The large hardback she was reading must have been a real page-turner, because she never looked up. Jake passed her and dropped into a window seat about halfway down the length of the car. He put his briefcase in the empty seat between him and the aisle, and he peered out the glass. Al and the kid were out of view. The train door closed with a whoosh, and Jake popped open his briefcase and pulled out his newspaper.

The train jerked forward and began to pick up speed, and in Jake's mind, Bing Crosby started singing a tired, Depression-era show-song with a somber tone. He checked his watch and wondered if this train could race against time. A minute later the door at the rear of the car opened.

Unlike the passenger reading her book, years of riding the rail had taught Jake to be aware of his surroundings, and he stole a quick glance back at the door. Al entered the car and wobbled up the aisle. Jake thought there were more dark blots on the old man's suit than there had been earlier.

The weathered old waif heaved himself from one row of seats to the next, grabbing the shiny bars on the backs of the chairs as he made his way toward the front. He didn't seem to notice Jake; the frail man with the slouched shoulders and hunched back was focused on the lady with the salt-and-pepper hair.

Jake held his newspaper in front of his face, but he peered over top of the black and white pages to watch the goings on.

"Sister, can you spare a dime?"

The lady shook her head from left to right. She never looked up from her book.

"Sister! Can you spare a dime?" It was loud, even over the rattling and roaring of the train, and this time she gave the elderly beggar her attention.

"I said 'no.' Now go away." She was looking back down at her book before she finished speaking.

Al's shoulders seem to sag a little lower as he inhaled deeply and then exhaled. He stood there in the aisle, facing the lady.

"Can you please go sit down?" she asked, still staring into her book.

Al's tattered jacket flapped and bulged as he fumbled behind his back, underneath the beat-up old suit-top. When his hand emerged and reached upward, he was holding one of those heavy, framing hammers with a large, round face for pounding new nails and a long, straight claw for extracting old ones. Jake noticed that Al's hand, the one that had accepted Jake's dime a short time ago, seemed to be wearing a dark red glove that matched the end of Al's jacket sleeve.

The lady with the salt-and-pepper hair never looked up from her book, and Jake prayed it was a happy story. When the hammer came down, the little old man really put his back into it, like he was trying to ring the bell at the county fair.

Jake heard the *thunk* when the flat face of the head punched into the woman's skull. When Al raised the hammer back over his head, blood gurgled from the neat, round hole that the hammer had just knocked in her head, and an arc of spatter dotted the window and extended up onto the ceiling. Al's knobby red fingers spun the handle of the hammer in his hand so that the claw pointed forward, and when the tool came down again, it plunged in deep and wet.

Jake was paralyzed and wide-eyed as the little old man's arm nodded up and down like the head of a pumpjack. When he stopped swinging the hammer, the side of the train car was awash in red, accented with what looked like little clumps of tofu.

Al sat down in the aisle seat across from the lady he had just bludgeoned into oblivion and faced forward as the train rumbled onward. Jake stared at the neat swirl of thin, white hair on the back of Al's head as it swayed gently with the rocking of the train.

Jake felt he should do something, but his mind was tripping over itself, trying to put together a coherent thought. He was certain he could overtake the old man without much of a tussle, but the harder task was getting his body to obey his brain.

Before he could move, the train's brakes began to howl.

Jake watched Al stand up, totter to the front of the car, and pause at the top of the stairs for the train to come to a stop. Jake could see that his face and the front of his suit looked like Jackson Pollock had gotten carried away with the red paint.

When the door slid open, Al carefully stepped off, steadying himself with a gooey crimson hand on the handrail. His jacket fluttered in the wind and Jake saw the hammer was tucked into the frayed waistband of Al's dappled pants.

A corpulent man sat on a shaded bench on the platform with a magazine in his hand and a cigarette dangling from his lips. He looked at Al like one might look at an elephant that had just been birthed by a squirrel. As the train door snapped shut and the train started to groan, Al shimmied toward the man on the bench.

Jake's brain finally re-synched with his body, and he ran to the door.

"Hey! Hey!" Jake beat on the window in the door with his fist.

He watched as Al neared the man and began to speak. The man set his magazine to the side and patted his pants pocket as the train pitched forward. Jake ran down the aisle, past the wet mess with a hardbound book between its feet, to the back of the car. He jabbed at the button that opened the door to the rear car and sprinted to the back of the train. From the window that faced out of the back of the train car, Jake saw the man with the magazine shaking his head no.

"Al!" Jake screamed, his forehead mashed against the glass. "Al!"

As the train curved around the bend, and the platform was squeezed from his sight, Jake watched Al point his hammer to the sky.



The Screams of Winter

In these dangerous times of translucent dreams and heartache that seethes, a child screams for his mother upon Winter's wake

An open grave sighs
The metallic sun sings a
sonnet for the silver sky,
breeds silence for the departed,
cries of the damned,
a purgatory of sorts
in this land that's fit for a pauper

Perhaps Winter is our own private Hell of fake joy and contradiction
Perhaps we play our part too well:
A Grand Guignol on a broken stage where we recite our soliloquies to the mangled masses, this plastic audience

-stephanie smith

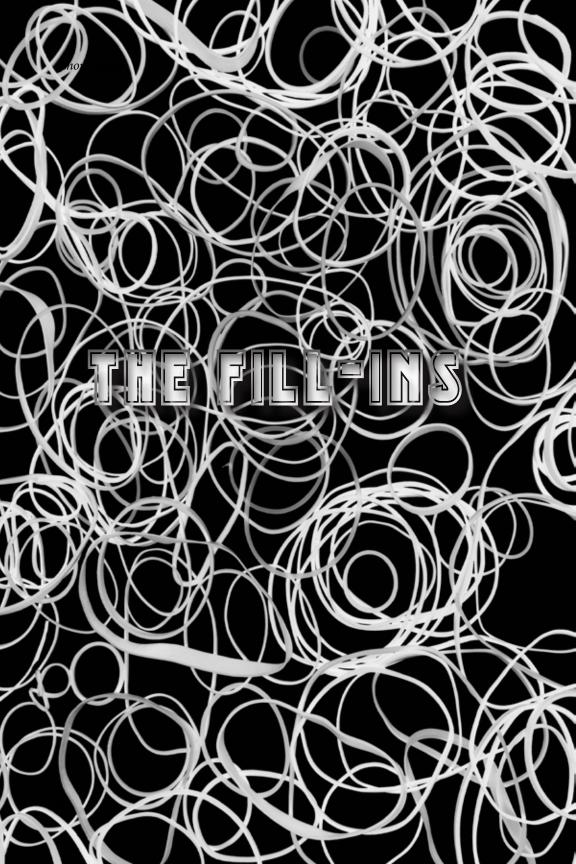


WHAT MAKES THE MAN?

The savage bought a suit It fit him really well The cuffs were linked The hat was tops It ended in a tail

He stole a matching cane With iv'ry-crested head But gore and game his shirt did stain An' all that's white ran red

—t.c. powell



by leland neville

"I'm Detective Beau Kellerman and I have a few routine questions concerning your wife."

Noah invited the slender gray man into his home.

