

The image is a full-page illustration. It features a person with short grey hair, wearing a black top hat, round goggles, and a dark brown coat with a high collar. A crow is perched on their left shoulder. They are holding a torn, sepia-toned photograph of a classical building with columns. A pair of scissors is open in front of them, and another torn photograph lies on the surface below. The entire scene is framed by a dark, ornate border. At the top, there is a draped fabric in shades of brown and beige.

# *Literary* THE *HATCHET*

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# MASTHEAD

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Stefani Koorey  
Editor and Publisher

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# PINK TIGHTS

by wayne scheer

Elvin Arcade lived in a two-bedroom ranch house on a street filled with alternating two and three bedroom homes, each looking almost the same and each lined with box woods, trimmed exactly three feet tall. A community ordinance required the use of a yard stick.

The neighborhood association banned all planting other than what they considered appropriate. They also required approval before painting a house and the front doors had to be white or, for the more daring in the community, a sober shade of dark red.

Elvin occasionally felt boxed in, but for the most part he accepted this life. The neighborhood was safe and affordable. He lived his life within those parameters.

One morning, while eating his oatmeal with raisins and walnuts, Elvin glanced out his kitchen window and saw a young woman skate by wearing nothing but pink tights. He rubbed his eyes and stared as her tight, pink derriere sashayed out of sight.

Not quite believing what he had seen, he called his neighbor who lived directly across the street.

"Gloria, did you see that?"

"See what?"

"The woman in pink tights."

"What woman?"

"She was skating. Naked."

"I thought you said she was wearing tights?"

"Well, yes, she was. But she was topless."

"Was she wearing a helmet?"

"No."

"Then call the neighborhood association. There's an ordinance against that."

“Elvin?” she asked after a long silence. Did you prepare your morning oatmeal with bourbon?”

He hung up and continued staring out the window, waiting for the woman in pink to skate by again.

He waited and waited.

After finishing his oatmeal and washing the bowl, Elvin decided to do something which for him was akin to running off to join the circus. Instead of going to work, he got into his Ford Taurus to search for the vision in pink.

Like a dog chasing a car, he had no idea what he would do if he found her, but he felt compelled to search. Was it the sight of a bare-breasted woman that had aroused him or was it that she represented life outside of the box?

Up Elm to Oak, he drove. Down Cedar to Maple, he drove some more. He finally reached Main Street. Would she dare skate down such a busy thoroughfare during morning rush hour, her breasts exposed? He turned left, drove a few miles and turned around to drive in the other direction.

No topless woman on skates. No pink tights.

Instead of beginning the routine of his day, Elvin felt a need to do something else out of the ordinary, something spontaneous. He pulled into Starbucks and ordered the most bizarre-sounding item on the menu, a Caramel Ribbon Crunch Frappuccino, feeling certain the skater in pink would approve.

The sugar and caffeine made him light-headed. His mind wandered to the time his older cousin, Belinda, had taken him to a skating rink. Although he spent most of his time holding on to the railing, a little girl urged him to let go. And when he finally did, he felt genuine exuberance. Every time he fell, the girl pushed him to get up and try again and again until he began skating on his own. Although he must have been moving at a pace slow enough to frustrate a snail, to eight year-old Elvin he was flying.

He laughed and screamed and sang along with the music without knowing the words. When Belinda took him home, and he ecstatically recounted his exploits to his mother, she grew angry with Belinda.

“He could have broken a leg, an arm, or worse,” she shouted.

He never skated again. Even as a teenager, when his church group went to the rink, he didn’t dare put on skates. Elvin put down his Frappuccino, his hands shaking. His heart pounded like it had decided to stop playing back-up to his other organs and take a solo. Without conscious thought, he pulled out his cellphone and did something he hadn’t done in the four years since graduating college and going to work at Finch Financial. He called in sick.

It surprised him how easy it was. After telling Beth, the office manager, he wasn’t feeling well and needed the day off, he attempted to describe a series of symptoms. She interrupted him.

“I’m sorry to hear that Elvin. I hope you feel better tomorrow.”

That was it. That was all it took to free himself for the day. The last time he

took a day off was in the fifth grade when he induced vomiting in order to stay home and study for a geography test for which he felt unprepared. The next day his mother composed a note detailing his symptoms. Guilt-ridden, he wrote an extra credit report on the human digestive system.

Perhaps Mr. Finch would be interested in a paper on the effects of caffeine on the heart? Elvin laughed out loud, causing the young woman at the next table to turn his way.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes, thank you.” He felt his face flush.

“That’ll make you giddy.” She pointed to his Frappuccino. “You need to build up to a drink like that. Perhaps a Toffee Mocha Lite?”

She extended her hand. “Hi. I’m Cassie.”

Elvin took her hand, noting how soft it felt. “Elvin.”

Desperate to keep up his end of the conversation, he said, “This is only my second time in Starbucks. The first time I just ordered coffee. But I had a strange experience this morning and I can’t focus.”

“What happened?”

The caffeine reduced his customary reticence to share personal details with a stranger. “I saw a woman skating down my street wearing nothing but pink tights.”

Elvin watched Cassie’s eyes widen before breaking into an uninhibited laugh, far too loud for the small room. “Nothing but pink tights, eh?”

He feared her laughter was directed at him. For some reason he didn’t understand, he wanted to continue talking to her.

“Maybe I just imagined her.”

“Do you have that kind of imagination?”

He didn’t know what to say.

Still laughing, Cassie stood up. Under her short, rainbow-patterned dress, she wore pink tights.

Instantly, he recognized her, and thought of her small, firm breasts. Trying not to stare at them, he sipped the remains of his Frappuccino to steady himself. It dribbled down his chin.

Cassie took his hand and said, “Let’s blow this joint.”

“What do you mean?”

“I heard you on the phone taking the day off from work. You can do anything you want.”

“But...where would we go?”

“Wherever our imagination takes us.”

She sounded insane, mad, crazy. And happy. He followed her, feeling the fresh morning air on his face as if for the first time, although he could also hear his mother’s voice warning him about never putting himself in jeopardy.

“I can’t skate.”

“Why not?”

Now it was his turn to laugh. “No helmet.” He paused to gain confidence. “And I’m not taking off my clothes.”



She winked. "You need to build up to that. Like the Frappuccino."

"Here's my car." Elvin pointed to his sensible Ford Taurus.

"Let's take mine."

He didn't know the model, but it was red, small, and didn't look safe. He got in anyway and buckled up. Her skates were on the floor.

She drove fast and talked non-stop about everything from a Tom Robbins novel she had been reading to a kale-quinoa salad which Elvin thought sounded awful. She played a CD of jazz and had him pay attention to each instrument as if they were speaking to him personally.

It seemed like only minutes had passed when he looked around and saw nothing but pasture, so immense and green.

"I feel like a child lost in a painting," he told Cassie.

"Good. There's hope for you yet."

With that, she pulled onto a dirt road, stopped the car, jumped out and began running until she found a path through a fence and onto the open field.

Elvin followed, gasping for breath, his lungs unaccustomed to such exertion. Still he kept running, exhilarated, not wanting to lose sight of Cassie and awed at the expanse of land, so lush he wondered if he had died and his spirit had returned to the Garden.

"Isn't this beautiful," she shouted. It was a statement, not a question. All of a sudden, she began spinning, her short dress rising in the air, exposing her pink tights and looking like she should be performing on a high wire.

Elvin used the time to catch his breath and stare at this strange, wonderful vision. She was crazy, he felt certain of this, and he knew better than to be out in the middle of nowhere with her, but like young men since the time of Adam, he wanted to please her. She possessed a quality--call it madness, joy, spontaneity--a quality he sadly lacked.

"How far can you jump?"

He wasn't sure he heard her right. Her rhetorical leaps without segues made his head spin.

Without further explanation, she took a running start and jumped, marking where she'd landed with a fallen branch. "Your turn," she said.

He hadn't done anything like this since he was a child, before his father died in a car crash and his mother grew fearful of an accident that would take her son's life. He took his running start and leaped with all his might.

He landed short.

"Try again."

When he fell short once more, she urged, "Again."

Again and again until he landed inches past the branch.

She ran to him, almost knocking him over, and kissed him, lingering just long enough for him to taste her before pulling away.

"Now watch." This time she took her running start and flew into the air, defying gravity, landing far beyond the marker.

Elvin rubbed his eyes the way he did in the morning when she skated by his neatly trimmed shrubs.

"You flew! You flew! I saw you fly! How did you do that?"

"I imagined I could. And I did it."

"Can you teach me to fly?"

"In time. At your own pace. If that's what you want."

They embraced.

"It's been a long day," she said, patting him on the back. "Time to return to our lives." She kissed him again, this time on the cheek, and ran back towards the car. Elvin chased after her.

They drove in silence. Elvin imagined life with Cassie, free and uninhibited. Then he thought of his own boxwood-lined house and knew instantly she had no place in his life. What might her life be like? He could never fit in there.

At his car, they hugged goodbye.

"Will I ever see you again?" he asked.

She shrugged and laughed. "Who knows?"

Over the next few months, Elvin joined an exercise class and began dating a woman he met there. His supervisor at work praised him for his creativity, and he planted sunflowers in defiance of a neighborhood ordinance.

Cassie had disappeared from his life as suddenly as she had appeared. He still glanced out his kitchen window hoping to see a vision in pink skate by, and he began most days at Starbucks, although never again ordering a Caramel Ribbon Crunch Frappuccino.

He might have filed away Cassie as a caffeine-induced hallucination had it not been for a phone call he received from his cousin Belinda. She called to say she had just adopted a kitten and named it Cassie. She laughed; Elvin went silent.

"Don't you remember that day I took you skating and that little girl kept telling you to let go of the railing and try again?"

"I never knew her name."

"She told me it was Cassie."

"Belinda, tell me. Was she wearing pink tights?"

"Who?"

"The little girl."

"Pink tights? Geez, I don't remember. Why?"

"No reason."



# 'TIS A GIFT

Shaker  
artistry

essential  
spare

planed  
planks

precisely  
squared

handwoven  
baskets

handcrafted  
chairs

meticulous  
joinery

utilitarian  
ware

Shaker  
simplicity

minimal  
bare

—ada jill schneider

[short story]

# LIBERATION DAY

by joseph rubas



Stefan Weyzak flipped open a note pad and jotted down the basic details of the crime scene: Female. 20s-to-30s. Blonde. Nude but for a pair of socks. A knife lay near her outstretched right hand; the blade was crusted with blood.

"Forty," Bruno Cezary said, having counted the number of wounds. A tall, muscular man, Bruno was kneeling beside the body, his face hard and expressionless. Stefan wrote that down as well.

The call came in an hour before. A woman on her way home from the market found her in an alley; she was covered in garbage bags, only her feet jutting out.

Police cars blocked either end of the walkway. Officers stationed by each car shooed onlookers away. If anyone got too close, Stefan knew, they would be pushed against the hood of the car and cuffed. Later on, after a go with the MBP, Poland's secret police, they'd be released with a warning: Show more respect for the privacy of the state or else.

"Whoever did this must have a lot of hate in his heart," Bruno said, examining her neck. It bore deep bite marks ringed in pink.

Stefan grunted. "We know who did it."

Bruno didn't reply. Even among the police force, it was forbidden to speak the name of the Red Spider. Officially, he didn't exist, the Communist Party stubbornly refusing to admit that a mass murderer operated in a workers' paradise; such defusing crime was a product of the West, they said.

Rubbish.

It began six months before, in February. A Party official received a strange and rambling letter written in red ink. The contents were secret. Stefan was one of the few who had read it. It threatened violence against women, death, destruction, and was signed "Love, The Red Spider." Less than a week later, the first victim, a pretty twenty-five-year-old nurse, was found in the middle of a park, a piece of rope wound tightly around her neck. Another note was found under her body; written in the same spidery red, it mocked the "ineptitude" of the communist officials.

Two more women had died since then, making this one number four. In his latest letter, mailed to the Party just last week, the Red Spider promised a "bloodbath" on July 22, Liberation Day.

That was two days away.

"Any notes?" Stefan asked.

Bruno shook his head and stood. "No," he said.

The Red Spider hadn't left a note on a body since the second.

Stefan went over what he had written. "Signs of rape?" he asked.

Bruno shook his head. "No."

Stefan looked at him. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," Bruno replied.

The Red Spider always raped his victims. It was his hallmark. The first victim, the nurse, was found with a length of pipe jutting from her vagina.

Later, one of the police cars moved, and an ambulance backed into the alleyway. Two MBP agents hopped out and came toward them, one tall and thin, the other short and stocky.

Stefan and Bruno both saluted.

"This is the body?" the tall one asked.

What else would it be? Stefan thought. Out loud, he said, "Yes."

A paramedic with a stretcher came up and loaded the body up like a sack of refuse. As they wheeled her away, Stefan thought, *no one will ever know*.

Her family would be notified, of course, but they wouldn't be allowed to see her. Most likely, they would be told she suffered a heart attack, or was hit by a car. The papers wouldn't report it. Word would get around, however. It always did. The people of Katowitz knew there was a mass murderer in their midst. No matter how hard the Party tried, they couldn't hide it.

"Good job," the tall MBP man said. "Now...go look for clues or something."

With that, he and his comrade departed, climbing into the back of the ambulance and pulling the doors closed. As it pulled away, Stefan and Bruno walked lackadaisically to their cruiser. When they first arrived, it was sunny and warm, but now it was gray and windy, thin droplets of rain beginning to fall from the white sky. "I hope we get him soon," Bruno said.

"So do I."

Bruno sighed. "If only they wouldn't hamper us."

Police work was hard under communist rule. Stefan knew no different, but some of the older men on the force groused from time to time. Stefan himself wasn't a communist. He was a Party member, yes, but he didn't follow its doctrines. He was a common sense sort of man, and if the communists lacked one thing, it was common sense; keeping the murders hush-hush frustrated their efforts to capture him.

On the opposite side of the street, across from the alleyway, a bar sat hunched against the day, its windows dark and grimy. A simple wooden sign over the door carried its name.

"Wonder if anyone over there saw anything," Bruno mused.

"I doubt it," Stefan said. All bars in the city were legally obligated to close at midnight. From what they'd found, it looked as though the girl had died after that, probably closer to dawn.

"It's worth a try," Bruno said.

The bar was empty at this hour, save for a few men at the counter, eating an early lunch and drinking from tall mugs of beer. It was dim, too dim, and Stefan thought he could smell vomit and urine.

A fat man in a white shirt stood behind the counter. When he saw Bruno and Stefan, he stiffened.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

They came to the bar. The diners went about their business, pretending to take no interest.

"Can we talk to you in private?" Bruno asked.

The man looked scared. "O-okay. What is this about?"

"Private," Stefan said.

The man nodded, "Okay. Follow me."



He led them down a brief hall, past the bathrooms. At the end of the hall, a door opened onto a storeroom. It was wide and dark, the far wall lined with metal shelves laden with boxes. The man turned on a light and stepped in.

Stefan and Bruno followed, Stefan closing the door behind him.

"A woman was killed last night," Bruno said.

"I knew it," the barkeep said. "I saw all of you over there and..."

"Shut up," Bruno said.

The barkeep did.

"Did you see anything suspicious last night?"

The barkeep wracked his brain. Finally, he shook his head. "No. Nothing."

"Are you sure?" Stefan asked

The barkeep nodded. "I swear. I didn't see..." He trailed off.

Stefan and Bruno looked at each other.

"What?" Bruno asked.

"Well..." the barkeep started. "It's probably nothing."

"Tell us."

"There was a red car parked by the opening of the alley," the barkeep said. "I noticed it there around seven, and it was still there when I left at one."

Stefan pulled out his trusty note pad and jotted that down. "Did you see any people around it? A driver maybe?"

The barkeep shook his head again. "No. That's all. I swear."

"Have you ever seen it before?" Bruno asked.

"No."

Outside, Bruno said, "I bet that was his car."

Stefan wasn't as sure. "Why would he be parked there for so long?"

"I don't know," Bruno said, "but it's a lead."

Neither one of them spoke much on the ride back to the station. Stefan watched the city pass from the window, his thoughts lazily wandering. Men and women rushed to and fro as the rain intensified, young men in suits and old women in colorful kerchiefs. Here and there, men in cherry pickers hung decorations for the Liberation Day parade: Flags and portraits of Lenin chiefly among them. He also saw a few young blonde girls on the way, and wondered if they, too, would fall victim to the Red Spider.

"How did your date go last night?" Stefan asked, turning to Bruno. He meant to ask him earlier, but almost as soon as he walked through the door, they were rushing away to the crime scene.

"It went fine," Bruno said. As far as Stefan knew, the girl Bruno was seeing now was a Party official.

"That's good," Stefan said. "Did you...?"

Bruno looked over at him, a sly smile playing at the corner of his lips. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

Stefan laughed. "I would."

Bruno chuckled. "No, as a matter of fact, we didn't."

"Oh?"

Bruno nodded. "She's the kind who waits for marriage."

"Is she religious?"

Bruno didn't speak. Under communism, Poland was an atheist state, and religion was virtually illegal. If someone's faith got out, they would be persecuted, harassed and possibly fired from their jobs. Stefan understood Bruno's hesitance to respond, and said, "Never mind."

The Katowitz police department was in the middle of the city in a large, Gothic style building with wide stone columns and tall, vaulted windows. A new building, in the Socialist realist style, was being built several blocks away, next to the office of the Central Committee. Bruno navigated the car down a narrow drive between the police department and the next building over, and parked in a space next to another police car. A few officers stood around the back door, smoking and laughing, probably over a communist joke. Stefan was fond of anticommunist jokes. His current favorite went: A Russian is informing the KGB. "I think my neighbors have suspicious contact with the West."

"How can you tell?"

"I hear them eating every night!"

Stefan smiled as he got out of the car. The rain had tapered off, but the wind sprang up.

"What did you find?" one of the officers asked.

"What's red and lives in a web?" Bruno asked.

The officers' faces paled. Bruno nodded and went into the building. Stefan followed. Inside, a long, marble hall led toward the front of the building, where a bored receptionist sat behind a big desk. Bruno and Stefan shared an office on the second floor. They spent most of the afternoon writing up their report, copies of which would be given to their captain, the MBP, and the Party.

"I'm hungry," Stefan finally said. Bruno was hunched over the desk, furiously scribbling away, his face stony, as always.

"I'm not," he said, "go on and get something. I'll finish up."

"Are you sure?" Stefan asked.

Bruno waved his left hand. "Go on. I don't see how you can eat after this morning, but go."

Stefan chuckled. "I'll be back."

The cafe Stefan frequented, was busy, and he had to wait for a table; the owner offered to "clear" one for him, but he assured him it was all right. He didn't mind waiting.

He ate slowly, savoring the kielbasa. When he was done, he paid his bill and walked back to the station, his hands behind his back. He thought of the murders.

Night fell suddenly over Katowitz. The rain had picked back up close to dusk, and now it fell from the sky in torrents. On the city's western edge, a woman, young, blonde, and thin, walked hurriedly along the sidewalk, an umbrella shielding her from the downpour. The streets were empty save for the rain.

A car pulled up beside her, and the driver, a dark blur in the shadows, leaned over and rolled down the passenger side window. "Do you need a ride?"

The woman stopped. "No, thank you," she said.

"Are you sure?" the man asked.

She went to reply but stopped. Her apartment was ten blocks away, and the rain was getting heavier.

"All right," she said, and got in.

The Red Spider laughed.

As soon as Stefan walked in the next day, he knew something was wrong. "Bruno?"

Bruno was hunched over the desk, furiously scribbling on a piece of paper.

Without looking up, he said, "We got a letter."

Stefan froze. "From The...from him?"

"Yes," Bruno said. Still without looking up, he handed Stefan a sheet of paper.

Red ink.

The letter began:

*Dear police, MBP, Party officials, and people of Katowitz, I am among you. I slither the gutters at night. I find pretty women and kill them. I will kill another on the night of the twentieth.*

"Jesus Christ," Stefan muttered. "That was last night."

The letter went on:

*I will leave the body in People's Park so you know it's me. I will be at the parade for "work." Maybe I will find another one there.*

*Love, THE RED SPIDER.*

Stefan sat the note down, his hand trembling. "Where did you find this?"

"It was in the mail. Captain Karowitz opened it."

Captain Karowitz was the head of the police department.

"Did he send someone to the park?"

"Yes, but they haven't reported back yet."

Stefan sat heavily down. "This is madness."

"It'll be over soon," Bruno said. "I'm going to find that son of a bitch."

Stefan wondered.

The station, typically quiet in the early afternoon, was abuzz with activity; cops, MBP agents, and Party officials crowded into the hallways, talking and getting in the way. By now, it had been three hours since the woman was found in People's Park, just like the note said. She was young and blonde, like the rest. She may have been pretty at some point, but no one could tell; the Spider bashed her face in.

Stefan Weyzak drew a deep breath and knocked on the door labeled KAROWITZ. Beside him, Bruno showed no emotion whatsoever.

"Enter!" Karowitz barked.

Stefan opened the door and stepped inside. The office was small and bright, the sun streaming in from a window on the far wall. Framed certificates and photos hung here and there. Party leaders. Marx. Lenin.

Behind a vast mahogany desk, Captain Mark Karowitz was a study in authoritarianism. Short and beefy with a bald head and a thick black mustache, he reminded Stefan of an army drill instructor, the kind of man who ate nails and shit bullets. His arms, bare and resting on the table, were round and hairy, invested with endless power. His chest was barrel-like, his white shirt stretched taunt across.

In the two chairs before the desk, men in suits faced them. Stefan recognized them vaguely as the Chief of Public Security and the Undersecretary of Public Security...the top of the MBP food chain.

"Shut the door!" Karowitz said, and Bruno did.

"This is Mr. Bundy and Mr. Jez. They've made the decision to form a task force on the Red Spider. You're my two best officers and you've responded to more Spider calls than anyone, so you're on it."

Bruno nodded. "Thank you."

Karowitz ignored him. "We're setting up checkpoints on all the roads out of the city. I want you, Bruno, at the north checkpoint on 902, and you, Stefan, in the south."

For the first time, the Chief of Public Security spoke. "Stop all red cars and detain the drivers for questioning. Take down their information for...further investigation."

Stefan noticed the pause.

"Yes, sir," Bruno said, and Stefan followed suit.

Stefan sat in the driver seat of a loaned police car and watched as a solider in drab green waved on vehicles. Several other men, all carrying automatic rifles, went window-to-window, checking papers and asking questions. Do you own a red car? Does anyone you know own a red car? Have you seen anything suspicious?

Other officers were scouring the city, talking to reliable informants and asking questions. *They* were the ones most likely to catch someone. It struck him as funny. Captain Karowitz said he and Bruno were his best men, yet here they were, doing little more than car watching.

"Sir?"

Stefan startled. A soldier stood before him, his rifle slung over his shoulder. "There's another red car."

Great. Stefan nodded, thanked him, and got out, stretching. The car, a Fiat, was behind a cargo truck, and the man inside looked nervous. As Stefan approached, he fidgeted and looked away. *Guiltily of something?*

Stefan motioned for the man to roll down his window, and he did. "Good afternoon," he said, leaning down. "Do you mind showing me your papers?"

The man opened his mouth, as if to protest, thought better of it, and reached into his glovebox, coming back with his papers. Stefan copied down his information, took his license plate number, and came back to the window. "Where are you going?"

"H-home," the man said.

"Expect a visit."

With that, Stefan stepped back and waved him on.

Back at the squad car, he went over the man's information one more time. Peter Geller. 25. He circled his name.

Stefan watched from the office window as day turned to night, and the lights of Katowitz blinked on one-by-one. A few sections of town remained dark. Power outages were bad this time of year.

Bruno went over the names and addresses of the red car drivers, and sighed. "Fifty-eight people."

"The MBP has its work cut out for it."

He looked at Stefan. "I'm going to stay over tonight. Drive the streets a little. Would you like to come with me?"

Stefan thought about it. As a matter of fact, he didn't. He wanted to go home. Skirting your duty to socialism and to the people, however, was a good way to get in trouble.

"Sure," he said.

After they turned in their papers to the Chief, Bruno and Stefan changed into their civilian clothes and took Bruno's personal car out. It was almost ten, and the lights along the streets twinkled in the summer blackness.

"Keep to the side streets," Stefan said. "I doubt he'll be on the main thoroughfares."

The streets stood empty as they passed through the commercial district. A curfew was in effect and no one was allowed out. "A counterrevolutionary," Karowitz said. "That's the story. Don't say anything different."

Bruno negotiated the car down a side street and into a residential neighborhood. Blocks of ugly apartment buildings hunched against the stars. Ahead, a woman walked a small dog along the sidewalk.

Bruno pulled beside her and Stefan rolled down his window. "There's a curfew. Get inside."

The woman looked at him. "Oh? And who are you?"

"Katowitz Police."

She hurried away.

Why did people always do that?

Later on, after a meandering circuit of the city, Bruno parked in front of a closed down bakery and killed the engine. For a long while, they sat in silence, watching the desolate sidewalk, shadows pressing close to the street lamps.

"He's out there," Bruno said. "Somewhere. In the night."

Stefan scanned the darkness. Nothing moved.

"Do you really think he's going to strike at the parade tomorrow?"

For a moment, Bruno considered it. “No. I think he’s trying to scare us. He’s too much of a coward to operate in the day.”

Stefan lit a cigarette and offered one to Bruno. He took it and held it between his thumb and forefinger. “I think he’s too much of a coward to pick on someone his own size. That’s why he kills women. They’re weaker than he is.”

“You may be right,” Stefan said. “What if he really is a counterrevolutionary? A terrorist for the west?”

Bruno chuffed. “I doubt it. They have to make everything political. This isn’t political.”

No, it wasn’t, Stefan guessed. Political murders were businesslike. The excessive force used on the Red Spider victims indicated something more, something deeper.

“Do you think he’s mad?”

Bruno finally lit the cigarette. “No,” he said, blowing the smoke slowly out. “Not fully. A mad man doesn’t know what he’s doing. A...a...creature like this knows exactly what he’s doing.”

Stefan checked his watch. “It’s late,” he said. “We should go. We have a big day tomorrow.”

Karowitz and the MBP men had already called for more troops and police officers. They hoped that the increased presence would dissuade the Spider from striking.

“You’re right,” Stefan said. He started the car. “I’ll take you home...after one more round.”

The Red Spider watched the rising sun with a shiver of excitement. Twenty years ago, July 22, 1944, Soviet troops rolled into Warsaw.

The Red Spider loved Liberation Day. It reminded him of the death and destruction of that long ago period, the bodies lying in the streets, their heads, hearts, and stomachs blown out, their flesh charred and blackened, their eyes staring sightlessly into the heavens, as if in condemnation of the God who had abandoned them. He remembered wandering the streets of Warsaw as a child, no more than five or six, going from body to body, touching them, studying them. His favorite was the woman. Was she Jewish? He didn’t know. He found her in an alley, nude and covered in bullet wounds, her golden blonde hair streaked with dull brown blood. He stood over her, his eyes wide and something, something dark, stirring in his stomach.

Even to this day, he wished he’d touched her breasts. And her vagina. In his dreams, he raped her, only when he looked down, she was a skeleton and she screamed.

Was his mother blonde? He tried to remember but couldn’t. His mother and his father died fighting the Nazis in the last days of occupation. If he closed his eyes and tried real hard, he could just recall his father’s face, but never his mother’s.

Now, at dawn, the Red Spider greeted the day with furious masturbation. Happy Liberation Day!

Floats and military vehicles crept slowly down the narrow street. Screaming



Poles crowded the sidewalks, waving red flags and howling in faux delight as the General Secretary of the Polish Communist Party waved stiffly from on high. Stefan stood along the curb, his hands behind his back, watching the parade.

There were a lot of police officers and MBP agents along the parade route. He knew there were also a number of others among the crowd, dressed in civilian clothes. Further along, north and south, soldiers watched from armored vehicles jutting out from alleyways. Though he wasn't sure, he thought he'd also seen several snipers on the rooftops.

"Have you seen anything?" Bruno asked. He was standing next to Stefan, his arms behind his back as well.

"No," Stefan said.

Bruno sighed. "The bastard won't show. I know it."

*No, he wouldn't*, Stefan thought. *Not with the number of cops and soldiers around.*

"Just keep an eye out," Stefan said.

The parade was over and night was falling. Men swept confetti from the streets and took down decorations. All the good little socialists of Katowitz were home, ahead of the curfew.

In their office, Stefan took off his coat and hung it up. Bruno was hunched over the desk, writing a report.

"Maybe tomorrow," Stefan said.

"Maybe."

"Up for another late night?"

Bruno looked up. "Of course."

They left the station at eight and drove the streets, shooing curfew breakers back home but seeing nothing else. Again they wound up parking, this time down the street from a grocery store.

For a long time, they sat in silence. Bruno was upset, so Stefan didn't engage him. Shortly before asking to be taken home, however, Stefan froze.

"You see that?" he asked, pointing to an alleyway a quarter of a block away.

Bruno, hitherto slumped, snapped to attention. "What?"

"I don't know," Stefan said, "It looked like a person."

Bruno got out of the car, his gun drawn.

"Wait!" Stefan cried.

But he was already moving.

Stefan got out of the car and shut the door behind him. Bruno was just stepping into the alley when he caught up.

"Do you see anything?" he asked.

Bruno shook his head. The alley ran for a half a block before letting out onto another street. Heaps of trash lay strewn about.

"Maybe he's hiding."

Bruno, gun out in front of him, crept slowly toward the first heap. Stefan, his own gun drawn, followed.

The bag seemed to move.

Bruno pounced, crying out as he leapt.

Just as quickly as he sprang into action, he stopped. "There's noth...."

The first shot hit him in the throat, tearing it out in a fine mist of red. The force of it spun him partially around. The second took him high in the head; pieces of skull and chunks of brain matter flew into the night, splattering the slime slathered alley floor.

For a moment, he teetered, keeping his balance, but then he fell.

He didn't move.

Working quickly, Stefan went to him, taking his hand in his and checking for a pulse.

Nothing.

He glanced over his shoulder, saw that no one had come, and removed the bloody knife from his coat pocket. Carefully, he placed it in Bruno's open palm, and returned his gun to its holster. Done, he took out the ID card belonging to the last Spider victim, and placed it in Bruno's pocket.

*He said he saw something, Stefan rehearsed. He lured me into the alley and tried to kill me.*

The Red Spider laughed.



## A Sonnet of Sorrow

She said she heard her garden's voice  
in color spread and range of hue.  
Carnation pink to pansy blue,  
a pastel span always her choice.  
My prayer the day I knelt alone  
where lilacs wept as if they knew:  
*Forgive my picking just a few  
for bouquet placed upon your stone.*

How then to live, in fear as much  
as every flower left to be  
forsaken in its destiny,  
bereft of care, denied her touch?  
In garden's grief and mine, the same—  
to know what was, what then became.

—alan meyrowitz

## Witchfinder's Lament

Yea, though I work in the shadow  
I shall fear not my path  
Yea, though I walk amongst the dead  
I shall fear not their wrath  
And though their magic stains the soul  
My light shall not be corrupted  
But the flames do not entice me now

My hands are scarred, my brow smudged with ash  
But no spell can now oppose me  
My lungs strained with soot, eyes red from smoke  
But no glamour can I see  
The guilty stacked like stones  
The innocent cower by the gallows wood  
Shaken in their fearful symmetry

Magistrates breathe their sounds of relief  
And shake my hand carefully  
Their eyes do not meet mine, do not look away  
And do not hint of what they have seen  
"The Church," they say, "calls you again."  
And with mumbled blessings and the Lord's due  
They point the road out yonder

I mount my horse, and ride him away  
Off to another village and place  
In the space between heartbeats, I know  
The dread I dare not trace  
It used to be I could see magic and evil inside  
The most innocent of faces  
But now I can only see it in mine

—brandon nolta

## My Search

I met you on a blinding morn in church,  
Your suff'ring eyes they pierced me to the soul.  
I knew right then that I could end my search,  
At last I'd found a saint to make me whole.

We married on a rainy afternoon,  
The honeymoon belied what lay ahead.  
Your chilling moods, as frigid as the moon,  
Left me in anguish, wishing you were dead.

Now here I sit a widow in this pew,  
The hands that struck me safely in the grave.  
I come for Bach—ethereal and true,  
And trust that music soon my soul will save.

But as for you, there's nothing I'd reverse—  
I keep the ricin hidden in my purse.

—jeff haas

# Clouds Over Lichen Spire

by cody schroeder

“Crap, crap, crap.” Peter Langin sprinted to his car and flung his bag into the passenger seat. As per usual, he was late. The less usual part, tonight was his first night class. He had always said he would never bother with night courses but Kaylee, his wife, was due in a month. Any extra money couldn’t be refused.

If he hurried, he might make it into town and to campus, and only be ten minutes late. Luckily at this hour, traffic in the boonies proved negligible. Peter backed away from the garage, dodged around the cans sitting at the end of the drive, and swung onto the road. He returned Kaylee’s enthusiastic wave and sped off.

Orange and brown trees blurred by. He preferred not to speed but he preferred keeping his job more. If his roster proved accurate he had a dozen or so students in the class. Guess a night course in Ancient Architecture would never prove popular but he had expected at least twice as many students.

He sped around a sharp curve and the land opened up around him. Forests gave way to rolling fields. On his right the massive, craggy rock known as Lichen Spire stretched toward the clouds. So named for a glaringly obvious reason. The pointed, needle of a rock looked green in the evening sun from the moss and lichen that covered its surface.

Peter’s gaze lingered on the spire. A single cloud hung over it, casting a shadow over the towering stone. The cloud stuck out, well, like a black cloud on a pretty clear day. Black as obsidian. It looked like floating ash. Some lost discharge from a volcano. More odd was that the cloud didn’t drift with the other wisps of white occupying the sky.



He slowed the car, fixated on the hovering anomaly. Maybe it was a storm cloud but it would have been the smallest he'd ever seen. The dark cloud hovered over the spire, still and unmoving.

Peter slowed around the next curve and pulled off into the clear area where a dirt path led back to the spire. It was a popular attraction in the height of summer. Hikers and climbers flocked to it like flies to a fresh corpse, not to mention college lovers looking for a secluded place with conservation department funded facilities close at hand.

He parked the car in front of a wooden post that designated parking spaces here. Peter glanced at the clock on the dash. A few minutes past seven. He didn't have time for this. Strictly speaking, he should be in his office already preparing for a class that started in less than twenty minutes. But he couldn't stop looking at the cloud. His students could wait. He didn't see things like this every day. Most of them would drift off to sleep before he opened his notes anyway.

The cloud seemed to be descending. Peter stepped out of the car onto the flattened grass. He watched the black, smoke-like, cloud. It covered the pinnacle of the Spire. The park was deserted. Peter started down the path to the Spire, all the while watching the cloud drift lower.

Thankfully, the park's caretakers had trimmed the trees away from the path. The Spire dominated his view as he jogged closer. The cloud stopped its descent. It covered the top quarter of Lichen Spire and cast a shadow over most of the park. Peter paused, leaning against a tree to catch his breath.

A brilliant flash of light illuminated everything around him.

He peeked out from behind the tree and looked skyward.

The cloud flashed again as he watched, like lightning without the thunder.

"What the?"

Peter crept out from behind the tree and onto the trail that led straight for the Spire.

The cloud erupted light again.

This time, Peter saw movement in the trees near the base of the Spire following the flash.

A shiver coursed through him. He was being watched. Either from the sky, or trees, or both. He couldn't be sure but he felt the weight of someone watching him, of eyes on him, as he drew closer to the spire.

He crouched lower as he moved closer. Almost on his hands and knees by the time he was within a hundred yards of the moss covered rock.

The trees to his right thrashed.

Out of pure instinct, Peter backed into the brush to his left and stepped behind the closest tree. He watched the spot where the trees flailed and flapped. No wind could move just a few trees so much and leave the others untouched. No beast alive today could bash a tree about with such force. His mouth fell open as something stepped from the trees within spitting distance of him.

Several somethings.

Four of them. Four horrible creatures that could not, or at least should not,

exist. Each came to about waist height. Their skin was a dark gray and looked like armor or some sort of carapace. They had thin, skeletal bodies and sported, what appeared to Peter, to be four arms and four legs. Said appendages appeared to be the result of some arachnid and crustacean mix.

The most alarming features of these new arrivals had to be their heads. Or what Peter assumed to be their heads. The proverbial jury was certainly out on this one. His immediate impression was that they had massive crabs with eyes like flies perched on their necks. There were even leg or tentacle appendages protruding from the front of their heads.

The creatures began their scuttling walk toward the Spire. They moved with surprising speed and agility, climbing over the fence at the end of the path as if it weren't there.

Peter let his breath out as the last creature vanished around the side of the Spire. His heart raced as if attempting to escape his chest. He looked to the sky where the dark cloud hovered overhead. No flashes. No movement.

He pressed his forehead against the rough bark of the tree in front of him. *What on Earth were those things?*

"On Earth," he muttered. He suspected there was little "Earthly" about them.

Peter took several long, slow breaths. He needed to calm down. Calm down and haul it back to his car.

His watch let out a shrill beep. Now officially late for class. He grabbed at his wrist and fumbled with the buttons of the side of the watch to silence it.

He poked his head around the tree. The path was clear. Peter stepped out of the brush and headed back the way he came, doing his best to sneak and sprint at the same time. He froze in his tracks near the bend in the trail when a horrible screech echoed in his ears.

*Don't turn around. Don't turn around.*

He turned to see two of the creatures at the base of the Spire. The one further from him held a boulder of some dark rock in its arms. The nearer of the pair had its head raised, its gaping mouth directed to the sky. The horrible noise emanated from it.

Before he'd even registered what was happening, Peter sprinted for his car. The screeching behind him grew louder. Something crashed through the trees like a bulldozer.

He fumbled his keychain out of his pocket and pressed the unlock button on the remote. Peter hurtled into the car and slammed the door. He jammed the key into the ignition and raced out to the road.

A flash of dark gray burst out of the trees behind him. The earsplitting screech rang over the low roar of his car's engine. In seconds he hit paved road again.

Peter glanced in his rearview mirror and saw nothing behind him. He looked to his right as he raced toward the city. The dark cloud still hung over the Spire's pinnacle.

His watch beeped again. Now ten minutes late.

"Yeah, yeah. I know." Peter pressed the accelerator harder. His pulse beat in his head. *What do I do now?* He shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts. *Go to class for now. You're already late. Go there. Be around people. Calm down. Talk this over with Kaylee when you get home.*

"All right," he said. It sounded reasonable enough but the screeching echoing in his skull drowned it out.

The rest of his drive blurred by. In what seemed like a blink, he found himself sitting in his parking space staring at a brick wall.

He took a deep breath, grabbed his bag, and headed inside. Much of the campus was dark, lit by lamps that lined the footpaths. The light in his classroom was on.

Peter went inside, past his office, and straight into...an empty classroom. A piece of paper sat atop the podium at the front of the room.

*Dr. Langin*

*We all showed up. You didn't. Try again next time.*

Peter checked his watch. Twenty-five minutes late. Not the best way to start a class. He sauntered back to his office and flopped back in his chair, his head in his hands.

Some of the students would probably complain to the department head. He'd had complaints before. No big deal. It's not like he was boinking any of his students.

He leaned back in his chair and rested his head against the wall. The light outside his window flashed. *Call maintenance Monday morning.*

"Excuse me, Dr. Langin?"

Peter turned to see a man in a dark suit standing in his office doorway. His short hair brushed the top of the door frame and his body filled the doorway. Strangest of all, he wore sunglasses, despite anything resembling a bright light in the room.

"Yes. Can I help you?"

The man stepped into his office. He moved in an odd, stiff, almost mechanical sort of way. Behind him came another man in identical attire who stood just inside the door. The first man moved to the window and glanced outside. He returned to the center of the room and stood before the desk with his hands behind his back.