"A missing person report was anonymously filed online," said Kellerman. "Ninety-nine percent of the time these reports turn out to be wrong."

The condo and its dusty furnishings felt familiar to the detective. How many interchangeable gloomy rooms had he visited the past month? At least ten. Maybe twenty. Even Noah was indistinguishable from the young man who recently bought the townhouse across the street from the detective.

"Is Lauren okay? She lives in Florida." Noah's words were unhurried.

"Lauren? Florida?" Detective Kellerman, confused, reexamined the report. "The missing person is definitely named 'Olivia.' But the emergency contact information is filled in with your name, your phone number, and your Baltimore address. It identifies you as the husband. There seems to be a problem. Perhaps I should return later with a corrected file."

"I think I can explain. Lauren worked at the Olivia desk."

"I don't understand. Who is Lauren? What's the Olivia desk?"

"Lauren's my ex-wife. When Lauren was hired at Infosystech in Florida nine months ago she must have inherited the name and the clients of her predecessor. That's not unusual. It's a business strategy that's supposed to deliver a less disruptive service."

Beau Kellerman shrugged.

"After Lauren left me and Baltimore for Florida and a new job I followed her on the Internet. She was determined to have a new identity. She got so caught up in her new life that she no longer wanted to be Lauren. Once I called her at Infosystech just to see how she was doing. I was certain it was Lauren, even though she denied it and insisted she that had always been Olivia. Lauren told me to never call her again at work or home. She threatened to notify the authorities, but I kept following her..." Noah's voice trailed off.

"Some courts consider that cyberstalking. I consider it cyberstalking."

"No, it wasn't like that. I loved Lauren and was worried about her. Anyway, except for that one time, I didn't engage her. I just observed what anyone with Internet access can observe."

"And what exactly did you observe?"

"Initially the photos posted on the usual social media sites were those of the Olivia who Lauren must have been replacing. It was weird because Lauren did bear a striking resemblance to her predecessor. They could have been, if not twins, certainly sisters. They both even liked the same romantic comedies. Soon new pictures began appearing, usually unfocused and distant. Then the images became sharper and Olivia became Lauren—or maybe I should say Lauren became Olivia. There were a few discrepancies. The Lauren I married had dark hair. The new one was almost blond, and her nose was a little thinner—but she was my Lauren. When we were married Lauren had mentioned wanting cosmetic surgery, even though there was nothing wrong with her. I always thought Lauren was perfect, but she didn't care what I thought. She had self-esteem issues. She was never satisfied with her life. Lauren and I divorced one year ago. No kids. We'd been married four years. She said I was an uninvolved husband. Lauren just wanted me to disappear from her life."

Detective Kellerman closed his eyes; he had heard too many similar stories. Noah was another abandoned husband or boyfriend who couldn't let go of the past. Everyday there were more and more of them. Most looked pitiful and lost—like Noah. Most didn't seem to be employed. Where did they come from? How did they survive?

"Oh, no," Noah said. He closed his eyes and pictured Lauren's prone naked body sinking into the warm thick black swamp. He could hear the exotic birds screaming and smell the diesel exhaust from an idling pickup truck. Noah had never been to Florida.

"Are you all right?" asked Detective Kellerman.

"She's dead. The reality is finally hitting me. Women who go missing for three months don't suddenly turn up alive. She was too trusting. She probably went on a date with the first man who asked her out without even doing a basic background check on him. Did I mention her self-esteem issues?"

"Why do you think she's dead?" Detective Kellerman yawned and prepared himself for a conspiracy theory.

"Lauren was murdered three months ago. That's when her Facebook photos started changing into those of another fill-in—Lauren's successor. Additional cosmetic surgery and short bleached hair could not explain away the changes. I just knew she wasn't my Lauren anymore."

"What other transformations did you observe?"

"The movies this woman working at the Olivia desk claimed to enjoy were wrong. The new Olivia loved foreign films. French detective films. Spanish horror films. Lauren always hated foreign films. The new Olivia also claimed to speak Spanish. Lauren did not speak Spanish. I even called this fill-in at the Olivia desk a few months ago—I couldn't stop myself—to ask her if she knew about her predecessor—my Lauren. The new Olivia sounded almost like Lauren, but not quite. I could tell. She told me to never call her again."

"Are you telling me that your ex-wife was murdered three months ago but someone just filed a missing person report?"

"The missing person report in your hand is not about Lauren. My ex-wife has probably been dead for three months. The missing woman you're investigating is—

was—the woman who replaced Lauren at the Olivia desk three months ago. Well, she is also missing and is most likely dead."

"Exactly how many women have you been stalking?"

"I'm not a stalker. And I've only followed three women if you don't count the Olivia my ex-wife replaced."

"Only three? That's reassuring."

"There was Lauren and then there was the woman who took over for Lauren three months ago and just went missing. Now there's a third woman who just replaced Lauren's fill-in. That's all. Three."

"And you continued to cyberstalk even after your wife disappeared."

"I kept hoping I was wrong about Lauren's murder. I kept hoping that maybe Lauren would return. I even considered flying to Florida and demanding an explanation from Infosystech or the police, not that it would have done any good. I prayed that Lauren's replacement was only a temporary fill-in-but now she's also gone. You need to do something. No one was concerned when Lauren went missing. Fill-in murders are ignored by the police and the mainstream media. I'm surprised you took the time to investigate the disappearance of Lauren's fill-in."

Detective Kellerman didn't answer. What Noah had just said was true. Every day the police fielded more and more calls from people asserting that a relative or friend had been murdered and replaced with a not quite perfect substitute. It was Internet psychosis. Police departments across America were rightly labeling it fill-in hysteria. The Internet made police work more frustrating. Two years ago there had been daily sightings and YouTube videos of a paranormal slender man terrorizing children. Last year there had been e-mail attachments that, when opened, resulted in the recipient witnessing his own imminent and horrific death. What would next year bring?

"Did you file this missing person report?" The detective waved a piece of paper in front of Noah's face. "Is that why it is filled in with references to an Olivia but includes your contact information?"

"Yes." Noah averted his eyes from Beau Kellerman's glare.

"Did you also file a missing person report three months ago concerning your wife Lauren?"

"Yes. No one responded. Obviously no one believed me."

"So you admit to filing two bogus reports concerning fill-in murders. Now we're getting somewhere. You've just confessed to a felony. Do you have any idea how many police hours you have wasted? Baltimore does have a serious and real crime problem. There are no fill-in murders. There is no Olivia desk. There are no missing women in Coral Shores. Your wife left you and you can't accept it. People change. They learn Spanish. They learn to like foreign films."

"You have to convince the Coral Shores police to investigate Infosystech. There must be fingerprints or handwriting samples. It's too late for Lauren and her fill-in, but maybe there's still time to at least warn the new Olivia—the fill-in for Lauren's fill-in—the woman who just started working at the Olivia desk. There's a serial killer on the loose, probably more than one."

"Did you ever consider the possibility that your wife and the other women you've been stalking both quit working at Infosystech and moved on to something new and better?"

"That's not what's happening. Haven't you been listening to me?"

"There is no conspiracy. You need to accompany me to the police station."

Noah briefly contemplated the fate of the newest fill-in at the Olivia desk. How much time did she have left? Where did all the new fill-ins come from?

Melissa's position as a sales representative at the largest call center in Buffalo was her sixth full-time job since graduating from high school. When she first spoke to a client in a New Orleans Yat dialect, her team leader, a dullard who had been in her high school class, gave Melissa an official warning. She ignored him and continued to assume the dialects of her clients. She was given a second warning. When the supervisors grasped that Melissa's sales were better than her colleagues by a healthy margin, she was permitted to continue working in a flexible voice mode. Customers enjoyed talking to people who sounded like them. Melissa's skill at dialects, honed by her appetite for films, television shows, and YouTube videos, began to pay dividends. She was employee of the month seven times. Each time she was given a \$50 Amazon gift card. She soon grew bored. Melissa was twenty-five-years old and wanted a new life.

The online job application was quick and painless. In the supplementary one-minute video Melissa simply stated that she was a dependable worker who enjoyed challenges and knew how to fit it. Neither friends nor family appeared distressed about her impending move to Florida.

"You won't like Coral Shores," said Jackson, her predictable and remote boyfriend. "It's being overrun by snakes and old people. Cottonmouths and cotton heads."

Jackson had once visited Florida and Disney World in middle school.

"Do you speak Spanish?" her mother asked. "Most people in Florida speak Spanish."

"In high school I was president of the Spanish club."

"I don't remember that," said her mother.

Her dullard team leader told her that there were eight overqualified applicants desperate for her old job. He didn't say, "Good luck."

Her parents and Jackson predicted she'd return to Buffalo within three months.

The Coral Shores office looked identical to the Buffalo call center. The employees also looked familiar. Ten percent of Melissa's salary went to the Internet business that had assisted her in finding new employment, but it was worth it. The small apartment she found three blocks from the ocean was clean and reasonable. She could hear the ocean. Her life in Buffalo soon became a faded smear of grayscale images.

"We have a lot of regular clients, and Olivia, the woman you are replacing, was very successful," said her new team leader. "Many of our callbacks specifically request Olivia."

"Why did Olivia leave?"

"We don't ask those kinds of questions here. Privacy is extremely important."

"We also want you to continue to use the name Olivia."

"For how long?"

"For a while."

"I guess I could do that."

"Also, according to you application, you have a talent for dialects."

"Yes."

"Can you do a Baltimore dialect?"

"Would East Baltimore work?"

"Perfect. When you talk to clients always speak in an East Baltimore dialect. And it wouldn't hurt to use that accent here at Infosystech."

"You want me to stay in character."

"Exactly. You're like an actor playing a role. And remember to continue to use Olivia's social media sites. Our business has a lot of likes."

"All right."

Her team leader nodded and left. Another man, Jake from human resources, appeared.

"Welcome to Infosystech," said Jake. "Remember, my door is always open."

"Thank you," said Olivia. The East Baltimore dialect already felt natural.

There was a natural order to the murders. For a moment the universe felt right. When his hands closed around their throats he was contributing to the grateful escape of their souls. He was an essential player in a phenomenon he knew he could never understand. He was a foot soldier, following orders, making it happen. Sooner or later there'd be a sharp CCTV picture—instead of the grainy images of some vaguely familiar-looking man—and he'd be apprehended. But there were others waiting to take his place. He would live on through his fill-ins, just like those that had been captured, convicted, and sometimes executed were living through him. There was immortality.

In New Orleans, six or seven years ago, he had been more anxious than the young woman. It was his first time so he did harbor a few stray doubts. There were many others who shared her pretty but indistinctive appearance. The human resources department was swamped with applications. Maybe she wasn't the right one. Maybe the right one hadn't been hired yet and he needed to be patient. He kept making excuses, hesitating. But their paths kept crossing. More than once he found himself sitting next to her in the cafeteria. It wasn't a coincidence; more than one thousand people were employed at the call center. He learned about her interest in craft fairs from Facebook. She had been surprised to see him at the fair and agreed to help him find a suitable gift for his make-believe niece. She accepted his invitation for drinks. First, he had to check up on his fictional mother.

"Were you raised around here, Jerry?" He was Jerry back then. "You sound like you're from the Midwest."

Privacy was never more than ten minutes away in Bayou Country. She didn't scream, and her struggle was perfunctory. She too suspected the natural order was at play. His bones rattled when her liberated peaceful soul passed through his tense body. He quickly buried her in a shallow grave. The next day, after a deep dreamless sleep, he drove his pickup truck back to the scene of the crime. Her body was missing. It could have been alligators, but it was more likely the recalibration of the natural order. She would be replaced and he would hunt down her fill-in. It was his job to help clear out the old to make way for the new.

He rotated identities. He became Jason and then Jake. He moved from city to city. That was difficult. He hated change deep down. He fantasized about settling down in a small city in Florida.

Noah sat in Detective Kellerman's compact office, alone. Could he be arrested for submitting two missing person reports? The police obviously did not enjoy being the target of what they believed to be Internet insanity. Noah knew he could never convince the detective that the fill-in murders were real.

Noah stood up. The office was bare except for two chairs, a desk, a computer monitor, and keyboard. The police were of course observing him—but why? Noah had seen videos of suspects alone inside interrogation rooms confessing to crimes. Did the police imagine that he would suddenly scream, "Yes, I did it! I filed two bogus missing person reports!"

Why, he asked himself, am I still here?

Detective Beau Kellerman, sitting across the hall, studied the TV monitor. The man on the screen was not the man who had admitted to submitting the missing person reports. There was a different Noah on the monitor. His nose wasn't right. Even his slouch was wrong. And this Noah had shorter and lighter colored hair. Beau Kellerman was obviously not going to mention the discrepancies to anyone. The detective's retirement was less than a year away and Noah was never going to be arrested anyway. The detective had just wanted to read Noah the riot act. Kellerman needed to raise his voice and see Noah quiver and sweat. He needed to remind himself that all the Noahs in Baltimore were not bloodless nonentities.

Beau Kellerman moved closer to the TV. The detective tried to convince himself that he was observing the same Noah. How closely did I observe him, he asked himself? Noah just looked like another neurotic, living his life inside the Internet. There had been no reason to memorize his appearance. All the Noahs are starting to blur. I just need to hang in there for one more year. Then I can retire to a small city in Florida.

Kellerman refocused his eyes on the monitor. The room was empty. Did Noah just leave? Did another detective tell him to go home? Mix-ups happen. Noah had not been arrested and was of course technically free to go home. It didn't matter. Beau Kellerman knew that every new day would bring more Noahs.