"I do hope we aren't bothering you," he said in a dull voice.

Peter leaned forward and rested his arms on his desk. "No, it's fine. What can I do for you gentlemen?"

"My partner and I wanted to ask you a few questions about a case we're working."

Peter sat up straighter. He'd never been asked to consult on anything before. "Certainly. How can I help?"

The man at the door put his hands in his pockets. He wore sunglasses as well.

Peter couldn't look away from him. Something about the man's face held his gaze. His clothes weren't the only thing identical to the first man. Could they be twins?

"Dr. Langin?"

He turned back to the man in front of him. "Excuse me, yes?"

The man unfolded a piece of paper and set it in front of him. It was blank. Pure white. Not a mark on it.

"Um..." Peter looked to the man's face and froze. He couldn't blink or look away. He was paralyzed.

The man pulled his sunglasses down his nose to reveal black eyes. Like the eyes of an insect. Light gleamed off them like polished metal.

Peter's breath caught in his throat. His heart raced in his chest.

"I..."

The man in the dark suit shook his head. "Do not speak Dr. Langin." He took back the paper, refolded it, and slid it back into his pocket. "You've given us quite the crisis." He removed his glasses and set them at the edge of the desk,

Peter stared into the reflective eyes. His hands shook atop his desk.

"You see," the man said. "We have taken great care to insure humans are unaware of our presence."

The man at the door stepped closer and closed the door behind him.

"In fact," the first man said. "You are one of the very few to stumble upon us."

Peter managed to open his mouth but couldn't produce sounds.

The second man moved to stand beside the first. He removed his sunglasses and put them in his breast pocket. His eyes looked identical to the other man's insect eyes.

Peter heard his pulse throbbing in his head. Behind this, a loud buzzing began. It grew in intensity the longer he stared into their eyes. But he couldn't look away. Couldn't close his eyes. Or even blink.

The buzzing grew louder. He felt as if his brain was vibrating. It hurt. Like a slow building migraine.

"You will tell no one what you saw. They won't believe you. You saw nothing. You will not remember us either."

The buzzing and pain intensified. The vibration against his eyes blurred his vision. His breath came quicker and harder.

The dark shape in front of him reached down and picked up another dark shape. It put this shape on its face.

Dark spots appeared on the edge of his vision. His head wavered from side to side.

"Goodbye Dr. Langin."

Peter awoke staring at the tree outside his office.

*What happened? "Oh shoot!" Must have dozed off.*

He was going to be late for his class. He tried to get up but a wave of nausea surged through him. He collapsed back in his chair, taking several deep breaths. The room swam for a moment. Peter shook his head. His gaze fell on the clock over his door.

The clock showed 3:10 a.m.

He reached inside his pocket and grabbed his cell phone. It also showed 3:10

a.m. That couldn't be. He been in his car, driving here, and...the clock on the dash showed just past seven. Where on Earth had eight hours gone? He couldn't have slept at his desk that long.

His phone flashed a little envelope showing he had a dozen new messages. All from Kaylee.

Peter grabbed his bag and darted out into the hallway. He raced home in record time. Kaylee was asleep on the sofa when he crept in the front door.

"Pete?" she asked through a yawn. "Where have you been?"

He dropped his bag at the door. "Sorry babe. Fell asleep at my desk."

She eyed him in that way women have. As if looking for the truth in his very soul. "For like six hours?"

He sat beside her and took her hand in his. "I guess so." A dull pain radiated from the center of his forehead. "It's kind of a blur actually." The pain grew worse.

Kaylee sat up, as much as she could at this point anyway. "Probably one of those young bimbos. Drugged you and had her way with you." A wry grin formed on her face.

He tried to return her smile. Blurry images danced in his mind. A dark cloud. A green stone. A flashing light.

"Peter?" She grabbed his arm. "Are you okay?"

The same overwhelming vertigo he'd felt in his office returned. He fell forward onto the carpet. Loud buzzing filled his ears. His head felt like it was going to explode. A terrible screech echoed in his brain.

"Peter!"

He collapsed on the floor, Kaylee's screams joining the cacophony in his head.



## SWEET DREAMS

I awaken to a nightmare.  
Creeping out of my closet  
like broken clockwork  
the shadows move closer.  
Their eyes are will-o-wisps,  
silver mirrors burning,  
in them I see my dreams  
consumed in flame,  
reduced to ash.  
My screams are silenced;  
Fear suffocates  
like black plastic  
pulled tight.  
Their whispers are narcotic,  
lids become heavy listening  
to voices that promise oblivion.  
*"Feed us.  
Dreams taste sweet  
like spun sugar or decay.  
Sink into the sheets,  
be our buffett."*

—robert perez

# Sahib's Waiting

Sahib's head  
swings in an arm-chair  
while waiting for his son.

A midnight fox howls.  
His son hasn't returned  
yet. Disquietude deepens.

Curls of smoke  
stain adolescence  
in the cannabis lit nights.

His son washes  
his wounds in rum. His  
stepmother's tongue was sharp.

Bell rings, as usual.  
Sahib opens the door,  
his mind's hinges grate.

His son passes by  
as an emperor from  
the lawless kingdom,

and stares with  
his sin streaked eyes.  
Reek of liquor mutes Sahib.

Each night burns  
until its edge. Waiting's  
love's non-profit pain.

—fabiyas mv

## First Impressions

Trying to get out of here,  
lost in lucid dreams  
Struggling to escape their stare,  
ripping at the seams

Cautious, calibrated smiles,  
lips and teeth aligned  
Choking on my own sick bile,  
as I say, "I'm fine."

Torturous thoughts of tales untold,  
spinning 'round my head  
Seeming to appear so bold. . .  
One slip of the tongue, I'm dead!

—jenny santellano



## Chiaroscuro

It's like a pall  
    when the green ground  
is first topped all  
    with snow and found  
by the full moon—  
    the eye can sense  
some light, but more doom,  
    where the mind's dense

and careless view  
paints with one hue.

—gregory palmerino

# ROY'S DESERT MOTEL

by arthur davis

“Of course I’m going to make the meeting on time, so stop whining and give my message about the Markson account to Lenny.” Jerry Bishop switched off his cell phone and tossed in on the seat next to him. It bounced off the leather, tumbled to the floor, and disappeared.

He shouldn’t have spoken to Donna so harshly. Some day she would up and leave him and he’d spend another year going from one gum-chewing dimwit to another trying to find someone who can take a message or file a document, or spend most of the day on the phone with friends.

Though he reasoned, who would want to work for the vice president of a three employee insurance office in the middle of nowhere hustling retired farmers, day laborers, truck drivers and outcasts from trailer parks? And, every month, the same divorcees, screaming kids, drunken husbands and cheating wives.

He reached into his shirt pocket for a cigarette but came up with a wad of messages from Donna. He had given up smoking a week ago at the insistence of his doctor and, because his second ex-wife wouldn’t leave him in peace after realizing his getting emphysema might threaten her alimony.

The drive from his office in Bisbee, Arizona, only an hour southeast out of Tucson, was something he looked forward to each month. The tail end of the swing south into New Mexico ended back north in Douglas, Arizona, and a night with Sherry Burgeon who ran a little cafe her mother opened twenty-one years ago. Sherry was sweet, wore too much make-up, believed every Hollywood tabloid and, though she had long since seen her fortieth birthday, still had a body worth a wet dream.

Jerry turned down the air conditioner to conserve his battery as a jackrabbit jumped from the roadside into his path. He watched with fascination as the little gray-brown creature sat there, unaware it was about to become road kill.

He hammered his horn a couple of times. "Lazy little prick."

Twenty yards away he swung the wheel sharply, skidded against the shoulder of the road, kicked up a whirlwind of dirt, and struck a small rock that bounced up against the undercarriage. When he regained speed and composure there was no sign of the rabbit in his rear view mirror.

Three country western songs and an endless commercial for Texas Southern Beer later he noticed his gas gauge dropping. He got out of the car, bent down and spotted gas draining through a two-inch gash the rock must have made in his tank. He jumped back in the car, jammed down the accelerator and prayed. The odometer quickly passed ninety miles per hour on the late-model sedan. He steadied himself out at an even hundred. If there were police around, he only hoped he would be picked up on their radar.

"Okay. We can do this."

He searched for another channel but it was all the same shit-kicker's droning, same lamenting pathetic men and women spilling out their sad guts over lost loves and misspent lives. The gas gauge's thin red indicator slipped under the quarter tank mark. He had eighty or so miles to go to the next town.

"Think," he exhorted himself.

The desert just west of the continental divide was as barren as Sherry's lust-loving heart. Scrub, sand, saguaro, dung beetles, and rattlers. He had left a good job in Los Angeles eighteen years ago with his first wife. It was supposed to be a new beginning for both of them, and turned out to be a repeat of past failures.

The indicator slipped through the red, Empty-zone. A few emergency gallons and the engine would sputter and die. He was trying to calculate how far he had to go when he spotted something at the edge of the horizon steaming up from the heat waves on the tarmac.

"Yes!" he shouted, fist-pumping the air. "Yes! Yes! Yes!"

The sedan slowed but not before it covered enough ground for Jerry to make out three small bungalows behind a main house. He couldn't recall it being there in his last trip. His car rolled to a halt no more than fifty yards from a battered sign reading, Roy's Desert Motel.

He switched off the engine, grabbed his briefcase, and slammed the car door shut. The baking late July afternoon sun was still a formidable presence. He hadn't seen any sign of life except for one lousy rabbit. No trucks or cars on a road that was routinely used by both.

He walked a few paces, remembered his cell phone and returned to the car. He bent down at the side of the car and examined every inch of carpet under the seat. It was not on the floor between the rear and front seat either. A sickening feeling welled up into his chest.

"OK, don't panic."

The neon light announcing Roy's was broken. Two weathered pine chairs sat

on the front porch. Neither looked as though they would support life. The vending machine at the end of the porch was empty. A pair of tumbleweeds lazily crossed the tarmac nearby and fell into a patch of cacti.

Jerry Bishop opened the screen door and stepped inside. The air was cool. A long couch occupied one side of the office, a desk the other. A radio was playing in the background. He dropped his briefcase on the couch and straightened his tie. He leaned over the partition but couldn't find a telephone. He heard voices, music and footsteps.

A young man came out of the back clutching a dog-eared paperback under his arm. The boy couldn't have been twenty. He was wearing regulation jeans and dust stained black T-shirt. His face was round and soft and with small grey eyes sunk deep in his freckled face.

"What can I do for you?"

"Well, for starters, I could use a phone."

The boy sat down behind the desk. "So could I."

"I ran out of gas a few yards down the road. Can you spare a few gallons?"

"You want a room?"

"No."

"All we got are rooms."

"No phones or gas?"

He looked up again. "We rent out rooms. Rooms are what we've got."

Jerry glanced around the office. The weathered blue walls were bare. The linoleum frayed. "And there are no phones in the rooms?"

"No phones anywhere."

Playing along. "So you're all booked up?"

"We were. They all left this morning. You can have your pick if you're staying the night."

Do you have a car around here?"

"Mister, we got no cars, no phones, and no gas."

"I have a meeting up in Douglas and I need to get gas or find a phone so I can tell them I'm going to be late," he continued. "Do you have any suggestions?"

"No, but I see your problem."

"Anybody around these parts have a car?"

"Sure. Some folks do."

"But there's no way to call or reach them. Right?"

"Maybe someone will drive by and you can flag them down."

Jerry walked to the door. The mountains in the distance were cloaked in a charcoal afternoon shadow. Soft white clouds drifted high overhead. "I've landed in goddamn lost fucking world inhabited by inbred cretins," he lamented quietly, and turned to the boy. "So when was the last time a car came by?"

The boy folded his book up and set it on the desk. "Just now."

"I mean before me."

"Don't know. I was out back reading. Expect I'd still be there if you hadn't come along."

Jerry had meetings scheduled for afternoon and evening and Lenny was going to need help processing the new Markson account. "You live here?"

"Born and raised here."

"Parents?"

"Two."

*At least the kid has a sense of humor.* "Where did the name come from?"

"Grandfather's name was Roy."

"What an amazing coincidence. My brother's name is Roy." Of course it wasn't. It was just that Jerry couldn't figure what to do next. No car. No gas. No phone. No brains.

"Take your pick. All three of em' are empty."

"Jacuzzi in every cabin?"

"Just like in the big hotels."

"You're kidding, of course."

The kid got up and came around the desk. "My grandfather was a very smart man, mister. He wasn't a cretin with a sense of humor either." He reached back over the desk, picked up his book, and before he disappeared into the back, added, "Keys are on the desk. They're all fifty bucks a night."

Jerry Bishop stood in deafening silence. He hadn't considered the possibility of a mind-reading cretin. He picked up all three keys and went out into the suffocating heat. His car stood like a beached whale in the desert.

"Fucking wilderness."

Without immediate help he was going to miss a night between Sherry's welcoming thighs, her shapely buttocks in one hand and Jack Daniels in the other.

"Fucking rabbit," had plenty of time to save itself he considered, and stepped up to the first cabin, inserted the key into the lock and pushed. He was met with a blast of cold air.

The inside was several times the size he would have imagined and decorated in rich fabric and accented with ornate antiques. Rose and green silk curtains covered the two windows. There was thick, wall-to-wall pile carpeting, a loveseat, a lounge chair upholstered in some exotic burgundy colored fabric, and two heavily cushioned chairs offsetting the front of a king-sized, four-poster oak bed. Music was seeping into the room. He went directly to the bed.

"Perfect!"

He let his fingers graze the fine finish on the large Korean enameled chest of drawers. Just like the one he had seen in a museum in San Diego years ago. His heart pounded with excitement.

The bathroom contained a large white Victorian sink, toilet and oversized glass-enclosed shower and an ample Jacuzzi, as promised.

"Not a bad love nest for fifty bucks."

It took half an hour for him to go through the other two cabins, which were much like the first. He went out to his car, checked for the phone again, removed his suitcase, searched around for signs of life, then bounded back to the cabin as though Sherry was waiting for him in her favorite black silk teddy.

He stripped off his clothes and plunged into the warm Jacuzzi. The shower had twin water poles on each side of the enclosure that sprayed out high intensity water. He held onto the safety railing and turned up the pressure. He stepped out, toweled off, and rolled onto the bed.

"Well I'll be dipped in shit and rolled in cracker crumbs. This is definitely not bad."

A small chest in the corner of the room held a freshly stocked bar. "Sherry is going to love this place."

By the time he'd finished off two mini-bottles of Jack Daniels he realized he hadn't eaten since breakfast.

He flipped open his suitcase, took out a pair of casual trousers and yanked open the door. The night was desert black. A moonless evening illuminated only by the twinkle of dying stars. Forgetting his shoes, he hopped the distance to the office and pushed open the door. He tapped the silver desk bell but there was no response.

"Here Lightning Boy. Here Lightning Boy. Come out, come out wherever you are."

He walked to the partition behind the desk where the boy first appeared then disappeared, and knocked. No answer.

When he could no longer stand the frustration, he yanked the door open. The same twinkle of stars greeted him. A light breeze swept across the desert enveloping Bishop in a deep chill. He shuddered violently.

"What the fucking hell is going on here?" He fell back through the doorway and against the partition. The view from inside the doorway was a framed chink of iridescent desert defying a jet-black sky.

"Where'd he go without a car?" he said in a voice only his fear could hear.

He fought to control his trembling and walked back to his cabin. He locked the door, turned on the oversized television screen, grabbed a bottle of beer and a can of macadamia nuts, and watched basketball until the nightly news came on.

"Fucking rabbit bastard think he could stand in my way, in my way, like he owned the road?" One of the empty beer bottles fell off the bed.

"I'm drunk, and I'm worried about an empty beer bottle. But, you know, it's the empty ones you have to be concerned about," he garbled, crawling like a scared child to the fridge. He pulled the door open. "Okay. That's better."

Jerry Bishop slept on the carpet in cabin number one of Roy's Desert Motel that night. He slept, as they say, like a baby, having gone through a six-pack and a handful of bottle shots of Jack Daniels. He woke to an acid dry day. He stumbled half-naked outside and threw up behind the office. When he stopped heaving, he wiped his face and looked up. A jackrabbit sat a few paces away, staring him in the face.

The rabbit's eyes darted left and right, assured itself that it was in no danger from the rattler that had been following it all morning, and eyed the evil smelling creature with suspicion.

"You're responsible for all this!" Jerry screamed, swinging his arms in a wide, senseless arc. "But you're not going to get me. Not you, not my wives, not any of those incompetent parasites in my office."

He lunged forward and landed on his face. When he looked up the rabbit was gone. Bishop ran haphazardly through the scrub and sagebrush. Following an imaginary path, he lurched forward past mesquite and ancient Palo Verde trees. Soon the pain in his legs was matched by the burning clutch in his lungs and the throbbing pain in his head. When he stopped stumbling and looked around, Roy's Desert Motel was gone too. "Oh no. Oh no, oh no, oh no," he frothed. "You can't hide from old Jerry here."

Another hour of wandering and he fell to his knees and began frantically digging a hole in the sand. He used both hands to scoop and scour until he had dug a pit in which he could almost kneel. "There's water down here. I read that aquifers are under all deserts."

He dug and dug until his fingers bled and the sun baked his back a deep umber. He dug until he was half submerged in the hole. He dug until the rattler that had been stalking the jackrabbit, having found the scent of his puke behind the office, caught up with him and struck squarely at his buttocks, before sliding back into the sagebrush.

He became dizzy and disoriented. His breathing became shallow and labored. He flapped his arms around, every so often, slapping the air near his buttocks to prevent another mosquito from taking advantage of his vulnerable state.

He grew weak, and could barely sit up. He remembered falling over into the pit. He remembered the sun hurting his eyes. He remembered watching a tiny ant scamper away a few feet from his nose. He felt the sweat drip down his forehead and sting when the salty solution bled into his eyes. He thought he felt something crawling up his back but he couldn't be certain. But he did know Lenny was going to screw up the Markson account. He just knew it.

David Lawry took his usual half-hour to walk from his parents' trailer park and opened Roy's Desert Motel at exactly seven o'clock. He took down the welcome sign, switched on the air conditioner and checked for spiders and other nasty creatures that might have invaded his sanctuary.

The asshole's car sat on the shoulder of the road, only the key to cabin one was missing. He would tell the asshole about the trailer park after he paid his bill and checked out.

Most people would have considered reading people's minds as clearly as their own, a gift and not a curse. But it had plagued Lawry his short life and he felt much better as a recluse than a spectacle. It was probably the reason he enjoyed the solitude of maintaining Roy's. It was preferable to listening to a soundtrack of evil most people had in their heads.

The rental car was eventually towed to the local police station and examined by the medical examiner for signs that might lead to the whereabouts of one Jerry Bishop, who apparently had disappeared into the desert without a trace. While the investigation proved inconclusive, the auto mechanic assigned to detail the car at

the rental agency in Bisbee discovered a cell phone wedged high into the springs under the seat next to the driver.

A deeper sweep of the surrounding hillside a week later revealed Bishop's partially decomposed body. A forty-three year old male Caucasian of average weight and height. The coroner concluded that the body exhibited no unusual or suspicious injuries or trauma, but that Bishop's system was overwhelmed by a lethal amount of snake venom. When combined with a substantial amount of alcohol, the coroner suspected it rendered Bishop incapable of making his way back to the motel. Essentially, he died in the grave he seemed to have dug for himself.

David Lawry, the grandson of the man who the motel was named after, later confided to the coroner that he sensed that Jerry Bishop had a death wish and was so depressed about his life that what happened in the desert may have more to do with his frame of mind than the more obvious forensic and pathological circumstances that precipitated his death.

When the coroner inquired as to what made Lawry so certain of Bishop's mental state at the time, the young man quietly withdrew his observations.





## Light Within the Abyss

Your shadow in the darkness;  
is my light within this abyss.  
Breathless whispers tout the faithless;  
cherished heartbeats now remiss.  
Drifting home through the blueish haze;  
fires burn hot in the cavernous lair.  
The brimstone steeping and rhythms play;  
a raucous medley to a Serpent found there.  
A captured heart in a golden cage;  
chained so bold, yet loosely bound.  
escape the trap while hiding the rage;  
Lest I dwell forever as the devils clown.  
You're shadow writhes in a haziness above;  
guiding the way to a pathway home.  
Grasp my essence; accept my love.  
Treasure this enlightened dispirited soul.

—ken allan dronsfield

# A SEPARATION

by evan gorzeman

Emily found him in the backyard of some house party. He gulped down his beer and threw his cigarette on the wet grass. Rich introduced himself with a handshake that snaked up her wrist like some tempting vine. She liked him then—his strong forearms burnt red from the Midwest sun. She felt comfort in his strength—the way he commanded a room as he threw his arms wide whenever he saw one of his friends. Not long after she graduated he asked her out.

Emily's house shared a fence with a rickety single hangar airfield. Farmers used it to store the planes that dropped the pesticide on the crops in the spring. Emily and Rich sat on the back porch and drank lemonade that Emily's mother brought them as they watched the planes take off. Rich enjoyed the planes' simplicity. He liked the grumble of the engines as they spat exhaust into the clear sky. He liked how they dipped and soared over the fields; the way they darted reminded him of the finches he and his father would hunt when he was a boy.

"Someday I'll take you," Rich said. "We'll fly first class."

"Oh, is that right?" Emily threw her head back. "First class?"

"Right to St. Vincent."

"You can't fly to St. Vincent's," Emily said. "You have to fly somewhere else and take a boat there."

Rich plucked at his chin. "You didn't say that."

"It was beautiful. But we should go somewhere else. You know? Explore."

"Don't you want more sand for your jar?"

She laughed and buried her head in her hands "Honey, it's sand from different places I want. I want to have jars from all over. I want to go to Hawaii and Tahiti and places like that."

"I do want to go to St. Vincent's though," Rich said sheepishly. "It sounds nice."

After the planting season ended the planes stopped flying as much.

She came in a dream first. Rich saw her face. When he laid her in the crib after the long hospital night he knew they would be all right. She was full of moonlight, her eyes deep celestial blue like in his dream. Rich loved her. Emily loved her.

"Daisy, my Daisy," Rich liked to say as he peered into her crib. He counted her toes before he tucked her in every night just to make sure none went missing while he was at the refinery.

One night after Rich counted toes, he popped open a beer and collapsed at the table. "Pasta again?"

Emily finished scrubbing plates in the sink and turned to him, hands on her hips. "You always wash your hands before you touch her."

"Always," Rich said.

"What about me?"

Rich stared at his food.

"It's cold. Here, give it here. I'll fix it."

"Don't bother," Rich said. He started to stand. He said, "Not that hungry tonight."

"What's wrong?"

Rich leaned in the doorway between the kitchen and living room; his fingers drummed on the beer can.

"We had plans," Emily continued, "I'm not sure where we went wrong."

Rich set down the beer. "Honey—"

"Not tonight, Rich. Please."

He slid his arms around her waist and played with some threads that fell from her blouse. "Don't worry. We'll get there. We have to work on it."

She pushed him back. "I need to finish the dishes."

Rich grabbed his beer off the table and went to the living room. "I'll work on it, honey; don't worry."

Daisy grew too slowly for Rich. He wanted her to walk after eight months. Rich held her up by her arms and asked her to walk. Sometimes he moved her legs with his hands and hoped she stayed up. "Walk," he said. "Come on, Daisy. *Daisy*. Walk, honey. Come on." Daisy just smiled and fell back down in her crib.

Before Daisy came Rich and Emily nuzzled close in the back roads and fields of their dying farm town. They stretched out underneath the stars and planned their future in the wilting corn stocks. It felt comfortable to the young couple in the field, twisting their own lullabies until the owl's disappeared into the sun that peaked beyond the grain silos.

"What would your parents say?"

"I'm just not sure, Rich," Emily said. "They wouldn't be happy. Obviously."

"We don't have to tell them."

"Where the fuck am I getting that money?" She shivered slightly; her back was cold from the bed of the truck.

"I have a plan. We just need to commit," Rich said. "I'll work. You can find something. Or go back to school."

"It's not all as easy as that." She brushed the strands of bangs from her eyes and sat up against the back of the truck bed. He stayed very still. An airplane blinked behind some clouds and Rich tracked it until all he could see was the faint yellow glimmer from downtown above the trees.

"It won't be hard." Rich sat up next to her as he spoke. "We'll have to work for it, sure. But I'll take care of you."

"But it will be hard. It's hard right now. Nothing is as easy as you say."

He pulled the blanket up and leaned close to her ear. "I know," he said, "but think about it, honey. Trust me. It'll be great. I promise."

Daisy learned to walk and Rich kept making promises, each one emptier than the last. But he never again promised out loud that it would be great. Maybe he learned his lesson; maybe he just couldn't say it anymore because somewhere in him he knew it wasn't right for him to always say that he would "try harder" or "work at it" without anything coming from his words. Emily knew Rich and understood that promises were hard for him. Knew him from the days when he would make all kinds of promises.

One night he parked down the block and tried to walk the rest of the way, pretending the lines in the cement were a balance beam. Sometimes he would chew gum or peel an orange from a neighbor's tree to try and cover up his smell. But it was his smell now. He fell in the stench and never got out.

Emily heard the key carve deep grooves in the white paint of the back door. That night he took longer than usual. He was dizzy again. Daisy ran to the door and pointed. "Daddy! Daddy!"

Rich hoped the door would open, prayed it would.

He stumbled in and wrenched the keys from the lock. He pulled on a smile and massaged Emily's shoulders in the kitchen then slid past her into the living room. He tossed the suitcase on the table and left his shoes by the sofa.

At first Emily didn't notice. Now Rich didn't even think she cared. She stood in the bathroom door and watched Rich strip. He needed to shower; he would be fine if he could shower. Emily watched him fumble at his tie and belt, watched him pull off his shirt, his arms sticking to the sweaty cotton—listened to him try and say he was sorry, saying it was his friend's birthday and if he turned in early all the guys would never let him forget it. He stopped trying to explain when he heard Emily walk away.

Daisy started to cry.

Rich still remembered the water hissing on the stove, the broken plate's white pieces scattered across the floor. He sank to his knees in front of the door. What he could remember he pushed down. But it was the tears, the hurt that ran down Daisy's pale face he thought of often.

From then on he only saw Daisy on weekends.

Daisy could walk and talk now. Rich liked that. He told her stories at night. He took her to the bowling alley and he got her a lane all to herself—Daisy's with bumpers, his with some friends and a pitcher or two of beer. Rich knew the owner from way back so he would always set Rich and Daisy up in the corner of the alley.

The nice waitress brought Daisy apple juice so she could be like Dad. His friends got a kick out of that. When she got tired of bowling she took daddy's tie and sat down and pretended she was part of the gang.

"Huh Daisy, you one of us?" one of the men would yell.

She nodded and sipped her juice.

After a couple games she fell asleep in one of the orange plastic chairs, Daddy's sport coat her blanket. Those were her weekends with dad. As they drove home he lit up a cigarette. She faked she was asleep, so he carried her inside and upstairs to his apartment.

As she grew older she didn't enjoy the lanes as much. Rich thought her dolls would get lost. Emily asked more questions as Daisy got older. Daisy did too.

Rich's station wagon shivered to a halt. "Wait in the car," he said "and stop kicking your legs for a second, please, sweetie."

"Whose house is this, Daddy?"

"Daddy's friend. Just play with your doll, okay, sweetie? Daddy will be right back."

Snow blew through the door. Receipts and napkins whipped around and settled at Daisy's feet. Tiny snowflakes melted and ran down the worn leather seat.

Daisy undid her seatbelt and hoisted herself onto her knees, her hands clasped at the base of the window, her small breaths forming tiny circles of condensation.

Rich crouched as he made his way across the white lawn. He slipped as he headed up the driveway and caught himself on the hood of a car. He smacked the snow off his pant leg and peered through the side window of the house.

"Light's on," he said. He stepped back to the car in the drive and tugged his glove off. He placed his hand on the hood of the car in the drive. "Still warm."

Snowflakes rushed inside as he got back in the wagon. He breathed into his hands. "Cold out there, sweetie."

Daisy had her knees folded to her chest. She looked at him; she looked down. A snowflake had landed in her lap; it slowly sank into the fabric.

"Can we go now?" She wanted to say something else.

Rich's eyes were fixed on the car in the drive.

"Can we go home, Daddy? Please?"

"Not now, sweetheart," he muttered. "Where is she?"

“Daddy—”

“Not now, honey. Daddy’s busy.”

The curtains drawn over the living room window rustled.

He ducked, knocking his head against the steering column. His threw his arm across Daisy.

“Whose cat is that?” his arm still strung across her body.

“Daddy, please—”

“I’m so sorry, baby. Daddy just got scared.”

Daisy sat back up on her knees and looked at the cat.

The cat licked its paw on the windowsill, its tail whipping the curtain. Rich opened the door and more snowflakes flew inside.

Daisy stared at the faint blink of Christmas lights as her dad climbed out of the car again.





# Paranormal

I sat  
with the frustration of a ghost  
listening and almost  
understanding  
yet unable to offer  
anything  
but shrieks, bumps  
and whistles.

No wonder  
ghosts are angry  
if they inhabit  
prisons like this;  
if they endure the humiliation  
of such flimsy walls and bars.  
If their transparent bodies  
can be so easily contained.

They are  
constrained by the faultiest memory  
manacled with guilty thoughts  
anchored without mass  
gripped by intention  
byproducts of things  
that actually matter.

I listened  
like a ghost  
and sputtered  
and gibbered  
and spun  
casting a milky shadow.

—mark thomas

[short story]

*such  
a  
lovely  
girl*

by pat tyrer





Everyone who knew Emily Carter said they couldn't believe she'd do such a thing, but isn't that always the way?

"I never suspected a thing," Mary Dowling had said when she'd heard.

"She was always such a responsible girl," from Linda Carmine.

"Such a disappointment to Jean," offered Mary Abbot.

There had always been plenty of indications that something was terribly wrong with Emily Carter. Most had simply chosen to ignore them. After all, nothing of the sort involving Emily had ever occurred in Riverton. Even her father was shocked. But her mother . . . she knew. She'd known for a long, long time.

When Emily was five, she'd bitten one of the other girls in her kindergarten class, which wouldn't have been unusual for a five-year-old, except Emily wouldn't let go of the girl's arm until she drew blood. Mrs. Anders had to force her teeth apart with a wooden ruler, the closest thing at hand. After that, Emily sat a little apart from the other children—not so far that any of the visiting parents would notice, but far enough so that Mrs. Anders could reach her quickly.

And then there was the incident in fifth grade when she'd stapled a yellow sticky note to the right shoulder of Patty Hansen on which Emily had written "Fatty Patty, 2x4, couldn't get through the outhouse door." There was no accounting for Emily's badly plagiarized poetry, but Patty's shrieks could be heard as far as the cafeteria on the other side of the building where Patty's mother was working. Mrs. Taylor immediately recognized her daughter's scream, arriving sweaty and out-of-breath. Patty was still screaming. Emily, on the other hand, had opened her copy of *The Secret Garden* and sat calming reading. After reporting the incident to the principal and discussing it in the teachers' lounge, Emily was moved even further away from her classmates to a corner of the room, pending her return after being suspended for five days.

Junior high with the accompanying move to a different building with new teachers gave Emily a fresh start. She arrived at homeroom of her 7th grade class, eyes bright, smile cheerful, and blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail held together with a pink ribbon. She wore a pink T-shirt with sparkling glass beads spelling out "Dance" in large glittering letters and designer jeans with appropriately spaced rips and tears, even though fall was still a couple of weeks off. Others were dressed likewise. The weather hadn't taken into account the needs of pubescent girls to "establish their pecking order."

Emily's change in behavior evolved as she became aware of the social norms of teenage girls and comported herself accordingly. Her mother, Joan, who was

secretly in therapy, related many of Emily's exploits to her psychologist who had suggested, on several occasions, that Emily might be helped by undergoing a personality assessment.

"I don't think there's anything really wrong with her," Joan said. "I mean, not really."

"And?" Dr. Emmett asked, urging Joan to continue.

"She just seems distant. She's not my little girl anymore," she said.

"Perhaps you're feeling a bit of a loss now that she's a teenager," he said.

"Yes, perhaps."

"It might be good to discuss this with Emily," Dr. Emmett suggested.

"Yes," she said, "I will."

Walking in the door at home, Joan was nearly knocked over by Emily who threw her arms around her shoulders burying her head in Joan's neck.

"Mom," Emily cried. "I thought you'd never get home. You won't believe what happened at school today." She pulled Joan into the family room. The two plopped down on the sofa where Emily charmed Joan with a delightful, totally fabricated story of a lunchroom encounter with a new boy.

Emily was well aware that Joan had been in therapy for years, having followed her to Dr. Emmett's office on numerous occasions. She couldn't have known what they talked about, but still, Emily was sufficiently astute to recognize Joan's moments of anxiety over her behavior. It would take a few days of devotion for Joan to turn her attention elsewhere, but it was worth the time. At her next appointment, Joan felt comfortable in assuring Dr. Emmett that she had exaggerated Emily's demeanor.

After all, Emily was a very bright girl. She had learned from prior experience that acting on her impulses was troublesome for her at best. She'd become somewhat of an expert at studying the behavior of others, especially her parents. She could cry, sympathize, laugh, or make jokes as effectively as people with feelings. She still responded to her impulses of course, only she had learned to bide her time and to hide her darker thoughts from everyone, including her best friend, Becky Stepely, whom she planned to kill from the first time they met, the very first day of 7th grade English I, American Literature.

When Becky disappeared that late summer afternoon before senior year, Emily was so distraught that her parents arranged counseling twice a day for the three weeks before school began. By mid-September Emily had developed such a convincing display of coping skills that her psychologist agreed she could reduce their meetings two twice weekly. Three months later, the sessions were ended abruptly when Emily suggested to her mother that Dr. Harper made her uncomfortable.

"He gives me the creeps," Emily said.

"Oh, Emily," Joan said, her head never lifting from the few dishes she was rinsing at the sink.

"He looks at me when he thinks I don't see him," Emily continued.

"What do you mean?" Joan asked, drying her hands and sitting down across from Emily.

"I mean he looks at me, mother. It's creepy and I don't know why I have to keep going. Last week he was staring at my crotch, okay?"

"Emily, don't be so vulgar," Joan said.

Of course, nothing of the sort ever occurred, but Joan phoned the office the very next day, cancelling all of Emily's future appointments. She knew her own daughter better than some psychologist who clearly had issues of his own. Emily had finally recovered after Becky's disappearance. No point in dwelling on the past, especially a painful one.

Kent Williams, the young attractive FBI profiler who'd been called in after Becky's body was found in a bordering state, prepared a file of his impressions of the likely killer: white, male, late twenties to mid-thirties, most likely a sexual deviant, and well-practiced. In other words, this wasn't his first kill. The body had been left partially clothed with clear signs of vaginal trauma. The insides of her thighs were bruised and her underwear had been ripped off and stuffed in her mouth. She'd been bludgeoned and garroted. It was a horrific scene.

Fact was, it had taken Emily months of research to grasp the required elements needed to mislead the investigators. She'd stared at so many photos of dead girls that she might have been traumatized by them had she not been totally without feelings of guilt, remorse, or sympathy. The best part of the kill was watching Becky's face as Emily sat on her chest, knees firmly positioned on the inside of Becky's thighs with the belt of Becky's jeans pulled tight around her neck. Becky was woozy from the doctored bottle of wine they'd shared, at least that's what Emily assumed. She'd pulled the belt tight several times, watching Becky lose consciousness and then begin to slowly wake in terror. Eventually Emily became tired of the game. She'd then set about methodically arranging the scene, after which she'd met her parents for dinner at Frank's Steak House. It was her mother's birthday and Frank's was her mother's favorite. As she entered the restaurant, she smiled to herself just wondering what a psychiatrist might make of the coincidence.

Of course, there were no coincidences. Emily didn't believe in coincidence and the level of planning involved in each of the twelve murders she'd committed attested to the fact that Emily was both shrewd and well organized. The first couple of summers after high school were a bit difficult to arrange since her mother had accompanied her on vacation. She'd chosen easy targets those first few years having only short periods of time when she could reasonably get away from her mother. During her junior year of college, Joan finally decided that she didn't need to chaperone her lovely daughter any longer.

That was the year that Emily prepared for a more exotic hunt. She'd felt so little satisfaction killing the elderly, the homeless, and the drunks that passed out in doorways. She'd quit expending her energy on them. What she needed was a challenge. She hadn't had a good kill since Becky and that was nearly three years before. Emily would be twenty-one soon. A clean kill would be a perfect present. Now to find someone she could wrap up in a big, red bow.

Emily had considered killing her father; getting him alone would have been easy. Still, without her father, her mother would be unbearable. Joan was barely able to function with Emily away at college. They should have had more children. Even though she'd love to kill her mother, she would restrain for the time being as her mother was so easily manipulated and without her, Emily would have had to work while going to college. She didn't have time for work. She'd fantasized about killing her mother plenty of times, planning how she'd make her listen to the story of all her kills; show her the box of treasures she'd collected—Becky's Medic Alert bracelet, the wooden button off that drunk's overcoat, a teacup from old Mrs. Edwards who'd gratefully invited her in to visit. Stupid old woman. No—she'd need a real candidate, a test of her ability, her intelligence. She'd keep her options open. She wouldn't be twenty-one for a couple of months; there was time.

Special Agent Kent Williams had been going through the database off and on for years without results. Intellectually he knew that whoever had killed Becky Stepley would kill again and that the killer would eventually make a mistake. They all did. Nevertheless, this being his first verified serial killer, he intended to catch him either before or after his next kill, but he would catch him. He would. He told himself to keep his emotions in check, but the vision of that dead girl lodged in his psyche, lived with him during the day, and infiltrated his dreams at night. He couldn't shake the feeling she was trying to tell him who killed her. Of course, he told himself, that was ridiculous, but the feeling was still there.

Having gone through the files again today, he made a bold decision. He would go back to the beginning—revisit the crime scene, interview the family, and try to view the videos taken of known perpetrators with a new eye. Maybe, just maybe, Becky had known her killer.

Even after all these years, the location in which the body was found looked very much the same. Kent could hardly look at that patch of ground without seeing the girl's body spayed on it. He stood dead center of where she'd lain. He turned around slowly, taking in a 360° view of the area. It was heavily forested with the body found within view of the river. The highway overpass could be seen in the distance, but it was a good two-mile hike in that direction. The spot was at least a hundred yards off the trail which itself was a good mile from the parking lot. It was a small clearing, just the kind made for an afternoon rendezvous. The girl would have had to come here willingly. There was no way, she could have been dragged this far, and why? Why not kill her and dump her in the river from the bridge? Or just off the trail. No, she had to have come here willingly.

Joan had called and left two messages before Emily finally returned her call.

"It's that FBI agent, Wills? Willis? Wilson?" she said into the phone.

"Williams, mom; Kent Williams. So what'd he want?"

"He wants to talk to you again about Becky. He's already been here. Such a nice fellow," Joan said.

"Fine, but he'll have to wait until Winter break, or he can come up here," Emily replied.

"I'll let him know. How are you, dear?"

"I'm fine, mom, like always. Gotta go. Call you later, okay?"

"Love you," Joan said.

"You too," Emily said and hung up.

Emily sat on the steps outside the library watching students rush past. Most were there to print off papers they'd bought or stolen or badly plagiarized. Emily had formed a very low opinion of freshmen students, and since she'd been teaching Introduction to Psychology to sixty of the little buggers, her opinion of the ethics of the future society had fallen considerably. She'd agreed to meet Kent Williams in front of the library to rehash the Becky Stepley file, as Williams had put it. She saw him coming across the quad long before she glanced up and waved.

"Hello again," Williams said, reaching for her hand.

"Hi there," she said. She stayed seated.