Me That Was

No friends, only competitors No sunrises

Romantic walks at night in the park do not end well

Nightly drudgery over and over, forever

I could . . . or I could ... But no matter what I do the song, as they say, remains the same

I stare for hours at a faded photograph Mom and Dad, Billy & me sigh

—tyree campbell

STAYING IN ON PAY-DAY NIGHT

It's Thursday night and pay-day and all I can be bothered to do is sit at home, bored and alone

The kids out on the beach look like they are having the times of their lives Whilst all I can think is it weren't like that in my day

Back then I'd have been in the pub just like I should be right now, getting drunk But this town and its many places for watering the thirst don't offer me anything Not on a Thursday night, even when it's a pay-day night

I got my regular which I could go and hang out at but there's music tonight When all I want is a quiet few pints and the chance of some pleasing conversation

But with the blues blowing out loud it's hard to think and I don't want that Not tonight, not on pay-day, do I want to sit around and have to think Think about my life, think about my work All I want to do is get blotto and have a few laughs

Not like those kids on the beach

With their designer clothes, bedecked like an advert for a young person's retail chain, and their STDs

All I really want tonight is some company in a place I can get drunk and not worry

About getting out of bed and going to work tomorrow

Cos then it's a long shift ending on a Friday, the night the undead come out

Those who follow those labels but have no clue

Those who drink in bars even I don't go

The undead, possessed by the consumerist mentality

—bradford middleton



Edgar G. Ulmer's Detour Into Darkness

by denise noe

This essay is dedicated to the memory of actress Barbara Payton.

Director Edgar G. Ulmer's 1945 black and white *Detour* is an extraordinarily powerful movie. Its power is especially remarkable for a cheaply made film confined to a few sets and riddled with technical errors. However, Ulmer sets forth in *Detour* a vision of darkness that draws the audience in and haunts long after the credits have rolled.

Released by Producers Releasing Corporation (PRC), a "Poverty Row" movie studio, Detour was chosen by the Library of Congress for the United States National Film Registry of films deemed "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant."

The motion picture begins by showing an open road. Al Roberts (Tom Neal) trudges by that road. A car picks him up. We next see him sitting alone at a diner booth. A trucker tries to strike up a conversation; Roberts snaps out answers indicating he is in no mood to chat.

When the trucker makes an order, he addresses a waitress (Esther Howard) as "Glamorous." This teasing set the tone for *Detour* is a film that is deliberately anti-glamorous.

The trucker has the jukebox play a song. An agitated Roberts shouts, "Turn that off! That music stinks!"

"It's my nickel," the trucker retorts. The diner's proprietor (Tim Ryan) reminds Roberts, "You can leave anytime."

Roberts settles down. From then on, Roberts narrates most of the film in flashback.

The song that riled him? "I Can't Believe That You're In Love With Me." The flashback shows him playing that song on the piano in the Break O' Dawn Club in which he was pianist and his girlfriend, Sue Harvey (Claudia Drake), was a singer. Roberts says, "I was an ordinary healthy guy and she was an ordinary healthy girl and from that you get an ordinary healthy romance."

However, we soon learn that Roberts feels stymied. Harvey encouragingly asserts, "You'll be in Carnegie Hall."

Roberts dryly comments, "As a janitor."

They exit the nightclub and Roberts mentions yearning for an ordinary healthy marriage. Harvey assures him she ultimately wants to marry him but adds that she intends to travel to California, saying, "I want to try my luck in Hollywood."

Roberts reminds her that many people travel to Hollywood for film careers and "end up polishing cuspidors."

Harvey heads west. Roberts is back at the nightclub. A worker hands him a \$10 bill, remarking, "You hit the jackpot." Roberts thinks, "A piece of paper crawling with germs. Couldn't buy anything I wanted."

Roberts telephones Harvey. He learns she works "as a hash slinger." This seems to confirm his prediction that, like so many others who go to Hollywood to make it big, she would fail. However, since she is already in Hollywood, he changes his previous tune and assures her that the film industry will soon recognize her talent. Then he informs her that he will join her in Hollywood.

"Fate Sticks Out Its Foot"

Roberts hitchhikes. A talkative bookie, Charles Haskell, Jr. (Edmund MacDonald), picks Roberts up. When Roberts notices deep scratches on Haskell's left hand, Haskell reveals he got them from the "most dangerous animal of all—a woman." Haskell had picked up a woman, expecting her to be sexually available. "What kind of dames thumb rides? Sunday School teachers?" he asks. However, this female hitchhiker was not sexually available—thus, the scratches. Haskell then shows a scar on his arm. He recalls the story of that scar. Haskell's father owned sabers. When Haskell was young, he and another kid dueled. Haskell got that scar—and he put one of the other kid's eyes out! Haskell ran away from home fifteen years ago and has not been back since.

During the ride, Haskell repeatedly asks Roberts to take out a bottle from the glove compartment so Haskell can take medicine. Tired, Haskell has Roberts drive while Haskell sleeps in the passenger seat. Roberts tries to awaken Haskell who falls out of the car. Roberts discovers Haskell is dead. Terrified police will assume Roberts murdered Haskell, Roberts leaves Haskell's body in a desert gully. Roberts takes the corpse's clothes, cash, and car.

At a California's border police stop, Roberts displays Haskell's driver's license. The cop does not notice the fakery. This oversight is credible since the two men were similar enough in build that Haskell's clothes fit Roberts and they had similar features.

Later, Roberts looks through papers left by Haskell and discovers that the

bookie claimed to be a "seller of hymnals" in a letter written (but not sent) to his father.

The next day, Roberts gives a ride to a hitcher. Vera (Ann Savage) has shadows under her eyes indicating she needs sleep. In keeping with the aforementioned deglamorizing, Roberts remarks that Vera "looked like she had been thrown off the crummiest freight train in the world."

Vera takes a brief nap. When she wakes, she exclaims, "Where did you leave his body? Where did you leave the owner of this car?"

Rattled, Roberts insists he owns the vehicle. Vera snaps, "This buggy belongs to a man named Haskell and that's not you." She wants to know if Roberts "kissed [Haskell] with a wrench."

It turns out Vera is the woman scratched Haskell. Reflecting on his bad luck in picking her up, Roberts thinks: "That's life. Whichever way you turn, fate sticks out a foot to trip you."

Roberts tells Vera what happened with Haskell. "That's the biggest cock and bull story I ever heard," Vera sneers. Convinced Roberts is a murderer, Vera agrees not to alert authorities. "I liked Haskell even less than I like you," she explains. However, her silence comes with a price. First she takes the money Roberts lifted from Haskell's corpse. Then Vera insists Roberts sell the car and give her the proceeds. Then the two will part.

Roberts and Vera check into an apartment as a married couple. But there is no hanky-panky. Vera takes the bedroom while Roberts sleeps on a closet foldout mattress.

The next morning, posing as a married couple, they go to an auto dealership to sell Haskell's car. However, before they can get the car sold, Vera finds a newspaper that indicates that Haskell Sr. is dying and people are searching for Haskell Jr. She believes Roberts could impersonate the dead man since Roberts has a similar height and build (as noted, Haskell's clothes fit Roberts) and has possession of Haskell's car and some of his papers.

Roberts realizes the scheme is hare-brained. "As Charles Haskell, I didn't even know my mother's name, where I'd gone to school, the name of my best friend, whether or not I'd had an Aunt Emma, whether or not I'd had a dog, or what my religion was," Roberts points out.

Vera refuses to recognize these obstacles. That stubbornness leads straight into another tragedy for her as well as Roberts. Detour ends on a note of despair.

A Masterpiece Filled With Flaws

As previously observed, *Detour* is cheaply made. It is also a film glutted with flaws. Respected critic Roger Ebert wrote, "*Detour* is a movie so filled with imperfections that it would not earn the director a passing grade in film school." The Internet Movie Database reports, "In the first shots of Al hitchhiking, the film is reversed. The cars are driving on the wrong side of the highway and the drivers sitting behind the wheel are sitting on the right side of their vehicles." Goofs

include cigarettes appearing out of nowhere, Roberts moving his fingers over piano keys without pressing them, and eyelashes fluttering after death.

Why has *Detour* become a classic? The straightforward story deeply resonates. Al Roberts is a normal, decent man undone by coincidences. When Roberts says, "That's life. Whichever way you turn, fate sticks out a foot to trip you," he sums up basic human fears.

Another reason for its greatness is that Ulmer cleverly plays with audience expectations. At one point, Roberts says, "If this were fiction, I would fall in love with Vera." Of course, it is fiction but he does not fall in love with Vera. There are moments Vera seems to be softening to Robert or even becoming seductive—for example, when she asks, "Do I rate a whistle?"—but those moments are fleeting.

I believe a common mistake made by those discussing Detour is to view Vera as an especially venomous femme fatale. Although played by Ann Savage, a popular World War II pin-up, Vera is not a femme fatale. She does not manipulate Roberts through sexual attraction as a femme fatale would. The scratches on Haskell's hand were dramatic evidence of what she did to someone who assumed her sexual availability. The way Vera snaps out dialogue, her waspish manner, is diametrically opposed to femme fatale behavior.

There are other ways in which Ulmer plays with expectations. A couple of times, Vera is racked by what Roberts describes as a "wicked cough." She says, "I'm on my way out." But we never learn what is wrong or when she might die. We may want to see how Roberts' fraud would be exposed if he poses as the long-lost Charlie but this never happens.

Another reason *Detour* is a masterpiece is that Ulmer artfully crafts parallels and ironies into the film. Roberts hitchhikes and is picked up by a man who endangers him. Roberts picks up a hitchhiker who doubles that danger. Vera scratches the hand of a man who sexually harasses her. Roberts hurts Vera's hand leading her to accuse, "You're no gentleman!" Much of the film revolves around the road—supposedly a symbol of freedom. Yet that symbol of freedom leads to multiple traps.

Real Life "Detours"

In the decades since *Detour* was made, it may have gained in interest because of the way its plot resembles star Tom Neal's life. Unlike the major characters of Detour, Neal was not "born in the gutter." He was the son of an affluent banker and the product of prep schools. In college, he distinguished himself in boxing. Deciding on an acting career, he appeared in various B-movies. However, six years after *Detour*, Neal made headlines, not for acting, but for his private life. In 1951, Neal met the lovely Barbara Payton, who had acted opposite stars Lloyd Bridges, Jimmy Cagney, and Gregory Peck. She had made her biggest splash co-starring with Cagney in the tense crime drama Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye. However, she had long been plagued by negative publicity due to associations with low-level hoodlums and appearances in courtrooms. Thus, at the time she and Neal met, Payton was making a cheap film called *Bride of the Gorilla*. The campy film would attain cult status and become one of the films for which she was most famed, the other being *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye*.

Also at the time Neal met Payton, she was engaged to A-list actor Franchot Tone. Despite her engagement, Payton was instantly smitten with Neal as he was with her. Later she recalled, "I was hung on him. That Tom made hot peppers run up my thighs. When we made love, buds sprouted flowers and Cupid got a medal."

However, she also felt a strong pull toward the more refined, and more successful, Franchot Tone. Payton went back and forth between the men. They met one evening and tempers exploded. A fistfight resulted in which the former college boxer beat Tone, smashing his nose, breaking a cheekbone, and pulverizing him into a coma. Payton attempted to intervene and received a black eye.

Tone pulled out of the coma. He and Payton wed. However, fifty-three days after their nuptials, Payton left Tone for Neal. Neal and Payton never married but stayed together four years.

Tone continued enjoying a successful acting career in film and on stage. The careers of Neal and Payton faded away.

After his movie career ended, Neal became a successful landscaper. He had a second brush with violence that ended in an even worse manner than the beating of Tone. In 1965, Neal shot and killed his third wife, Gale. Brought to trial, he said the killing was accidental. Prosecutors alleged it was murder motivated by jealousy. Like Al Roberts, Neal faced the possibility of execution. The jury convicted Neal of involuntary manslaughter.

It is not known with certainty, but there were reports that Barbara Payton appeared in the courtroom audience during Neal's trial. By that time, Payton bore little resemblance to the beautiful movie star she had once been but was a heavyset woman with blotchy complexion and missing teeth.

Her last film was made in 1955. Her spirit appeared crushed by the film industry's rejection. She sank into alcoholism. Her looks deteriorated and she ended her life as a cheap prostitute, performing sex acts for as little as \$5.

Payton was the first of the infamous Tone-Payton-Neal triangle to depart life, dying in 1967. Tone followed, dying in 1968.

Tom Neal served six years in prison and was paroled in December 1971. He appeared far older than his fifty-eight years, a white-haired man with a deeply lined face. He died of heart failure in August 1972.

Ulmer and Barbara Payton's Cinematic Swan Song

There is still another real-life *Detour* irony: Ulmer directed Barbara Payton's final film, the 1955 *Murder Is My Beat*. Although not a masterpiece, *Beat* is an interesting film. Perhaps most pertinently to this essay, the film has significant parallels to Detour.

In *Detour*, Tom Neal plays a discouraged nightclub piano player. In *Murder Is My Beat*, Barbara Payton plays Eden Lane, a discouraged nightclub singer. *Detour's*

Roberts fears being suspected of murder. Beat's Lane is suspected of the murder of her married boyfriend.

Payton plays Lane with a haunted ambiguity that puts an appropriate question mark over her character. Despite her denials, the audience cannot know whether or not Lane is guilty until the truth is revealed in a dramatic finale. The movie is a mystery and Payton does a fine job of keeping Lane mysterious.

Although Payton's acting in Beat is praiseworthy, her appearance displays problems. Payton's facial structure was such that she needed to be slim to look beautiful. Just a small weight gain threw her beauty off. In her final film, Payton is not fat but neither is she slim. Her face in *Beat* is puffy. That round face is attractive but not gorgeous.

The haunted Eden Lane that Barbara Payton played in Beat is a perfect complement to the haunted Al Roberts that Tom Neal played in Detour. Roberts observes, "Fate, or some mysterious force, can put the finger on you or me for no good reason at all." In both their films and their lives, these people felt the awesome fury and bitter brutality of cruel fate.

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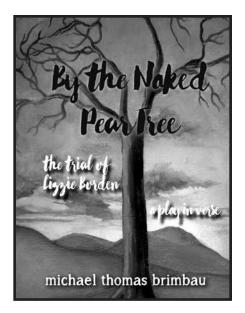


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By the Naked Pear Tree, a play in verse, was written in the spirit of Steve Allen's unconventional television program, *Meeting of the Minds*.

Our satirical performance begins outside a New Bedford, Massachusetts, court house. The year is 1893 and the trial of Lizzie Borden is about to begin. Dispatching his oration, the tragedian, Euripides, stands in the street preaching the merits of womanhood and relating the concerns he has for the outcome of the trial, and how it may corrupt the honor of the fabled heroines he has written about. Not long after we are introduced to Clarence Darrow—progressive attorney and respected member of the American Civil Liberties Union.