"I really appreciate your taking the time to see me."

Emily suspected that this was his opening line for every interview, that and the polished grin revealing perfect white teeth. He was remarkably well groomed in dark slacks, matching sport coat, and power-red tie. Emily glanced at his shoes thinking she'd never seen a pair quite so shiny. He reeked FBI.

"How about a coffee?" he asked. "It's a bit public here."

"Sounds good," Emily said, and directed "call me Kent" to a small coffee shop at the edge of campus. Once seated, she waited for him to begin.

"So you and Becky were best friends," he said.

"Yep, BFFs since freshman year."

"And the last day you saw Becky?"

"August 28th."

"You're certain of the date?"

"It was my mother's birthday," she said. "Have to remember mother's birthday, right?"

"Right," he said, smiling. He remembered this girl as a pampered, self-indulgent teenager who was so overcome with grief that the initial interview had to take place at her therapist's office. Time had changed her. This woman was not only beautiful, but charming and refreshing. Plus, she made him laugh. He was enjoying their conversation too much for it to be considered a witness interview.

By winter break, they were an item. By the end of winter break, they were a couple, and when the semester finally ended, Emily Carter had agreed to marry Kent Williams the following Christmas.

Kent was eleven years older than Emily, but she'd pooh-poohed any talk of the difference in their ages, arguing that she had become an adult the day she found out her very best friend, Becky Stepley, had been murdered. From that moment on, she assured Kent, "my childhood ended." She'd said this with such great

seriousness that Kent decided to return the Stepley file to the cold case division. It had been a shot-in-the-dark anyway and now that he would be marrying the girl's best friend, he could hardly consider himself an unbiased investigator. Emily reluctantly agreed.

"I just hope someone else will pick it up and work it," she told Kent.

Over the course of the summer, they'd spent nearly every week-end together. Emily had picked up a tutoring job in the University Writing Center, but she never scheduled anything after 3:00 and never on a Friday. She'd leave the university late Thursday afternoons and be at Kent's by evening where they spent the week-ends sharing their pasts, talking about the wedding, and planning for their future. Emily had informed Kent that there could be no sex until the wedding night as she was just not that kind of girl. Of course, he agreed, not wanting to seem like an oversexed teenager.

"I completely understand," he'd said to Emily.

"It's just that I believe I should save myself for our wedding night. It's so important that we do this right," she'd said to Kent.

And so the wedding with all its trappings was scheduled to take place at the club with additional heated tents placed on the lawns in order to seat most of the town who'd already been invited. According to Joan, this wedding was going to be "the highlight of the holiday season."

Kent had introduced his closest friends to Emily with whom he claimed to be unbelievably lucky.

"I can hardly wait until December," he told Emily one morning after a night of passionate kissing.

"Me neither," Emily agreed, leaning close, her breath upon his neck. "You know," she began, almost hesitantly, "we don't really have to wait."

"I thought you wanted to wait until our honeymoon for that," Kent asked.

"I do, but we could elope, couldn't we?"

"What? Your family would hate us," Kent said. "Wouldn't they?"

"Baby," Emily cooed, "do we have to wait? They'll forgive us. They just want me to be happy. The week-end's just started; we could be in Vegas in a few hours. How about it? How about me?" she crooned.

They were married within an hour of landing in Las Vegas. Minutes later they were checking into a suite at the Bellagio, all paid for in advance of their arrival. At the door to the suite, Kent swept Emily up into his arms for the traditional walk across the threshold.

"Will we be married forever?" he sighed.

"'Till death do us part," whispered Emily.



# Chapatti

Her callused fingers  
Plow flour. A clock  
Pendulum annoys her.  
'Anon', he's impatient

Before the plate. Her  
Sweat creates a moon  
In wheat. A soft thing  
Is transformed by a hot

Experience. It swells  
Like the belly of a  
Pregnant lady. Kitchen  
Heat disfigures beauty.

Dark spots appear  
Slowly. Steam, like  
The anxieties of an  
Exploited wheat farmer,

Rises up from the chest  
Of chapatti. 'Dry chapatti',  
He utters his distaste. It  
Wets with concealed tears.

(Chapatti is a flat round South Asian bread.)

—fabiya mv

# Hell's Bells

by bruce costello

"How *are* you, Rhea?" Rex whispered across his desk, startling me.

His brows were slightly raised and his eyes seemed to shine into mine. I'm fine, thanks died in my head before reaching my lips. There was a softness in his face I'd never seen before. A gentleness out of place in an accountancy office.

"Pretty flat," I heard myself saying. "Struggling."

"Rhea, you're welcome to come around home anytime, if you need to talk."

He wrote the address on a slip of paper and slid it across to my desk. I turned back to my computer.

I'd been Rex's Sunday School teacher when I was nineteen years old. Since then, I'd dropped my faith, changed my name, and aged twenty years, so it was hardly surprising he'd shown no sign of recognising me when he'd joined the firm several months earlier.

But I remembered him very well. His expression after I slapped his eleven-year-old face in disgust was as vivid in my mind as if it were yesterday.

Snow was falling and I was desperate when I knocked on Rex's door three nights later. Taking my coat and leading me to a sofa by an open fire, he gazed into the flames.

He told me he'd never married. Out of loneliness, he'd turned to a charismatic church, where he found comfort and God's love. "I got disillusioned after a while



with bricks and mortar, but kept my faith. I'd learned a lot about people, though, and how to truly love."

*Here it comes*, I thought, wondering what I'd let myself in for.

"Love is a verb," Rex stated. "A heavenly thing we do on Earth by caring, not being afraid to really listen and talk, by understanding, and accepting other people. Without judgement. We're all God's children."

He leaned toward me. "You can learn a lot about people by touching them, Rhea," he said, squeezing my hand. "I can feel the tension in you."

A feeling of pleasure mixed with fear arose in my mind, along with the image of my dead father, who'd abused me in more ways than one. It was years since I'd known a man's touch. He eased me around to recline my back against him and began to massage my shoulders.

"I've been so aware of your sadness," he said, "drawn to the loneliness and the aching in you."

The warmth of his breath was on my neck. "Why are you doing this?" I asked.

"Because God has told me you need a lot of love, Rhea," he replied simply, stretching out, and laying his head on my lap. His hand wandered to my elbow and rested there, one finger rubbing gently, the others unmoving but pressing softly. His touch was intimate and soothing in a way I'd never experienced. Almost spiritual.

"What's been troubling you, Rhea?" he asked.

I gazed down into his clean-shaven face and saw serenity with no trace of anything other than openness and sincerity. I felt my walls slipping away and began to open up.

I took to visiting Rex three times a week at his flat, where we would talk and cuddle, and sometimes watch television, holding hands. How gentle was this man! He gave of himself to fill my incompleteness and asked nothing in return. He awakened in me needs I knew were there, but had lain dormant because I wasn't ready. I knew I had love to give, but it had to be to the right man. Not just any man.

Now I was ready and Rex was more loving than I'd ever imagined a man could be. Why was I so afraid?

His soothing hands shied away from my intimate parts.

"I've got this hang-up," he confessed one evening. "It stems from bad stuff that happened to me when I was small." He stopped talking, and tightened his lips, like a little boy trying not to cry.

I looked away, my face reddening and said nothing

"It's an issue I'm hoping to work through in my relationship with you," he continued, slowly. "I'm not ready to talk about it yet, but I will, one day. Please be patient, Rhea." Then he added, in a small voice. "You're so kind and gentle. Sometimes I feel like I'm just using you as the good mother that I never had."

I found a place deep within me where I could meet with Rex at night in my lonely bed, a warm wheat bag against my back, my arms clutching another one, like a teddy bear.

Sensations I'd never felt before began to stir, but my soul was troubled by the way my body reacted to the fantasy of him, and how I physically relieved my frustration.

*It's only love, and love can only be healing. Perhaps I'm being given time to learn how to love myself first.*

We were saying goodnight, locked in each other's arms, his head resting on my shoulder. I raised his face to look into mine, kissed him full on the lips, and my hands began to wander, down his strong back, his firm buttocks, then across the front of his thighs. He started violently and anger flashed in his eyes. He pulled back, glaring at me.

I apologised and went home, cursing myself, wondering what sort of a woman acts like that, and whether I'd ruined it with Rex forever.

"Sorry about last night," Rex whispered to me over lunch in the staff cafeteria the next day. "You didn't do anything wrong. I'm the one with the hang-up."

"I should've waited, not pressured you. You'd asked me to be patient."

"It's okay," he said, smiling gently. "It's okay."

"So we're all right, you and I?"

"Of course."

We never went out socially together, and I was content with that as Rex was a quiet person, awkward in groups.

In the office staffroom, he seldom spoke and the others thought him a little odd.

"Strange chap, never been married," I heard the accounts clerk say one day. "Mummy's special little man, I'd say."

Rex related best to the older female staff, and could often be seen in conversation with a woman, his eyes gazing intently at her, as if trying to see beyond her words.

He was scrupulously clean and kept a box of hygienic wipes on his desk, frequently cleaning his phone and computer equipment, even the office photocopier.

Every half hour or so he'd say, "Back in a minute. Just going to wash my hands," and he'd head for the toilet.

He didn't want the other staff to know we were an item, so we kept that to ourselves. "We don't need people making smart comments because I happen to be younger than you," he said.

Occasionally, though, I saw people looking at us when we were talking together. Once, after I'd been chatting to Rex, one of the older female partners frowned at me, shook her head and warned: "Watch him, Rhea."

Rex fell asleep lying beside me on the sofa. I slipped out of his arms to go to the toilet. When I returned, the moonlight was streaming into the room, shining on his brown hair, his broad cheeks and deeply dimpled chin. I stood for a while gazing at him. He stirred in his sleep, his lips parted and he gave a little moan. My eyes travelled to where his chest rose and fell as he breathed, and journeyed on

down his body. I leaned towards him and, with shaking fingers, reached out to touch. . .

Rex leapt up; his face distorted, and lunged at me. Screaming, I stumbled to the door and ran out to my car.

I took sick leave for the rest of the week. When I returned, they told me Rex had left.

I won't attempt to describe how I felt reading in the newspaper three days later that Rex had been arrested, charged with raping a prostitute.

I avoided the trial, but Pamela Wilson, our Human Resources person, persuaded me to go along to hear the judge pronounce sentence.

"It'll be good for you," she said, "It'll help you to get closure."

The judge described Rex's crime as 'a monstrous attack against womanhood' and gave him the maximum jail term, despite the defence lawyer's impassioned plea for clemency.

The news media ran hot with shocking details that emerged at the trial about the incestuous nature of Rex's boyhood relationship with his mother, recently deceased.

"Background factors may provide insight into the Oedipal aspects of your psychopathology and even earn you a measure of sympathy in some quarters," the judge said, "but they cannot serve to excuse the crime in any way, nor diminish the pain and suffering you inflicted on the victim. Neither does your remorse, however genuine and commendable it may be. A person who cannot control their sexual urges has no right to freedom."

"I understand that perfectly, Your Honour," said Rex from the dock, bowing his head.

He turned to look at me as he was led away. The same look I remembered only too well from twenty years before, after I'd slapped his face at the Church Youth Camp, disgusted by the things he was disclosing about his mother.

"It must be awful for you, having been friendly with him," said Pamela, at the bottom of the Court House steps. "But it was his crime, not yours, Rhea. No need for you to feel guilty."

I turned away and walked back to the office alone.



## Death is a Mandolin

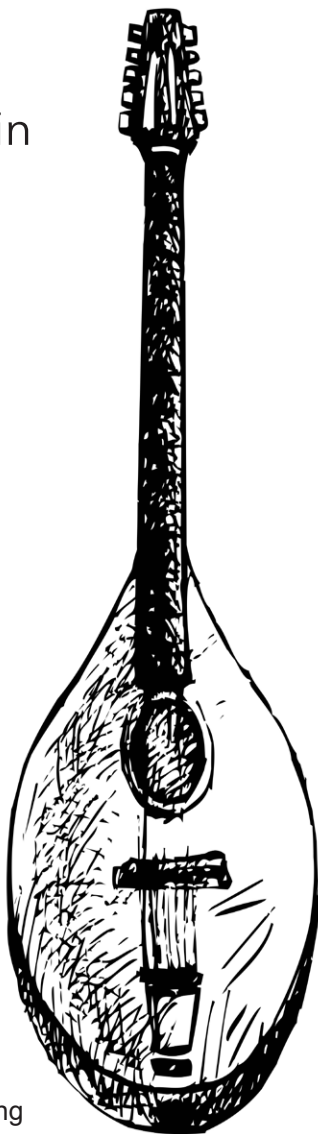
Death is a mandolin  
Wooden gold gleaming  
It looks expectant  
For all the world appearing  
Innocent of pinching souls

Body round as a skull  
Perched on the little neck  
Frets down the spine  
Holes like empty eyes  
It calls, music silent but divine

It's heavier than you think  
Dark around the edges  
And once you begin  
You become instantly attuned  
Forgetting the song of sunshine

The strings are so thin  
They'll slice right in  
Down to the bones  
White picks for plucking  
The new ditty of dying

And you can't stop playing  
The tune of obeying  
To the grave for a rest  
But you can't get the song out  
Of your head, incessantly humming



—sasha kasoff

# Misunderstood

They say  
He was misunderstood,  
especially by me  
I wonder if he hears them  
now and wishes he could see  
all the people gathering  
to pay him their respect,  
and if so, would he want  
to stop and interject?

In his youth  
he was homeless,  
and his life was trailed in tears,  
but he became  
a very shrewd businessman  
after many years  
He was selfish and boorish,  
yet quite charming  
when in the mood,  
but for the better  
part of the time he was  
bitter and rude.

Before long  
he met his fair maiden  
and ushered her a life decree,  
with twelve roses and an  
everlasting promise of plurality  
She took it upon herself  
to deem him a fit father  
She bore him six children,  
and with the rest of the story  
why bother?

I'm here now,  
so what more should I say?

Eulogies are stupid anyway.

—jenny santellano

A high-contrast black and white photograph. A knife with a long, straight blade and a dark handle lies diagonally across the frame. The blade is positioned from the upper left towards the lower right. The background is a dark, reflective surface, possibly a table or floor, which is covered with numerous white splatters and puddles of liquid. Scattered around the knife are several ice cubes, some of which are partially melted. The lighting is dramatic, creating sharp highlights on the blade and the white splatters, while the rest of the scene is in deep shadow. The overall mood is gritty and unsettling.

# BLOODY WHITE

by eugene hosey

Vivian sat at the kitchen table, satisfied at least for the moment that her house was as clean as she could get it today. She would notice more dirt tomorrow, she was sure. She had finished early today and felt tired; if she noticed any more dirt today, she would remember it as the place to start in the morning. She cleaned constantly. It was an obsession. Every day she polished her furniture, swept and mopped her floors, scrubbed kitchen and bathroom fixtures, and at least once a week she cleaned all the bric-a-brac and the glass in the chandelier that always sparkled like diamonds. Dirt made her sick to her stomach.

As she sat with her elbows propped, she rubbed her pink palms together, admiring her hands; she took care of them, keeping the nails filed and painted red. She never cleaned without wearing gloves. She was 60 years old, but she had never lost her vanity. She was not wrinkled-up and old-looking. Her figure was straight and thin, at least. She thought of herself as much younger than she was. She couldn't stand the thought of death, yet she hated her life.

She got up and stared out the window over the sink. She could see the Whaley's nondescript planked house and their big white car. They had lost their disabled daughter ten years ago, and Mrs. Whaley drove to the cemetery to visit her daughter's grave every day; she even went in the rain with an umbrella. Vivian thought it was stupid, but then it was also just another example of how peculiar people could be. *God knows what we don't see; maybe the world is an insane asylum.*

Today was Saturday and her gruff, potbellied husband was reading the paper on his easy chair with his feet on a round plastic stool. So Saturdays was her day to nag him about putting a new lock on the back door, but she knew he would say, "I'll get to it." He would never get to it. James spent the week at his job in a machine shop. She was fond of saying she wished she could get out of the house like that but that it was evidently her lot to stay in this house like a caged animal, cleaning and waiting for when their daughter Jo and the three grandchildren would come tearing through her house and making her sick. The Week of Hell, she called this awful period of time, which always lasted more or less two weeks.

James was fond of telling people, in a low desperate tone, that he had a problem he had no way of solving, because if it weren't for him, his grandchildren would starve and perish.

Vivian's eccentricity, apart from her obsession about cleanliness, was her preference for the color white. She never left the house and always wore a simple white housedress that buttoned down the front. On her feet were thin-soled, white house-shoes that covered her toes but left the backs open. Her hair was salt-and-pepper, but she wore a white lace hairnet most of the time. Fabrics, tiles, and



cabinets in her house were white. The kitchen, her favorite room, was immaculately white and gleaming, as was the bathroom. She hated the way James stayed in the living room with his shoes kicked off and his black socks crossed on that stool, which she scrubbed every day he was at work. He didn't want to be bothered, and she really didn't want to be bothered by him, yet she resented his way of ignoring her. It was as if he had found a way of tuning everything bothersome out of his mind by using the television or the newspaper. The mere sight of this was unfair, by her thinking. She agonized over one thing or another, but she could not get him to talk to her. He liked to say, "It'll all come out in the wash." She hated that expression. She wanted the whole house remodeled, and he laughed at her when she brought this up. Most of all, she wanted peace, she declared. He called her a liar on this point, saying that she would never tolerate peace any more than their daughter would tolerate it. "You and Jo both are natural-born hell-raisers, Vivian," he would say. They argued frequently about whether it was Vivian or James who made The Problem they lived with worse.

Vivian heard a car roll over the graveled driveway, and she recognized the sputter of the engine. A surge of adrenaline flooded her and she stood. She placed her hands flat on the table as she felt like she might swoon. She hurried past James in his chair and said, "Are you deaf? Do I have to tell you who's here? You'll have to go to the store."

"When I finish my paper," he said irritably.

"You might as well put on a shirt and get ready," she said. "You'll have a grocery list in a minute."

Vivian pushed the screened door open and stepped out onto the porch. She stood there with her hands on her hips, her face sullen and resigned. There was her daughter's beat-up little orange car. Doors opened and the four of them scrambled out. Steven and Stefanie were arguing as Jo screamed at them, ordering them to get the laundry baskets and the suitcase. Jo stepped onto the porch first. She wore the same expression her mother wore, though she bore little resemblance to her. Jo's hair was reddish brown and unwashed, her face scarred from a bad case of teenage acne. Her eyes were light green and slightly crossed. She wore a white T-shirt lettered "MAMA" in red, and her white shorts were dingy. They were all barefoot, which Vivian thought nasty. She particularly hated Jo's feet. The bottoms were nearly black with dirt, the toenails flaking pink polish, the big toes oversized. Jenny, the baby, was propped on her hip; mama's body leaned from the baby's weight as she walked. She resisted looking at Vivian's face.

"Put everything in the spare room," Jo told the kids as they ran inside.

Vivian had always thought it remarkable that all three of her grandchildren looked so much like their father. They all had black curly hair, long dark eyelashes; pale skin, a light smattering of freckles; and their lips pink and pale. The two oldest, Steven and Stefanie, could have been twins, as their names might have indicated. They were thirteen and eleven, and they were loud and rambunctious with never a trace of poise or calm. Jenny was a clumsy and agitated toddler, still in diapers.



Vivian said, "If you made an effort, she'd be potty-trained by now, and there's no excuse for not keeping her clean."

"I bathed her last night," Jo snarled.

Vivian looked Jo over for new marks or bruises. Mack had beaten hell out of her many times. Her nose was crooked from a fist blow; he had split one of her earlobes by pulling out an earring. Once she had stayed in a hospital for a week. But she always went back to him. Vivian didn't know what her daughter was by any clinical definition. She and James had argued about the root of Jo's problem many times while they always, again and again, since the marriage, had never failed to rescue and support their daughter and their grandchildren. Was she a masochist or just a fool? Jo called it love.

"Did he hit you?"

"No," Jo said.

"Well?" Vivian said. "Did he go off by himself or with a bunch of drunks?"

"One of his friends came over with a bottle," Jo said. "They finished it off in the house and then they left together."

"Did he say anything to you?"

"Not a word," Jo said.

Following Jo inside, Vivian heard Steven talking to his grandfather about a baseball game today. And Stefanie wanted to go. That would mean James taking them to the game with a shotgun in the trunk. One time years ago he had pulled the trigger on Mack at point-blank; amazingly the gun had misfired and Mack had escaped with his life.

The grocery store list was the top priority. Vivian and James consumed little more than cold cuts and a six-pack every day between them.

Jo went straight to the kitchen and pulled a chair from under the table. It made a loud scrape on the tile. Vivian grimaced and slapped down a pad of paper and pen. "Let's get started with the list. I understand your daddy is riding shotgun to this ballgame or whatever it is." She yelled, "James, get dressed for errands!"

James raised his voice for the first time today. "There's plenty of time! Don't start that bitching with me or you'll go yourself!"

Vivian stood with her chin in her palm, thinking, naming off cleansers and foods, while Jo simply wrote it down.

"Can you think of anything else?"

"I think I wish you'd shut up," Jo said.

Vivian smiled and chuckled sarcastically. "You're not going to sit on your ass till that son-of-a-bitch is sober while I cook and clean. I know that. And you can get started with that laundry."

When James was finally ready, he sniffed at their list. "My God," he said.

"Don't leave off one thing," Vivian ordered, pointing at him.

He was back from the store in about an hour. The kitchen table was quickly piled with grocery bags. Vivian and Jo were putting up things when James passed through after washing his hands in the bathroom. The kids were ahead of him,

waiting at the car. He paused bitterly and said one thing to his daughter: “I wish to God you could have at least married somebody who didn’t want to kill you.”

“Go to hell!” Jo shouted.

“Don’t start!” Vivian shouted at James.

During the ballgame, Vivian and Jo fought about bathing, until finally Vivian won and Jo bathed herself and the baby. Then the atmosphere struck a calm note for a while. When James and the kids got back, he said he had seen no sign of Mack. Vivian was frying chicken and boiling vegetables while Jo was setting the table. They had a quiet dinner that night and later Vivian and Jo folded clean clothes. Vivian was the last to bed. She stood at the sink and looked at a black sky empty but for a single pale star.

For a week chaos and mess-making reigned in the house while Vivian swept and wiped and bitched at her daughter for help, who sometimes cooperated and other times cussed and refused to move. The kids ran through the front door and out the back all day every day. James stayed in his corner chair after work with his face behind a newspaper, trying to ignore everything he heard. Vivian screamed for his attention, and he threatened to leave the house along with his money. “Would y’all like to make it on your own?” Jo called him a hateful bastard; he laughed sarcastically and said he wished that a bicycle accident she had had as a child had destroyed her vocal chords—to which she screamed louder. The tension in the house was so thick it was palpable; one could faintly see static electricity collecting in the air daily and never abating.

During the quieter periods they begged Jo, as they had done many times before, to divorce Mack. They promised her they would buy her a mobile home and support her and the children. James said he would padlock the doors on it and if Mack showed up she could dial 911. Vivian thought that a big part of Jo’s problem was that she had no job, no interests, and did nothing. “How do you expect to meet a decent man and friends your age?” But Jo took all this as some sort of threat to control her. “I love him,” she told them. “This is what y’all don’t get. This is not some game.” They told her they didn’t know how much more of this they could stand, and she told them that she would rather be with him when he was sober and in his right mind than to be with them. It was their world and their house that she truly hated. And she always said that she would eventually persuade Mack to join a group for alcoholics, and with her help as well, he would soon enough beat his problem. Vivian and James racked their brains for a solution, but Jo hated all their ideas. It was unbelievable but true, Vivian and James agreed privately, that Mack was the only thing in the world that Jo wanted and it did not matter to her that he was a monster. James said that Jo was as sick as Mack, that she had a natural preference for a man who was a monster that would hurt and possibly kill her. “My God, James, don’t say that. What will become of them when we’re dead and gone?”

One evening just as darkness set in and they had all sat down for dinner, there was a knock at the front door.

Jo said, "That must be Mack. He wouldn't knock like that unless he was sober. Thank God."

James said, "I'll get it." He got up to let him in.

"What a relief," Vivian said. "He usually stays gone longer than this."

"Probably ran out of money or things to pawn," Jo said.

"We're going home tonight?" Steven cheered.

"Hell, yes," Vivian said. "I've had all of this I can take. It'll take me two weeks to get this house in order."

At that they heard the door open along with Mack's low voice and James inviting him to dinner. But suddenly there was a hostile noise of stumbling and loud shouting. Fear popped out on the kids' faces, and Vivian ordered Jo to take them out the back door to the Whaley house. She did not hesitate or say a word; she was trembling. And they were out the back in a flash.

Vivian rushed to the living room doorway and flipped the switch for the chandelier. The brightness of the light stung her eyes; all ten globes had one-hundred watt bulbs and directly beneath it, Mack had an arm around James' neck and another around his waist. Mack reminded Vivian of a bear-like creature, tall and broad. James was obviously the weaker, the older; he was humped over, trying to break loose. He said, "If you don't let go of me I'm going to kill you." His voice was strained. Mack turned his face up and made eye contact with Vivian. He had a visage of madness, an expression made of both paranoia and rage. James said, "Vivian, get the gun."

She knew the one he meant, the one he had taught her to shoot. It was a Winchester Lever Action 30-30 rifle they kept in the bedroom closet. James had made her memorize what the gun was called. She got it as quickly as she could and pulled back the hammer.

"Let him go or I'll shoot, you bastard! Do you see this?"

Several things instantly shot through her head. Should she shoot to kill or try for a leg? What if she missed and shot James instead? *Is it finally time for death or prison or both?*

Mack babbled something she couldn't understand.

"James?" Vivian said.

"Go ahead and shoot," he said.

She aimed at Mack's leg, but within a second of pulling the trigger, James said, "No, don't shoot. Not yet."

She thought about ignoring James' instructions. *Shoot him in the head anyway, forget about any consequences.* A whole head above James, this was the easiest target. And The Problem would end. The greatest blessing would befall them.

A strange splattering sound distracted her. Then she saw the blood on the floor. There was one solid little pool and drops surrounding that. More blood fell. It glowed in high contrast with the white tiles. James had his pocket knife, of course, she thought; he always kept it in his right-side pocket. Then they began to slip and slide in the blood. James continued to cut. When they were turned so she could see James' right hand, she watched in awe as he stuck it and dragged it from Mack's

upper chest down to his inner thigh. Mack's clothes were turning nearly black as big drops fell rapidly. The floor was puddled and smeared.

At last Mack said, "You son-of-a-bitch, you've cut me."

"And I'm not done," James said.

The two bodies did not separate until both of them fell to the floor at once, sliding off their feet from the slickness and hitting hard. They rolled in different directions. James was on his back, his eyes staring straight up, his breathing hard and his body shaking. Mack was curled on his side, crying like a baby.

Vivian propped the gun in a corner outside the living room entry, admonished herself for not dialing 911 to start with, and then did so. "There's been a bloody fight. We need two ambulances. Blood is everywhere."

Then she knelt beside James and put her ear to his mouth but couldn't understand him. About that time Jo appeared in the front door and took in what had happened. She said, "My God, daddy, you've killed my babies' daddy." She knelt beside her husband and said, "Baby, can you hear me?"

Vivian walked out of the living room and took off her bloody-soled shoes. She said, "Jo, don't you dare track blood out of this room."

The sound of sirens was far away but getting closer.

Vivian thought and picked up the phone again to tell the Whaleys what had happened and that they would be over for the children later.

Both men were alive when the paramedics got there. Vivian told the police how Mack had grabbed James and forced him to use his knife. Jo followed the ambulances to the hospital. Vivian got a bucket of clear water and a sponge mop. She dumped three buckets of red water off the front porch. Her head was pounding and a tooth ached, so she sat at the kitchen table for a rest. She lost her sense of time as she worried over all the awful possibilities as consequences of this disaster.

She looked up and suddenly Jo was seated opposite her.

"They're both in bad shape," Jo said. "They're sewing on Mack and daddy's had a heart attack."

"Oh, my God," Vivian said. "Prison or death."

"Or two deaths," Jo said.

Vivian said, "I need some help. I've got to call your brother."

"He doesn't give a shit," Jo said.

"He's got to this time," Vivian said.

Her son gave her a lecture over the phone: "Help? What can I possibly do now? I told y'all to turn your backs on her completely years ago and y'all wouldn't listen. No. Always about the children; they'll starve to death without a place to live. All of this is Jo's fault to start with, and you and dad have enabled it since it started. There is no doubt in my mind that Jo is a fool and she has made fools of the two of you. If they both live, the same thing will go on longer. This either continues until y'all die by natural cause or get killed or somebody kills Mack and Jo both. If Mack and Jo both die, y'all can raise the kids as best you can. Hell, that's what y'all are doing now. But I will not have anything to do with it."

Vivian said, "Don't you realize your daddy might be dying right now?"

"There is nothing I can do about it," he said and hung up on her.

She sat back at the table and said, "He forgets what we've done for him. And the gifts we've given him and that bitch he married. I'm taking back the guns we've given him birthdays and Christmas. I'll take back that grandfather clock too. And I'm sure I can think of more of our generosity we can retrieve in due time."

"I told you," Jo said.

"He said we were all fools," Vivian said. "While his daddy could die any minute."

"He hates our guts."

"I guess so," Vivian said. "I don't know what I'm going to do."

"They probably won't die," Jo said. "I bet anything they both live."

Vivian's head pounded. She stood abruptly and poured another pail of water. "Come in here," she said.

Jo buried her face in her hands. She could hear her mopping the living room.

"Jo!"

She finally went and looked at a bucket of pink water.

Vivian said, "When this water comes off the sponge crystal clear, then we have to scrub every inch of this room with cleanser. I don't care if it takes all night."

"It can wait," Jo said.

Vivian told her to take the mop and work at it while she made some more phone calls.

Jo picked up the bucket and slung the water in her mother's face.

Vivian gasped, remembering a childhood incident when she had done the same thing to her mother for favoring her sister. She raised her hands as if to choke her daughter. Instead she grabbed the mop and slapped Jo across the face with the sponge end. Jo ran out the front door; Vivian ran after her. Mostly she kept up with Jo, knocking her in the back of the head. Neither one of them left the premises. They ran around and around the house until they were both too tired to keep going. They went back inside. The phone rang and Vivian answered it; Mrs. Whaley offered to keep the children overnight and Vivian thanked her profusely. Jo put on some clean clothes and went back to the hospital, while Vivian resumed her mopping.



## WITH STRINGS ATTACHED

Although the strings  
are often invisible to me,  
I can sometimes trace  
their pull and pantomime trajectory  
as they compel me  
to woodenly walk and talk and perform  
in all the ways  
that have already been determined

... still, the show must go on.

And I, in my horror  
at those times when the light flares  
and pierces through shadow and dust,  
forcing the scene into harsh focus,  
realize that I, too,  
am just another form of marionette  
slightly more aware than the rest.

And then, the blessed fog of forgetfulness  
covers me like a soft, smothering blanket  
until again,  
the horrid dance begins:  
my rigid body awkwardly  
hopping and pirouetting  
in herky-jerky grotesquerie  
--a special variety of agony,  
waiting ...  
for the final curtain to fall.

—allan rozinski

# The Fallen

Knots of burden  
in the belly of the beast

that roams these winter woods  
& dreams of dancing bones.

The kindest of serpents  
can no longer look at him

without wanting to proffer  
a long, sturdy rope

for his flagrant failure  
to leave more red icicles

dripping in the tracks  
of time travelers.

Their only contentment  
seems to be the teeth flying out of his mouth

like ten thousand blackbirds.

—darrell lindsey

[short story]

# Homecoming at Hemlock High

by jill hand





Fiona was seated at a table in the school cafeteria when Chrissy Bartlett, Hemlock High's head cheerleader came up to her. "That looks great," Chrissy said, admiring the poster Fiona was making for Friday's pep rally. She was using a black magic marker to color the robe of the school's mascot—a hooded skeleton holding a sickle in its bony fingers.

"This is going to be the most awesome pep rally ever," Chrissy bubbled.

To demonstrate how awesome the pep rally would be, she shook her black and orange pom-poms and turned a cartwheel.

Mrs. Victor, the cafeteria monitor, called out that there was no horseplay allowed in the cafeteria. "If you want to jump around and turn cartwheels, do it outside," she said. "Just look out for zombies. There were some hanging around out by the soccer field earlier."

Chrissy tossed her shoulder-length blonde hair and gave her pom-poms a shake. "I can't go outside. It's too sunny. I'm a vampire, remember?"

Mrs. Victor shook her head in exasperation. "Sorry, Hon, I plumb forgot that you got bitten by that mysterious exchange student from Eastern Europe who turned out to be a vampire."

"That's okay, Mrs. V. Gee, wouldn't it be awful if zombies crash the pep rally? They're so gross. What do you think, Fiona?"

"What do you think, Fiona?"

Fiona Creel raised her head. She was seated in the comfortable leather chair behind the desk in her office at her renovated eighteenth century farmhouse in Colts Neck, New Jersey. Her antique mahogany desk was wide and gleaming. The floorboards were the original pumpkin pine, waxed to a high gloss. On the walls were framed posters advertising the Hemlock High books—five of them so far. Courtney, her assistant, sat perched on the edge of a wing chair regarding her anxiously, pen in hand, a legal pad in her lap. "Sorry, I must have dozed off," Fiona told Courtney, blinking and sitting up straighter. "What did you say?"

Courtney said she had an idea for a new Hemlock High book, one in which bullying would be the central theme. "The shape-shifters could be bullying the witches, or vice versa. What do you think?" She looked at Fiona half-expectantly, half-fearfully. Courtney was a mousy little thing with no self-confidence. Fiona liked being around people who lacked self-confidence. It made Fiona shine that much brighter. And Courtney, with her dull brown hair cut in an unattractive bob and her Shetland sweaters and knee-length plaid skirts that made her resemble a frumpy librarian straight out of a nineteen-fifties comedy, was valuable to Fiona because she had no idea how smart she really was.

Fiona pursed her lips and put her head to one side as she pretended to consider the idea, although she knew immediately that it was brilliant. Bullying was a hot topic right now. She nodded her head grudgingly. "Possibly. Why don't you write something up and I'll take a look at it. Do you think you can have the first three chapters for me by Monday?"

Courtney looked as if she was about to explode with excitement. "Really? You like it? Oh, my gosh! I'll work on it through the weekend," she babbled.

*Of course you will, Fiona thought. You don't have anything better to do on the weekends.*

She'd steal it. That went without saying. She'd rewrite whatever Courtney gave her, making small changes here and there, and send it off to her publisher, who would ask for a completed manuscript in six months, if Fiona thought she could have it ready by then. That would be no problem, not with eager Courtney at her beck and call. Fiona stole all of Courtney's ideas, not that Courtney minded. She was too much in awe of her employer to mind. Fiona wore beautiful clothes and she knew all sorts of famous people, other writers whose work Courtney had studied in college, and also movie stars and musicians. Fiona had allowed her to serve canapés and drinks at one of her parties once, and she'd met Bruce Springsteen. It had been the high point of her life.

Fiona Creel was well aware that Courtney had a girl crush on her, and she used it to her advantage, as she used everything valuable that came her way. Fiona was the author of the best-selling Hemlock High books for young adults. Teens were crazy about the Hemlock High series, in which adolescent werewolves and vampires and witches formed cliques and went on dates and grappled with homework and peer pressure and all the other problems faced by regular high school students. The Hemlock High books had made Fiona a wealthy woman. The spin-off merchandise—T-shirts, notebooks, water bottles, action figures, and so on—had made her even wealthier. A movie deal was in the works that would make it so she never had to write another Hemlock High book again if she didn't feel like it, and she definitely didn't feel like it. She was starting to detest Hemlock High, with all its smarmy or brooding denizens. Chrissy Bartlett, the bouncy vampire cheerleader, was particularly loathsome, with her peppy school spirit. She wished she'd never created her, not that she had, not really.

Chrissy had come to her fully formed almost ten years previously, when Fiona was an editor at Shivers, a now-defunct publisher whose specialty was paranormal romance books for teens and new adults. A woman named Suzanne Silver had submitted a novel about a high school where the students and teachers all were supernatural creatures. The writing was amateurish, but Fiona thought the idea was a winner. She sent Ms. Silver a form e-mail saying thanks for the submission, but it wasn't what they were looking for at the current time. Then she used the manuscript as the basis for the first Hemlock High book, *Welcome to Hemlock High*. It was an immediate success, appearing at just the right time, after the popular Sweet Valley High series and just as the Harry Potter books were starting to catch on. It helped that the fictional Hemlock High was located in Connecticut

and not in England, or the comparisons to Hogwarts would have been too obvious. It also helped that although there was a certain amount of gore, the general mood was light and cozy.

She'd been afraid that Suzanne Silver would contact her and accuse her of plagiarism, but she never had. And really, when it came down to it, she hadn't plagiarized. The words were all her own, she'd just used someone else's plot. How did the saying go? Good artists copy, great artists steal? Fiona considered herself to be a great artist.

And now she'd dozed off in the middle of the day and had a daydream about Hemlock High. How irritating. She asked Courtney to bring her a cup of coffee, black, and one sugar. Courtney scurried off in the direction of the kitchen as Fiona went online to respond to an invitation from the owner of a book store in Red Bank to have a book signing for her latest creation, *Hemlock High Halloween Carnival*. Fiona enjoyed book signings, all those adoring fans telling her how wonderful she was, some of them shyly presenting her with little gifts, most of which she later threw away or gave to Courtney. Being admired was what Fiona enjoyed best about being an author.

There was another e-mail, one inviting her to her high school reunion, her class's twenty-fifth. She deleted it without responding. She hadn't liked high school. The girls were catty and the boys, for the most part, were sweaty lumps. Then there'd been the incident with Mr. DiLorenzo in her junior year. He taught geometry, a subject that Fiona disliked nearly as much as she disliked chemistry. Fortunately, Mr. Cathcart, the chemistry teacher, was a sweetheart. He gave her an A, despite the fact that she failed all the tests. She smiled, thinking about how grateful poor old Mr. Cathcart had been for a few kisses and cuddles. Their mutually beneficial alliance was their little secret. She'd been fond of him, the way she would have been fond of a slavishly devoted old dog that enjoyed having its tummy rubbed. Mr. DiLorenzo was another story.

She'd found a copy of the geometry mid-term exam next to the mimeograph machine. That was back when schools still had mimeograph machines. She memorized the answers and got an A, causing the teacher to become suspicious. He asked her to stay after class and accused her of cheating. She angrily denied it. When he told her that he didn't believe her, she decided to take drastic action. Mr. DiLorenzo was young, and he sometimes made what could be considered mildly inappropriate remarks to his female students. Fiona took a deep breath, untucked her blouse from the waistband of her acid-washed jeans and mussed her hair. Then she ran from the classroom. "He grabbed me!" she screamed. That was the end of Mr. DiLorenzo. It was her word against his. Despite his repeated denials that he hadn't touched her, everyone knew that he sometimes said things to the girls that were a little bit, well, suggestive. They had a substitute teacher for the rest of the year and Fiona's final grade was a C-minus, not great, but not too bad, all things considered.

Another e-mail came in, this one from Cathy Burgess, one of the few friends from high school with whom Fiona kept in touch. Cathy wanted to know if Fiona

would be going to the reunion. She hoped she was. They had a lot of catching up to do. Fiona wondered if Cathy would be so eager to see her if she knew that Fiona was having an affair with her husband. It was Cathy's fault. She'd let herself go and all the cheesecake and ice cream that she liked to eat had gone straight to her thighs. Fiona's thighs were admirably slim. She wrote back and said that she wished she could go, but she had a previous engagement. *In bed, with your husband*, she thought, smiling as she sent the e-mail. High school reunions were boring. All those aging people sizing each other up, deciding where they stood in the great game of life. Fiona didn't need that. She knew she was a winner.