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.

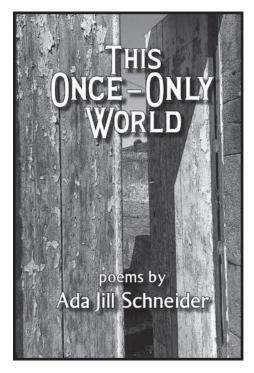
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poems by Ada Jill Schneider



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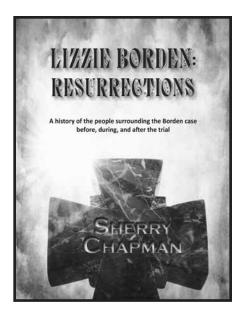
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Whatever happened to Lizzie Borden after the trial that accused her of bludgeoning her father and stepmother with a hatchet in 1892 Fall River, Massachusetts? It's all in here, and it doesn't stop with Lizzie. A plethora of persons were involved around 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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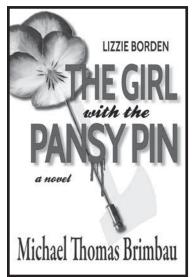
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Lizzie Borden: The Girl with the Pansy Pin

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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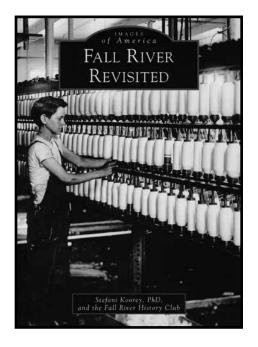
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by Stefani Koorey and the Fall River History Club

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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.

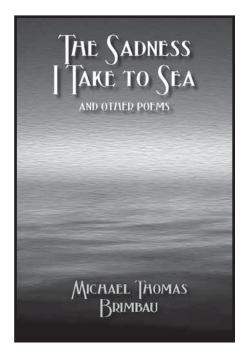
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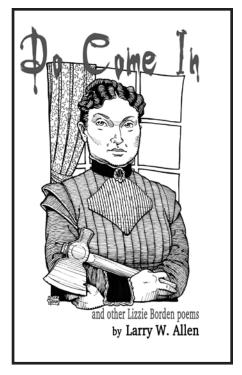
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by Larry W. Allen

with a new Lizzie Borden sketch cover by Rick Geary, famed author and illustrator of *The Borden Tragedy*.

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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."

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Lizzie Borden: Girl Detective

by Richard Behrens

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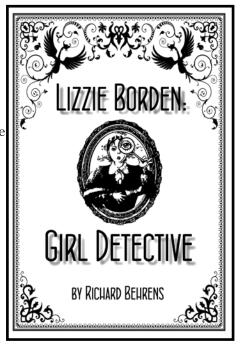
Many years before her infamous arrest and trial for the murders of her father and stepmother, Lizzie Borden pursued a career as a private consulting detective and wrestled unflinchingly with a crooked spiritualist, a corrupt and murderous textile tycoon, a secret society of anarchist assassins, rowdy 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.

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Contributors

Michelle DeLoatch lives in Georgia 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.

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 http://issuu.com/pearnoir/docs/ revealing moments. A short film has also been produced based on his short story, "Zen and the Art of House Painting." Wavne lives in Atlanta with his wife and can be contacted at wvscheer@aol.com.

Denny E. Marshall has had art, poetry, and fiction published, some recently. dennymarshall. com.

Robin C. Jones has worked as a muralist, sculptor, illustrator, poet, lyricist, recording musician, and storyteller. She thrives on artistic diversity and finds her greatest happiness in the act of creating.

Rick McQuiston is a forty-five-yearold 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.

Sue Barnard is a British novelist, poet, shorty story writer, and editor. She is married with two grown-up sons.

Ashley Dioses has been published by Hippocampus Press, Centipede Press, Weirdbook, Martian Migraine Press, Burial Day Books, and a few amateur ezines. She will have her debut poetry collection published by Hippocampus Press in 2016. She has also appeared on Ellen Datlow's full recommended list for Year's Best Horror Vol. 7 for her poem "Carathis," published in *Spectral Realms No. 1* by Hippocampus Press.

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.

Joann Grisetti is an author living in Florida.

Jackie Bee has had stories published in *Phobos*, *Sanitarium*, and *Fiction Vortex*.

Fabiyas MV is a writer from Orumanavur village in Kerala. India. He is the author of Moonlight and Solitude. His fiction and poems have appeared in Westerly, Forward Poetry, The Literary 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

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 11 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 76 poetry videos on YouTube. facebook.com/ poetrymanusa.

Ed Ahern resumed writing after forty odd years in foreign intelligence and international sales. He's had ninety short stories published thus far, as well as two books.

A.J. 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 may2>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, a frequent contributor to The Literary Hatchet, his second poetry collection. Stage to Page: Poems from the Theater, will be out in June of next year. His first, Manhattan Plaza, is currently available.

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

Jim Courter is a winner of an Illinois Arts Council award for short fiction and a Pushcart Prize nominee. His stories and essays have appeared in a variety of magazines and newspapers, incluiding The Chronicle of Higher Education, Smithsonian, Chicago Tribune, The Wall Street Journal, and numerous times in Downstate Story. He is the author of three sofar unpublished mystery novellas.

Janne Karlsson is a widely published artist/author from Sweden. His books are available on Amazon and Epic Rites Press. Contact him at svenskapache@gmail.com. Website: www.svenskapache.se.

Paul Edmonds' short fiction has recently appeared in *Freedom Fiction, Ruthless Peoples*, and anthologies from Rainstorm Press and Horrified Press.

Joshua Dobson likes to make his own fun, some of which can be seen at joshuadobson.deviantart. com.

Sally Basmajian is an exbroadcast executive and has spent much of her professional life selling, marketing, acquiring, and scheduling other people's artistic visions. Over the years she has started dabbling in writing and has found some success, winning prizes in 2014 and 2015 Rising Spirits Award competition and placing in ScreaminMamas and Canadian Stories creative nonfiction contests in 2015.

Rory O'Brien lives in Salem. His debut novel is a murder mystery titled *Gallows Hill*. roryobrienbooks. com.

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.

William Doreski lives in Peterborough, New Hampshire, and teaches at Keene State College. His most recent book of poetry is *The Suburbs of Atlantis* (2013). He has published three critical studies, including *Robert Lowell's Shifting Colors*. His essays, poetry, fiction, and reviews have appeared in many journals.

Michelle Bujnowski has been writing short horror fiction for over a decade. Previously, she worked as a geologist all over the country. Her work has been published in Dark Moon Digest, The Lightning Journal, and Dark Edifice Magazine.

Matt Duggan is a writer and filmmaker based in Los Angeles. His first one-act play 'Irish Spirits' was selected for Edward Albee's Last Frontier Theater Conference in 2003, a career highlight. His first feature film "Inverse" premiered at the 2014 Boston Sci-Fi Film Festival, winning many awards. He had always had a passion for short story writing and his screenplays usually begin as short stories.