She went upstairs to her room to take a nap. She had a date that evening (not with Cathy's husband, with someone else's husband) and she wanted to look refreshed.

She was in the school cafeteria again. A cute guy approached her, carrying a skateboard under one arm. It was Trey Thatcher, a mixture of nerd (he was president of the debate club) and bad boy (he'd stolen a car once, back at his old school, which had been located in the inner city). He regarded her with caramel-brown eyes and purred, "Hey, Fiona. I was wondering. Are you going to the homecoming dance?"

Something wasn't right. There was something off about him. One of his eyes pointed in the wrong direction and, oh, God! There were big black stitches encircling his neck!

"Maybe I should mention that I'm a zombie now," he said, giving her a sloppy smile, one eye pointing to the wall and the other regarding Fiona in a way that she found extremely unpleasant. "The zombies got me when I was skateboarding in the park. They grabbed me just like you said that Mr. DiLorenzo grabbed you, but in my case they ripped my head clean off. Bummer, huh?"

Fiona stood up and bolted for the doors, her shoes clattering on the linoleum. Mrs. Victor shouted that there was no running in the cafeteria, but she ignored her and pushed through the swinging doors, skidding into the hallway. *I'm dreaming again*, she thought. *Wake up!*

Trey came shambling after her. "Fiona? Do you want to go to the dance with me? I promise I won't eat your brain."

A severe-looking woman who was studying the announcements tacked to the bulletin board outside the cafeteria turned to her and asked, "Is that boy bothering you?"

*Wake up! Wake up!* Fiona thought frantically.

"I'll have a word with him, if he's bothering you," the woman said. "I don't believe we've met. I'm Suzanne Silver, the new principal."

Suzanne Silver. That was the name of the woman whose idea for the Hemlock High books Fiona had stolen. Fiona stared at her, noticing that she flickered in and out of her vision, one moment transparent, the next solid. *You're dreaming. Wake up!* Fiona thought.

"Full disclosure, because I believe in being open and honest with my students, even nasty little thieves like you," Suzanne Silver said, giving her a cold smile. "I'm a ghost. I was hit by a car and killed when I was riding my bicycle yesterday. When

I got over the initial shock, I realized that being a ghost could be useful. I could punish you for stealing my book by haunting your dreams. Oh, yes, I knew you stole my book. I went to a lawyer about it, but he said there was nothing I could do. Now I'm doing something, you bitch. Every time you dream from now on, you'll be at dear old Hemlock High. Forever."

Fiona sat bolt upright in bed, her heart hammering in her chest. She was drenched in sweat and the covers were all bunched up. Someone was knocking insistently on the bedroom door. "Are you okay? I thought I heard you cry out."

*Courtney*, Fiona thought, embarrassed. *She must have heard me all the way downstairs.*

The door swung open and someone entered the room. Fiona squinted in puzzlement. Had Courtney dyed her hair blonde, or was it a wig? It had to be a wig because it was shoulder-length and gleaming. And what was she wearing? Not the frumpy sweater and skirt that she'd had on a little while ago. She wore a black miniskirt and black leggings, with a black T-shirt with orange letters that read *Hemlock H.S. Cheerleading*.

Fiona whispered, "Chrissy?"

Chrissy smiled. "I came to see if you were ready for the pep rally." She shook her orange and black pom-poms, chanting, "Move to the left! Move to the right! Sit down, stand up! Fight, fight, fight! Go Hemlock!"

Fiona screamed. She screamed so loudly that Courtney, alarmed, called the police. She didn't stop screaming when the ambulance came, or when she was wheeled into the emergency room, strapped to a gurney. She didn't stop screaming until she was sedated in the psychiatric ward.

"I thought you'd scream your head right off," Trey told her at the pep rally. "That would be cool because then we'd match."

She made helpless gurgling sounds as he slipped his leather-jacketed arm around her waist. On the football field, the marching band struck up the Hemlock High School fight song, "Hemlock High Forever."



## Midnight Dreams

Roar abates.  
My sea is serene like sleep.  
They often gather here and  
disappear before the dawn.

My dad's smile like a crescent  
gleams again through our  
coconut palms – his words  
have lost its voice, yet its  
cooling effect is still there.

My grandma gives me my  
favourite fruit, calling me  
'Baby' sweetly, and walks  
back along the shore.

Whenever I had cried over  
my dry dish - a thousand times  
during my boyhood - she  
managed to give me a banana  
somehow. Now I feel the real  
taste of her voice and banana.

Midnight is sometimes blue.  
A cat eyed girl creeps like  
a snake on the shore.

All die, but all die never.

—fabyias mv

## *What I Didn't Think*

I would not go back to city streets  
where we played till suppertime,  
where everyone's mother had an opinion,  
none louder than mine.

I suppose that is what I built on  
though it obliged and embarrassed me  
to defend what my mind resisted  
and spout what I didn't think.

I intended to do otherwise  
but in the end listened and pleased.  
I swallowed my guilt, always felt weak,  
and never knew what to think.

Some say nature is tempered by nurture.  
It may be the other way round.  
Larkin placed blame at his parent's feet.  
I'm not sure I should lay blame on mine.

At eighty years old, I still try to please.  
I strive for the middle ground,  
so people I meet will pet and praise  
that little girl I'm trying to find.

—ada jill schneider

## Dementia, Early Onset

*Remember me*, I plead again  
and close my eyes  
to dream a course  
of new meds tried

prelude to the stars defied  
when she will yet remember me

till then, a too-soon wilted rose  
no longer to provide the bloom  
once mine to hold

One thing I know, need not be told—  
Sisyphus cried

—alan meyrowitz



## VEINS OF INK

Your eyes are the gray-green  
of a storm off the Irish coast,  
and the gentle curve of your lips  
intoxicate like a Rosé Pinot Noir.  
You are the things I drown myself  
in, and your movements write  
emotions I cannot admirably  
reflect with the ink of a pen,

but that ink leaves handprints  
smeared across my thighs, and  
they climb higher until raven  
blood spills into my open lips.  
I am captured by the way you  
travel through my veins. Even  
when I swallow you whole,  
I cannot write the truth of you.

—sara tantlinger

## ANGINA PECTORIS

That pain across  
his chest  
was a caveat shot.  
The convulsions  
mingled with  
his bulging eyes  
became something  
else less  
extraordinary  
that I can calmly  
capsize with  
two fatal winks.  
He compressed into  
a shadow on  
the still quagmire  
at my feet;  
his small voice  
conched up from  
the pulpy neck,  
flitting through  
the apathy  
I trafficked on  
the dragway he  
toppled resembling  
a cut rock.  
So what did it mean  
when he caught  
me looking down  
from different eyes,  
when his tears were  
already dried on  
my party dress  
and his heart  
splayed open  
like iced shavings,  
as my lips pursed to  
some narrative arcs  
of reverie, and him  
a pawn in my cosmic  
accouterments?

—lana bella

## WHEN THE SILHOUETTE FALLS AWAY

familiar *it* and well-worn you:  
where you sit  
and emulate the words of Bashō,  
*it* stares endlessly into  
the pages  
as the ink dissects through  
your mad calligraphy--

quick and precise,  
you slice *it*  
from your spine as if being  
torn at from within,  
for your playmates drop by with  
every stroke of your fingertips  
on the papyrus,  
and no use for *its* company--

so when the silhouette  
falls away from your body,  
just dangle *it*  
over the tip of your need,  
cast *it* into wind  
and wait for the gentle sobs  
to spar with the flourished loops  
of your pale knuckled bones--

—lana bella

# The Roving Jewel

by alexander leger-small

I left the babe behind the day I gave birth. His da didn't want me, and my family turned me out when they saw my belly bulging. The Serving Sisters let me stay at the abbey 'til I popped him out. Then it was, "Feet get to steppin' girl" and they chased me down the stone path with brooms and paddles swinging.

The War was done now for six months. I had choosing to do—to find a man who don't mind used goods or walk the wicked road. I loved my baby's da and I gave him my jewel 'cause I wanted to. Was I gonna go be some man's maid, 'pologizing for my state and singing my sins for the rest of my life? I couldn't. I wouldn't. That girl wasn't never gonna be me. I had to trust my own heart.

I took to walking.

The fighting left the traveling ways full of knives and bitterness. After that mess in my village, I saw the world from a new spot. I reasoned best as I could.

*Had a bit of fun with that baby's da, didn't you, Katie? Maybe you can keep having fun to stay living.*

So that's what I did. And I'll kill the man who says I regret any of it.

I stuck to those roads for a long spell, taking to inns when they'd let me, sleeping under bushes when they wouldn't. Certain 'keepers, they liked having a lay-lady in house. You wouldn't think it now, looking at me, but all the men liked my jewel, and I shared it gladly with 'em. There were times I had coin, times I didn't. If I wanted a man to keep the worst ones away, finding one to tie to my skirts was no trouble. If I didn't, well, a girl learns quick to poke a man when he's aiming to do wrong.

I tasted all the sweet drinks. Tasted the sour ones too, in their bottles green and brown. Those long slim necks, giving up their potions that turned black moods to glad ones—those were the ones I liked best.

A gal can't keep to that life long and keep living, and my wandering way got weary. Seemed like every new inn had a 'keeper who thought my hard-earned coin should be his. Or some man would be trying to tell me who to be and how to act, laying claim and calling me his own like a pup. Folk were jawing on 'bout The Woods then—unwatched and full of folk looking for a new way. 'Bout how you could be anyone you pleased and none would tell you otherwise. So I thought, *Maybe that's the living for you, Katie. You can be a woods-witch, or find a woodcutter looking for common-law, or anything at all.*

I'd been out of my village for a handful of years now, and wasn't the same lass who'd been left for useless with some hick's babe in her belly. Wasn't just thinking that I could do anything; I was sure of it. So I took off down that road, past the murderers and the pimps who tried to twist a tit and grab me for their own. My man-poking skills were sharp then. Laid out my fair share of grubbers who thought they'd take Katie for her worth. Walked and walked 'til the blisters popped and oozed out their nasty jam.

When I got to the far forest I set my foot and my face to the trees. The cold was coming on and in the morning the mists wove 'bout them pines like my grandmammy's long, grey braid. Their trunks were dark and wet, their bark streaked with tears and moss.

The woods held quiet and I liked that. Took my time eating the good plants and learning the bad. The cold wasn't too bad, even after the leaves fell. I wasn't missing no man. Think I was happy in those woods—true happy for the first time in my life. Being off the road felt fine. And as much as I like a warming 'tween my legs—being my own lady, that was the finest part of it all.

Sure didn't last.

I remember walking into Town. Didn't know it was coming and then when I found it, didn't have a care to turn back. I remember it all. The drop down into that ramble, where they'd cleared all the prickles out. The red clay, crusty and thick, coating their boots and hands and their smudged faces. The round-ring they set their fires in with the rickety spit sagging in the middle. The bone-piles. The tracks they left when they went a'marching out. Their leaning wooden structures, walled up on one side or two with those stinking furs hanging down over the open spaces.

When I first came to Town, every last one of them stopped whatever tiddlyshit thing they were doing. Hadn't seen a bite in three days and had been drinking dew out of leaves for my throat. But damn if I wasn't the prettiest gal they'd ever seen. Even in the woods, I still took a care to my looks. It made me feel fine, to tie up my hair and touch a berry or madder to my lips now and then. Boys came at me a'calling:

"Looke at herrrrr!"

"Here comes a rovin' jewel"

"Laddies come up quick, there's a treat."

I drank up every single word of it. Didn't I have a right to? And it had been a spell, a long spell, since a man put his hands 'round my waist. A long season living in them woods—no jewel for any man.

Now you know, if you were 'bout after The War, The Woods were one of the spots where the leftovers ended up. The dregs, the deserters, the ones who loved the fighting for the blood-rush and not for ideals or duty to kings and queens. And you know that some of those men were out for coin, and others were out for lassies and sometimes a lad, because a man can stick it just about any place he likes. But my boys—they weren't looking for anything but murder. I don't have to tell ya who their leader was, 'cause you know him by His deeds. Ain't a soul in all this land who ain't worried an hour away thinking about Him and His gang. Old-timers'll still fall in a fit when you mention 'em.

You can believe me when I tell you how dark things turned in the end.

But early-wise, it was good for me at their camp. The boys all called it Town, but that's a laugher. At the most, maybe you'd find fifty of 'em—when they were a'teamed up with other fellers and their crews. Those times never lasted though. He kept a tight band, always said, "Too many mouths give heads ideas." My own village had maybe twenty folk all counted, so could be it was like a town. Can't say true.

Ruddy Tam and his Breaker Boys took me first. Spent nights with each of 'em, and then the four together. Met the Brothers Kerkpaater, who turned me out after they found I had had 'em both. But we laughed the next night when they caught each other trying to bring me back to bed! There was dancing at the fire-pit at nights, a brace of rabbit stretched on the spit with Blackie playing his mouth harp and the wagon boy his fiddle. They passed their bottles and their jugs, and I was second to drink only after Him.

You hear that, I got those bottles. I was honored! Those men all loved me.

When I first came to Town, they told me how they liked me. My coal black hair, when I done it up all pretty, with the two braids coiled 'round my head like some kinda crown. My lips red and ripe, ready for them. My long white arms and heavy hips, saved from scars 'cause the pox never made it to my village.

They brought me little things, when they came back from the bloody places they went. First a mirror, cracked through and sharp as a blade on its shattered end, but oh I loved that. Then they got me a pair of bright blue ribbons and I wove them in my braids, right the way it should be. I'd stare at that silk, vining through my locks, day after day in that broken looking-glass. Time after that, a pair of skirts in the band's own colors. That one turned my cheeks to blush. 'Cause they planned it! Had to think it out to find me a skirt in red and a skirt in gold. I tossed the ribbon after that. Wouldn't do to have it mucking up the boy's colors. I was proud to wear 'em.

I was their gal, their Katie, and I ain't sorry to say that my spot in Town was good enough to please me. I met them all, that whole gang. Every last black-hearted one of them. The stories that keep you pissing your britches? I met the man who done it and I took him to bed.

Spit and swear it.

Even Him.

When I first came to Town, He didn't care about me. Had His pick in every spot they took. Said He never needed a lass back at camp to nag on him.

Then his boys were getting me skirts and paints for my lips, though the Brothers Kerkpaater said I didn't need it and that, "I shouldn't wear that shite anyway." 'cause I was pretty enough. All them fellers calling me their Roving Jewel, not for the way I'd walked into Town outta the woods but 'cause I'd been making my way 'round the bedrolls for a spell. And He saw it. Knew He'd want what they were all so damn randied up for.

I liked that too. Here I was, little miss me, Katie Clantick, turned out by her ma and pa and left for lonesome by her baby's da. And now, lookee here, I was Queen of Town! Even after He made the men leave me be, when He made me His, they still got to giving me gifts. And He wasn't so bad at it. Giving gifts. And that other thing too—I know you're wondering.

No more sleeping in tents on that dog-wet ground for Queenie Katie. No more eating last in lines, or going days without. Now I had squirrel and beaver and sometimes wild turkey in his hutch. He brought me combs and scissors, dull but working. We slept under those stinking furs for a handful of seasons. Back then, they didn't stink to me. Felt like fancy frills. Like I say, I was Queen.

We were good together. Him and me.

A time came when His boys got a hankering for new jewels. Like I said, he stopped my roving 'round the camp and I guess those boys got themselves ideas. Blackie brought the first back with him, after he'd gone out of the woods for cat-gut and tallow. She wasn't nothing to speak of, missing her teeth and hunchbacked 'sides. Called herself Mary, like she was some prim and proper virgin. Even though she belonged to Blackie and the boys couldn't dip their willies in her honeypot, every one of them acted like she was God's own gift to camp. Like I wasn't even there! One night the little bitch took the bottle right from my hand, right of my grip 'fore I could even drink it. I cut her throat out with the shears He gave me by sunrise.

There were more they brought, one and two and three, sometimes together and other times not. Once the boys brought back a pair of sisters, thinking that two might be better than one. None of them lasted more than a week after Miss Priss Mary. I cut and killed each one of them. There could only be one jewel in Town; I wouldn't have it any other way. After a time, they stopped bringing them back. The Brothers Kerkpaater told me the boys gave up, that they were tired out from digging graves.

Time got on and got on and got along. Most of them were gone and off somewhere, killing someone and stealing their gold. If it wasn't one of those two I don't know of it. But they were gone and me, I was left at camp, tidying up and playing Mother the way they liked me to do in those days. And no, I didn't mind it. Had a place to be and they liked me still and they'd stopped bringing lasses back with them. And wasn't He like a Da anyway? So couldn't I be the Mum? Seemed to fit.

They left the new boy behind, saying he wasn't ready for the road or some such. Fact is they didn't want to share their gold with him. He'd been at camp no longer than a month, maybe a week less. You'd think after all of it, I'd remember his name. Truth is, I never knew it. In my mind though, he's just My Jonny.

A sweet one, that boy; he saw maybe fourteen summers, and I was the first miss he ever thought he could have. Not that I minded him making eyes at me. Looked good in those moleskin britches, gave a girl a good look at it all. Know how I mean? Round in the right places and full in the others. And his fiddling was a special, so I liked that too.

I wanted the boy. I wasn't afeared of Him or His gang. Every move I made was my own. I look back at 'em, those choices, and polish them like silver. More dear to me than any skirts or ribbons.

Keeps a gal free, having her own say.

So we got to romping, me and my Jonny. 'Cause there wasn't a thing to do and the boys were gone for day and night and another whole day. My Jonny knew how to handle things. And after so long being just His gal, it felt good to be randy with a lad. A good touch softer than He dealt me. And I could use that, just then. Not that I longed for some dandy-man. But it felt nice. That newness, being a boy's first—nothing in the whole world like that.

I wasn't in love. I know who I love and I know who does love me. Never thought another way and it wasn't never My Jonny. But we had fun.

When He came back the boys were carrying a whole elk to celebrate, strung up on poles with the Brothers hoisting it on their meaty shoulders. They found us together in His furs. We weren't ready. We thought they'd been killed themselves, never coming back. Well, they were hollering when they came down into the ramble and My Jonny tried to up and out 'fore they could catch him.

'Course he didn't make it.

There was close to twenty of 'em. Why'd he even try it? Poor lad never had a chance.

They killed him then and there, with me screaming and watching and pleading. They sliced his tugger off, shoved it in his throat and then they strung him up from the biggest, darkest, most tear-stained tree and left him swinging for a whole damn month. Four weeks he hanged and creaked, turned blue and then green until he was black and dripping. The animals would come at night and leap up, snatching bits and pieces of him so that at the end of the month, there wasn't nothing left below the lad's knees.

They did it to him and I tell you true, that's what they'll do to me.

Things turned for me then. Still passed me the bottles and I kept His furs warm a while longer, but it'd never be the same. They beat me to a ripe state when they found me with My Jonny, so I couldn't do a thing 'til I healed up. For a while, they thought it funny and wouldn't leave me be to heal proper. Not 'til He made them, 'cause I just wasn't setting right.

That was the last kind thing He ever did for me. And I spat in His face for it.

Soon as I got my health, I made my first run. I was tired of being His and



thought that I'd like a life where the choosing was mine to do again. So I waited until they were all on a hunt together, waited 'til they trusted me to be alone in Town. They left me that day and I took it as a sign from God Himself that the time to run had come. I'd been in that ramble for a long, long time now. I forgot a lot in my time and those years were a long time in forgettin'. Can't say true how long, but it was long enough. I left every single stitch they gave me, save for them red and yellow skirts I wore. And I ran.

Ran through the black and grey trees, their arms twisting and tugging at me. I was falling and running and crawling and flinging myself from one trunk to another. Black hair in my eyes, black hair in my mouth. I ran that whole day. The ground grabbing at me with rooty, ratty claws. Splashing into the bog, peat-sweet smell and sticky tar on my legs, up in my skirts. Through the woods I ran, through the rotting mire. Ran otherways from their path when they left, thinking I'd get as much distance as I could between me and their backs.

And I did it. I burst out of them wicked trees and onto the road. Made it all the way there and only my shirt was torn, but right across my breast so I had to clutch at it with one hand. Could barely tell my skirts were gold and red anymore, and I thought that might help—not being tied to the boys with their colors. I burst out like a bird flushed by a dog—into the bright, bright sun. I remember feeling it on my face and arms. How long had it been since I drank it through my skin like this? Felt good, soft as My Jonny's fingers on my downy hair. It never warmed like that in the ramble.

Saw the way out of it then, for a quick breath. Found myself thinking of all the other places I'd be going; how I'd do things different ways now that I was out of them woods. Choices spread out like sweets for the tasting and I was ready for every one of them.

I got drunk on it, I'll admit it now. I was spinning and letting the sun touch me tender. So I didn't hear them. Wasn't until He had His big, greasy hands over my mouth and the Brothers Kerkpaater took both my arms and my legs, like that elk strung up and out, that I knew I wasn't alone. Boys weren't even looking for me! Didn't know I'd run from Town! I was just stupid enough to go stumbling into them as they made a shortcut back to camp.

Chopped my right foot off for that. He did it Himself. Used the big wood felling axe and put my leg on the stump for splitting like I was tinder myself. Hacked it off in a single blow.

"Nice and clean," he said.

Told me after that I should be happy for it, He might've shattered my whole leg. That I was lucky.

It wasn't the only time I tried to run and every time I did, they took a little something. The fourth runner—they took my other foot. My ears went on the times 'fore that. I stopped wearing my braids and let the black fall down 'round my shoulders after they took 'em. Ran as many times as they gave me chances to. Stupid oxes. Every time they stole another part of me, they thought they'd got me beat. That they had me scared and that I wouldn't try again.

I couldn't stop trying.

After a time, I knew it wasn't worth it. They'd never let me go.

I couldn't run no more.

He says to me, "Katie girl, don't you want to learn? You can be a good girl for the boys now, there ain't none of me left for you. This running, all this trying you're doing to get me to keep eyes on you, it ain't working. Don't care a tit for you. You gonna play nice or you gonna die. That the choosing left to you."

I couldn't hear it. I'm my own woman, ain't I? Ain't I always been? Even when He had me, I still had a say in some things.

No more bottles came to me, save the empty ones for washing. Or if the boys were feeling tart, they'd come flying at my face, at my stomach. Caught a few with my hands but more with my teeth, 'til there were only three left, cracked and rotten. The rest of them got to calling after me, calling me Katie Cruel, cause I started fighting back when they'd drag me to their tents. Once He turned me out, the boys stopped asking, just acted like I was there for the taking. The Brothers never did though. And Ruddy Tam died 'fore I lost my second foot, so he never saw me at my worst.

I held onto that name. Katie Cruel. What else did I have?

*Let'em call me what they will, I sulked, I'll give'em who they want.*

They made her but I had to be her.

My hair ain't black pitch no more and they're sorry they kept me as long as they did. There are lads here that never knew when I was His girl. They never saw me spinning in the fire light with the green glass bottles pressed to my cherry lips. All they knew is Ol' Katie Cruel and the promise that if you try to stick her with it, she'll bite it off you.

If that's true, how come half of them kept sticking me for a long while?

They all stopped, 'cause He told them they'd better. He's had enough, even though He ain't touched me for years now. I guess I was still playing Ma to his Da. He's ready for a new one, heard the boys talking the other night. But they won't bring her to the ramble while I'm still here. Even now, with all they've taken from me, they're still a'feared that I'll kill any bitch they bring to my Town.

Right so.

Soon they'll set me swinging, footless and earless and missing all the fingers on my left hand. Scarred and stitched and white haired, thin as a damn bone. Am I a'feared? Not of no rope. Same as I ain't never been frightful of these boys. I'll be laughing that day, tomorrow or the next, when their balls drop enough and they get the courage to do me in.

That's the say I get. I aim to take it.

They'll leave me in the tree, week after week. My body'll turn. The animals will come at night and tear at the stubs of my ankles, bite at my knees—they'll take every last thing that these boys haven't taken already.

But when I first came to Town—they called me the Roving Jewel.



## GEODE

My stack of paper  
is coarse beside  
the contours of  
your red-pleated skirt  
and white-striped sweater;  
*who are you, little one,*  
*whose aches and smiles*  
*that begin well at the split*  
*pinwheels of my thoughts?*  
So take these metrics of  
learning mouth which  
speeds my heart  
a thousand ways,  
and still leaves the rest  
of me on your door step;  
where my long shadow  
is cast on  
the quiet symphony  
of waiting,  
with snow flaked  
about my shoulders,  
then ground ward,  
turning the earth white.  
I measure the pulses  
of my heart then,  
sensing the confetti  
of catching the centuries  
of your beauty within and  
all around; with space  
is squeezing down my wine-  
toothed throbbing, I lean  
my whole into  
your two trickle-lips  
of tearing ribbons.

—lana bella

## Before The Death Rattle

Once rice plants in golden  
frocks danced on my lap.  
And I was proud.

Now the weeds dry my  
veins.

Once reapers, bending like  
the sickles, lulled me with  
their bucolic songs. And I  
snoozed under the paddy  
fragrance.

Now I wake up frightened  
by the 'profit – talks'.

Once the ecstatic moon  
rose above the rhythms of  
the night. Moonlight was so  
charming with some  
magnetic eyes. And I held  
my chest as a stage for your  
dancers and singers.

Now your nostalgia is  
twined around me.

Once the monsoon hid me  
deep under the water –  
fishes and frogs enjoyed  
their carnival. And I was  
tickled by the floating  
canoes.

Now an architect stares at  
me. A tipper lorry vomits  
the sand and stones on my  
face. I die leaving a furrow  
in your mind.

—fabiyas mv

# MY CATARACT

You are a woman, tethered to the moon by  
your sex.

All the blood that orb draws  
Flows along

my crow's feet and  
Wells into the tiny tributaries of  
my eyes.

Until

I blink, and arks everywhere unmoor.

Set sail upon  
your sibilant issue, cresting on  
your swells of sanguine ink,

I can create  
unburdened by birds bearing branches  
with their leaves of dry land that lay upon  
my sight.

—cr dobson

# halls of silt and seawater

by dennis mombauer

“That’s exactly what I imagined. Isn’t it great?” Ben and his friends looked down the dunes, over the beach and the rolling waves, crashing against the shore with the incoming tide. There were the ruins of a bunker, half-buried by the sand, a breakwater stretching out, and some fishing boats far away to the left, white specks on the horizon.

“Oh, yes. Look at the waves!” Nick led their descent on the path from the dunes, the wind tearing at their clothes with fury, blowing sand devils between them. “Anyone up for a swim? Try out the waves?”

“Sure thing.” Ben and Lucas put down their things and nodded to Nick’s suggestion.

“You go, we’ll stay here.” The girls started to spread their beach towels and open their bags, settling in on a wind-protected spot at the bottom of the dunes. “We’ll go in later, maybe.”

They laughed while Ben, Nick and Lucas stripped down to their swim trunks, then ran across the beach, cursing and jumping when their bare feet hit stones or sank into wet silt. The water was cold, and it took them some time to gather the courage to jump in. But finally Nick did it, and Ben and Lucas followed suit.

It was glorious, pushing through the green twilight of the ocean, making a few strokes, coming up again and spitting out salt water while the others did the same around them. Ben had only been to the sea a few times, and he had almost forgotten how much fun it was to paddle through the water and feel nothing below him but cold wetness.

The waves carried his body up and down, breaking around him in spraying foam. He turned on his back, made a kick, floating parallel to the beach. The concrete of the bunker ruins had shifted to the right, and he made a few swimming strokes to correct his position again.

“I’m swimming back now, I think.” Nick dove headfirst through a wave and snorted.

“Yes, me too.” Ben felt the cold creep into his bones, not unpleasant, but permeating his skin deeper and deeper. “Better to be careful—I don’t want to catch a cold.”

He shivered and began to swim after Nick, who steered landward. They swam, but were pulled sideways by the waves and out to sea by the current, and Ben realized that the beach was farther away than he thought, the bunker tiny in the distance, the girls barely visible.

"Wait." There was Lucas' voice behind them, sounding distressed. "Wait for me, please. I'm not such a strong swimmer, not like you."

Ben could feel exhaustion in his own arms, his left foot suddenly hurting, muscles cramping in the cold water. Could he even make it to shore? He looked left and right, but there was no one else in the water except for them, no boat, and no possible help.

"Nick! Ben! Come back, please. I can't swim that far."

Lucas sounded weaker, but Ben couldn't turn back, not without risking his own life. He wasn't sure of himself anymore, his strength leaving him, and there was nothing he could do for Lucas, even if he would be right beside him. Drowning people could panic, he knew that, and in the worst case, Lucas would drag them both down into the deep.

"I don't want to die!"

"Just swim like you would swim in a pool." Ben couldn't look back, too occupied by his own struggle. The beach seemed more distant with every stroke, the waves higher and crueler, Nick seemingly lost between them. "Just swim."

He followed his own advice, telling himself that it had to be possible to get back to the beach, that there would be lifeguards otherwise, or buoys, or some ships patrolling the deeper waters. Surely he couldn't just die like this, on a harmless afternoon out on the beach? What would his friends at home say? How would they react if he never came back?

"Help!"

Ben looked back and saw Lucas' head vanishing under a wave, not coming up again, his voice suddenly falling silent.

"I can almost stand! Just a little farther! We've nearly reached the shallow part! Come on!" Nick was shouting, and Ben forced himself to another stroke, then one more, one more, one more. He dipped down and felt land, maybe a few inches under his feet, renewing his efforts.

"I'm standing on solid ground!" Nick waved excitedly, and Ben closed up to him. "Wow. That was more dangerous than I thought ... are you all right?"

Ben found purchase with his feet in the sand below, breathing freely for the first time. "What about Lucas?"

"I'm here!"

"Everything's all right, no worries. Come, come!" Nick plunged back in and swam toward Lucas, who was a good deal behind them, while Ben waited, breathing heavily. He had seen Lucas vanish, hadn't he?

"There, I have you, come on. Ben, help me pull him here. Yes, that's it—everything's all right, everyone safe. What an adventure, eh?"

At night, Ben dreamt of the waves pushing him up, making him feel weightless

for a moment and crashing down with him again, a constant up and down, a sensation of movement that enveloped him in his sleep.

When he swallowed, he tasted salt, even though he had eaten and brushed his teeth; there was resistance when he tried to move his hands, as if the air around him had become viscous.

He dreamt that they were all swimming again, Lucas' voice behind them, calling for help, pleading, then only an inhuman gurgle, the sound of water rushing down a windpipe and into lungs, of human struggle giving way to the fathomless pull of the ocean.

"Ben. Ben." His name rose up from beneath the water, following him on the foam crests of the breaking waves.

"Ben!"

He snapped his eyes open, unable to orient himself, the sea gone, his blanket wrapped around him so he could barely move. Nick and Lucas were standing in his room, staring at him from the bright circle of his night lamp.

"Are you awake now? Be quiet."

Ben freed himself from the blanket. "What's happening? What time is it?"

Nick and Lucas exchanged looks, and Lucas spoke softly: "I want to go back to the beach, to the sea. I want you to come with me."

"Right now? Can't we go in the morning?"

"Please. I need to see it again, tonight." His face was earnest, as was Nick's, and Ben slowly rose up and began to dress.

"Then let's go."

The sand scrunched in the darkness, occasional flat rocks shimmering bright like beached jellyfish, the transition between land and sea indiscernible. The moon hung above them as a sharp sickle, its shine barely sufficient to highlight the placidly rolling waves with glittering silver.

"What now? We are here, the same place as this afternoon. There is that bunker ... and I think out there is the farthest point we swam to." Ben pointed at the ocean, but Lucas didn't even look at him, just walking over the beach. He seemed entranced, almost somnambulant, his eyes open and unblinking, staring forward at the heaving darkness. There was something glowing far out under the sea, like spotlights slowly sinking toward the bottom, discolored by the waves' murky green.

"What is that?" Nick raised his smartphone, and for a heartbeat, a bright flash illuminated the scenery.

"I have no idea ..."

"We can take a look."

"I'm not swimming out there again, especially not at night. Are you crazy?"

"There is another way." Lucas wandered over the sand toward the half-buried bunker, part of a defense line against an invasion that had never taken place. From the rectangular loopholes, the same soft luminescence was sloshing out onto the beach, almost as pale as moonlight, but less steady, flowing, ebbing and swelling.



"How ... what ..." Ben eyed his friends in the ghostly light, Lucas' face strangely determined, Nick's bloodless, trembling, his skin covered in goosebumps. Ben had never seen him this way, never seen such weakness in him—Nick was always their leader, the strong one, the one who never showed fear.

"Come with me. I want to show you something." Lucas vanished into the dilapidated structure, Ben and Nick still standing out on the night-dark sand, the wind tugging at their shirts.

"Come on, please." Lucas' voice from inside sounded distorted, hollow, as if it were coming from the bottom of a deep well.

"All right." Nick clenched his teeth, raised his chin and followed Lucas.

Ben looked at the entrance, and then at the path inland through the dunes, to their holiday home, where the girls were sleeping soundly, not suspecting what was happening here.

"Ben! Come on!"

The interior of the bunker was gloomy, the light washing over the concrete in a shimmer of algae-green tongues, not illuminating the floor or the boys' faces. There was a hallway leading down, in the direction of the sea, and it was covered ankle-deep in mud and murky water.

"This way, please. There is something I want to show you both." Lucas waded into the cavernous hallway without hesitation, and the other two had no choice but to follow him. It was surreal, but they had already gone so far, coming here in the middle of the night and entering the glowing bunker that they could hardly stop now.

Ben saw Lucas' head vanishing between the waves again, heard his cries for help, felt his own arms carrying him away through the roiling ocean.

"Where are we going? How do you know this place? I thought this was your first trip to the North Sea?"

"It is." Their splashing steps echoed along the hallway, and Ben noticed slight structural changes: The concrete was giving way to wet earth and clumpy sand, the water on the floor increasingly covered with foam and drifting seaweed, the air smelling of salt and fish, of mold and putrefaction.

"Where the hell are we going? We must be well under the ocean by now! I'm turning back." Ben stopped, and the others turned back to him, little more than silhouettes against the stronger brightness flooding the tunnel from behind them.

"Come with us, Ben. I want to show you where I was today, and I want you to stay there with me."

Ben could intuit a vast room at the end of the tunnel, its walls more natural and flowing than the sharp edges of the bunker, its air heavy with a fog-like humidity. There were figures moving, their outlines not human, glistening scales highlighted by the aquatic light, fins protruding in sharp ridges.

"This is madness!" Ben almost screamed, his heartbeat pulsating through his body, his fingers throbbing with blood, his eyes wide open. "Where are we going? What is this? What are you talking about? Nick, say something!"

"I ... I don't know ... maybe we should follow him, Ben. Maybe we should see what he wants to show us. Don't you remember this afternoon? What happened in the water?"

"Nothing happened! We all made it out, you know that!"

Lucas shook his head, sadly. "That's not true. I drowned, Ben, in the waves of the sea above us." Lucas' lost all color, as if it had been drained out of him instantly, and he seemed bloated, horribly bloated, water gurgling out of his mouth as he spoke. "I drowned, and you abandoned me; you didn't come back for me, even as I pleaded for your help."

His eyes had become blue and cloudy, and the skin was peeling off his fingers as he reached for Ben. His touch was freezing cold, wet and spongy, and Ben couldn't stand it anymore: he broke away, glanced one more time at the hall behind Nick and Lucas, then turned and ran, as fast as his feet would carry him.

Ben snapped his eyes open, unable to orient himself, the undersea halls gone, his blanket wrapped around him so he could barely move.

"Lucas?" He stumbled through the door into Lucas' room, still not fully awake. "Lucas!"

Lucas' bed was made and empty, as if no one had slept there at all, as if he had never returned from their swimming trip yesterday. Ben looked through the room and then stormed out, down the stairs and into their shared living room.

"Lucas! Oh, thank God!"

Lucas sat at the breakfast table with the girls, smiling at Ben and making himself a sandwich. "Morning, Ben. Everything all right?"

"I had a dream, and in this dream, you told me that you had drowned, and you turned into some kind of horrible creature, and I ran away." Ben laughed, nervously at first, then full of relief. "What a nightmare! Nick awake yet?"

"Sounds like a strange dream. I haven't seen Nick, must be still asleep. Wanna wake him? Sun's already up, and we want to drive to the city soon."

"Sure." Ben felt his pulse gradually slowing down again, and he allowed a smile to enter his face. "I'll get him."

He climbed back up the stairs and knocked on Nick's door, once, twice, three times. "Wakey wakey!" He pushed the door open and saw Nick's feet poking out from under the blanket, his head buried under the pillow. "Come on, it's morning already—no time like the present!"

Ben walked around the bed, pulled away the pillow—and felt his heart stop. Nick was lying there, but he was not asleep: his face was bloated and white, the eyes faded blue orbs, a trickle of saltwater still running from the corner of his mouth to the mattress beneath him, which was drenched to the core.



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## What the Cat Dragged In

Tokens of her affection, they tell me, scattered throughout the house; she stands by contentedly, crimson-lipped, guarding each monstrous mass of unidentifiable gore. Initially, lizards kept her occupied; their squirming, severed tails writhing on the porch long after she had finished them. Next came birds with a flurry of feathers; then mice and larger rodents fell victim as she expanded her hunting grounds. Now, she brings in mangled bits of meat and fur and flesh beyond classification – dragging mutilated carcasses across the kitchen tile, ignoring me, taking them down into the basement. I mop the floors daily, eyeing stains that seem to form pentagrams anxiously, scratching her bobbing head as she licks her paws, slick with blood.

—lee clark zumpe

# Black and White Spectacles

by fabiyas mv

Dilyab is searching for his father's death certificate in a faded green iron box in the storeroom. Quite surprisingly, he finds the spectacles—a rare inheritance from his father. As he takes it, a cockroach, which was clinging to the spectacles' thick frame, falls down. He looks through the thick glasses—sees his father. And aching memory fills in his eyes.

Then he couldn't listen to his father's words. Perhaps he was deafened by the prospect of a distant rapture. Or he longed for peace amidst his secret tension.

His father Zainu owned a printing press, which was the sole source of his family's income. But the monsoon always rocked the boat. Diverse cultural and art programs faltered to a stop—nobody came to his press to print the program notices and receipt books. People curled themselves up in their houses with the laziness of a cat while it rained cats and dogs. Though he was on the verge of bankruptcy, his father never tried to borrow money from others, for his inherited nobility made him scrupulous. Noble births grow in poverty as the chaff burns.

"I didn't get a single coin today. It's very difficult to go forward like this." As Zainu had expressed his helplessness, his wife and son kept silent, unwilling to bother about their uprooting issue. Zainu had a mind that was always moist—very conducive too—for the rich growth of tension. He had become a diabetic patient—sugar syrup flowed through his veins, rusting his internal engines. He struggled hard to satisfy the basic needs of his family. But his wife Saya was not sensible enough—and his son not matured enough—to realize his efforts. Root always remained unnoticed beneath the stem and bloom.

Saya came to Zainu's life with an acre of coconut grove, another acre of paddy farm, and a mound of gold. But she was an illiterate woman, the youngest of the four daughters of a rich widow residing in the next village. Though the dowry dazzled him, he couldn't foresee the squabbles in store for him. Dilyab had learned from his parents how marriage could knit the day and the night together. His dad and mom became the most matchless couple in the universe, and he a compound word, made up of his father's softness and knowledge and his mother's coarseness and ignorance.

"Look at my left leg, Dil. There's a swelling near my ankle. I feel burning pain inside." Zainu eyed Dilyab packing his luggage silently.

"Don't worry, Dad. Please apply Betadine ointment there. It'll be healed soon."

"Where're you going?"

"Dad, I'm going on a pleasure trip to Ootty along with my colleagues. I'll come back day after tomorrow."