Steve Slavin is a recovering economics professor and earns a living writing math and economics books.

Josh Craven is an attorney and writer in McKinney, Texas. Josh grew up in rural East Texas, and enjoys reading and writing dark fiction and interacting with fellow writers via Twitter @thejoshcraven. His story, "For Better or for Worse," was published in the July 2-15 edition of Beyond Imagination Digital Literary Magazine.

Tyree Campbell has seven novels. over a hundred short stories, and some three dozen poems published in the small press. He is a Rhysling finalist (third place, 2003) and a Darrell Award runner-up. He resides out in the boondocks. where it is easier to write.

E.M. Eastick was born and raised in northern Australia. She travelled and worked as an environmental professional in Britain, Ireland, and the United Arab Emirates before embarking on the writer's journey. She currently lives in Colorado.

Jack Campbell Jr. has been published in Dark Eclipse, the Page and Spine Fiction Showcase, and Sanitarium Magazine. His collection All Manner of Dark Things was released by Bottle Cap Publishing in April.

Daniel Stern has been writing dark poetry, splatter prose, creepy short stories and full-length horror novels for well over twenty years.

Joshua Flowers is a short story writer born in Los Angeles, California and somehow living in Bangor, Maine. He also really hates moose and ice. Both are huge jerks. He's been published in The Fictioneer, Inwood Indiana. The Cricket Online Review, and The Short-Story.me horror section. He occasionally tweets @Flowersisbrit. Tim Dadswell lives in Norfolk. England, and began writing when he retired from the civil service in 2013. His first short story was published in a British crime fiction magazine in summer 2015. He is working on stories for a range of competitions.

Aletheia Adams is a full-time working mother of two teenagers. living in a suburb of Chicago. She loves psychology and typically writes poems about the human psyche. This is her first poem of this particular genre to be published under her pen name, Aletheia Adams. She also has had three other poems published in anthologies using her real name, Jenny Santellano.

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 was born at an early age. Five years later, when he was five, he started school which lasted a long time. A college education supposedly taught him how to teach, but the only thing he really learned was that no one can teach a person how to teach. The teaching gig lasted twentyfive years, until he got tired of the federal government thinking they had the answer on how everyone should teach. He guit and went into business for himself. Later. like all good mid-westerners, when he retired, he moved to snowless Florida. So far, so good.

Dustin Farren is an unpublished college undergraduate pursuing an engineering degree in beautiful Montana. When not writing stories and lab reports, he has been spotted flipping off treacherous cliffs, racing down double black diamonds, guzzling tasty local libations, and helping the occasional elderly take out their trash.

Shane Fraser has been published in several online and print forums—this includes a local newspaper, which hosted a weekly column of his for five years. The majority of his publications have been nonfiction, though he has fiction upcoming in *Beyond Imagination Magazine*. He is completing a BA in English at the University of Regina in Canada.

Lee Glantz, Batik artist and poet, was born in Kingman, Arizona and now lives in Barrington, Rhode Island. Her poems have appeared in Rhode Island Roads, Crones Nest, Newport Review, Traveling Poets Society, Literary Hatchet, Evening Street Review, Spillway 22, and the anthology, Regrets Only (Little Pear Press). Her book, A House on Her Back, was published by Premiere Poets Chapbook Series.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident. Recently published in New Plains Review, Perceptions and Sanskrit with work upcoming in South Carolina Review, Gargoyle, Owen Wister Review and Louisiana Literature. **A.W. Gifford** is an internationally unknown author who gets many of his story ideas from the nightmares of his wife, Jennifer. She too is an author of dark fiction, but she refuses to write her own nightmares as she fears doing so will make them come true. Story ideas also come to him from his dogs, the dust bunnies under the bed and one very helpful garden gnome. He is an editor at Bête Noire Magazine and Dark Opus Press and his work has appeared in numerous magazines, anthologies and was once spotted stalking the woods of the Pacific Northwest. He. on the other hand, can be found stalking the woods in the northern suburbs of Detroit, while his wife and daughter huddle in the warmth of the house with his two dogs and the aforementioned dust bunnies.

Amelia Gorman is a student and baker in Minneapolis, MN. She has a short story in Innsmouth Free Press's *She Walks in Shadows* anthology and poetry in *Nonbinary Review*.

Deborah Guzzi is a healing facilitator specializing in Shiatsu and Reiki. She writes for Massage and Aromatherapy publications. She travels the world seeking writing inspiration. She has walked the Great Wall of China, visited Nepal (during the civil war), Japan, Egypt (two weeks before "The Arab Spring"), Peru, and France (during December's terrorist attacks).

Nicholas Powell is eighteen years old. "I am always looking to improve and I encourage others to do the same."

Stuart Guthrie is an English teacher at The Taft School in Watertown, Connecticut, where he teaches creative writing and advises numerous student publications in the literary arts. His fiction has been published in several print and online publications, most recently including The Bread Loaf Journal.

Alexis Henderson is a college student majoring in English. Her short story "Sin Eater" was featured in the literary magazine Beorh Weekly and her short story "Baby Doll" was a Writer's Digest Annual Writing Competition honorary mention. When she's not writing she likes to paint landscapes. wander used bookstores, and take long nature walks along the Low Country salt marsh.

Kevin Mulligan has been writing for quite a while, only starting to send stories out in the last year. He enjoys watching his characters live their imagined lives. He also likes winter and snow.

Andrew Nelson is writer who resides in Colorado.

lan Mullins slings his hook from Liverpool, England. He has published stories with Brand, Black Petals, Hellfire Crossroads, Massacre and The Literary Hatchet. His poetry collection Laughter In The Shape Of A Guitar is now available from undergroundbooks. org.

D.L. Shirey is an author living in Oregon.

McKinley Henson is a 19-yearold with too many thoughts and inspirations. He admires poetry for its limitless styles and formatting. He is described best as an indecisive paradox. No. Perhaps a "ghost" would be a more fitting term. Just like any amateur poet, he hopes he can create many beautiful works in the future.

A.W. McKinnon resides in Southern Illinois with his wife and their Yorkie. He enjoys reading and writing fiction.

Craig Steven has been writing since he was old enough to pick up a pen and do so. Though his interests lie mainly in horror, he never shies away from writing a good fantasy or mystery story. His fiction has been published in Sanitarium Magazine, Under The Bed Magazine, and assorted anthologies from Horrified Press. When he's not writing, at the gym, or spending time with his wife, he's also the editor for Bevond Imagination Magazine and Beyond Science Fiction Magazine. You can connect with Craig easily at http://www.writercraig.com.

Soren James is a writer and visual artist who recreates himself on a daily basis from the materials at his disposal, continuing to do so in upbeat manner until one day he will sumptuously throw his drained materials aside and resume stillness without asking why. More of his work can be seen here: http://sorenjames.moonfruit.com/ home/4580917876.

M.Y. Kearney is a southerner transplanted into Alaska, where her aversion to being outside on frigid and windy days leaves a lot of time for writing.

Mary King has read many things and written a few. Her favorite writers include Shirley Jackson, P.G. Wodehouse, and Ray Bradbury.