Zainu had struggled hard to provide his son with a better education. He covered his poverty with a smile. It was a matter of wonder how he fulfilled his son's needs even in the midst of bankruptcy. Dilyab graduated in education from the Kerala University. Before too long, he was appointed as an English teacher at CWA English Higher Secondary School, Karikad. Though he got a meager salary from the school, it was really a buttress to his family. He was fortunate to get a couple of good colleagues at school.

Hearing a horn honking, he said, "Dad, my friends are waiting outside. Bye."

"When you reach there, don't forget to call me. Be very careful..."

Zainu noticed a red hue spreading rapidly around the affected area on his leg, with a burning pain and consequent uneasiness. It was a diabetic swelling. After a couple of days, all the joys that had been deposited in Dilyab's mind by the pleasure trip were shattered before his father's leg. He took his dad to Koja Hospital in the city. A minor surgery was suggested. A junior surgeon came to room 203, where Zainu was admitted, followed by a nurse, who held a tray with a few scissors, knives, a bottle of lotion, another bottle of surgical spirit, some cotton, and so on. The doctor performed a minor surgery on his leg and dressed the wound.

"You should regularly bring him here for dressing the wound," Dr. Paul advised Dilyab.

The doctor removed the puss with fragments of flesh from the sore on Zainu's leg on alternative days. Healing the wound was very difficult in his diabetic body.

He fell into a chasm of silence. Betadine, a yellow ointment, and a thick piece of cotton hid a horrible hole in his leg. He lay on his bed like a broken winged pigeon. He grew thin, and his penury thick, day by day. He couldn't even get up to shave; silver bristles thrived on his chin.

His wife was trying to pour rice porridge into his mouth with a steel spoon. Aching wound had turned him peppery. He didn't feel hungry. He had lost the sense of taste. "Take it away, Saya. I don't want it."

He pushed his wife's hand with the spoon, which fell down. Rice porridge lay

scattered on the mosaic floor. That kind of behavior was quite unexpected from him.

Dilyab soothed his dad with mild words, and ultimately tamed his rage. He sat beside him, holding his palm. Then he noticed tears filling up in his father's eyes.

A cloudy morning.

Hearing Saya's shriek, their neighbors came like moths. Kakka brought a phial of honey, for whom honey was the panacea for every disease. Zainu used to share his pains and pleasures with Kakka, an aged lean neighbor. Kakka poured the honey into his friend's mouth. Zainu was lying on his bed with a faint gleam of consciousness, breathing unusually and noisily. An ambulance came nodding its head along the country road. Dilyab took his father to the ambulance with the assistance of two stout young men.

Deep silence prevailed in the ICU of Koja Hospital. He stared at his father through a tiny glass window on the door. A duty nurse opened the door and asked him to talk with the doctor in the ICU.

"How's my dad, sir?" Dilyab inquired in a doleful tone.

"He's in a coma state. Now you call him aloud."

He went to his father's bed and called him, "Dad...dad...DAD..."

He noticed—he alone noticed—a tear drop in the corner of his father's closed eye. That was his dad's last tear drop like a seal on the container containing all the pain he had experienced during his life time.

Saya sat curled up on the damp floor of the dining room amidst the holy showers, fenced by her friends and relatives.

Dark night and the snow of December gobbled everything. There were no friends and relatives, except his mother and an aunt in Dilyab's house after his father's funeral. Emptiness deepened in his heart. He couldn't resist an impulse. Secretly he took his dad's unwashed cotton shirt from a black hanger—brought it close to his nose—got the smell of his dad's sweat mixed with the jasmine scent.

That trip to Ootty remains as a stain in his mind even after ten years. He rears himself—his immature mind—for not taking his dad to the doctor in time. Perhaps that wouldn't have made any difference. But it is a fact that an early treatment often avoids the complication in a diabetic patient. People often fail to do the right thing at the right time, he contemplates. And he wipes the dust from his dad's spectacles with the end of his white dhoti.



## A MURDER OF CROWS

Three crone crows glower on a light pole  
bobbing heads and gnashing beaks.  
One of them trills at you, a noise  
you've never heard before.  
like the clicking of pebbles against  
sheet metal, with just a hint of melody,  
threatening a song, a deathstroke harmony.  
As you walk towards the light,  
you linger a little longer in  
the darkness. The crows continue to caw—  
feathers ruffling, eyes glinting—and  
you hesitate because something  
whimpers on the sidewalk, a shapeless  
form, squirming in swaddling blankets  
whitewashed below the neon light.  
Messianic, with its three wise men above.  
The whimpers turn to cries as you  
shatter the womb of the dark,  
you're birthed out of night. The three  
crone crows laugh when you stand over  
the crying thing, over what you  
know to be—what must be—  
a baby. Their laughs are like crackling  
bellows, hoarse breathing, but you  
don't look at them, though you feel their eyes.  
You look at the blanketed thing, and  
you put a hand to the cloth,  
as the baby inside writhes and cries.  
One of the crows giggles, "Little  
did he know, little did he know,"  
And the rest take up the chorus.  
When you pull the blanket back  
there is no baby, but another crow  
covered in blood and feces. You  
jump back, but the crow flies faster  
black talons, anthracitic, search your  
face as the bird cries, cries like the infant  
it ingested. And the three crone crows  
they laugh as your screams pierce night  
like a shiv made in a dark prison cell.

—caleb warner

# the long white walk

Spotting Dave for the first time in four years was a shot of white lightning. A jolt that I had the skills to find him, followed by the warm spread of elation that he seemed okay. I understood all that. But just as quickly, I had the feeling of something else. It was the hesitation in his hunched walk, how he peered into the darkness beyond the streetlights. Instinctively I did what I had learned to do in Fallujah and any of a hundred other places in Iraq. I shrank back into a doorway and scanned the windows and rooftops of the facing buildings. Tried to see everything I could see.

It was my first time in Seattle, my first time this close to the Pacific. I'd been around the riverside docks in Pittsburgh, but never a harbor of this scale. Everything was new to me. This half-deserted warehouse district, the snow whipping out of the black west, the six weeks it had taken me to find him. Even Dave seemed new and different.

Half a block away Dave stopped beside a faded red brick warehouse with boarded windows and yellow warning tape chattering in the wind. He glanced up and down the street, then dropped to his knees in front of a small sidewalk-level window and jerked away the boards. Twisted onto his stomach and slid legs-first into the window. It was as if the building swallowed him. For a moment just his arms stretched outside as he maneuvered the boards back into place. The wind swept the empty street, streetlight to streetlight. A few footprints and scrape marks remained in the snow outside the window, nothing else. It was as if Dave had never existed. Or me, for that matter.



by peter w.j. hayes

That was the first time I ever set out to find someone. I might never have got into that line of work but Dave was my best friend at college. I was barely six months out of the Marines when his father asked me to find him. It wasn't like I was doing much anyway.

In college Dave and I met on the football field. He was a six foot two and stoked. Competitive. The kind of guy who found everything funny, and grinning, would lean over you in the weight room and push down on your weights as you bench pressed your limit. Just because. When I washed out of the program he could bench 50 pounds more than me. One drunk night I watched him stand a motorcycle upright as if it was made of balsa. Long story. They bred them tough in Meadville, PA, the old German farmer stock. The same town Sharon Stone came from, and Dave had the blue eyes and blond hair to prove it.

That was all before he went missing.

We dropped out of the University of Pittsburgh football program the same day. I was a linebacker, always trying to prove something, not so much tough as angry all the time. One game sophomore year we played a Texas team with a running back ticketed to the pros. On an end-around our cornerback stood him up, the two of them pushing against one another. All I had to do was finish the tackle, but being me at that time, I needed to prove something. So, from a dead run I jackknifed down on his knee.

You know it when a knee really goes. The wet pop and scream, all within the stone silence of the stadium.

Coach took me out of the game before the stretcher reached the running back. Nobody came near me on the bench. That kid never really played again. He went back to Texas. Drank. Ended up in jail.

I did that.

And this is what he did to me, although I would never use it to absolve how I injured him. He disconnected me. After that hit, anything and anyone related to football, it was as if I saw them from fifty feet away. I had crossed a line.

After the game only Dave talked to me in the locker room. He told me I needed a drink. And that night was the first time I noticed it, even through my self-disgust. Maybe seeing things from fifty feet away makes you more objective. But this is what I noticed: Dave had changed as well.

No reaction from him when a good-looking girl walked by, no rolling his eyes at guys hitting on girls out of their league. Through the din of the bar it dawned on me that Dave hadn't said ten words all night. There was I, seeing everything from fifty feet away and it was as if Dave couldn't see outside his head. That led us into some really serious drinking, which is, of course, how the motorcycle incident happened.

By the next morning Dave was gone. I never heard from him again or thought about him that much. I was too distracted. I stayed that way for another month, then dropped out and joined the Marines. I don't even remember my reasoning any more. But I liked the military. The structure and camaraderie all made sense to me, until Iraq took all that sense away again.

Now, three years later, I was standing half frozen in a Seattle doorway knowing I had two ways to go. Follow Dave into that building or walk away. I'd found him, I knew he was alive, I could report that back to his family. But given the dollars they'd sprung to get me this far, I didn't see how I could just walk away. And one other thing: I'd never found anyone before, but common sense told me that some people don't want to be found.

Like I had a choice.

I hiked the whitening sidewalk to the warehouse.

I did a once-around the place just to see what I had to deal with. More boarded up windows and doors. No go. Only one way in.

I knelt before the same window Dave had used. A tug shifted the boards. I took a breath, yanked, and followed Dave's technique of sliding inside legs first and maneuvering the boards into place behind me. My feet found a crate beneath the window. I worked the boards back into place, pivoted and peered into the darkness.

The wind whispered around the building. The room smelled damp. I felt my way down to the floor.

In the Marines I learned to be patient. I waited now, straining my eyes and ears, and gradually shapes emerged from the darkness, including a light grey rectangle on the far wall.

A door.

When I reached it I heard music, muffled and distant. I shuffled toward the sound. Dave hadn't even gone upstairs. A line of orange light showed at the edge of

a blanket-covered doorway. I took a breath and pushed the blanket aside. Stepped in, my arms loose.

Dave, sure enough.

The light was from a candle lantern on the floor. Dave was sprawled on a twin mattress, his head propped against the wall. He stared at me through pupils as black and hollow as the outside sky. The music came from a small boom box on the far side of the bed, next to a small bag of white powder and a bent spoon and syringe. I looked back at Dave. His pupils had shrunk but something moved behind those blue eyes.

"Levon Grace?" he finally croaked at me.

"Dude."

He didn't seem surprised. He blinked and waved me toward the floor as if he was expecting me. "Siddown."

I stepped closer to the bed and hooked a plastic milk crate from the wall. Sat. Prescription drug containers littered the floor around the lantern.

I studied him for a moment: "You're a hard guy to find."

He didn't answer right away. I could see him sequencing his thoughts, searching for coherence. "No phone, so everyone thinks I'm lost?"

"Are you interested in who is looking for you?"

"Nobody I can think of."

"Your parents. Your Dad mostly. He hired me to find you."

"How'd you do that?" He tried to focus and gave up. I could tell that he was actually interested in the technical part of it, but he just couldn't get his mind to gear up.

"How stoned are you?"

He looked from one gloomy corner of the room to another. I waited. Finally he twisted his neck and gazed at me. This time his eyes didn't waver: "So you found me. Now what?"

Up to you. I'll tell your Dad I found you. Then he's going to ask what you are doing and how you are. You tell me what to say."

"Tell him you didn't find me."

"But I did."

"And how did you do that?"

He was on point now.

"How do you think? I followed the motorcycle."

"I sold it no questions asked. Word of mouth."

"Yeah, but the guy who bought it resold it on Craig's List. I had a crawler looking for any sale of a black Ninja. He had a picture and I recognized the dented tank from the night we stole it. When it fell over and you picked it up?"

"That guy was an asshole." The corners of his mouth curled in a glimmer of his old smile.

"I wouldn't have let anyone take it for a ride either. Would you?"

"Depends on the size of the guy asking me. I was bigger than he was."

I pointed at the prescription drug containers. "What's that?"

His eyes traced the direction of my point and his tongue moistened his lips. "My good luck charms."

"Meaning?"

"I have to take a bunch of them every day."

"For what?"

"AIDS."

I lost my breath and wanted to close my eyes and not know any of this. I thought about hitting that guy in the knee so many years ago and all it had meant to what came next. For the guy I hit. For me. For Dave.

"Then," I said, just to breathe. "I remembered that bar getting robbed near college the night you took the motorcycle. Closing time on a Saturday when the money is good. One guy with a gun. And how the next day you were gone. So I searched on the same kind of robberies across the U.S. Found a rat trail of them every few months leading to one here about two weeks ago. Bike sold here. Same armed robbery here. Even after all these years. It wasn't rocket science."

"Wow. Dick Tracy"

I didn't say the other thing. How the first robbery was clean, but in the second shots were fired into the ceiling, the next included a pistol whipping, the robberies building like rage and despair right to the last one. The one that left a bartender with a hole in his chest and part of his jaw missing. The guy was alive, but just barely.

Then it dawned on me. "You got HIV in Pittsburgh. That's what started this."

He shrugged. "Yeah." He settled himself into the mattress. "I found out a couple of days before you put the hit on that guy. I thought some chick gave me herpes, so I got tested. They ran for all the sex diseases and HIV showed up, not herpes. I'd shared a needle with a guy right after spring ball. But HIV takes a while to show up on the tests, they said. Right then I was walking dead. Now it's AIDS. Who gives a shit."

"So you got pissed off and took the bike from that guy."

"No more pissed off than how you used to play. I always figured that was because you didn't know who your father was."

"Wow. Sigmund Freud."

He hadn't asked me how I'd found him in Seattle, a city big enough for people to live their whole lives without being found by anyone. I let it go. I didn't want to relive the two weeks I had spent talking to people and showing his picture around.

"So what do I tell your Dad?"

"I heard you went into the Marines."

"Yeah. After you left."

"Iraq?"

"Two tours."

"Did you light anyone up while you were over there?"

I had no answer for that and couldn't have put it into words anyway. He and I

had been friends years ago, but Iraq had put a stake through that heart. Iraq was something I could talk about only with guys who had been there.

"So, I heard that last year you talked to some of the guys from football. Borrowed money from them on some bullshit about needing to outfit yourself for a salmon boat? Is that how you heard I'd enlisted?"

He nodded. It took a moment, then he rolled onto his right side and fished under the mattress with both hands. He came up with an envelope in his left hand. "Here." He held it out to me. "Guys I borrowed from are listed on the front, plus how much for each one. Money is in there. You can give it back to them."

"Give it to them yourself."

"Not where I'm going."

I sat back. I was tired suddenly, mostly of talking in circles. "Dave," I said softly. "Tell me what to tell your family. Tell me what to say. I'm not going to lie. I found you, I'm going to tell them that. They will want to help you."

"You did light some guys up over there, didn't you? Shit, look what you did to that running back."

"Answer the question."

"Tell them I'm done. My life is over. I got nothing. Senior year in high school was the best I ever had. I was a football monster. I bagged the prom queen. Maybe a couple of years of football in college. Downhill from there."

"You know that is all bullshit."

"Really? I'm dead in a year or five. I got nothing. This is my mansion." He waved the envelope at the walls and ceiling above. "Is it making you proud?"

I wouldn't take the envelope so he dropped it on the floor between us. The track on the boom box shifted. It was a song I recognized from Smile Empty Soul. Guys in Iraq had posted videos of their firefights to YouTube using their songs for the soundtrack. It pulled me back there, distracting me. I said something just to get myself back into the moment.

"AIDS isn't a death sentence. You still have time." Technically that was true but there was nothing in my voice that would make anyone in the world believe it.

His hands were shaking and a line of sweat streaked the side of his face closest to me. "You know I have nowhere to go." He rolled his head toward me, the black of his pupils widening. "I've got as far as I can. It's water out there. The end of America. And here you are. A guy from the best years of my life asking me what the hell."

"Not the end of anything. You can start over. You know that."

"Not me. I'm done with it."

His right arm moved and came free of the sheets, a 9mm clenched in his fist. The gun from the robberies, I knew in that split second. Muscle memory had me half up off the milk crate but I froze as he nestled the muzzle under his chin pointing toward his brain.

"Dave, no."

"Tell my parents I don't have herpes."

The bang of the shot knocked me back down onto the milk crate, ears ringing. I swayed, trying not to puke. Closed my eyes, waited, opened them again looking at the floor. I rose and stepped into the hallway to get away from it all. I just stood in the dark, my ears ringing. The air of the building was flat, damp and tasted of salt.

I don't know how long I stood in the hallway. At some point my ears cleared enough to hear music again. Only then did I step back into the room. I made myself look at Dave one last time, then studied the gun laying at his fingertips. I thought about taking it so he wouldn't be connected to the robberies, but that was something I couldn't change. He had done those things. Instead, I circled the room. Turned off the boom box. Picked up the envelope and stuffed it in my back pocket. I leaned over to blow out the candle in the lantern and caught myself. I just couldn't leave him in the dark.

It took a few minutes to work my way back through the basement to the window. After I levered myself outside I stood for a time staring at Puget Sound, the cold settling into my bones like it would never leave. I decided to call the cops once I was back at the hotel. I had no choice. When they found the body they would figure out I'd been there.

The joy of the military. Your fingerprints and DNA are in every database known to God.

On the walk back to the hotel the wind dropped and the snow fell faster. My feet crunched with every step. I stopped a couple of times and looked back through the white silence, saw how the snow filled my tracks as I passed and gradually erased every step I took forward. I knew that feeling. The dust in Iraq had made me feel exactly the same way. When I looked forward the sidewalk stretched ahead, long and white. At the end was a warm room and a bed, then a plane to Pittsburgh and a car to Meadville. Finally, a kitchen table under a ticking clock with Dave's father on the other side staring at me with his German blue eyes. At that moment this is what I would say:

"I found him, but I got there too late."

The oldest story in the world, but at least it was honest.



## JACK SPEAKS

Although intoxicated within ethereal madness;  
bound within the chains of a soulless treason.  
I'm desperately in love with this Gothic sadness;  
whilst staring into mists of disheartened reason.  
Walking and stalking through dark rancid streets;  
stopping for shots as the pain's finally receding.  
Through smoke and crowds; reverent and discreet.  
A bottle to the abyss, now heartless and bleeding.  
See their frightened eyes view my crumpled prize;  
found there in the lane of the White Chapel fame.  
A gutter splashed with blood; wasted faceless lives;  
Feeling not of blame, nor an absolved pious shame.  
Destiny awaits all that tempt this pattered wraith  
from the harbors of doom, to the arches of festoon  
stealing souls from those; courting a dervish dance  
I'm in lust with the blood of all devoid of romance.  
Muffled be the moans through all incised dreams;  
Inhaling a darkling mind while exhaling into hell.  
Humming in rhyme; of timed whispered screams.  
Clock talks bye, so should I, pack and leave as well.

—ken allan dronsfield



## THE SURREAL MONSTER

is deftly composed of conglomerate parts  
thrives on dislocated dream fragments  
sometimes needs a crutch to stand upright  
is beautiful as a bronzed reflection of itself  
ugly as a nightmare sin  
has drawers in its chest and a bicycle pump for a hat  
embraces turbulent juxtapositions  
lives with flies in its brain  
spawns monstrous beauty

—bruce boston



## Up at Catfish Creek

Found her name in the obits one day last week:  
A slapdash little blurb  
summing up too little  
of the girl I used to meet  
up at Catfish Creek.

Wondered how much they really cared,  
the faceless survivors  
who did her no justice  
and provided no picture  
to memorialize her in print.

Could have said so much more than they did –  
described her beauty,  
praised her intellect,  
celebrated her academic achievements ...  
mentioned her recent love interest.

Clipped the text anyway with my favorite pair of scissors:  
With a thumbtack, I added it  
to the bulletin board in the basement  
where I keep a lock of her hair  
I collected up at Catfish Creek.

—lee clark zumpe

[poetry]

## My Guest from Finland

Rural eyes fall upon my white guest with golden hairs.  
She's put on jeans, not a sari, and an orange T-shirt, not a blouse.  
I can't blame our dusty children chasing her in wonder along our country road.  
I'm her host- cum- guide just for a day.  
My Indian English and her Finnish English meander through a mist.

Kids clap seeing her risky balancing on a fallen coconut palm across our canal.  
Applause replaces her nerves.  
She buys a paper bowl of parched peanuts.  
The vendor's eyes tickle her skin.  
...and we return like the sun amidst the saffron splendor.

She watches me boiling water in the kitchen.  
Emotions with the aroma of chocolate coffee powder fill up in the kettle of my mind.  
Her tongue like a spoon drops sugar words.  
Vapor of some sweet vibe rises up.  
Not enough hours remain to grow it up, either as a friendship or as an international love.

I resist my hot impulse to pinch on her apple cheek.  
I bundle everything up in a precious smile.

—fabiyas mv

# Eternal Fragments

His smile and sob – in exact  
shape – live on my face. Alter  
egos of his tension loiter in  
my mind.

My big toes – like the tortoises'  
heads – are perfect imitations.

The same smell of sweat from  
my armpits rouses his presence.

The sparks within my skull are  
from his furnace. His gene  
reflects in my word and deed.

As I fumble in the snag, light  
falls from his antique lantern.

I often see him on the pavement  
of my midnight dream.

What he dreamed of me, I dream  
of my children.

When death had chewed my dad,  
some eternal fragments fell out  
of its mouth.

—fabyias mv

[short story]

# STOOL FOOL

by douglas ogurek



My crap looked like an A one night. I showed my wife. She said, “Weird. I’ve made lots of Is, Js, and Cs. But an A? That’s unique.”

“We should take a picture,” I said. “Call the paper. I can see the headline: ‘Honorable Discharge.’”

We laughed. Thought nothing more of it. Until the next night: I got a B.

“You’ve heard of alphabet soup?” she said. “Well this is alphabet poop!” We laughed.

I said, “My GPA has dropped.”

“GPA?”

“Grade Poop Average.”

“No matter what grade you get, it’s always going to be crappy.”

“And no matter what grade I get, I’m expelled.” We laughed.

We chalked up the A and the B to a fluke. Shit happens, right? But if I had known those letters were the beginning of what would plunge our relationship into the toilet in less than two weeks, I never would have shown them to her.

The next day, we went out for dinner.

I said, “I dropped off a letter today.”

“To whom?”

“To me, I guess.”

“You wrote yourself a letter?”

“No, no. I dropped a letter in the toilet.”

“Ha ha.” She rolled her eyes. “What letter?”

“Oh, maybe you don’t care.”

“No, no. What letter is it?”

I said, “It sounds like you don’t really want to know.”

“Please. Just tell me.”

“Guess.”

“Don’t tell me it’s a C.”

“No.”

“Well, what?”

“What do you think?”

“Jerry, just tell me.”

“Fine. It’s an S. A-B-S. I think this could mean something. Maybe it’s spelling out a longer word. Like ‘absent’ or ‘abscond’ or ‘absolute.’ Maybe even ‘abstemiousness’ or ‘abstruse.’”

“How about ‘absurd?’ I think your A-B-S theory is just BS.”

“How do you know?” I said. “You with your occasional Is and Js and Cs?”

“All of a sudden the toilet’s some kind of crystal ball?” she said. “Jerry and his crystal bowl. All signs point toward a shitty future.”

The next day, I thought more about what ABS might mean. Was it an acronym? Anti-lock brake system? Stop? Stop doing something? A-B-S. Was it talking about abdominal muscles? Somebody’s initials? Or maybe some complex code? Maybe some message that would change my life.

When I received a T the next night, I elected not to tell my wife. A-B-S-T. BATS? STAB? Abstruse?

The following evening, I peered into the receptacle. What I saw resembled a massive boulder beginning its descent down the left side of a mountain peak. This time, I decided to show my wife. "Last night, I made a T. But I'm not so sure about this one."

"I guess that's it," she said. "Sorry. A-B-S-T. Looks like an end to your streak, except for the one at the bottom of the bowl."

After she walked away, I looked in the mirror, and what I saw in the bowl was no longer a massive boulder commencing its descent. Instead, I observed the next stage of the masterwork I was gradually unveiling, for the mirror revealed an "R."

"It's not an R," she said. "You're making a mountain out of a dunghill."

"I think that you're envious because you were incapable of interpreting the next piece of the puzzle."

"You're right. Let's see...A-B-S-T-R. Perhaps we should rearrange the letters. BRATS maybe? Or STAR then a word that starts with B. What do you think?"

STAB R is what came to mind. "Oh, I have begun to catalog my thoughts. However, my preference is to patiently await the next component."

"Let's hear your thoughts now. Maybe we can figure it out together...make a game of it!"

"This is not a game," I said.

"Oh, right. This is some serious shit. Let's tell some of our friends about it. Maybe ask my mom. Perhaps we can start a spiritual movement...travel around the world preaching the good news according to your butt."

"Our friends are far too sophomoric to even conceive of something this profound. And your mother?" I chuckled. "She got squeamish when we revealed that the mushrooms she was eating were shiitake."

"Oh, right. This is a special message just for the two of us."

"We are the elite," I said. "Presently, the only ones capable of grasping its meanings. Our unequivocal calling is to interpret these works and share their philosophical implications among the elite."

"Works? So you're an artist now?" She looked at the backwards R. "I hate to say it, Jerry, but your work stinks."

"Don't fall prey to the idiot machine."

"I'm tired of your shit."

"Please try to understand...understand that there is something beneath what is floating on the surface...some profound truth. Perhaps this whole experience is challenging us to reach into the infinite."

"Into the infinite? Come on! The only thing about it that's infinite is its stench."

"Well, I'm beginning to think that you're stupidity is also infinite."

During the succeeding three days, the chasm that parted our aesthetic sensibilities widened significantly. However, I had also emitted and, through an acute awareness of geometrical variations and a knowledge of the distortion and violence apparent in varying shades, interpreted three more letters. The first

consisted of one elongated line, which could have been interpreted as an I. Instead, I determined that it was actually a one, which inevitably led me to the first letter of the alphabet.

The next expulsion was so profuse that it smothered the surface like algae. After photographing the work and hanging it in my study, I contemplated it for two hours. I was struggling to unveil, struggling to see. See. That was it. Clearly, the next letter I was seeking was a C.

A murky contortion of splotches and fragments submerged in strident browns and smears of raw black formed the next letter. I spent the remainder of that night studying the implications of this curious conglomeration, and finally, I discovered that it was not so much about what was there, but more about what was not there. I had my word: “abstract.”

I was studying my latest creation when she interrupted me by jiggling the doorknob. “Jerry, what are you doing in there? Why is this locked?”

“Please, love. I’ll be out in a minute. Patience is a tree with bitter roots, but sweet fruits. I’m merely—”

“Patience is the virtue of asses.”

“I’m merely enjoying the latest of my works.”

“What letter is it this time?”

I flushed.

The next night, I went beyond the finite; the work I produced transcended time. She pounded on the door. “Come on! You’ve been in there two hours!”

I took a sip of my cocktail and then allowed her to enter. “My sincerest apologies.”

“There’s no letter in there. It’s just a bunch of slop.”

“You need to spend at least two hours with this piece. Then you will unveil its meaning.”

“You want me to stare at your shit for two hours?”

“You’re thinking too mainstream,” I said. “You’re only looking at what’s on the surface. Try looking beyond that. Don’t you see? This is not about a specific thing that is painted there. It’s about a mood that it evokes.”

“What? You’re nuts.”

“This is an emotional conquest. This is art...art that is to be enjoyed solely by me. It is not meant for any market; it is meant for me. I am elite.”

“You’re nuts. That’s not art. That’s a pile of crap.”

“You’re a fool,” I said. “Does everything have to be dumbed down for you? It is art because I say that it is art! I am the emissary in darkness. Why don’t you join the rest of the idiotic masses with your immediacy?”

I thought I knew, but now I am miserable. She has gone, and I am alone. Every day, I look into the toilet and strive to unscramble what occurred. One thought dominates: abstract art is shit, and shit is abstract art.



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# of a different kind

by kimba rose williams

Rory hitched her sodden backpack higher on her shoulders; it was now at least twice as heavy as it had been when she left. Her tennis shoes sloshed through moonlit rivulets that ran down the sidewalk and into the street. Her neck ached from the weight and her socks absorbed and squished out water with every step—like sponges—but Rory refused to go back.

A car pulled up beside her, and Rory jumped. The engine was so quiet that she hadn't heard it coming. She'd been listening, too. But for the *k-clunk-k-clunk-k-clunk* of an ancient engine, not the silent purr of a black convertible.

Rory's hand clutched over her heart as the car rolled down the passenger window. She leaned over and relaxed upon seeing the driver—a cute blond with an easy smile.

"Hello, darlin', where you headed?" the woman said.

"The airport," said Rory.

"Sweetheart, that's gotta be four hours on foot."

Rory's shoulders slumped, "Oh, I hadn't realized ... Well, my flight doesn't leave until noon anyway. I'll make it in time."

"Don't be ridiculous," the woman said. "Get in, I'll give you a ride."

"Oh, I couldn't, really."

"C'mon, it'll only take twenty minutes. I'm already headed that way, it's no trouble."

Rory shivered in the cold rain as she deliberated.

She shook her head and opened her mouth to refuse—"That's very kind, ma'am, but no thank you"—when she heard it:

*K-clunk-k-clunk-k-clunk.*



Rory turned, and saw the familiar flash of red cresting over the hill. Coming toward her.

"Darlin'?" the woman said.

"Are you sure?" Rory asked, even as she opened the door and sloshed in.

"Absolutely." The woman put the car in drive, and Rory watched as the red 1957 Chevy pickup passed them. She breathed a sigh of relief.

"Thank you," Rory said as she rummaged through her backpack. She pulled out her journal, now soggy and wrinkled. "Do you mind?" she asked, as she motioned toward the dash heater.

"Go right ahead," the woman said. Rory opened her journal and put it spine-up on the dash, hoping the dry heat would save it. The woman continued, "And honestly, it's my pleasure. I couldn't leave you out there; you looked like a drowned rat."

Rory laughed. "To tell you the truth, I felt like one."

The woman laughed with her, and then said, "Oh, where are my manners? I'm Lucille."

"Oh, right. Nice to meet you; I'm Rory."

"Rory? Ain't that a boy's name?"

Rory laughed. "Actually, it's a unisex name. Like Taylor or Alex."

"Ah. I like it, it suits you."

"I like to think so. And ditto for yours."

"Why, thank you, sweetheart."

Rory examined the vehicle. It was spotlessly clean, and the leather seats shone.

The look of the car sparked something, and Rory just had to ask, "Hey, isn't this that car from that TV show?"

"Which one?"

"You know, that one with the two brothers who hunt for ghosts or something. They drive a pretty black car that looks a lot like this one."

Lucille snorted. "And I thought *I* was the blond." Rory blushed. "That's a 1967 Chevy Impala. This beauty is a 1966 Cadillac Sedan Deville."

"Right, sorry, silly me." Rory stared out the window.

*And I thought it was only him who could make me feel two inches tall.*

"So," Lucille said, "how long you been walking in this weather? You must live close by."

Rory rubbed her chest. "No, I actually left around ten last night."

"Ten? Good night, woman, this storm's been going since nine. Didn't you have anyone who could give you a ride?"

"Could, maybe, but he never would. He's the reason I'm leaving." Rory took a deep breath. "My husband is abusive, and so, so manipulative. I just sorta ... I guess I just woke up yesterday, and realized what he'd done to me, what I'd *allowed* him to do to me."

"What do you mean, darlin'?"

"It's just ... he was so kind at first, y'know? Then a couple months in, he lost

his temper. I was going to leave him, but he was so apologetic the next day. I told myself it was the only time ... until a few months later. Then it was every few weeks, then every other day. He convinced me to move far away from my family, from everything I loved." Rory wiped her eyes.

"Hold on, I got some tissues," Lucille said, rummaging in her purse.

Rory continued, "I called my dad, and he bought me a ticket. He's waiting for me at home, I just have to get to the airport."

Rory looked out the windshield, past the curled spine of her now-dry journal, and saw her exit.

"Oh, just turn here ..." Rory trailed off as Lucille sped past. "Oh, you missed it. If you take the next exit it's not too hard to do a u-ey."

Then Rory felt a pinch in her arm, and looked down to find a needle being pulled out. She followed the hand holding it to Lucille, and her easy smile.

Lucille put the syringe back in her purse, and reached for Rory's journal. Rory tried to stop her, but her arms were so heavy—at least twice as heavy as when she'd left – and she could only watch through fuzzy eyes as Lucille snagged the journal—the messy chicken-scratch the only thing that had kept her sane all those years—and tossed it out the window.

It landed with a *squelch* on the highway as the red taillights vanished into the distance. The words had long since run from the pages in black rivulets before the rain stopped, and the sun rose.



# Garden M

Like cartoon characters  
On motion picture shows  
With human skin attached  
Have little eyes that glow

Variety of types thrive  
Colors differ by row  
Some limbs are exposed  
Select legs buried below

Because of condition  
The sight creates a show  
Display mosaic of art  
Of someone in the know

They sit by their window  
Watch garden monsters grow

—denny marshall

## The Drifter

The drifter in the room is a stranger,  
he is crazy, is Bigfoot with deer moccasins on—  
monster of condominium rooms and dreams.  
The drifter in this room used to be my friend.  
He spoke straight sentences, they did not sound like poetry—  
reverberated like a narrative, special lines good a few bad,  
or stories being unwound by the tongue of a gentleman,  
lip service, juggler of simple words to children.  
The night is a dark believer in drifters,  
they sound sober, affairs with the wind,  
the 3 A.M. honking of the Metro trains.  
Everything sleeps with a love, a nightmare at night.  
The drifter.

—michael lee johnson



## REMEMBRANCE

Stone after stone rolling uphill  
to the place of remembrance,

the cosmos plucking  
on blue, sinewy strings.

I thrash toward the music,  
disappear, for now, into clouds

where all the shapeless things go  
to try to find your face.

—darrell lindsey

[short story]



## by michael seese

*Ding dong.*

I looked at the clock. 8:19. Almost twenty minutes past the official, government-sanctioned end of trick-or-treating. Don't these parents have watches? Of course they don't. They have cell phones which happen to show the time, if they cared enough to actually check it, that is. Perhaps if I ignored them, they would just ...

*Ding dong. Ding dong.*

Pushy. So it probably was some older kids flying solo. If so, I knew that if I didn't answer, I'd be on the receiving end of a trick. Soaped windows or toilet paper yard art at best. Slashed tires at worst. What the hell. I had a ton of candy left. I might as well make their day by unloading my remaining stock. I had to peel myself off the couch anyway. Sheila would be over soon, and I had to get my costume on.

*Ding dong. Knock knock.*

*Coming, coming,* I thought as I grabbed the bowl and opened the door.

They seemed tall ... taller than the menagerie of monsters—ghosts, fairies, and Darth Vaders—who had formed a near-constant progression of outstretched hands over the course of the evening. They also were bigger than the typical too-cool-for-a-costume teens who, nonetheless, apparently were neither too cool nor too old to beg for sugar.

The one to the right—a woman—held a video camera, and the one to the left had one of those movie-set clapperboards. He took a slight step forward, said, "And .... action!" then snapped it shut.

The one in the middle, at least, saw fit to dress for the occasion. Playing off the now-obvious film-making theme, he wore knee-high black leather boots, tan jodhpurs, a white shirt with a silk ascot, comically oversized sunglasses—the foot-

wide kind one finds at a novelty shop—and an undersized black beret. In his left hand he held a megaphone.

Then I saw the gun, pointed at me. Without saying a word, he fired. A burning fist slugged me in the gut, and I blew back into the room. Butterfingers and Snickers scattered across the floor.

“Please tell me you got that,” he said to the one with the camera. “I’d hate to have to re-shoot. He’d probably hate it even more.”

“Why ...”

“I’ll bet there are a million questions running through your mind right now. Is there a god and, if so, why would he choose a name so similar to dog? Are Katy Perry’s real? *Pssst*. They’re not. If a man falls in his own house, does he make a sound?” Removing the sunglasses, he bent down and distorted my nose with the barrel. “If he’s smart, he won’t.”

“Who ...”

“Oh, *that* question. OK, that’s an easy one. Allow me to introduce myself.” He snapped his fingers and pointed at a space near the television. Clapperboard Guy set up one of those elevated canvas chairs. He sat down. “I am The Director. And my colleagues are,” he said motioning to either side, “who gives a rat’s derrière? *No one cares* about the minions behind the scenes. If you really want to know, wait for the end of the credits.”

“What ...”

“Another good question. Have you ever heard of *cinéma vérité*?”

I had. But I was in no condition to offer up my interpretation of the art form, nor discuss the merits of simple reportage versus artistic expression through subject manipulation.

He continued, “Well, I am filming a *cinéma vérité* oeuvre titled, ‘Bleed.’ And being that it’s *cinéma vérité*, it has to be ... well ... *c inéma*,” he said, tapping the shoulder of the woman with the camera.

“Mr. Director,” she said, “you made me jiggle.”

“Sorry, Susanna. But I do tend to make myself jiggle. Or is that giggle? *Tee-hee*! Where was I? I don’t remember. Film on, my dear.”

“You were talking about *cinéma*—”

“Oh, yeah. And it has to be *vérité*, or true. And what better way to capture the gritty, desperate reality of a man who has been shot in his own home and is lying there bleeding than to ... well ... shoot a man in his own home and let him lie there and bleed?”

My mind wanted to sort it all out. The first thing I needed to do, though, was stop the bleeding. A shoe lay to my left. I turned it over and placed the sole against the exit wound, then shifted to place my weight on it. I couldn’t tell if I had managed to have any effect on the flow of blood from my back. But it would have to do. The front would require a dedicated effort. I reached into my pocket for a handkerchief then applied as much pressure as I could. It seemed to help, a little. I knew I wouldn’t be able to continue for long.



“Oh! Very good!” The Director gushed, clapping. “See how he makes an heroic effort to save himself. His survival instincts have kicked in. I’m glad. This would have been such a dull endeavor if you had just quickly and quietly expired on your off-white—but now flecked with red—carpeting.” Looking directly into the camera, he said, “Let’s get to know our victim ... I mean our *star*, shall we? Tell us something unique about yourself, slowly dying guy. Any hobbies? Funny jokes? Last requests?”

I elevated my head slightly to look at him. But it began to tax me, and I dropped it back with a thud to the floor. I could *feel* my pulse increasing and weakening. I had entered stage 1 of clinical circulatory shock.

He got down and knelt at my side—so the camera could see us both—and began shaking me slightly. “Hold on, Sarge! Hold on! The medics are on their way. Don’t give up. Fight. Fight! Remember, Annabelle Lou is back home, waiting for you and not sleeping with the mailman, and the twins are on their way. Hold on!” He then flopped down next to me. “I ... I see ... a light. It’s so beautiful. So warm. Grandpa? Is that you?” He returned to his original position. “Don’t do it, Sarge! Don’t go to the light! Fight it, Sarge! Fight! Oh, this is getting boring. Do you have a deck of cards, or an Xbox, or something?”

I may not have seen “the light.” But I began to see stars. *What next?* I wondered. I didn’t have to wait long for his next delusional, sadistic tangent.

“Hey!” he said as a switchblade slipped from his sleeve and settled into his palm, “It’s Halloween, and I have not yet carved a jack-o’-lantern.” He waved the weapon—still closed yet still menacing—an inch from my eye. “It’s my favorite holiday, you know. And I’d really hate to miss out on the *slicing*! So I don’t want to forget. Do you have a pen and paper I could borrow?”

He seemed completely serious. I nodded toward the desk near the door.

“Splendid,” he cried as he absently dropped the weapon, just out of arm’s reach. The camera followed his motion. Ignoring the pain, I reached out, snatched it, and slid it under my thigh.

With a great flourish he sat down, uncapped a pen, and began writing. “To do. One. Wait for this guy to die. Two. Flee the crime scene. Three. Carve jack-o’-lantern. Is that hyphenated, or with an apostrophe, like an Irishman? It probably doesn’t matter. I think I’ll be able to figure out what I meant. Hello! What’s this?” he said as he lifted a photograph of Sheila and me taken—incidentally—at a Halloween party last year. She wore a police uniform to complement my “traditional” white-and-black-striped prisoner costume. This year, we had planned to reverse roles. My outfit, in fact, lay over the arm of the couch, wrapped in plastic, just to the left of where he sat.

The Director followed my gaze and spied it.

“Ah, clever!” he said, holding it up, examining it, and—apparently—mistaking it for real. “Last year you got to be the naughty one, officer.” His face assumed a look of mock fear. “Oh no, kids! We just shot a cop. We’re in trouble. He’s going to arrest

us! Come to think of it...nah! He's too busy expiring. But this! *Ooh la la!* What a tasty dish," he said as he stuck out his tongue and licked her photo.

"Why you ...?" I flicked the switchblade open and flung it at his ribs. I hit my intended target squarely. Unfortunately, I had retaliated with a comb, rather than a blade.

"Good trick, huh? You are a feisty one. Stupid, but feisty. I like that," he said as he walked over and bore down with his heel on my wrist. I sucked in deeply—or tried to—but couldn't get enough breath.

"You're making ..." I gasped.

"A movie! Yes, I know. To be honest, I really thought this would be more interesting. Do you think you could crawl around, or something? Maybe even try to escape?"

I could not. I could barely speak. But I still managed to eke out, "I'm cold."

"It is chilly in here. Rufus, close the door." The clapperboard guy obliged. "Better?"

"No. I'm still cold."

"Prima donna! What would you like me to do about it? Reverse the calendar back to summer?"

"Could I have a blanket?"

"No. Sorry. This is *cinéma vérité*."

"So?"

"So, this is real life. You're cold. Deal with it."

I summoned strength. "In real life, a person who has been shot and is bleeding out gets cold. There's always that scene where the person says, 'I'm so cold,' just before dying. So covering me with a blanket would be a logical plot element of the story."

He thought for a moment and said, "You're right."

I motioned toward the back of the couch.

"That ugly thing? Your call. But I suppose if you're going to get blood all over something, it might as well be something that's already hideous." He covered me. "Now, where were we? Oh, yes. We're trying to come up with something more interesting than this...still life that is your soon-to-be-over life. Team ... ideas?"

"We could put his hand in warm water and make him pee."

"Well, it's only funny if you can see it. And he's now covered with an ugly blanket."

"We could put make up on him," offered Susanna.

"Juvenile."

"We could pee on his carpet."

"Gross!"

"Invite the neighbors over and shoot them?"

"Intriguing, Susanna, intriguing. But complicated. Besides, they might not like him. So they'd hang up."

"Ooh!" gushed Rufus. "Why don't we—"

"No."

"I didn't—"

"No."

"But you didn't even let me—"

"I just *know* it's stupid."

Rufus pouted.

"Hey, bleeding guy. How about you? Know any good jokes?"

"How many idiots does it take to make a movie? Three. And they're in my living room right now."

I knew I was pushing. I meant to push. I assumed I would die. I was going to bleed to death. The only question in my mind was whether or not he would torture me. Plus, I held out the small sliver of hope that if I died sooner, rather than later, they would leave before Sheila arrived. All things being equal, I would have preferred that she not walk in on a trap like this. So I paid homage to the scene in *True Romance* where Dennis Hopper, realizing the same thing as I had, goads Christopher Walken into putting a bullet in his head.

"Nice try, Clifford," he said, a clear reference to the name of Hopper's character in that film. "I've seen the movie. So close, but no cigar for you, bad boy! But, hey! Here's another famous scene." He then maneuvered around to my wounded side, and began performing a little soft-shoe while gaily lilting, "I'm singing in the rain. Just singing in the rain ..."

I closed my eyes and waited for the series of kicks. They didn't come. I opened my eyes. He was right in my face. "Never rub another man's rhubarb."

All I could do was moan.

"I know," he continued. "It's getting really boring. Can't you do something else? Do you have to just lie there? I really should have scripted this thing out. Come on! Think, think, think. Hey! Halloween is a time for parties. *Couples* parties. You don't suppose that tasty little treat over there," he said, nodding in the direction of our photograph, "is the liberated kind? The kind who will come by and pick her man up?"

I stifled a flinch.

"If so, we'll have a cameo appearance. A walk-on. The mind reels at the possibilities. Let's see...how to work that in? I could shoot her knees and then put her somewhere comfy to let her watch you bleed, unable to help her beloved Romeo. That's gritty. That's tension. Or perhaps we just handcuff her to the desk. You must have a pair lying around somewhere, Officer ... um ... well, I'll come up with a clever name later and just Foley it in. Handcuffs? Wow! That opens a whole new world of possibilities with regard to how we could get into the movie. *All* of us. Susanna...remind me. Do you like girls, too? Or just boys?"

"I'm flexible."

"So then the only question becomes sequentially or simultaneously? I can work on that."

"You fu—"

"Shut up!" he said, kicking me in the side. Mercifully, the side without the bullet wound. "Susanna, let's visit the prop department and find those cuffs," he said as he marched into my house. "Rufus. Stay here and keep an eye on him."

Though I didn't hold out any real hope, I decided to try making small talk with Rufus. He seemed less than bright, and might offer up some useful information.

"So, Rufus. How long have you been working with The Director?"

"Um. We got in the car to come here around 8:00. It's now about ..." He stared stupidly at the wall clock—the kind with hands—before searching around for another one. After an unsuccessful minute, he simply looked down at the floor and began whistling. He picked his nose and flicked the output in the general direction of the wall. I decided he wasn't worth the effort and energy. I rested instead.

After several minutes The Director announced his reappearance with a joyful, "Whoo-ee! I feel so relieved."

I opened my eyes to see him zipping up his fly.

"What ..."

"I tell you my friend, I thought *that* picture of your girlfriend was hot. But the one on your nightstand? Hubba-hubba."

"Tell me you didn't ..."

Susanna nodded morosely.

"Don't worry," he added, "I wiped it all off. Oh, but you might want to get your carpet cleaned now."

Susanna made a discrete finger-gagging gesture behind his back. *Perhaps she could be more useful to me*, I thought.

"Mr. Director?" I asked. "Could you please get me a glass of water? I'm very thirsty."

"I'd love to help. Really, I would. But I have a lot of trouble working faucets. That's why I have 'people.' It's a nice perk."

"There's a glass over there," I said, pointing at the table by the couch where I had been comfortably, peacefully, sitting 15 minutes ago.

He sighed. "Oh, why not?" He walked over, retrieved the glass, returned, bent down carefully, brought the glass in close, and then threw its contents in my face. I didn't actually expect him to hold it to my lips and serve me. I was prepared, and at least managed to catch some in my mouth, which would not have been possible had he simply poured it on the floor.

Rufus raised his hand. "Mr. Director?" he asked sheepishly. "Can I go see the picture?"

"I don't know. Can you promise you'll control yourself, and will not sully that lovely woman's face with your sticky biological fluids?"

"No."

"Great. Let's go. Susanna, my dear, you stay here and keep filming. See if you can make him do something. Perhaps you can get a rise out of him. Oh, that might have been a bad choice of words, considering ..." he said as he adjusted his private parts. "Ta-ta!"

I didn't hold out great hope for reaching her, either. But I had to try.

"Susanna. That's a nice name. My sister is named Susan," I lied. "So, have you gone to film school? Or are you self-taught?"

Silence.

"Come on. You can talk to me. The Director said to make me do something. Talking is something."

"I'm not supposed to be in the movie. I'm just working the camera."

"Oh, there are plenty of instances in *cinéma vérité* where the crew is filmed, as they are filming."

"I like staying behind the camera."

"I understand. Hey, I have an idea. Look to your right." she did. "What do you see?"

"Your desk."

"Above that?"

"A mirror."

"You know what I see? I see a woman who can't be an accomplice to murder."

She paused, then lowered the camera and stared at herself. Seeing her full face for the first time, I noticed she was pretty. And scared.

"You don't want to go through with this, Susanna. You can't. It's not in you."

"I ..."

"Why don't you pick up that phone? Pick it up, and dial 9-1-1. When they answer, just whisper, 'Please send the police.' Then hang up quietly. That's all you have to do. In a few minutes it will be over. For both of us."

"You don't understand!" she said as she faced me. I then noticed her black eye. "He controls people. He just gets inside of you."

"Susanna, listen to me very carefully. I know people who can help you. My girlfriend is going to be here soon. I'm surprised she's not here already. But when she does get here, she—"

Susanna gasped slightly, her frightened, heightened senses able to hear his footsteps well before I could. She wiped a tear, and resumed her position.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," she whispered.

"Wow! And I thought *I* was prodigious," the Director exclaimed. "If I ever decide to make *those* kinds of movies—wink, wink, nudge, nudge—I may have found my star."

Rufus grinned stupidly.

"I'm glad you both were able to relax," I said sarcastically.

"So tell me, Susanna ... anything good?"

"No, Mr. Director. He just lay there with his eyes closed."

"Too bad. Maybe I should cut off his eyelids. Of course with the switchblade comb, it will take some time and effort. But I suppose it would be well worth—"

"Uh-oh. Mr. Director? I think my battery is running low."

"What? How can that be? Did you forget to charge it?" he spat out.

"No, sir. I did. But it's an old camera, with an old battery. They don't hold charge that long. Maybe we should wrap up and go."

"Are you revising *my* script? Are you trying to muscle in on the writing credits?"

"No, sir."

I could tell she was terrified. And really brave.

"Cut!" he yelled before turning his back to her and impatiently tapping his foot.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Director," Susanna said. She set the camera on the floor, and produced from her back pocket a small kitchen knife. She pulled up a sleeve of her sweatshirt, which exposed an extensively scarred forearm, and drew the blade across. She exhaled softly as her eyes closed and fluttered, her face a mixture of pain and pleasure. A small crimson line appeared in the blade's wake.

The Director, to that point unaware of her little mutilation ritual, turned back, sighed with disgust and said, "Susanna, Susanna! You put the camera down! Where are your brains?"

She looked down, and stifled a sob. "Sorry, sir. Sometimes I—"

The Director pressed the pistol against the side of her skull and pulled the trigger. A complex grotesque pattern of gray and red joined my wallpaper.

"Oh, I found them! They're over there," he cackled. Looking back at me, he added, "I have got to talk to the agency. These interns they send over are just dead weight. Get it? *Dead weight!* Sometimes, I just kill myself. Oh, I did it again!"

So engrossed was he in his self-amusement that he failed to notice the knife had hit the floor just in advance of Susanna's dead body, bounced twice, and landed a literal inch from my hand. I reached out, snatched it, and secreted it away under the blanket. Now, I just needed to bide my time.

"Rufus," he said picking up the camera, "I am giving you a field promotion to head cinematographer. I know you'll come through with flying colors." Glancing at the wall, he demurred and said, "Hmmm. Maybe I should rephrase that." He then clutched his comrade's shoulders and kissed him on both cheeks.

"How do I work—"

"Just look through here and squeeze that. Good boy."

Perhaps the time to discuss the merits of simple reportage versus artistic expression had come.

"You know," I said, drawing a surprising amount of resolve from somewhere, "this movie is going to suck."

"*Pfff!* Actors do not question The Director. I direct. You act. Got it? Good! Because don't think for a second that I can't replace... Um, what do you mean?"

"You're driving the plot. That's not *vérité*. *Vérité* should be more like a documentary, where you merely record what happens. You should be a fly on the wall. But you didn't do that. You walked in here and shot me. How often does that happen in real life?"

"More often than you would think, chum. You know, chum is the term for shark bait. Why would we call our friends something like that?"

"You're not making *cinéma vérité*. What you're doing is more mock-umentary. Or muck-umentary. Or suck-umentary. Hey! Maybe you could coin the phrase. Own it, like Pat Riley does 'three-peat.' Then, whenever some future filmmaker creates a piece of garbage like this, he'll have a name for it. And you can collect royalties."

"Careful, friend."

"What are you going to do? Fire me? You can't fire me. The Screen Actors Guild will have me back on the set before you can wet yourself."

“Fuck the Guild!”

“Ah-ha! You’re not a member. That’s why you’ve got a chip on your shoulder,” I said, more strength returning. “You can’t even get into the union. Of course, they do have standards. And one of them is that you actually need to be a part of a real film, instead of this hokey, two-bit home movie you’re shooting.”

“Why you!” he shouted as he straddled my chest and began choking me.

It was now or never. I pulled out Susanna’s knife, plunged it into the side of his neck, and twisted. I labored to move past the mere metaphorical concept of “twisting the knife,” and endeavored to open a huge literal hole. Though I am neither a doctor, nor do I play one on television, I have a pretty good idea as to the location of the carotid artery. Direct hit. He screamed and grabbed his neck in a vain attempt to stop the spray.

He fell off me, and rolled onto his back. After several seconds of gargling his own blood, he stopping moving and stared silently at my ceiling.

Rufus, to this point either paralyzed with shock or as slow-witted as he had seemed all along, yelled, “Hey!” and moved in toward me. I tried to roll as he swung the camera at my head. I did manage to avoid what easily could have been a fatal blow. Nonetheless, he did connect solidly with my cheek. I heard the bone snap. He raised the camera high above his head, preparing to bear down with a much more savage strike. There was a single gunshot, and a small red jet issued from his chest. He slumped to his knees and then collapsed to the other side.

I looked toward the door where Sheila stood, still in uniform, her service revolver clutched firmly in both hands.

I smiled feebly. “That’s a wrap,” I said, before fading to black.



[short story]

# *Sitting on the Waves*

by stanford allen





Since he was a young boy, Jonathan had always owned a canoe.

At the age of thirteen he and his friend Mike had made their own kayak. With five twelve feet long strips of wood, one inch by a half thick, with several short pieces to brace them, the boys glued, pinned and bent the timber until it formed the skeleton of a slim light-weight boat.

Thin canvas was used to cover the structure; sewn and sealed with more waterproof glue where the edges of the covering joined together. The whole craft with its pointed ends and slab sides was then moistened with water and allowed to dry in the sun. The canvas shrunk, tightening the cloth over its timber frame ready to be layered with several coats of red oil-based paint.

An opening, eighteen inches square, had been left on the deck for the venturing youth to slide in and take his position to propel the fragile, Inuit style craft with a double-ended paddle.

Following that year, come rain or shine, Jonathan spent many summers happily plying along the river Thames in his homemade boat in company with his water sport besotted friends in similar craft of their own.

Like the current of the river, in its endless flow, the boy grew into a man. His friends followed their own paths into adulthood and the summers and winters were consumed with the pursuit of a livelihood and attachments to the opposite sex.

Jonathan became a copywriter with a well known advertising company, and the financial rewards from his endeavours allowed him to buy a holiday home in an English East coast estuary town, where the sea strummed on a pebble-covered beach in harmony with the music of the spheres.

He, in company with his wife, would leave the frenetic automobile exhaust-fumed city streets at the weekends and escape within two hours to the ozone filled air and sanctity of their home by the sea.

Jonathan bought a fibre glass professionally built sea kayak with its high bow and stern, and joined the local boating club.

To the gentle lapping of the sea against the sides of the boat Jonathan followed the contours of the coastline, never more than half a mile from the shore; he paddled for hours, gaining experience and making friends with the briny water that supported him in his sturdy craft.

The on-shore breeze from Europe and the intermittent North Sea spray, complemented occasionally by interludes of sunshine, and the old weather-beaten sea salt—gave Jonathan's face a leathery tan. It was only the annual vacation to Corsica in the Mediterranean, with his wife, that gave him the chance to lie in the sun and match the rest of his body to the brown of his face.

"Hi, Jonathan." The deep voice of the commodore called through the open window of the sailing club.

"Good morning, Charles. Coming out for a bit of exercise this morning instead of downing G and T's with the rest of the dry land sailors in there." The banter between the two old friends was always with the humour of men enjoying the privilege of complete confidence in their ability to perform their pastime with skill and care.

"The forecast is storms, Jonathan."

“Nah! Look up, Charley. I’ve never seen the sky so blue. And look at the sea. Like a bloody mill pond.”

With that said, Jonathan slid his craft into the water and with the dexterity of a ballet dancer he entered the kayak, dipped a blade into the waiting sea and with a few balanced strokes was twenty-five yards from the shore.

The ripples of the sea reflected the sun’s rays and the sparkling diamond-like surface warmed the glass fibre deck and Jonathan stowed his anorak in the forward locker, continuing his journey with a self-satisfied feeling of contentment at the first fine day of early spring.

It was not too long before more rain clouds as usual began to appear. The temperature dropped, waves rose in height and oversized raindrops beat a paradiddle on the deck. Jonathan reached into the locker in front of him and retrieved his anorak.

Keeping his distance from the shore, he continued on his way, feeling quite safe; challenging the elements.

The canoe behaved well as it rose and fell to the rhythm of the swelling sea as Jonathan increased his paddle speed. *Just one more kilometre then I’ll turn and head for home.*

Above the hills to his land side he saw the ceiling of grey cumulonimbus clouds flicker with light and a few seconds later he heard a low voiced rumble in the sky.

*Seems like a storm over there,* he mused.

Through the windows of the houses scattered along the coastline he saw the householders switching on their living room lights. Cars were flashing headlamps and pedestrians with raised coat collars were leaning into a rain filled wind as they sought shelter.

The day was turning into an early dusk and even with the rain percussing on the deck of the Kayak and the waves beating a tattoo on the side of the boat, sound seemed to lessen its intensity in concert with the darkening of the day.

Jonathan dipped the right-hand blade of his paddle into the water and repeatedly made his stroke, turning the boat to the left. When the craft was at ninety degrees to the shore and about to continue its manoeuvre in the direction of the clubhouse for the passage home, the cloud squall line over the land reached the sea. The negative and positive charged particles that were insulated from the earth by the atmosphere found a course through the rain and made contact with the metal ring on the bows of the lone Kayak in its path.

The single finger of lightning discharged its one million volts upon the small craft and was satisfied. A clap of thunder completed the display and the boat sailed on.

Jonathan was not burned nor singed or seared. The electrostatic energy dancing throughout the boat simply stopped his heart and his consciousness was no more.

It was only the evidence given at the inquest, some weeks later, by an eye witness who was watching the lone canoeist, from his house on the shore through his telescope, and saw the unearthly event take place, that the cause of the heart attack in such a fit man was found.



## SENESCENCE

The full moon a creamy white dissolving starlight  
fine granules stirred in bitter tea  
this still dark morning by the sea --  
Sky slowly graying, pinking as wind whipped limbs rattle windows  
shaking her from the bed sheets  
Trembling. Blinking.  
Is this me?  
Salt on her lips, skin stretched too tight.  
Finger to throat  
Can this be right?

A sable fan of hair spans in waves the adjacent pillowcase.  
She studies the curve of her lover's back,  
pale nape of neck exposed but draped in silky black.  
She longs to kiss, caress this waxen flesh  
but rather waits and baits her breath.  
I did this all for you, my love.  
She yearns to see her tranquil face.  
To lean in close, to glimpse --  
If only she would turn  
stir an inch  
quick blink  
or sigh  
"It's just a little change," she would impart so tenderly --  
We are the same still, you and I.

Limbs intertwined, impressing angels on the chill, wet sand  
they'd probed the darkness, dampness -- seeking  
crying, shrieking -- neither speaking  
knowing well the rush of tide would come and sweep their prints away.  
No sentiment can truly last, no mortal dream can make a stand  
against the grip of time's cruel hand.  
'I love you's cannot sway the way that fate  
so neatly clears away the letters from our fragile slate.  
But we will last forever, you and I.

Lyrical the lashing, thrashing branches scrape and pound outside  
in rhythm with her throbbing breast  
her glance cast on the wooden chest  
propped open slightly  
enough so wafting from inside  
the faintest air --  
formaldehyde.

And glistening on the needle tip,  
a luminescent pearl, a drip of mingled crimson.  
Parched tongue teasing swollen lip,  
she smiles  
and turns to watch her lover rest --  
Oh, sweet angel, rest!  
For surely she could not protest  
an act of love so justified.

From grim reverie stemmed the eulogy:  
A scientist falls  
victim to biology.  
Her dark fantasy simmering  
that bygone sunset spent meandering  
the unraveling thread of sky and shore.  
Their fingers interwoven like the fibers of her cap,  
a hand-knit woolen red --  
the jealous winds conspiring to snatch it from her barren head.  
They'd seen gulls sucking spattered guts of cracked crabs off the slatted walk  
We are the guts, my love.  
She'd laughed.  
The spectral taunting of her laughter stinging, ringing in her ears --  
Had made her wince.  
We have no shells to keep us safe.  
We're sacks of meat and nothing more  
just sacks of meat more rancid with each passing year  
A voice that only she could hear:  
Your time is growing near.  
Your time to say farewell to all that's dear  
An incapacitating fear  
she no longer could ignore.

Lab protocols were followed for her brute refute of mortal station:  
gown and booties, crisply donned  
mask and glasses, both put on  
blond wisps tucked in bouffant cap.  
Rodent death by single snap, hard rap against the table's edge --  
a routine task of her vocation,  
to euthanize by dislocation.  
This final subject  
He was different --  
Red eyes focused, whiskers twitching  
writhing, twisting in her fist  
She first examined pink skin, scaling -- hairless.  
Crustacean?  
His substrate carpeted with fresh shed fluff of downy white  
perhaps she ought to make a wish.  
Before she breaks his neck --  
a kiss goodnight.

Now morning's blush behind the curtain  
thrills, incites, and makes her certain  
fills her veins and makes her flush.  
She hears the call of hermit thrush  
its haunting melancholic tune:  
Oh, holy holy, ah  
purity purity eeh  
sweetly sweetly  
Echoes fleetly, trill and thin  
She feels a tingling on her skin as it begins to fissure.  
So goes the agony of splitting  
bursting, ripping, molars gritting  
biting back the searing heat,  
a rapid gasp, an inhalation  
nerves scream in exhilaration  
arch of spine  
a tug  
a tear  
she holds her breath  
she doesn't dare...

Beneath the fresh-sloughed layers of her cast off epidermis  
lies an iridescent sheen of pallid greenish opalescence.  
It is tacky and elastic  
stretching almost to translucence  
and she cannot help caress this flesh  
A taction so exotic --  
that the action is erotic --  
Electric.  
Spent, she gently rolls to spoon  
her lover in a crescent moon  
She knows she will awaken soon.

My love, I beg you not perceive my weak deceit a grieved transgression.  
It is ours to share, this feat of biological ascension!  
Love's dominion over fate, forever more  
forever new  
Liberated from senescence  
Is that not our greatest triumph --  
Love's purest essence?  
Ubiquitous telomerase expression  
I've exploited just for you!

The faintest shift, the quaintest yawn  
A blink to greet the reddening dawn.

—julie campbell

# THE BOARD

by m.e. purfield

The vote was over.

The board members lowered their hands.

Koongi rested his large weight in the most comfortable chair as Lily, Marta, Mike, and Chris sat around the table in the metal folding chairs. He stared at them, not shy about showing his confusion.

"I don't understand?" Koongi said.

"It's simple, Koongi," Chris said. "You have been voted off the board."

"But I'm the president of the board."

"Not anymore."

Koongi glanced at all of them. They all avoided his eyes. Except for Chris. He smiled.

Koongi sat at the kitchen table in his apartment. Vishnu stood at the stove and fried eggs for breakfast. The twenty-one year old son, who shared the same short portly body as his father, frowned at the eggs.

"Can they do that?" he asked.

"The by-laws and management company says they can. But I'll double check with my lawyer," Koongi said. "What bothers me the most is that I don't know why. I've completed the gas conversion for the boiler, supervised the cleaning of the building, bought new benches and tables for the back, and enforced all the house rules. I've done so much to make this building respectable."

"Why don't you ask them," his son said. "Privately. Maybe they'll be more open."

Koongi smiled.

"Yes. I will try that."

The boy placed the eggs and turkey bacon in front of his father.

"Thank you," Koongi said. "Are you seeing Mercy again tonight?"

Vishnu placed his own dish down and sighed.

"No. We broke up last night. We weren't getting along."

"Too bad. I liked her. She was good for you."

The son nodded and shoved food into his mouth.

Since Koongi lived on the first floor in the front of the building he was able to accost the board members as they left and came home from work.

"There's been a lot of things," Mike said. "One thing that bothered me the most was how you fined Chris walking his bike up to his own apartment. What was that about?"

"You fined Chris \$150 for smoking in front of the building?" Liz asked. "Really? You should have given him a warning. It was too extreme."

"Chris told me how you threw his friends out of the building when they came to visit him," Marta said. "I met those guys. They are very nice."

Koongi started to see the pattern.

He sat in the large leather chair across from his lawyer's desk. Both men picked at their black mustaches. The lawyer leaned back and half listened to Koongi talk.

"Seems like they did everything legal," the lawyer said.

"Yes, but that man orchestrated the whole thing," Koongi said. "I don't think the other members would have voted against me if he didn't brainwash them."

"Is anything they say untrue?"

"That's not the point."

"In a court of law it might be the point."

"Well, yes. Then it's true. The man broke the rules. When you break the rules, you must accept the punishment."

"Hmm. Who's president now?"

"Chris."

"How are the other members? Think any of them could be president?"

"Oh, ho ho. These people would not make a good president. They are too lenient. And very busy. I always say to myself, 'Koongi, these people would let the building fall apart if you weren't here. Our investment would surely decline.' No, when I first came on the board none of them wanted to be president. They asked me. They needed me."

"I would wait until this Chris leaves the presidency," the lawyer said. "Since the job is so bad and no one else will take it, they might come knocking on your door to ask you back."

"Wait for him to leave?"

"Yeah, like if he sold his unit."

"No. That will be too long. The building might not be there by the time that happens."

The lawyer smiled and said, "Well, maybe you'll get lucky and he'll suddenly die."

"Where are you off to tonight, son?"

"I have a date."

"Wonderful. Will you bring her by?"

"Um, not tonight."

"How about tomorrow?"

"I'm not sure."

"Is there something wrong?"

"Well, there's nothing wrong. Just that I don't think you would like, um, her."

"Don't be silly. My son has wonderful taste in women. You bring her by when you are ready. I'm sure she is wonderful."

Even though Koongi handed in his keys to the board, he still kept a copy of the master key. The night Vishnu went on his date, Koongi snuck down to the basement. He opened the boiler room and turned off the building's water. With the revolver he recently bought from the security guard's friend at work, he smashed the two bulbs hanging from the ceiling. He then found a comfortable corner and waited in the dark.

After some time, the door to the room opened. The light switch clicked up and down. A man sighed. Koongi smiled at Chris's aggravation.

Chris walked across the concrete to the main valve in the wall.

Koongi snuck up behind him. He pressed the gun into his back and pulled the trigger. The bullet went right through and plunged into the wall. Chris grunted and fell dead to the floor.

Koongi backed up and exhaled.

The door opened behind him. Someone stepped inside and flicked the lights. "What now?" He then dragged an old paint can to hold open the door. The hall light shined on Koongi and the body. "Don't tell me your father taught you the wrong way to turn a valve."

Koongi recognized the voice.

"Koongi? What are you doing here?" Chris asked. "Did Vishnu call you?"

"What?"

Chris noticed the body on the floor. Koongi recognized the clothes from earlier.

"Vishnu?" Chris asked.

He rushed over and turned the body. Vishnu's dead eyes stared up.

Hollowness rushed through Koongi's body and weakened his legs. He remained frozen. All he could do was watch Chris kiss his son's face and beg God that Vishnu was not dead.





# Partier

My life,  
that party-coated  
hole of loneliness,  
was cured one day by love -  
in a clowning denouement  
of putty-headed longing  
and soppy-sour deliciousness.  
about to end.

—soren james

## blood and feathers

If this effervescent silence—  
derived from the glow of dreams—  
is nothing more than false poetry,  
and the wings of the dove are plastic  
and bloody,  
what side do we lean on  
when hope disintegrates  
and despair dominates?  
What world is this  
that bludgeons the brave,  
the twirling ballerinas on a lighted stage?  
What awful nightmare have we conjured  
to lead such a life as this,  
to encourage the murder of angels  
and make profit from their halos,  
to lay the foundation  
for the golden road  
that will lead us to our graves?

—stephanie smith

# NOEL

After Noel left,  
she stood beneath  
the chamber dome  
and ignored  
all the nights  
sweating caked on  
her skin,  
and each new day  
left gold over  
her bedroom floor.  
This disease,  
it was a cargo  
that singed her sleep  
when putrid growl  
of the abstract  
engulfed the concrete;  
a nuisance of  
need whose legs  
walked the length of  
the ice-crowned  
streets, with tongue  
consigned to tiny  
words dressed in  
sour lemon and salt,  
and fingers dipped  
into the asphalt milk  
of Noel's leaving.  
Then it was just her  
and the slick rope,  
arms splayed out mid-  
air, without anchor,  
heart stripped all  
of calcified dripping--  
wedded at last,  
to Noel's altered self  
in dance.

—*lana bella*

[poetry]



# INNOCENCE

Strawberry is the flavor of innocence  
of holiness

I dream of casting off these robes  
inflicted on me by my parents  
the papacy  
and God

and putting on a blue-collar shirt  
*Craftsman* jeans  
and going to work in an ice cream factory  
crushing strawberries

—mitchell grabois

## OLYMPIC TRIALS

Sometimes, when working in Goldstein's deli  
mopping or doing some other menial task  
I would fall into a reverie  
and dream of fields of strawberries

lovely female hands  
with thin fingers and clear nail polish  
gently harvesting  
careful not to inflict  
the slightest bruise

Then a new barrel of pickles would come in  
and I trembled as Goldstein  
summoned Mrs. Goldstein  
their daughter Eppa (my girl)  
their son Seth  
and myself

to convene another session of  
the *Pickle Barrel Olympics*

The sport was to hoist the barrel  
over your head  
and hold it there

They were crude power-lifters  
Their strength was astounding  
A platoon of them  
would have demolished the Third Reich

I could never copy them  
though the four of them exhorted me

I sustained many injuries  
when I lost control of the barrel

—mitchell grabois

# The Teeth of the Blizzard

by rick mcquiston

"I wouldn't go up there if I were you, young fella," the old man said with a hint of sarcasm. "You do, you don't know what you might run into. Sometimes a storm takes on a life of its own."

The old man's words made sense, but Jonathan didn't care. He pulled on his gloves and hat, zipped up his coat, and reached for the door.

"You should really listen to me, young fella," the old man said with a greasy smile. "If you go out there, out into the teeth of that blizzard, who knows what might be waiting for you." He ran a hand through his matted beard. Tiny crumbs of long-past meals trickled down his chest.

Jonathan gritted his teeth. The man annoyed him. He wasn't even sure how he wound up in an abandoned house with the guy. He didn't know who he was or where he came from, and his story about waking up and finding himself in the house was hard to believe. People, even homeless derelicts, generally knew where they had been or how they got there. But this man, this filthy old man who looked as if he hadn't had a bath in months, didn't remember anything other than coming to inside the house, confused and alone.

Alone, that is, until Jonathan had ducked inside to escape the biting cold.

"What I say is true, young fella."

"Stop calling me that."

"Sure thing, if that's what you want."

"Thank you, and I don't need advice from you. I'm not gonna die in here, you hear me? I'm not dying in some empty house. I'm going to go out that door and make my way to a police station or a hospital. I'm going to make it."

The old man smiled the same greasy smile as earlier and settled back into his tattered clothes. "Suit yourself," he mumbled through brown teeth.

Jonathan closed his eyes, steadied his nerves, and with a deep breath, opened the door. Immediately, a rush of cold air assaulted him. It tried to penetrate every opening, every weakness on his body. It was all-consuming in its hunger, relentless in its attempts to subjugate its prey to its frozen desires. Making a few adjustments to his coat and hat, Jonathan stepped out into the blizzard.

He couldn't see more than a few feet in front of him. Snowflakes swirled in every direction, impeding any forward progress he tried to make, and coupled with the stinging cold, created a truly inhospitable environment. Every direction seemed the same. There was no equilibrium. It was as if the storm had swallowed the landscape whole, leaving nothing behind but a cheap, distorted imitation of reality.

Deciding to push on (he really had no other choice) Jonathan trudged through the snow and cold. He shielded his eyes as best he could and hoped he was moving in the right direction. If he kept at it, he was confident that sooner or later he'd reach help.

The old man's words clung to his thoughts.

*You don't know what you might run into.*

He tried to shake them loose.

*Sometimes the storm takes on a life of its own.*

"Stop it!" Jonathan cried to the numbing cold. "Get out of my head!"

Only the swirling wind answered his pleas.

He felt an odd sensation on his leg then. It was like pressure, as if something was clamping down. He quickly looked down and saw nothing.

Moving on, Jonathan mumbled to himself to stay calm.

"Shouldn't be too much farther. People. There will be other people. I'll be warm again."

Something touched his other leg, followed immediately by stabbing pain. Snow danced in his face, obscuring his vision to a point where a mountain lion could've been clamped on his leg and he wouldn't have seen it.

But he would've felt it, and that's just what this felt like: a mountain lion.

Jonathan screamed for all he was worth as he thrashed back and forth in a vain attempt to alleviate his pain. He fell to the ground, clutching his leg.

And then another lightning bolt of pain hit him. It was as intense as the first, but was more widespread, like a thousand tiny needles puncturing his body.

Jonathan cried out for help.

Nobody heard him.

Still more attacks racked his body. Blood welled up beneath his clothes, soaking the fabric and causing him to feel the bite of the cold as well as the pain.

He craned his head up and saw in his blurred agony a figure in the distance. It drew closer to where he was, gradually coming into view through the blustery tempest.

It was a woman, a petite woman with long black hair that flailed around her head as if she were underwater.



And she was beautiful. Even through the blizzard Jonathan could see her piercing blue eyes and delicate features.

He found himself starting to crawl toward her, oblivious to his injuries or the cold.

He pulled his coat off.

He slipped off his gloves and hat.

He took off his boots, shirt, and his pants.

The woman smiled at him.

He crawled closer, hardly noticing that with each move he made she grew fainter and fainter in the storm. And by the time he reached her, the cold had numbed his body to the point where he didn't feel the teeth that were cutting into him.

He would have screamed had he been able.

The old man huddled in the corner. The house had no heat, so he was having trouble keeping warm. He pulled a tattered collar up to his chin and blew into his hands, lamenting how the young man didn't listen to him and had ventured out into the storm.

"Crazy kid," he mumbled under his breath. Brown spittle dribbled into his beard. "He should've listened to me, and stayed in here where it's safe."

He looked over at a small window on the other side of the room. Frozen grime covered most of it, but he could still see through the glass.

Snow whipped up against the pane. A lone tree limb, barren and long dead, hung just outside the glass, occasionally scraping against it like deformed fingers. The old man stared at the blowing snow, mesmerized by its ferocity, its ability to snuff out life on a whim.

He focused on the tree limb. He watched as it slowly transformed into a set of fingers, long delicate fingers with bright-red tips, fingers that belonged to a beautiful woman.

He stood up, ignoring the creaks and groans in his body. The desire he felt to reach the woman was irresistible.

He simply *had* to hold her.

Stumbling through the room, the old man made his way to the window. He thought of nothing else. It was all that mattered to him.

A woman's face smiled at him through the glass. Her lips were blood-red, which contrasted sharply with the chalk-white complexion of her skin. Frost tainted her otherwise perfect features, but still added a touch of beauty to her visage.

Ice-cold beauty.

Without realizing it, the old man pressed his face against the glass. He didn't feel the cold, only a powerful yearning to be with the woman of his dreams.

The woman smiled even wider, revealing innumerable rows of razor-sharp icicles in her mouth.

"I ... I love you," the old man croaked, and snatched up a chunk of splintered wood from the floor. He then ran it with all his strength into the window.



The glass shattered in a jagged shower, and immediately a blast of frigid air rushed into the room.

And with that, something else, something that was hungry.

The old man stood firm before the window, cold wind and snow assaulting his face. He could feel his flesh freezing, but was still smiling.

"I love you," he repeated. "I always have."

The figure dissipated into a seething maelstrom of icepick-sized teeth that enveloped their prey.

"Looks like a storm is coming in," Jeremy said to his wife. "A big one too." He was looking out the front bay window of his house. "Strange how it seemed to come out of nowhere."

Louisa, Jeremy's wife of forty-eight years, nodded. She was busy cooking a pot of beef stew, her husband's favorite, and wasn't really listening.

"I guess I had better get the horses indoors, just to be safe."

Again, Louisa nodded as she added a dash of salt to her stew.

Jeremy forced himself out of his worn recliner and stepped up to the window. He gazed out into his front yard, through the swirling snow and increasing darkness.

"Hello?" he said when he noticed someone standing just beyond a copse of trees near his pickup truck. "Who are you?"

The figure swayed in the wind.

Jeremy pressed his face to the glass.

It was a woman, he was sure of it, and she was beautiful, far prettier than any woman he had ever laid eyes on.

"I ... I love you," he mumbled as he picked up a nearby lamp to smash open the window.



## LIVING ROOM

Our evenings have withdrawn  
into a closed living room,  
where we don't chat  
but let a large TV cheat us.  
We watch life on a screen  
with a vicarious thrill.

There were children everywhere  
in our ancestral home –  
you could see one  
even within a bamboo basket  
lying upside down.  
'One' is the ideal number now.  
No one likes  
noises annoying the living room.

We've banished our only daughter  
into an adjacent study –  
where she's seen  
as a broiler chicken.

A savory smell,  
wafting up from the kitchen,  
used to tickle my nostrils,  
while sitting on the veranda.  
Now our cooker rarely whistles –  
fast-food parcels really silence our kitchen.

Our pa and ma had defeated the hard soil –  
it was their sweat drops  
that soothed our stomachs.  
We've discarded the defunct parents  
in a dark stinking room,  
even where they pray for us.

We peep into others' life  
with a voyeur's eyes.  
Love and fun hatch not  
out of our muted words.  
We aren't living here,  
only imagining of living.

—fabiyas mv

## A Gentle Death

Avenge me not, for death has been a friend  
and anger ill befits love's gentle wine.  
All lovers true or not, must part, ascend:  
rise, or fall, as life's trials their paths assign.

Still as bone, white as winter's snow my skin  
by candle light, one can almost see inside.  
My hair a gossamer halo, so thin,  
my eyes, my blue eyes, still contain the tide.

I am your fair Persephone, your wife, bride,  
and soon I will return to you Hades  
to rise born on cherry blossom tides;  
when in the earth, I can no longer bide.

Bless gentle Thanatos for his death sublime  
and Hypnos, as in sleep, I do recline.

—deborah guzzi



## Endosulfan Rain

It wasn't monsoon  
but toxic rain.  
Diya drenched  
in the doldrums.  
Her head bloated,  
brain turned barren.  
Her body curved  
as a cashew nut.  
Her legs and arms  
dried.

Aches and anxieties  
grow up  
in the cashew farm.  
Sad sap oozes  
out of her mouth.  
Her doll lies dead.  
Now she isn't a girl  
but a remnant  
on an empty mat.

—fabiyas mv

## Shadowed Myth

“Yes, I shall admit, I love you,  
as dark creatures of the night are loved;  
concealed between the icy shadows  
and the haunted heart.  
Albeit the Sun now an evanescent memory.  
Our faith and hopes are born after twilight;  
whilst creeping among raucous thoughts of despair.  
Raising hands high to dispel even a star shine.  
Walk your hushed path keeping  
your faithless desires locked within for  
I shall always be but a whisper away,  
once the candle flames are extinguished.  
I'll then secretly ride the steamy ribbons  
of impassioned desires within your essence.  
Pursuing the rapture as I chain the inner demons;  
Spreading shadowed myths with a fiery flair.”