Michelle Ann King writes science fiction, fantasy and horror from her kitchen table in Essex, England. Her work has appeared in various venues and anthologies, including Strange Horizons, Daily Science Fiction, and Unidentified Funny Objects 2. She loves zombies, Las Vegas, and good Scotch whisky. not necessarily in that order. Her short stories are being collected in the *Transient Tales* series, and she is currently at work on a paranormal crime novel. Find more details at www.transientcactus. co.uk.

Ray Mears treats every day like it's Halloween; trying to find the dark in the ordinary. He has been published in *The Literary Hatchet* before and enjoys writing horror.

Daniel Marrone is a twicepublished horror writer, with one story appearing in Issue #6 of Massacre Magazine and the other in a paperback anthology entitled Creepy Campfire Stories For Grownups. He works as a receptionist at his local hospital in central NJ, and writes dark fiction in his free time.

Denny E. Marshall has had art, poetry, and fiction published, some recently. dennymarshall. com.

Lee Todd Lacks is a mixedmedia artist, music therapist, and clinical counselor, who tends to be informed by his experience of living with significant vision and hearing deficits. Lee Todd's writing has appeared in Bop Dead City, Tincture Journal, Liquid Imagination, Crack The Spine, and elsewhere. His poem, "Durgin-Park," won the Bop Dead City Beginnings Contest in July of 2015. This past October, his spoken word piece, "Holocaust Memorial," won the Blue Monday Review Storytime Challenge.

Tim Major is a 35-year-old educational publisher based in Oxford. His novella, 'Carus & Mitch', was published by Omnium Gatherum in February 2015. His short stories have been included in publications such as *Interzone, Perihelion* and *Every Day Fiction*. He blogs about writing and reading at www.cosycatastrophes. wordpress.com.

Wendy L. Schmidt is a native of Wisconsin. She has been writing short stories and poetry for the last ten years. The Four C's; cat, chocolate, coffee and computer are her chosen writing tools. Pieces have been published in Verse Wisconsin, Chicago Literati, City Lake Poets, Literary Hatchet, Moon Magazine and a number of other poetry and fiction anthologies.

Joshua Rex writes scary stories in the Midwest, USA. His work has appeared in several anthologies, podcasts, magazines and on-line journals. He lives with his partner, the poet Mary Robles, and three gigantic cats.

Bradford Middleton lives in Brighton on England's south coast after being born and coming of age in south-east London from 1971. His poetry is about drinking, football, love, work and madness and can be read in many places online and from late 2015 in his debut chapbook Drink Drank Drunk from Crisis Chronicles Press. He has work at Empty Mirror, Zygote in My Coffee #144, PPIGPENN, Rolling Thunder Quarterly #11, Fuck Art Lets Dance #5, Dead Snakes, Word Riot, Electric Windmill #12 and a few issues of *The Weekenders*. He is also a contributing poet at the magnificent *Mad Swirl* where he one day dreams of being able to perform at their legendary mad session at the Absinthe Lounge. Make contact @beatnikbraduk on Twitter.

Jason Lairamore is a writer of science fiction, fantasy, and horror who lives in Oklahoma with his beautiful wife and their three monstrously marvelous children. His work is both featured and forthcoming in over 40 publications to include Sci Phi Journal. Perihelion Science Fiction. Stupefying Stories and Third Flatiron publications to name a few.

Leland Neville's short stories have been published in Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Bartleby Snopes, FLAPPERHOUSE, Blue Monday Review, Pulp Modern and The Barcelona Review. Non-fiction works have appeared in U.S. News & World Report and The New York Review of Science Fiction. He writes fulltime in upstate New York.

Gregory Palmerino's essays and poems have appeared in *Explicator*. Teaching English in the Two Year College, College English, Amaze: The Cinquain Journal, International Poetry Review, Courtland Review, Shot Glass Journal, The Lyric, the fib review. The Road Not Taken and The Society of Classical Poets. He teaches writing at Manchester Community College and writes poetry in Connecticut's Quiet Corner, where he lives with his wife and three children.

Robert Perez lives halfway between reality and fantasy at all times, and becomes a doorway to nightmares when the sun goes down. His poem, "The Man Who Disappears", was selected for publication in Volume II of the Horror Writers Association Poetry Showcase. Follow @ TheLeader on twitter to keep up with future projects.

Stephanie Smith is a poet and writer from Scranton. Pennsylvania. Her work has appeared in such publications as Pif Magazine, Strong Verse, and Third Wednesday. Her first poetry chapbook. Dreams of Dali. is available from Flutter Press.

T.C. Powell starves full-time and is a freelance writer on the side. His poetry has been published by the Christian Science Monitor, Strong Verse, jerseyworks, and others. His woeful web presence can be found at http://tcpowellfiction.blogspot. com.

Joyce Richardson is a mystery novelist, author of two published mysteries, and poet of three chapbooks of poems. She is a past fellowship winner from the Ohio Arts Council in fiction and lives with her husband-writer in Athens OH, where they are enjoying a very fruitful retirement and each other.

Joshua Sczykutowicz is a young author from central Florida. His work can be described as dark, experimental, alternative and literary fiction. His writing focuses on tone, mood, atmosphere and specific experiences told through points of view via complex and complicated characters. His work has appeared in *The Fable Online*. He can be contacted at joshsczykutowicz@gmail.com.

Darrell Lindsey is the author of Edge of the Pond (Popcorn Press, 2012), and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize (2007) and a Rhysling Award (2014). He won the 2012 Science Fiction Poetry Association Contest (Long Form category), as well as the 2014 Balticon Poetry Contest. His work has appeared in more than 60 journals and anthologies.

Deborah Walker grew up in the most English town in the country, but she soon high-tailed it down to London, where she now lives with her partner, Chris, and her two young children. Find Deborah in the British Museum trawling the past for future inspiration or on her blog. Her poems have appeared in *Dreams & Nightmares, Star*Line* and *Enchanted Conversation*.

Michael Seese has published three books, not to mention a lot of short stories, flash fiction, and poetry. Other than that, he spends his spare time rasslin' with three young'uns. Visit www. MichaelSeese.com or follow @ MSeeseTweets to laugh with him or at him.

Edmund Lester is a lifelong fan of science fiction and horror. He wrote fiction, articles and reviews previously under the name I.E. Lester, for publications including New Myths, Nossa Morte, Shroud Magazine and Andromeda Spaceways.

Phil Slattery is a native of Kentucky. He has traveled extensively and currently resides in New Mexico. He currently writes horror and dark fiction, but started out writing poetry from about 1985-1995. Prior to *The Literary Hatchet*, his poetry has been published in numerous small magazines.

Cameron Trost is a writer of strange, mysterious, and often rather creepy tales about people just like you. His short stories have been published in dozens of magazines and anthologies, and many of them can be found in his collection, Hoffman's Creeper and Other Disturbing Tales. Cameron lives in Brisbane, Australia, He is the vice-president and QLD community leader of the Australian Horror Writers' Association, a member of the Australian Crime Writers' Association, and a member of the Queensland Writers' Centre. Rainforests, thunderstorms, whisky, and chess are a few of his favourite things. www.trostlibrary.blogspot. com.



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