—ken allan dronsfield

# Bharatanatyam Dancer

by fabiyas mv

Kanisha's head, fingers and remaining toes move instinctively and rhythmically while watching the *bharatanatyam*, a classical Indian dance, performed by her friend Nayana in the school auditorium. There are ten contestants in the *bharatanatyam* dance category. The noisy students have conquered all the benches and chairs in front of the stage. Kanisha sits in the last row, her crutches and frustration resting nearby.

The seed of dance sprouted in Kanisha's soul. She couldn't oppress her obsession to learn the *bharatanatyam*.

"My classmate Nayana's joined a dance class. Ma, I also want to learn the *bharatanatyam*." She opened her heart in front of her mother, who was sitting like a crow-pheasant in a broken cane chair.

"We can't even think of that, my dear. It's very expensive."

"Ma... Ma, please....please." She insisted. Paru was chewing a betel leaf along with tiny pieces of areca nut.

Like the other parents in her village, Paru also wished to bring her child into the limelight. But can a squirrel open its mouth the same way an elephant can?

Paru dipped in the canal and picked up the black oysters from the muddy bottom. She brought the oysters home in a bamboo basket, and scooped the flesh. The rustics would buy the oyster flesh from her. Sometimes, she earned her livelihood by catching tiny prawns with a small, sieve-like-net. She would dry the prawns in the parching sunlight, then walk door-to-door selling them.

Paru never liked her daughter falling into slough. She decided to find an additional income to pay the dance fee, no matter how inconvenient. She took her daughter to Sarigama Dance School. Roshini, the dance teacher, got up from



her fiber chair, and showed Kanisha a 'mudra', signing with her fingers, then asked Kanisha to repeat the steps. She did it amazingly well. Next, the teacher displayed a charming facial expression, which Kanisha also imitated.

"There's a spark in your daughter. It's really marvelous!" The teacher took an interest in her new pupil.

Before leaving, Paru did not forget to draw a verbal portrait of her penury before the dance teacher to note.

Kanisha went zealously to Sarigama Dance School in Chava City. Her classmate, Nayana, was a dance student there, as well. The school was adjacent to Roshni's house.

"It's a serious dance form. We take an event from *Mahabharata*, our epic," Roshini told her, explaining the utter importance of the dance. "We present it through our facial expressions, graceful style, gross bodily movements, acting, devotion..."

And Kanisha was all ears. Kanisha manipulated her body gracefully, completely in tune with the music of the dance. Pain and pleasure appeared on her face in turn.

"Ma, please come. Watch me dancing."

Kanisha invited her mother on a Sunday night. She had completed one-year of training under Roshini.

"No. Not now. I'm very busy. I've so much work to do in the kitchen."

"You can do that later, Ma." Paru couldn't resist her daughter's tenacity.

A lone bulb, hanging on a bamboo pole buttressing the roof, shed dim light. Moths swarmed the bulb—there was a drizzle outside, forcing them in.

Paru watched her daughter transforming into a wonderful dancer; rapture filled in her heart. "Excellent!" She clapped and embraced her daughter.

"Ma, I'm sure I'll win first place in the next school youth festival."

Unbound joy echoed within the walls of their home; it was a small hut, built with the financial assistance from the Panchayat.

"You're now fit for the debut," Roshini told her. Kanisha's face lit up with pride and pleasure at hearing her teacher's words. She carried that message of pride and pleasure to her mother.

"Ma...fix... the day for my debut..." She was panting.

They went to Roshni's house. In a pious setting, as per the codes of custom, Kanisha presented Roshini with Guru Dhakshina, a violet silk sari adorned with white blooms and a cash gift of five thousand rupees. She touched the feet of her "guru". The teacher was grateful and blessed her pupil, placing her palms upon her head. They reached a decision about the day for the debut. It would be on the day of their temple festival, next Saturday. Nayana's debut would be on the same day, the teacher mentioned.

When she returned home from her school in the afternoon, Kanisha found her mother putting the dance costumes, coloring powder, anklets, and so forth, into the bag, which they'd received as a gift from Sanora Silks, a readymade shop at Chava.

"Come on, dear. I'm packing for tomorrow. See if anything's missing."

"Okay, Ma. Tomorrow's the day. I can't even imagine it."



There was an amalgam of joy and tension on her mother's countenance.

Paru had borrowed a lot of money from her rich neighbors to buy the expensive costume of the *bharatanatyam*. She didn't know how to repay it.

Her neighbor's auto rickshaw, which Paru had already arranged, came by at seven p.m. Kanisha stood before her father's photograph hanging on a nail in the wall; she bowed her head, brought her palms together, and silently sought his blessings. Her coolie father died of a viper bite a decade ago, when she was just four years old. They set off at 7:10 p.m.

A big lamp opened its eye beside the banyan tree in the temple yard. There was an open stage under the tree. Eight p.m. At first, it was Nayana's debut. Her schoolmate danced in the limelight on the stage. But the *bharatanatyam* lovers were not contended with Nayana's performance. Eight thirty.

Kanish walked to the stage like a peacock, feeling the weight of many eyes fallen upon her body. She stood like a bloomed blossom on the stage. A song describing an event in Mahabharata flowed through the mike. She drew a beautiful saga in the air with her fingers. Her entire body moved in perfect rhythm. Diverse patterns of emotions flashed on her face. The spectators tapped their fingers rhythmically on their thighs and nodded their heads in unison with the dance and the music. She really dazzled the spectators with her top-notch performance.

"Fantastic!" Her mother whispered; everybody whispered.

Her performance was far better than that of her friend Nayana. Even Nayana may have known this.

Nine thirty. They started their journey home by the same auto rickshaw. Paru was very proud of her daughter. Pride let her forget her penury. There were ripples of pleasure in Kanisha's mind. The auto rickshaw moved like a tortoise. Quite unexpectedly, a stray dog, a white one with black spots all over its body, attempted to cross the road. The driver essayed to stop the vehicle immediately to save the dog—alas! a jeep, running just behind, crashed into the back of the auto rickshaw with a thunderous sound.

People approached from the darkness and gathered around the rickshaw, which rested upside down on the roadside. Three of them were taken to the hospital. "The girl's condition's worst," a street vendor observed.

Paru's and the driver's wounds were not deep. But Kanisha had to spend nearly a month in the ICU of the Alpha Hospital. The jeep struck the side where she was sitting. Her right leg was trapped under the wheel. The doctor was forced to remove her damaged right leg—and her dreams along with it.

Now the waves of an announcement echo in the school auditorium. "Dear teachers and students, here's the result of the *bharatanatyam* contest, HS section. First place goes to Nayana..." Nayana in her dance dress, walks to the stage like a princess to receive the certificate; her pride flashes in and out; the cameras gobble her glittering body; a precious moment of luck borne out of a tragic fate.

Innocent Kanisha stands up on her crutches to honor the winner and hides her broken heart beneath a charming smile.



## A DEATH IN CARAMEL

entwined,  
he swayed her to Suzanne Vega's Caramel's  
lavished refrains, splintered away,  
her breaths took their last  
as mercy flicked its  
tongue on his lagoon of madness,

immediately and hung up,  
he emerged from under the influence of death's  
wanderlust  
to her pale face and wild hair:  
smoothed out with his tender combing,

everything around was growing  
dimmer, even her skin-suit grew wax-like inside  
his cupped hands,  
he wondered then when it will turn  
beautiful once more  
so he can stitch himself  
that coat of caramel for winter--

—lana bella

# Sea Holly

At ten, my eyes sped  
over the lake with notes  
of sympathy scoured  
through the bones like  
dandelion seeds.

At sixteen, my fingers  
held a sea holly so close  
it spiked once more  
my grief, panicked,  
I tossed it down to ghosts  
that housed inside  
the havoc bobbing on  
the ancient water.

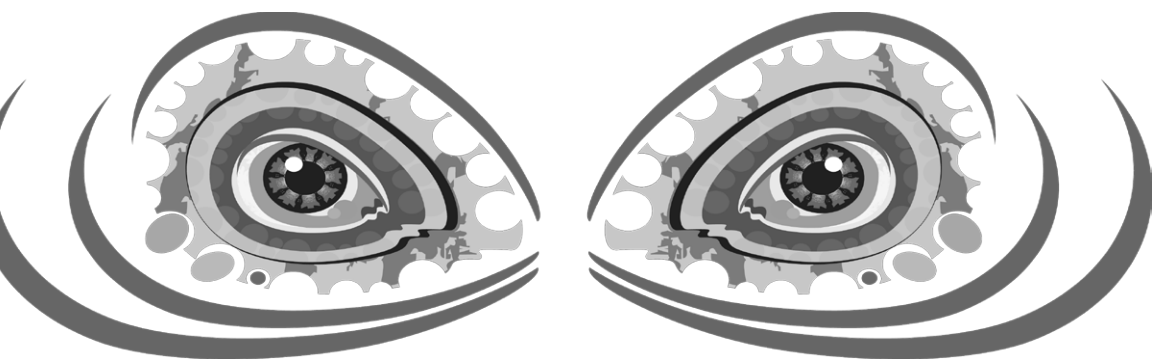
At twenty, I became that  
woman who slept in  
ireful waking,  
always half-hung over  
and warily touched,  
during which  
the lymphatic hymns  
washed under her  
from low-tide cusps.

With lips propelled voice  
into the venom of  
casting breaths, gently,  
I was back wading through  
the tendons of my gray-  
haired grief among  
the shifting bay grass,  
as if ghosting the water.

—lana bella

[short story]

# UNDER THE BED



by s.l. dixon

Suicide watch.

At the deepest, darkest depths of his life, the lights never go out. Day and night the glow remains constant, illuminating the entirety of the block and his cell.

The state demands his blood and they mean to take it.

The prison father has become a constant figure in a plastic-backed chair. The visitor quite similar to the kind totem Trevor Osmond recalled from Sunday school. Trevor stares at the father with increasing impatience and agitation.

“I didn’t do this,” Trevor repeated for the umpteenth time.

He’d stood firm, it was not at his hands that his parents had died, not his brother, not his sister either. The evidence was suggestive, but the showmanship displayed by the lawyers was a fantastic mockery of the system. The guilty verdict rained down on the expectant public as quenching a drought.

And just hours after the jury stepped away.

Only twenty and he awaited his last days on death row.

The father, a thin man, his pallor similar to vanilla pudding, sat in his plastic chair. Two crisp pleats ran along his black slacks. His thinned hair combed sideways for maximum coverage.

This boy was nothing new; he'd heard sinners deny their acts before and needed the boy to embrace his sins in order to accept the only worthwhile redemption offered. Acknowledge guilt and accept the Lord's embrace.

"You have to get right with God, my son."

"If there is a god, he knows damn well that they're executing the wrong man and you'd keep all that junk to yourself."

"Now, Trevor, redemption can be ..."

"Redemption can eat shit," Trevor flopped back against the wall next to his bunk.

The father tilted his eyes to the floor and searched for a method that might take the boy to an admission of guilt. Those that do not acknowledge and accept their crimes miss out on the eternal light.

To the father it feels something like a missed save, a two-run jack in the bottom of the ninth.

The pair sat in silence for a few valuable minutes, only forty hours until needle meets vein. "Why don't you tell me what happened? From the beginning, let it off your chest."

Trevor considered this. "All right, but this isn't a confession. I didn't do anything wrong, well, maybe I did, I saw it . . ." Trevor paused himself.

The father remained silent, avoiding derailment.

"It started eight years ago. I was only twelve, Dad brought home pizza and we buzzed like flies whenever he brought home anything. We never had much, but we got along and we always loved each other. I didn't hurt any of them, not a one.

"Anyway, the pizza was great and Dad pulled out a box from behind his back, Ace Ventura Pet Detective had been out just a little while, the other kids at school had all seen it and I was the odd one out. Funny the things you remember. I've been living the last year just remembering. Anyway, we almost never had money for rented videos. It was a great night, pizza and Ace. We all went to bed happy.

"My brother Ger and me shared a room. Nessa had her own room; she was oldest, fifteen then." Trevor wiped at the corners of his reddened eyes. "We were all in bed and that's when I heard a noise. Nessa was talking, soft, but urgent. Then I heard a few bangs and ran to her room. I opened the door and flicked the switch. I thought she'd had a bad dream or something.

"There she was, on the floor, blood everywhere. And I mean everywhere, sprayed up her wall and onto her bed. The blood just kept coming, drained right out of her as I watched. I dropped to my knees and screamed. I loved Nessa. I held her tight to my chest in all that hot blood.

"I didn't think much of it at the time, but Nessa's bed was pushed a foot away from the wall."

"Why would that matter?" the father asked, following along, listening to Trevor's

tale for the first time from Trevor's side. The newspaper coverage was limitless and often fantastical—drugs, Satan worship, kid serial killer cults.

"It was my grandparents' old sleigh bed, it was cherry or something. Heavy as hell, no way she moved it. Nobody mentioned the bed later and I didn't think about it. I stored the memory somewhere, like outback, you know what I mean?"

The father nodded to Trevor without condescension, a first of their relationship.

"It was a big mystery and the case went cold, or whatever it is they call it. Her death floored my parents especially, like, I mean almost ruined them. We buried Nessa and tried to move on. Mom lost her job and drank a bit. I don't blame her. It was hard on all of us.

"We recouped after a few months. Mom's drinking slowing all the time. Dad worked in the sheet metal plant and they got a new machine, so he had to go out of state for a week and learn how to use the thing at a factory in Battle Creek. He was pretty excited, we never took trips and Dad worked hard just to get even. You see he hated debt, hated it like the devil hates busy hands," the father smirked at this, "so he piled money up in the bank until he could lump it into the mortgage. There's some rule about slapping some extra in on specific months. I don't understand, never cared about mortgages. Guess I never will care, now.

"So Dad was gone. It was just me, Ger and Mom. Ger had turned fifteen and I knew he wanted more privacy, he'd started to ... well you know," Trevor's eyes met the father's, "Yeah, you know, probably hear about that stuff all the time. Only sex your kind really know about."

The father's cheeks reddened a shade, "You mean he masturbated."

"Uh yeah, I heard him. I never said anything, but my parents knew he'd need his privacy eventually. So without asking my dad, Ger and Mom painted Nessa's room. I sulked about it. It pissed me off. It had only been like ten months, not even a year. But it was a change and Mom said she needed more changes, needed to change things and then she could get healthy. I was already thinking she was getting to be pretty damn healthy, the gin bottles were lasting weeks rather than nights.

"Anyway, Mom and Ger painted the pink room blue. I helped pack, but mostly I just dug around the boxes, thinking, you know?"

"Guilt?" asked the father.

"What? Fuck no, I didn't do anything. You want to hear this or not?"

The father motioned to continue, paddling his fingers in Trevor's direction.

"So that first night Ger still slept in our room. He was on the bottom bunk and I was on the top. I asked him what he thought happened to Nessa and he tried to spook me. He told me children and teens all over the world died in their rooms. Monsters come, monsters with red lizard skin and claws like eagles, black, black eyes. Stuff like that, I didn't get scared, I got mad ... Maybe it was red eyes and black skin, doesn't matter. I called him names, he called me some back and then we went to sleep.

"That was the last night we shared a room. The paint was dry the next night, most of the fumes gone. Dad called, but Mom and Ger didn't say anything about packing Nessa away and painting her room."

"Your sister wasn't her things left behind, your sister is a soul, she's out there somewhere," said the father.

Trevor huffed, "Uh-huh, that night Ger slept in his new room. He'd started listening to music a lot and had the newest Alanis Morissette tape. Well, a bootleg someone made for him. I heard the songs at just about conversation volume, you know, like indoor voices kind of volume. The player was kind of fancy. It had a feature where it could read a cassette from both sides. It was the kind of fancy technology that was pricey about a decade before Ger had it. I heard the angry woman and I wondered if it was the music I'd heard that woke me up. I listened harder, blinking myself awake.

"I also heard my Mom, she whispered to someone. Then she yelped and I heard a thump. I jumped out of my bed and ran to her room. I rammed in through the door, flipped the switch and there was Mom," Trevor rubbed a finger at his nose, sniffled, continued, "bloody, just like Nessa was. There was a big comforter bunched on the floor and it soaked as I watched, white to pink, the blood looking for dry spots. Like the science project where you put celery in a cup with food coloring in it.

"The bed creaked and moved as I watched. I screamed and Ger came running. He grabbed onto Mom and I stood back looking around the room, numb."

"You say the bed moved, in what way?"

"It shook, as if somebody lifted it a few inches and dropped it back down. And it was away from the wall a bit. I told my brother, he didn't care. He was covered in Mom's blood. Something slashed her chest, just like it did Nessa."

"Redemption comes with ..." started the father.

"You can either shut up and listen or fuck off, got it?"

The father didn't move one way or another and was quiet. Trevor continued.

"Dad came home early and we buried Mom. He was never the same. I know the cops said something, something like since they couldn't figure it out, that it had to be one of us. Like, that me or Ger that did it. I told them about the bed, they checked, but it was nothing. I wish I never said anything. I see now that it made me look bad."

Trevor rubbed his hands, wiped his nose and eyes and then continued, "None of us really talked after that. Ger listened to more music. It got angrier all the time. Some stuff about devils and hell even, some gangster rap, as long as it was angry or violent. The police thought it was him after a while. I remember that stupid Detective Hays, he used to bug my brother at work, outside the school, just about everywhere he went.

"My brother worked at the bowling alley, spraying shoes and deep-frying things. It couldn't have helped his mood. He'd been there just under a year. His boss wasn't so bad I guess. Used to let the employees hang out and drink beer, even if they were underage. He was eighteen anyway. Close enough if you ask me.

"He came home about three in the morning. Dad was asleep. I heard him snoring. I was in bed, still on my top bunk, I think that help with acoustics or whatever, like nothing blocked sounds coming from other rooms. Plus, up high was good. I don't

know why, but I just felt better up there. I hate sleeping this close to the floor, not that I get much sleep. They never kill the damn lights in here,” Trevor said as he tapped on his cot.

“Anyway, Ger came home one night and by the way he stumbled around. I knew he was drunk. I’d heard Mom drunk enough to know what it sounded like. So Ger stumbled around, got into bed and I closed my eyes trying to sleep. I was in and out. Then I heard a voice mumbling, the snoring gone.

“I listened as close as I could without actually moving, it was Dad and he was at it about something. He didn’t talk much in his sleep, none of us did, well if I do, nobody told me. I listened and he was telling something to go away, talking to it like it was a cat that snuck in. Not really dire, just irritating. Then Dad’s voice changed and he yelled, angry and afraid.

“I held my breath. Heard a thump, but this time I refused to move. I’ve never been so scared in my life. A few minutes later, I heard Ger’s voice, he was talking to something. I didn’t move, didn’t want to. Part of me wanted the thing to come along and get me.

“I heard the thump,” said Trevor, pausing to lean back and fold his arms around his chest.

“And then what?”

“Then my fucking bed creaked and thumped. I leaned over the side. I saw something, I don’t know what, a shape, kind of like a man I guess, but different somehow, smallish. Then I heard a hiss like a snake and I threw the blanket over my head.

“*Why you sleeping so high, young man?*” the thing asked me. His voice was low and it hissed every S. “*Why don’t you sssleep down here, sssleeping on the bottom iss better?*”

I refused to answer. I knew it was going to kill me. I knew for sure it would get me. But it didn’t and I felt the whole bunk bed rattle and shift again. The next morning I stayed in bed. I stayed into the afternoon. There was blood on the floor, footprints leading from Dad’s room to Ger’s and then to my room. I didn’t think about it and ran.

“The police said those prints had to be mine. That I did it, had to, according to that dumb shit Hays. I asked about the beds, but the cops ignored me. I didn’t have a chance, they piled the circumstantial evidence against me, even tried to get a doctor to prove I was crazy. But I’m not crazy and I didn’t do this.

“My lawyer was a joke compared to the other guy. The other guy was like one of those revival assholes, had people eating up his proofs. My lawyer focussed on all the wrong points, asked all the wrong questions. And that’s how I got here. I didn’t do it.

“Don’t you see? I’m innocent.”

The father shook his head slowly, “The path to the Lord takes effort. He died for your sins, but only if you admit them, take responsibility here on Earth so He can take responsibility in Paradise.”



"You didn't listen to a thing I said. I bet if I had of stayed in that house I'd be dead already, so I guess it's fine they're going to stick me. But I'm telling you, I didn't do this. I didn't! There's something out there, something that came from nowhere and disappears under beds."

"You're blaming monsters under the bed?"

The father stood, annoyed with the wasted time, the young man was Hell bound. It was of no use. Trevor sulked in his bunk and flopped his head down onto his pillow. The father knocked on the cell door, the viewing window opened and after jingling his keys awhile, the guard let him out.

They walked side by side, father and guard. It was a shame. The boy would never see redemption, never have another chance. The father stopped dead and looked down at his Bible.

"I think I'd best leave this with Mr. Osmond," he lifted the Bible to show the guard.

"Needs something, he's the nicest killer I've ever known," said the guard.

The father and the guard walked back toward the cell. It took a moment for the right key to present itself on the ring.

"*Sssleeping on the low! Isss no more high bunk? That'sss a good boy,*" said a low hissing voice behind the door.

"Trevor?" the father called through the steel, he slid the viewing window and glared inside. Trevor was on his feet, blood splashed the white floor and his body dropped. "Oh Jesus!"

The guard managed the lock and swung the door open. The small steel bunk rattled and settled on the floor. Trevor had slashes over his neck and chest. The guard called for help on a shoulder radio.

The father crouched to look below the bunk.

From the darkness, two fiery eyes shone, winked playfully and then faded away into the steel coils and vinyl lining of the mattress.



[poetry]



## LaDY bUGGED

so – SO – oh      crawling  
over the sun says-a-me toasted glaze of  
bedroom windows so – jiminy –  
red carapaces with dots of black  
reminding me of Howdy Doody's cheeks  
and Polka Dottie's dress

so – NOT supposed to be HERE – hell  
naw – *they don't bite* pretty little aphid eaters  
*fly away home—your house is on fire—*  
*and your children are burning*  
(goodness how grisly)

a cardboard tag from a set of new sheets  
turns bug scraper  
each minuscule mother momentarily palmed  
(halfheartedly) into the vacuum hose

the balloon architecture of the hundred year  
old barn/come/garage provides a thriving  
hive for: lady bugs, carpenter bees  
and nasty wasps

ah nature

into the peonies beds with you Polka Dotties  
I opened the vacuum bag onto  
the warm mulch.

—deborah guzzi

## The Company of Werewolves

The northern wind gives no respite  
The fatal acquiesce  
Even as my bones transmorph  
I cannot scream  
I flip my skin inside out  
and wear it as a coat  
I am lost in the symphony of werewolves  
that howl in the night  
like angels stuck in the mouths of demons  
I join the communal choir  
This song of dripping flesh  
This fur on fallen snow  
Feet dragging,  
but leaving no stone unturned

—stephanie smith

# Cleetus

by mary king

I might as well admit it, this is a ghost story. It takes place in a little seaside town called Marblehead where I had recently purchased my first-ever home, a 250-year-old fixer upper with sagging floors and slanting doorways. It was a case of love at first sight.

I had saved up a bit of a nest egg from my one best-selling novel, said novel being a complete fluke, the culmination of years of rejection slips. I had been just about to return to corporate America when, out of the blue, there came the advance check for a freakishly exorbitant amount. A photocopy of that check has pride of place over my mantel along with a couple of Hummels, my fourth grade class picture, and a baseball signed by Louis Tiant.

When everything in my new home had been arranged to my satisfaction, I decided to resume work on my current novel which I had put away during the move. I had arrived at a particularly difficult point in the plot. The heroine of the tale had just committed a murder and I had to come up with a plausible reason for her having done so. If you think that's easy, just try it sometime. I burned the midnight oil for two nights straight and still nothing. On the third night, I decided to take a walk to clear my head. As I walked through the downtown area, I paused from time to time to peer into the shop windows. There was a great amount of

antiques, real and otherwise, and enough souvenirs to delight the heart of the most jaded tourist. In the bookstore window a black and white cat slept right smack in the middle of the book display.

I had just come back into my yard when I saw her. She was standing by the corner of the house, about twenty feet from me. I couldn't tell much about her since it was so dark, except that she was wearing some sort of long dress--possibly a nightgown, I thought. But what was she doing outside my house at this hour, of all the silly things? I whispered a kind of timid hello. When she turned her head to look at me, the moonlight caught her face for just a moment and I saw that she was well passed middle age, elderly, I guess, although that's not a word that I especially love. Weirder and weirder. Was this the local witch woman out to gather herbs for her latest potion? I realized that I needed to curb my imagination and get some sleep. I turned my attention to getting my key into the lock (sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't) and when I looked back, the old woman had disappeared just as though she had never been there at all. I shrugged and went into the house, thinking that she must just be someone who liked to walk at night, much like myself.

Later that night, I awoke from a bad dream that I couldn't quite recall. As I lay there trying to coax a few more hours of sleep from my now-active mind, I heard what sounded like a voice calling. I tried to make out the words but I couldn't hear more than what sounded like *ee-ee-eeee*. A bird? Probably not at 3:00 a.m. What, then? I continued to listen but the sound had stopped and I drifted back into an uneasy sleep until the alarm went off at seven.

Then I sat at the computer. Think. Why did the lovely Eleanor commit murder most foul? A deep, dark family secret? Or was there a money motive, greed perhaps? That always played well? Or maybe temporary insanity. A split personality? A bad hair day?

That night I heard the voice again. Voice? Yes, definitely a voice and not a late-night bird. A voice calling ... something. I strained to hear the words. Not *ee-eee* as I had thought originally. A name, maybe. Edie? No, more like ... Sweetie? I still couldn't tell. I decided that it was time to discover the voice's source and make it shut up. In a nice way, of course, not wanting to antagonize any of my new neighbors. But come to think of it, if it was waking me up, then other people must be annoyed by it, too.

So the very next night when the voice started up again at 3:00 a.m., I crept out of bed and over to the window. Gradually one of the shadows in the yard resolved itself into what could only be a human form. A woman, to be exact. Standing so still that she might have been a statue. And then, that call again. Enough is enough, I thought. Throwing on my robe, I went down to the yard to say a neighborly hello and, while I was there, to find out what the hell.

She turned and looked at me as I approached her, except that she wasn't so much looking at me as through me, if that makes any sense. Almost as though she were unaware of my presence. She took a step forward, one step, then another, all

the time looking from one side of the yard to the other. What on earth was she searching for? Throwing caution to the winds, I whispered hello. This time she looked at me, I'm sure of it. And when she did, I saw that she was crying. Now I'm never the best person to come to in a crisis; if you come to me crying, I'll probably cry too. I'm just useless. So I said the only thing I could think of, "Can I help you?" Hardly brilliant but under the circumstances, it was the best I could do.

"Gone away," she said. "Not ever coming back." There was something about the way she spoke that hurt my heart. It was maybe the saddest voice I had ever heard.

"Who's gone away?" I whispered. She just looked at me, tears running down her face, and said nothing.

"Look," I said, doing my little anxiety dance, "Just you wait right here. I'll run into the house and call someone for you." Exactly who I was planning to call was something I hadn't quite figured out yet. As I turned to go, I heard a rustling sound, sort of like autumn leaves when the wind moves them. I turned back quickly but not quickly enough. She was gone.

The next morning I cornered my next door neighbor, Peter. Peter is what you might call an old timer; he knows everybody and everything in town. If anyone could explain my night visitor, I knew that he could. When I had finished telling my story, Peter gave me a long, thoughtful look. "Well, well, well," he said. "It sounds like you had a little visit from Miss Maisie."

"Who the devil is Miss Maisie and what the devil is she doing in my yard in the middle of the night?" I will blame my crabbiness on my lack of sleep.

"Well," he said, "Miss Maisie was born and raised right here in this town. Never married, always seemed to prefer her own company to that of other people. Always got along with her neighbors on the occasions that she saw them at the market or such but aside from that, she pretty much kept to herself. Except for that one summer.

"The summer of '38, it was. That summer, days so hot there wasn't a breath of air stirring. Record-breaking heat. That summer, you couldn't stay indoors; you'd die for lack of air if you did. So Miss Maisie came out a little more than she normally would. She'd often sit in her yard with her knitting or a book and just watch the birds flying in and out of the trees. Seemed like that kind of peaceful life was as much as she ever wanted. Nodding to passing neighbors who nodded to her and kept on going. She was happy, I guess.

"But you know, sometimes I think a person can be missing out on something in their life and not even know it until it comes right up and smacks them in the face. Or, in this case, jumps into their lap. Because that's what happened one hot summer day. Now I wasn't there to see it, but the way I heard it was that Miss Maisie was sitting in her yard with her book open before her, maybe dozing just a little in the sun, when suddenly there's this little orange cat sharing her chair with her.

"Now Miss Maisie had never kept pets so this was a kind of new experience for her and I think maybe she enjoyed it. Cats do have a way about them, some of them anyway. They can be charming when they're in the mood to be. And that day, I believe Miss Maisie did something she had never done before: she fell in love."

"With a cat?" Rude, I know, but I just couldn't hold it in. Peter's look pretty much silenced any further comments I might have been thinking of making.

"Well," he continued, "at any rate, the first thing that happened was that she gave that cat a good dinner. Probably some of whatever she was having herself. And I suppose she watched him eat and felt good that she was taking care of him. And, of course, that cat would then climb back into her lap and purr, just as a thank you, don't you know. So every day after that, that little orange cat would make it a point to come visiting and he would always be fed and petted. Sometimes after he ate, Miss Maisie would play with him in the yard. Did I mention that she knitted him little cat toys? Well, she did. And she'd toss them for him and he'd fetch them back to her, just like a dog would. Smart little guy. It became a familiar sight to see the two of them in the yard, each step Miss Maisie taking, that cat taking with her. Like a shadow to her, he was. And she'd talk to him all the time and when she did, didn't that cat look right back at her with those yellow lion eyes of his, just like he knew every word she was saying.

"Then one day Miss Maisie found out that the cat was actually owned by some people a few blocks away. How she found out, I don't know for sure but I heard that the cat's owner objected to the fact that his cat was never at home and he found out where the cat was staying and went to have it out with Miss Maisie. Miss Maisie had a few choice words for him, too. She read him the riot act for not taking better care of his cat, leaving it out in all kinds of weather, and not feeding it adequately. She said that anyone who treated an animal like that didn't deserve to have a cat, and she only hoped that he didn't have any children!"

I had a sudden thought. "Did this cat have a name?"

"Cleetus," Peter replied. "But Miss Maisie called him Cleetie.

"Anyway, shortly after the confrontation, Miss Maisie heard that the cat's owner was moving to New York City. She was unhappy but she thought that maybe the owner might be persuaded to leave the cat with her, since in her opinion, the cat would be much happier that way. But, to make a long story short, that didn't happen and one morning when she went downstairs with the cat's breakfast, he wasn't there. She walked by his house and found it abandoned. The family had moved away the night before."

"Poor Miss Maisie," I said.

"Oh, it was pretty awful for her all right. People said that she cried for days and still went to her door with dishes of food hoping that they might have left the cat behind and that he'd turn up. He didn't, though. And even when enough time had passed so that you'd have to accept that he wasn't coming back, she would still go out in the yard and watch for him, sometimes even calling out for him."

One thing still puzzled me. "Okay, so you're telling me that this Miss Maisie is still out there looking for a cat that, if it were alive today, would be close to 70 years old. Even if I could accept that without also believing that the woman is totally insane, why on earth is she searching in my yard? Why not her own?"

Peter looked at me. "Well," he said, "it's because strictly speaking, your yard is her yard. Miss Maisie lived in that house until she died in 1950."

Have you ever felt like your head is going to explode? I realized right then that I needed a serious break from Miss Maisie, as sad as she was. I busied myself with buying fans, installing air conditioners, and working on my novel. Do I need to mention that I still hadn't come up with a motive for the lovely Eleanor to commit murder? During this time, I would often hear Miss Maisie in the yard at night, calling for Cleetus. I never went downstairs anymore. There was nothing I could do.

On the fourth of July, I and the rest of the town went down to the harbor to catch the pyrotechnics. As I returned home, I realized that nightfall hadn't done a blessed thing to put a damper on the day's heat. The wind made shadows dance across my lawn as I approached my house. Suddenly something that wasn't a shadow darted past me. I jumped back, thinking of raccoons, skunks, and the other assorted wildlife that you wouldn't care to run into at night.

Then I saw her. Miss Maisie. Standing at the corner of the house, just as she had been at our first meeting. And as I watched, the darting shape that had passed me on the lawn gave one great leap and landed in Miss Maisie's outstretched arms. When the moonlight touched them, I saw that she was holding a small orange cat. And she was smiling.

A few nights later, as I was getting ready for bed, I heard creaking noises from the attic. Not the usual house-settling noises, more like someone walking, pacing maybe. I slowly opened the attic door. What I saw then probably should have astonished me but for some reason it didn't. Not even a little bit. There was Miss Maisie standing by the far window, holding her little friend, Cleetus. Each wore the contented look of someone who has finally come home.

So that's pretty much the whole story. I can't explain what happened but I promise you that it did happen.

Oh and before I forget, I finally was able to come up with a murder motive for the lovely Eleanor. Once I put my mind to it, it was simplicity itself. You see, the motive was a stolen family heirloom. A cat. Or rather, a golden statue of a cat, hidden for ages in an old abandoned well, and only Eleanor knew that.

But I won't go on. It would spoil the surprise ending and, after all, the book will be out in time for Christmas.





# The Asylum

The vampires have turned in for the day  
Nothing roams here. Nothing lingers  
We remain chained in soiled asylums  
overpopulated with sins and children  
and abandoned hope  
Scars and cars  
and dead movie stars  
A hangman's rope for when we get bored  
Yes. And that's what that razor is for:  
to cut through the truth,  
feel its weight upon the skin,  
the exquisite pleasure when it dives right in  
without thinking twice

—stephanie smith

## Cornered

The horse stalls seem empty as if all life has been consumed;  
one who is alive hides breathless deep within the gloom.  
And, she's waiting, just waiting, for her life to be resumed.

This child had gone missing; the youngster's death presumed,  
but here she sits, huddled in the corner, still awaiting doom.  
The stable's stalls seem empty as if all life has been consumed.

Knife in hand, he searches for her; her fear's like perfume;  
sweat and blood drip from her, all about the cluttered room.  
And she's waiting, just waiting, for her life to be resumed.

Outside the stable, saviors shout. The bark of dogs resumes,  
she is in the corner midden hiding from the horse's groom.  
The stable's stalls seem empty as if all life has been consumed.

The posse finds her empty coffin but there's no child to exhume.  
Between the boards, she sees them shoot, sees his chest abloom,  
and, she's waiting, just waiting, for her life to be resumed.

Her gasps come now like a bellow's breath, rise in heated plumes  
as dogs and men come running at the rifle's cracking-boom.  
The stable's stalls seem empty as if all life has been consumed,  
and she's waiting, just waiting, for her life to be resumed.

—deborah guzzi

## Obit.

Hedera “Ivy” Cavendish, age 15, a life-long resident of Somerset, MA, died Sunday after battling a severe fungus for several months. Born in a 4-inch pot, she flourished into a prize-winning, heart-shaped topiary, taking a Division II First Place Blue Ribbon at the Boston Flower Show. “Ivy” leaves behind one niece, Hedera Minima, as well as many beloved friends with whom she shared the sunny kitchen window sill.

—ada jill schneider

[short story]

# NEVER GO BACK

by c.m. saunders

They always say never go back. I never really understood why, until I went back to Wood Forge, the little village where I grew up. Surrounded in farmland and nestled between two gently rolling hills with a river running through the middle, the place is home to less than three hundred people. To those that live there it seems frozen in time, somehow independent from the rest of the world. Far away from the hustle and bustle of city life. Some might say it was idyllic, like the picture on a postcard.

But young people who live in places like Wood Forge often develop strange love-hate relationships with their surroundings. They embrace the sentimentality and familiarity of home, yet feel frustrated and trapped. They yearn to be set free. Sooner or later, the clever ones invariably have their heads turned by the bright lights of the nearest big city. I was no different. By the time I was sixteen, I couldn't wait to leave. I had to wait until I was quite a bit older, but eventually, leave I did. I'm thirty-four now, and I go back to see my parents a couple of times a year. They are old. My father is retired, and the quiet life out there in the sticks suits them.

I never stay longer than I have to. In my adult years, it's more than the isolation and boredom that gets to me. More than the nagging sense that you are missing out on something, that everything worthwhile is happening someplace else.

Something happened to me once in Wood Forge.

Something bad.

During my waking hours, I've grown quite good at not thinking about it. It's really not that difficult. With a few years of practice I've grown quite adept at blocking it out and allowing it to be buried with the multitude of banal, every-day thoughts running through my mind. It's only in the dead of night when I lie awake or even worse, when I dream, that I am pulled back.

In such a small village there are only a few kids around the same age at any given time, so naturally we were drawn to each other. In my little group there were three: myself, Matthew, and Jonathan. We called ourselves the Three Musketeers. Not exactly original, I know. Today, we'd probably be the Three Amigos. Or some trio of Marvel superheroes—if, of course, there were still three of us.

We were always messing around and getting up to mischief. Just kid's stuff. Like the day we made a boat from an old discarded sofa we found and sailed it down the river. When our makeshift pirate ship finally became waterlogged and sank, pitching the three of us into the icy water, we scrambled to the bank and had to walk three miles back home in soaking wet clothes to face the wrath of our worried parents. That was typical of our adventures, or our misadventures. We enjoyed breaking the rules, pushing each other to the limit. Isn't that what boys do?

When you think about it, even as you grow up, that never changes. You just transfer the competitiveness and constant game of one-upmanship to your career where you hope it will pay some sort of material dividends. It's the thing that keeps you battling, keeps you striving. When boys turn into men, too often they find themselves cast adrift, lost in family or work, drowning in a sea of mediocrity. They would do almost anything to rediscover the zest of youth, even for just a moment—the boundless optimism, the sense of freedom, the raw energy, and the

appetite for challenges. It all fades as you get older. You grow tired and jaded; all the enthusiasm is sucked out of you by the daily grind.

There was an old stone bridge traversing the river next to Wood Forge. When we were growing up people said trolls lived underneath it, and our mothers would frighten us by saying things like, “You stay away from that bridge, now. Or the trolls will get you!”

Now, I can see that the real reason our mothers instilled that fear in us was to keep us away from the bridge, which was in a state of disrepair, and certainly not safe. It was just waiting for a reason to collapse into the murky water below.

But there was another reason our mothers didn’t want us near the bridge.

On the other side of the river was a deserted farmhouse, which was most certainly haunted. The passage of time has not changed my opinion on that. We all heard the stories of how decades earlier, a man went mad and slaughtered his entire family in those four walls before hanging himself from a roof joist. People who had ventured inside afterwards spoke of finding blood smeared on walls, and hearing children cry. I’m quite sure I will go to the grave believing that unearthly entities stalk those bare rooms, not least because of what happened to Jonathan.

That’s why I’m going back to Wood Forge. I’m going to quickly cross the troll bridge and see if the old farmhouse is still there. It’s a trip I’ve been planning for some time. You see, I need closure. I need to face my fears. Then, maybe finally the night terrors will abate and I will finally be able to move on and live something akin to a normal life.

The haunted farmhouse called us. We knew it was forbidden to go there. But that just made the attraction even greater. There we were, the Three Musketeers, my brothers in arms, on our greatest-ever adventure. It was just after the zombie apocalypse, and we were embroiled in an eternal war against the armies of the undead, fighting to save humanity. The stakes couldn’t be much higher. That was what our group fantasy game required. We did battle in our gardens, the fields, and on the riverbanks, slaying battalions of imaginary foe with wooden swords and an arsenal of invisible yet deadly firearms.

*POW, POW, POW!*

We ran the enemy ragged, all over the countryside. We pushed them over the troll bridge, until the only place left for them to go was into the haunted farmhouse. Looking back, I think the danger aspect, the lure of the unknown, and the notion that we were breaking the rules, all combined to make the farmhouse an irresistible proposition for our last stand. Where better for the scene of the final showdown between good and evil?

As we approached, the putrefying stench of decay filled the air. We soon saw why. A dead sheep lay in our path, its neck horribly twisted, and empty black sockets where its eyes should have been. Something white wriggled and squirmed in one of them. Entrails spilled from an open slit in its horribly bloated belly. The carcass must have lain there for some time, because some other animal or animals had come along and chewed off one of the back legs.

We stopped and gathered around the dead animal.

"The zombies did it," I said solemnly. Even then, I knew the fundamentals of storytelling. If you can pluck something that is wholly, undeniably real, and somehow weave it into your fantasy, it made the lie infinitely more believable. That's how empires are formed.

Matthew, however, wasn't convinced. "It's a sign," he said, his voice trembling slightly. Seeing death up close had different effects on people.

"Or a warning," Jonathan chipped in. He was the most vivacious and headstrong of the group. As such, he had taken on the unofficial role of leader. For the most part the rest of us were happy to let him. I took no pleasure in dictating things, and neither did Matthew. At least then, when we got in trouble we had someone else to blame. To his credit, Jonathan rarely shirked the responsibility.

"Maybe we should just go home?" It was Matthew who spoke the words we were all thinking.

"Hell no!" Jonathan said defiantly. "And let the zombies take over the world? Are you crazy, or just yellow?"

Of course, we all knew there were no zombies. They weren't real. They were just the product of our juvenile imaginations. At that moment, however, the make-believe monsters came to symbolize something else. Something real. And the dead sheep lying at our feet was certainly real.

But our leader had spoken. If anyone went against him, they faced being ostracized from the group and a lifetime of catcalls and "chicken" slurs. Plus, from then on they would have to fight zombies on their own, and that was no fun. We were a group, a team. The Musketeers. United, we were strong, and a little thing like a dead sheep wasn't going to stop us from ending the zombie war.

The putrid stench of death still hanging in our nostrils, we split into two groups. Matthew circled around the back of the farmhouse to go in through the back door and take the zombies by surprise, while Jonathan and I prepared to storm the front of the building.

Even though it was just a game, the tension we all felt was very real. The front door had long since been removed, almost like an invitation. As we paused just outside the doorway, one either side of the empty frame, Jonathan looked at me and, tucking an invisible sub-machine gun under his arm, made some funny hand gestures. I had no idea what they meant. But neither did he. He was just copying something he saw on a TV cop show. I nodded anyway, and together we burst through the opening, our fingers and hands fashioned into state-of-the-art weaponry, blasting away at the undead hordes as we went.

The cavernous room was empty save for a couple of piles of rubble and a discarded wooden table shoved in a corner. Wallpaper hung in strips off the grey walls and the huge bay window had long since been shattered, splinters of glass littering the bare wooden floor. We stopped shooting, instead allowing our mind's eyes to proudly survey the carnage we had wreaked.

"One of them is still alive!" I yelled.

"It's a zombie. It's already dead. They all are," said Jonathan, sounding like an old war-jaded NCO.

“Well, I mean it’s moving.” I quickly backtracked, pointing to the far corner of the room.

“Ten four, got it,” Jonathan said, then dropped into a wide stance and sprayed the area with bullets from the hip, spittle flying from his mouth as he made machine gun noises.

Just then there was another noise. A muffled thump from the room beyond. My breath caught in my throat, and I saw Jonathan’s eyes widen. His machine gun temporarily forgotten, he glanced back at the front door. I knew he was thinking about running away. But I also knew his pride wouldn’t let him. Not in the heat of battle. Instead, he planted his feet and said, “Who’s there?”

It was just Matthew, the other half of our assault team. He entered through a door at the other side of the room, having come through the back entrance and then the kitchen at the rear of the farmhouse. I knew the floor plan from previous visits. We all did.

The ground floor was clear. There were no more zombies.

Matthew and I looked at Jonathan, our fearless leader, who pointed toward the ceiling and mouthed, “Upstairs.”

My heart sank another notch. Invading the old deserted farmhouse by the wide open front entrance was one thing. But venturing into the inner sanctum was something else. I didn’t want to go up there and could quite happily have left right then, safe in the knowledge that our obligations to mankind had been fulfilled. I imagine Matthew felt much the same way. I could see it in his eyes. But how could we object?

As a group, we filed silently out of the huge downstairs room, which in its day must have served as a combined living and dining area, and into the stuffy narrow passage that housed the staircase. Plaster and other debris covered the floor, cracking underfoot. The stairs loomed ahead, rays of sunshine from the window at the top slicing through the dust-filled air like silvery sword blades.

Jonathan took the lead, as always. Only later did I analyze the situation and wonder if he did that through bravery or a less admirable and more selfish desire to be in control. It was one of many unanswered questions. The rest of us followed, noiselessly. As we made our way up the creaking, uncarpeted staircase, my mind drifted away from the zombie invasion to different forms of the undead. At times like this, at any time really, it was easy to believe the old house was haunted. It was the perfect setting for a restless ghost. Surely there had to be some substance to all the stories. There could be no smoke without fire. The stains on the walls I thought were damp could easily be blood.

At the top of the staircase, Jonathan turned to us and put a finger to his lips. “Sssh.”

Matthew and I were happy to oblige. An oppressive atmosphere had settled over the group. Nobody felt much like talking. We huddled together as if for warmth. Despite the sun beating down outside, it was chilly and dank inside the farmhouse. It was almost like being enclosed in a crypt. My breath was coming in short sharp gasps, and I wondered if my companions shared my sense of unease.



Jonathan was making his hand signals again. Evidently he wanted us to split up and each take a room. I think it's fair to say that neither I nor Matthew was overjoyed with the idea. Horror movie class 101 taught you to never split up because if you do, bad things happen. Machismo stopped anyone from voicing his concerns.

I allowed myself to be directed to the nearest room, while Jonathan made his way across the landing to the abode opposite, which we all knew was once the master bedroom, and Matthew took the room next to it. An uneasy silence enveloped us.

The door to the room I had been assigned was hanging off its hinges, almost as if someone or something had tried to break in. Or out. I swallowed hard and crossed the threshold. Beyond the doorway, the room was empty except for an old wardrobe and a pile of discarded sheets piled up in the far corner. At least, it looked like a pile of sheets.

I edged closer, feet scraping on the bare wooden floorboards and imaginary gun at the ready. I expected the pile of sheets to rise up and take human form at any second. Alone, the zombie fantasy dissipated and melted away to nothing. Now, my main concern was the remnants of the dead that were said to roam these deserted corridors after dark. Those wrenched away from life too soon.

The pile of sheets moved.

It wasn't much movement. In fact, it was barely perceptible. Had I not been staring directly at the affected area, I would surely have missed it. I froze, heart thudding in my chest.

More movement—a light fluttering.

My eyes darted around the room and settled on the window. Most of the glass had been broken, what was left sticking out of the frame in jagged splinters. I breathed a sigh of relief. It was just the breeze.

Rejuvenated, I pressed on. When I got within kicking range of the pile of sheets, I thrust out a leg. My foot sank into the soft mounds of material. I imagined a cold, dead hand gripping it and pulling me in, and was elated when it didn't happen.

Not yet satisfied, I stomped on the pile a couple of times, just to make sure it wasn't concealing anything within its damp folds.

It wasn't.

All that remained now was the wardrobe. I took a deep breath, balled up my fists, and took a faltering step closer. Then I stopped. Something was wrong. I tried to make my feet move, tried to make *anything* move, but I was frozen to the spot. I sensed something dark and ominous, as if I were in the presence of evil, the sensation threatening to overcome me.

To my horror, I realized the stench of death was in the air again. Surely, even with the window broken, the smell couldn't carry all the way from the dead sheep outside. And why hadn't I smelled it before?

There was nothing but the wardrobe. Suddenly, it was the only thing in the world that mattered. I couldn't take my eyes off it. I drank in every crack in the wood, every blemish on its blistered surface. I knew, on some primal level, that this

was where the sense of foreboding came from. Two rounded handles held the door shut, and I wondered if they were locked. I hoped so. Maybe it was the only way to keep me safe from whatever lurked within.

As if in a dream, I realized my arm was reaching out, toward the cupboard doors.

No!

But I was powerless to stop myself. It was as if my arm were being controlled by some external force. In my ever-vivid mind's eye, I saw the wardrobe doors open wide. Beyond lay a black void, the darkness spilling out like smoke. I knew something terrible dwelled in that space. I could almost hear unspeakable things scurrying about on many legs, like huge hairy spiders. I was being pulled, drawn toward the chasm. I wanted to scream but couldn't open my mouth.

Suddenly, I came to my senses. It was like waking up from a dream. The wardrobe door was still shut, but the feeling of foreboding remained. It felt as if every atom of my body was screaming at me.

*GET OUT!*

For once, I listened to my inner self and fled. Out of the bedroom I went, down the stairs, taking the steps two at a time, through the narrow corridor, the cavernous living room, and out of what used to be the front door.

The moment I emerged into the sunlight, the terror left me. It felt as if somebody had just removed a heavy black blanket that had been draped over my head and shoulders. The air was still tainted with the stench of the dead sheep, but I could breathe again and my will was my own.

To my surprise, Matthew was already outside, just standing there looking distant and troubled. I wanted to ask him what was going on, why he wore that expression. Had he shared an experience similar to mine? Only later did I wonder whether knowing the answer to that question would make me feel better or worse. If it was just me, I would doubt my own sanity. But if mine wasn't an isolated incident, it would mean facing up to the fact that the evil I thought I encountered in that back bedroom was something real and tangible.

"Where's Jonathan?" I asked.

"Still in there, I guess," said Matthew with a shrug. I noticed that he turned away from the house as if shying away from something he didn't want to confront.

"We have to go find him."

"Can't we just wait here for a while? He'll be out soon." Matthew's voice sounded like it was coming from far away, as if I were hearing it in a dream.

"No, we can't," I argued. "I think there's something..."

"What?"

"Nothing. Come on." With a heavy heart I led the way back into the house. I heard Matthew's hesitant footsteps reluctantly follow.

No sooner had we crossed the boundary, we heard Jonathan scream. Both Matthew and I had heard his scream before. Like the time he sat on a bumble bee and it stung him on the ass. But this was different. It was a scream of horror, like no other I had ever heard. It didn't peak and tail off like you would expect. This

scream rose and rose until it was a high-pitched wail like a siren. It was so loud I saw Matthew raise his hands to cover his ears.

And that was when the ceiling gave out and Jonathan came hurtling through it to land with a thump in the middle of the living room.

Matthew and I looked at each other. Jonathan, our friend, our leader, wasn't moving. He simply lay there on his back in a crumpled heap, surrounded by debris and chunks of plaster. Still in a state of shock, we approached.

"Jonathan?" Matthew said. "Hey, get up."

At close quarters we could see one of Jonathan's legs was twisted horribly beneath him and his neck was jarred viciously to one side, just like the sheep outside. There was a spreading pool of blood coming out of his head, and a trickle coming out of his mouth. Weird, it didn't look like normal blood. It was almost black. Worse than all the blood, his eyes were wide open. One pupil stared off to one side, while the other had rolled back exposing an opaque eyeball.

"Is he dead?" I asked, knowing full-well Matthew had no more answers than I did.

"No, he can't be," Matthew replied, his tone edged with stubbornness. At that age, neither of us had much concept of death over and above the odd stricken animal we stumbled across during our adventures. We didn't know how quickly and easily a life could be extinguished, how delicate the thread was. "Hang on, what's that smell?"

I inhaled deeply. There was the ever-present stench of death, damp, dust, and behind it lurked something new, though no less unpleasant. "Have you farted?"

"Me?" Matthew said, a look of exaggerated shock contorting his face. "No. And I'd be proud if I dealt that one. I think it's coming from him..."

"Urgh, he's only gone and shit himself."

It was true. Jonathan was giving off a putrid stink that was both unmistakable and overpowering. Matthew and I both backed away from the body, our hands covering our lower faces in an effort to keep out the stink.

"Well, I'm not carrying him home now," said Matthew, as if he could, or would have, anyway.

There was nothing left for us to do except go home. On the way, Matthew and I discussed at length what to tell our parents. We knew we would be in heaps of trouble, and probably get grounded for the rest of our natural lives, whatever we said. We eventually decided the best thing to do would be to tell the truth, minus the part about Jonathan shitting himself. That wasn't nice. And we surmised that people would discover that little detail soon enough, anyway.

At first, my parents first refused to believe anything I said; then they were predictably angry, not only about me crossing the troll bridge, but for going inside the haunted farmhouse. However, after the initial fallout, they actually seemed to feel sorry for me. I had rice pudding or apple crumble for dessert every day for almost two weeks afterwards. We rarely spoke of Jonathan, and quite soon I stopped thinking of him as being dead. He just wasn't there anymore.

As terrible as it sounds, sometimes I thought my parents weren't sorry Jonathan

was dead. He was our ringleader, the bad seed, even if the truth was that he was just the one we blamed for all our misdemeanors. We were all equally at fault. Perhaps they thought his death actually did us all a service, effectively cutting the head off the snake. Also, they were probably glad it had been him and not me.

Eventually, I grew up and moved out of Wood Forge. At first I moved only five miles away, then a few years later I moved farther. Then farther still. But as far as I went, I still thought about Jonathan from time to time. I couldn't escape it.

In time, I managed to convince myself that what had happened to him was nothing but a tragic accident, a consequence of us disobeying the rules and going to play in the haunted farmhouse. We had kept pushing the envelope, and it was inevitable that something bad would eventually happen to one of us.

There were just two things that bothered me.

Firstly, there was the episode I had had in the back bedroom with the pile of sheets and the old wardrobe. Perhaps my imagination had exaggerated events, but there was something about that wardrobe.

The other thing that didn't sit right was the fact that Jonathan had started screaming before he came through the ceiling. Not during the fall, and certainly not after it, but before. That shrill scream so full of terror that I could never forget.

So why had he been screaming?

What had he encountered in the master bedroom?

I pondered these questions for years, long after I moved away and started building a career. I always knew that my quest for answers would pull me back to Wood Forge someday.

So here I am, back in the village of my childhood. Nothing much has changed. It's still a sleepy little place set amongst a backdrop of gently rolling hills.

The troll bridge is still there, traversing the trickle of dirty water we called a river. I had a quick check underneath for trolls, but couldn't see any.

The farm house is gone.

That was a shock.

At some point in the past twenty-seven years, the building had been demolished and the bulk of it carried away. As I picked my way through the scattered piles of rubble, I wondered who had knocked down the building and why. Had it become such a hazard to the community that the local council had it done?

There was another possibility.

Somebody had bought the plot of land and had razed the old farm house in order to build on the site. Soon there would be new people living there—a young family with children, all full of youthful innocence, blissfully unaware that the place had a new ghost now.

The thought chilled me to the bone. The day I went back to Wood Forge I learned a valuable fact of life: Not every question can have an answer. Maybe it's better that way.



# SHOVEL DEEP

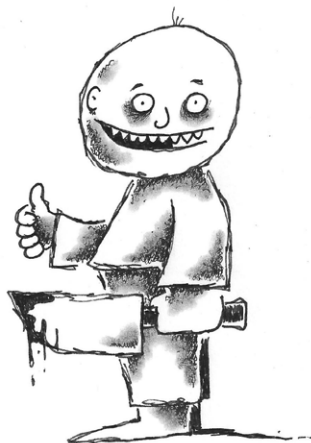
shovel deep, make sure not to miss me  
misstep, mistakes are gonna happen  
take the pressure off and it'll trap them  
the sand caves us into this cavern  
and I'm not the only one seeing this  
we'll go to pieces in the end  
so stab the shovel deep into the beach  
before the tide returns—before the castle  
becomes bombastic urns for fallen lovers distracted  
but under covers buried, bury me  
before the burn comes back to haunt me  
six feet under, what's to become of this weather  
just shovel deep and let me, leave

—grim k. de evil

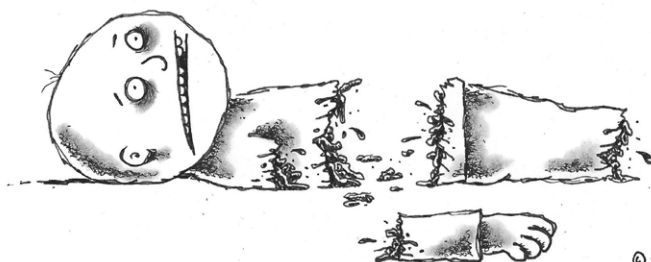
[poetry]

# CUT YOURSELF

When  
all  
else  
fails



cut  
yourself  
to  
pieces



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KARLSSON  
'16

—janne karlsson

## WHEN THEY BECAME MONSTERS

the sound of children playing  
dodge ball in the street,  
faces flush with anticipation,  
    replaced by mothers weeping,  
    madmen raving to the callous moon;

the once unwelcome chatter  
of mindless television,  
candy apple red cartoon violence,  
    replaced by gaunt newsmen  
    reciting statistics mechanically;

the buzz of weekends in the park  
beneath the shade of spreading oaks,  
picnic basket sandwiches and lemonade,  
    replaced by bulldozers shifting dirt,  
    trucks ferrying bodies to mass graves;

their small hands ever searching  
for balance and security,  
tiny fingers squirming with need,  
    replaced by talons, writhing tentacles,  
    claws and cockroach appendages;

the innocence of juvenile obsessions,  
hoarding playthings in closet caves  
and toy box treasure chests,  
    replaced by hideous fixations,  
    bloodlust and a cache of bones;

the softly whispered prayers  
on bent knees at the bedside,  
framed by naïve smiles and giggles,  
    replaced by howls and curses,  
    gnashing teeth and cackles

the hush of households after dark  
with children tucked in bed,  
like angels without malice,  
    replaced by screams and slayings,  
    and wicked devils without mercy.

—lee clark zumpe

# THE PASSION OF PIZZLE

by jeremy shane

## THE SNAKES OF NATHANIEL MOUNTAIN

Eli loaded a round into his rifle, slung the gun over his shoulder, and popped the cork on his jug. He looked at the woods around him, deep and dark with foliage, and took a big swig. Birds called in the distance and wind moved the branches in huge, rolling waves, an ocean of leaves giving the impression of enormity—a vastness of trees and brambles. He handed the hooch to Pizzle and wiped his beard. He wore big boots, his granddaddy's, and a striped brown three-piece suit. The suit was decades old and filthy from dirt, whisky, and human discharge. He was a buck of a man, standing well over six feet.

"Them Otee had it these woods was haunted," he said, planting his foot on a downed tree. "They'd see this thing comin' out the holler and, boy shit. They'd get the hell on!" He laughed, snorting.

Pizzle handed the jug back and looked around. The woods were thick on the back side of Nathaniel Mountain. The particular hollow they surveyed had been avoided by their fathers, their grandfathers, and the natives who once hunted the South Branch valley and surrounding hills. They'd never been in these woods before, knew few who had.

Pizzle, small next to his companion but sporting an enormous beard like some mating display, a grizzly waterfall of silver, grey, and auburn, chuckled. He said "I ain't scared a no snake man." Known around Hampshire County as a wild man, Pizzle knew no fear. He'd fought just about everybody worth fighting and was most known for beating a man to death on his daddy's property when he was a boy.



His lust for flesh was equally legendary. Word was he'd fuck anything on feet. His passion and violence knew no bounds. He leaned on his rifle, chewing rub. "We gotta find that sumbitch. Show him what is."

Old Buckley, drunk as usual, had brought up the whole thing about the Otee and the haunted woods and Eli and Pizzle not being as tough as everyone got on. Eli and Pizzle were drunk too that night, and let Old Buckley rowl them up, each one calling the other the bigger yellow belly.

"I'll whoop your damned ass right here, boy," Pizzle announced in front of everybody there at Shotgun's Tavern.

Eli just drank his whisky, sat there stewing. Pizzle eventually quieted down, but everyone knew it wasn't over, could see it in Eli's eyes.

With much pageant, they set out the very next day into the dark woods of Nathaniel Mountain, to bring whatever thing kept the Otee out of those woods, following a deer trail that wound through birch and pine, thistle and rhododendron. Eventually they came upon a dried creek bed, which they followed until they found their destination. A clearing spread before them, right at the bottom of a hollow, the remains of a lodging. All that stood now was the crumbling obelisk of a smoke-black stone chimney. The forest seemed to fall silent just then, the birds halting their songs and the wind stilling the branches above.

Pizzle asked for the hooch and took a long pull. "You reckon this is it?" he asked. "Must be. Ain't nothing else around here." Eli retrieved the jug and took a swig. He started kicking around at the leaves and turning over fallen branches while Pizzle examined the ruined chimney. It stood ominous against the green of the pines, dark against the orange of the autumn leaves. He felt the stones, rough hewn and pocked, dusting away the webs and arachnid and the corpses of insect. He stepped away from the structure to study it whole. It looked like a monument to him, and had the air of great age about it. It was all that remained of the house, all that was left after the murders, the suicides, and the fire that erased the madness of an entire family in one night. He felt mesmerized by the gravity of the thing.

For a moment it seemed to Pizzle that he and the chimney were all that existed in the world, a man and a monolith, extending to a sky and an infinity of leaves. A tongue flickered, breaking the spell. He caught sight of a reptilian head staring at him from a relief in the stone. He stepped back and hollered to Eli.

"Found one."

Eli ceased his efforts and came around to gander. He said, "Damn if it ain't big, too!"

The snake lay coiled in the chimney, black eyes staring at the pair. They left the serpent and walked to the periphery of the ruined house. Eli sparked a match and lighted the bowl of his pipe, drew a long puff, and tossed the match into a pile of leaves he'd kicked together. After a minute they caught and flames spread, white leaf smoke filling the hollow.

The two retreated to a safe distance as the fire burnt the leaves and scrub in the hollow. Directly, a couple of snakes slithered from the inferno, escaping the suffocating smoke. They were followed by a variety of others. Black snakes, garter

snakes, and copperheads suddenly appeared everywhere. They could hear the distinctive clatter of the rattlesnake's tail and a chorus of flicking tongues and hisses. Snakes just came out of nowhere. They gathered. They moved as a whole. The legless procession gathered at the edge of the hollow, past the smoke. The serpents were gathering into a pile, lumping together in a mass of writhing reptilian skin, all heads and tails.

Pizzle raised his rifle, but Eli put his big hand on it, told him to wait. They watched as the mass grew, more snakes than either man had ever seen joining the tangle. Eli and Pizzle regarded the thing, as by now it was as much a single thing as the black, ruined chimney peaking from the pale smoke behind it. It was undulating, swelling with writhing mass. It rose, somehow, and the slithering thing took on the proportions of a man, gathering into arms and legs, tails protruding as scaly fingers.

The thing raised what would be its head and looked at Eli and Pizzle, turning a misshapen mass of snakes in their direction, hundreds of tongues and thousands of eyes turned toward them.

Pizzle dropped his rifle and tugged on his beard.

"I'm feeling awful ornery," he said. He stared at the thing. The thing stared at him. He took a swig from the jug and tossed it to the ground. With a holler, he took off running, yanking off his overalls.

Eli watched him run bare-assed at the mess of snakes, hopping over a patch of raspberry bushes.

"God damn it," Eli said, cocking his rifle and following after. He caught up just in time to see the thing spread its arms, yielding to Pizzle's weight when they connected, falling to the leafy floor of the woods.

Snakes infested his beard and his wild, woolly hair. They twisted around his neck and over his face. He seemed to melt into the mess, his moans joining the soft din of hissing and slithering scales. The last thing Eli could see was Pizzle's ass rising from the mess and thrusting back into it as he was completely swallowed into the swarm. Eli wanted to shoot, but he and Pizzle were cousins, best friends even. He dropped the gun and went to his knees, grabbing handfuls of snakes and pulling them out of the tangle, one after another. He dug and dug, but he never found Pizzle.

When Eli emerged from the woods that day, something was wrong with him. His eyes weren't right. He was at Shotgun's Tavern when the sheriff took him in. Eli was drunker than ever, raving about snakes.



## FROM THE DIRT

I hold you in my two hands, feel the weight  
of centuries of the same act: sacrifice and the stone altar  
solid against my skin.

We wake up together, arms and legs entwined covered in slick  
barnacles of ancient flesh and there is  
no longer any real detail left to either of us.  
Where you end and I begin seems inconsequential.

Somehow finding feet to stand upright, I rise against  
stone and time and so much death, and wonder  
if what we have can be discarded  
so easily.

—holly day

## Committed

I laughed in their faces  
as I committed to flight  
within the dimmed night  
of a vast swirling haze  
sprinkled with delights.  
Awaken a spirited grin  
from a darkling gaze;  
a chalice of warm gin  
and unicorns danced.  
We all recited a ditty,  
“Race your dragonfly;  
Grasp a shooting star;  
Whisper to the Moon;  
Dance with the Fairy.”  
Your Devil warms up  
on the Summer’s grill.  
I forgot the bugle call  
whilst dipping my quill  
as I committed to flight;  
a soulless zombie bite,  
in the eve of a raucous,  
contentptuous icy night.

—ken allan dronsfield



[poetry]

## A COCONUT TREE CLIMBER

He climbs up rhythmically  
keeping his legs  
within a ring of rope  
like his life.

Intuition assures  
the ripeness;  
life-nut falls down  
from the tree top.

Just a slip  
will end in all end,  
but practice  
rarely slips.

Though the ways are hackneyed,  
he's honeyed and free  
under his calluses.

Morrows and yesterdays,  
he never climbs upon.  
He hugs today, green and yellow  
like the coconut tree leaves.

—fabiyas mv

# A Family Matter

Me and my little brother have a one Sunday a month relationship, so when he invited me to lunch on a Tuesday, I was surprised. We met at a restaurant in Atlanta, near Piedmont Park, at one of those places that calls itself a bistro. I think that's French for "our-staff-is-gay-so-we-can-overcharge." I'm about to order a beer when Chase asks what flavor martini they're serving today.

Flavor?

The waiter said something about boysenberry with a touch of melon juice. I laughed thinking it was a joke, but my brother ordered it.

"I'll have a Scotch, straight up," I said. And before he could ask what brand, I turned to Chase. So now you drink flavored martinis? I remember the face you made when I gave you your first beer."

He laughed. "It must have been domestic."

Chase is skinny with blond hair. I bet he paid more for his haircut than I paid for my entire wardrobe—what I'm wearing and what's in my closet. His hands look like a piano player's. Mine look like a piano mover's.

But he still has the family nose. His hasn't been broken so many times. It bends to one side, like mine, but it's red and round. No wonder the kids in school called him Bozo.

"Hey, Chase," I said. "Remember when I used to beat up the kids at school when they'd call you names?"

He looked like he was about to say something, but the waiter returned with our drinks and took our food order. I went for the beef tenderloin. Rare. Chase ordered the salmon. He sipped his martini and made a face.

I reached over and tasted his drink. "Where's the olive, man?" I ask the waiter. He turned up his nose, but I see him smiling just a little. Me and Chase cracked up.

Chase really isn't a bad guy. He's helped me out of a few jams. When I lost my

by wayne scheer

cop job in Philly, Chase brought me to Atlanta and got me security work at his company until I found something on my own. I stayed with him and Lori and their kids for a while. I enjoyed playing Uncle Tommy to his two boys. Still do. I like the way they feel my muscles and call me Superman.

And Lori. What a choice piece of ass. I remember telling Chase at the wedding that I used to think he was queer, but he did all right for himself.

The food came and the booze was making me feel so good. I don't mention how small a piece of beef they serve for \$21.95. He ordered white wine. I had another Scotch. I'm still wondering why he invited me, but I figured he would tell me in good time.

Chase hardly touched his food. He looked like he wanted to talk. I kept eating. Finally, he blurted it out. "Tommy, I need your help. Lori is having an affair."

Now I heard my own heart beating. Shit! I wasn't surprised, but Lori shouldn't be doing this to my brother. "You sure?" I ask.

"Yes . . . No. She's different. In bed, you know?"

I wanted to ask him how, but I didn't dare say anything.

"I have no proof. Maybe I'm just being an idiot. I tried talking to her, but she said I was imagining things."

"Who with? You got any idea?"

"Someone at work, I think."

I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. I wanted to say something to make him feel better, but what could I say? All I did was ask, "What do you want me to do?"

"Find the bastard and . . . and take care of him."

I made my living off people like Chase and Lori. I worked for a group of divorce lawyers who paid me for information, especially if it came with photographs.

"You sure you want me to do this?"

“Yes,” he said quickly. “I don’t even want to know who it is. Just take care of him.”

He pulled out this wad of cash, paid the bill, and said, “I’ll pay for your time. And something extra. This should get you started.”

I took his money. He held out his hand and we shook. He even grabbed my shoulder. I’m not a hugger, but I wrapped my arms around him. I patted him on the back a couple of times and told him it was going to work out.

I knew I shouldn’t have taken his money, being his big brother and all, but what the hell? Maybe I didn’t eat lunch at fancy bistros, but I had expenses, too. Besides, spying on my sister-in-law wasn’t exactly my idea of fun.

It took me all of two afternoons to discover that she and one of the suits in the office where she worked did more than exchange quarterly reports. They ate lunch in some swanky Thai place downtown and then went straight to a hotel for their dessert. I had worked the place before, so it didn’t take much of Chase’s money for me to get the clerk to tell me the suit’s name—the schmuck uses his credit card—and how often they made use of the hotel’s services.

“Every Wednesday, like clockwork. For the past two months.”

For an extra hundred, he offered to make me a room key, so I could surprise them and take their picture.

“No need,” I told him. “Not this time.” But I gave him another fifty bucks for being such a concerned citizen.

So now I had a decision to make. Do I go to Lori? I knew that’s not what Chase wanted. And I didn’t want her knowing I knew.

I decided to do what I’ve done since Chase was a kid.

The suit’s name was Bruce Kinkaid. I told his secretary I needed to see him about a private matter. Kinkaid opened his door and asked what he could do for me. I didn’t speak until the door closed behind me.

He was tall with the kind of face you see reading the six o’clock news on TV. The handkerchief in the breast pocket of his suit matched his tie. I hated him instantly.

One solid right to his gut and a knee to his nuts and he was on the floor throwing up. I told him to break it off with Lori, and not to tell her or anyone about our little chat or next time I wouldn’t be so gentle. I also mentioned the divorce firm I work for since he was wearing a wedding ring. I reached down and he thought I was offering him a hand to get back up. Instead I grabbed his handkerchief and used it to wipe the puke on the floor and his face—in that order.

I closed the door behind me.

When I got to my car, I called Chase and asked if he wanted to know the asswipe’s name. He said no.

The following Wednesday I checked with my favorite hotel clerk and he assured me Mr. Kinkaid and friend broke their string of eight Wednesdays in a row.

That Sunday evening, Chase invited me to his home for dinner. I brought a nice bottle of wine and presents for my nephews.

“I came into some money,” I told Lori.



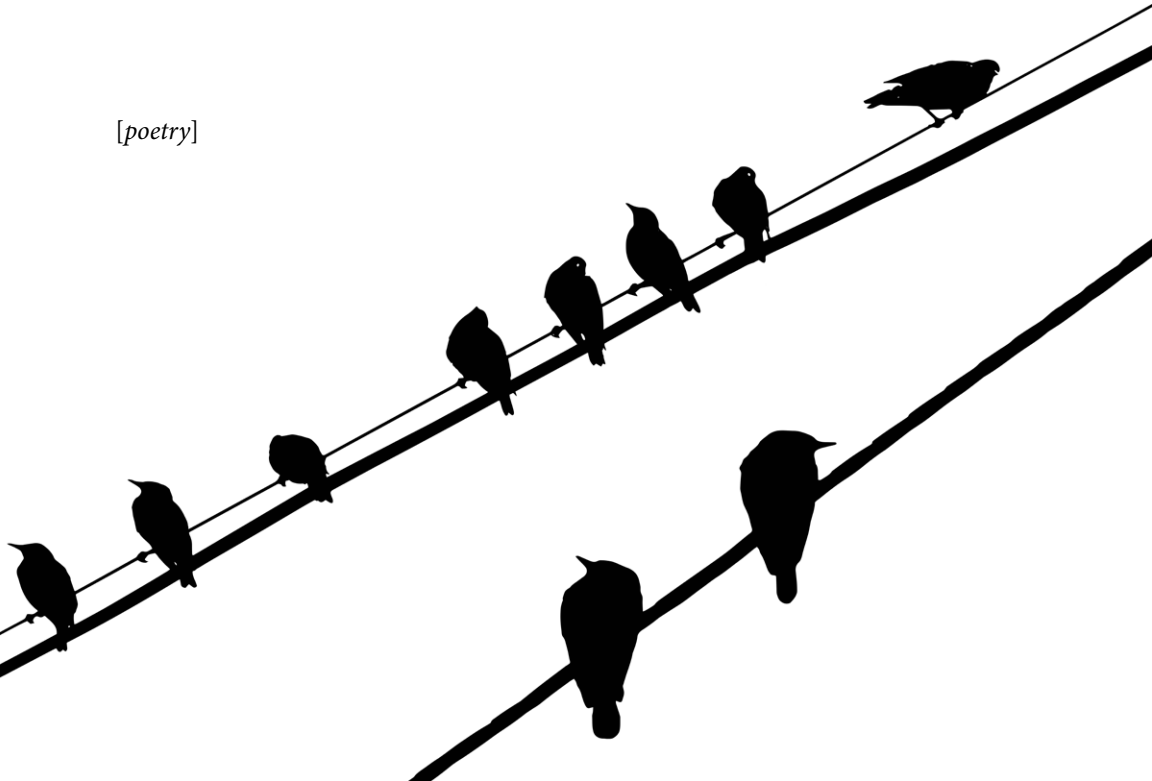


## Above All Aches

A car wheel crushed the leg  
                                of a family  
  on a monsoon evening.  
His spouse and son seemed  
                                strings broken.  
                                But the accident couldn't  
mute his vocal cords. Words  
                                live in lines,  
  and lines in voice – words  
and voice defeat his wounds.  
                                Her scarlet  
  smile sprouts again. Fresh  
shoots appear in the farm of  
                                songs. His  
  Adam's apple rises and falls  
above a pair of crutches in the  
                                limelight on  
  the stage. Rows of heads  
vibrate in his sweet voice  
                                flowing over  
  the hard stones of agony.  
His suppressed ache doesn't  
                                annoy their  
  vicarious joys. Pleasure  
grows out of pain. Enjoyment  
                                and existence are  
  the two sides of his song.

—fabiyas mv

[poetry]



# THE SHRILL

In the dead of night,  
upon a haunted rise.  
Blackbirds serenade  
in shrieking shrills.  
Sonnets to the lonely  
feed icy crispy mists;  
pouting moon dances;  
clouds blow a kiss.  
Coyotes sing to stars  
As Wolves to the moon  
Vibrations felt nearby  
Sharp like the blade.  
Sunrise chases away as  
fright leaves with the light.  
Sing your sonnet of joy,  
Blackbirds shall return.

—ken allan dronsfield

# Oops!

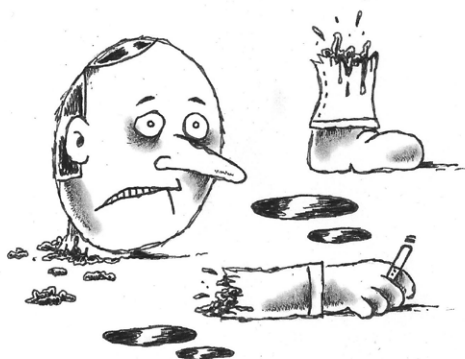
oops!

I  
did  
it  
again

I played  
with your body



got  
lost  
in  
the  
game.



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'16

—janne karlsson

# The Room

I am a General Surgeon at Saint Joseph's Hospital. I don't like people though. I know—pretty strange, right? I just like to look inside the human body. How the body once used to work to becoming lifeless. Maybe I should've chosen to work in the morgue instead. Everyone gets emotional when someone dies, but I really don't care. There's just one less person we have to worry about taking care of. My name is Paisley, and I am 36 years old.

The intercom sounds "911 all surgeons meet with the ambulance in the back for a terrible car crash."

I am so excited. "A car crash?" I yell excitedly.

My friends, Derek and Casey, who are trauma surgeons, run right behind me and say, "Do you know who is in the car?"

I am so busy cheering that I don't hear a word they say. They ask again, "Do YOU know who was in the car, Paisley?"

"No" I shrug.

"Guess we will have to find out," Derek replies.

As we run to the back door, my boss, Ms. O'Hara, or as I like to say, Medusa, stops me. "I want you to go to the Conference room and stay there until I come back. No questions asked."

I walk away in a rage. As I am walking to the room, Derek comes up behind me and asks if something is wrong. *Obviously there is something wrong if I'm walking away from the accident instead of toward it.* I reply, "Yes, I'm fine. Medusa told me to go to the Conference room, that stupid ..."

"Don't say mean words," Derek interrupts. "Maybe you're getting a promotion. Who knows? Just calm down."

I then unclench my fists and hug him. "Maybe, but I have to go now." I give Derek a kiss and go into the room.

## by molly richard

That was 4 hours ago. Now I am sitting on a very uncomfortable chair and just watching the time go by—second by second, minute by minute. “THIS IS RIDICULOUS!” I scream. I get up and start going through the fridge to see if I could find food. I would’ve left by now, but I locked my damn self inside. I hear the door start to unlock, and I run back to the seat, tripping over myself with a hand full of grapes. Then Ms. O’Hara comes walking in.

“Hello, Paisley. How are you today?” Ms. O’Hara asks. I am furious.

“Why am I here?” I reply angrily.

“I want to talk to you about your last four patients.”

“What about them, Medus ... Ms. O’Hara?”

She gives me a dirty look and continues. “Well, the assistants in the room said your last patient, named Dakota, was bleeding out on the table. They also informed me that you did not try to stop the bleeding. Along with the three other patients.”

I sit at the table looking at my hands. “I didn’t mean to let them bleed out but it just looked so interesting how they got more and more pale as the blood was flowing out. I was watching all the organs shut down, and the heart stop beating. It was fascinating. I didn’t know it was a big deal.”

She looks at her hands under the table and mutters, “Paisley, I’m sorry.”

What does she mean by that? Is she firing me? “What do you mean?”

“I’m so very sorry,” she says again.

I just sit there looking at her. I decide to get up and walk to the door to leave. Medusa calls my name. As I turned around she points a gun to my face. “I’m sorry,” she says and pulls the trigger.



# Suicide Hotline

by christopher waltz

“I’m glad I could help. Goodbye.”

All of the calls started the same, and they all ended the same. And Brian liked it that way. He’d become a crisis hotline councilor a little over a year before, and though the money—for lack of a better phrase—was shit, he enjoyed it. He liked to feel as if he were helping at least a few people, and though he could never be sure what happened to them once they hung up the phone, he genuinely thought he was making a difference in the world.

He knew the people he helped on the other end of the line would never be able to thank him, and he knew if he passed one of them on the street the next day, neither of them would be able to recognize the other. Hell, even if they somehow happened to speak to each other, at the bank or in line at Starbucks, there was a pretty good chance they wouldn’t even hear the slight familiarity in each other’s voices.

And if they did, neither of them would mention it. That’s just how it worked.

Brian was legally obligated to keep any information he learned about his callers private, which wasn’t a problem; he was a bit of a loner. The callers, the ones who really meant it and needed Brian’s advice when they called, well, they usually weren’t the type of people to go around telling their friends or relatives they’d spent their Friday night on the phone with some soft-spoken guy from the suicide hotline. Mental illness or not, people judge.

Brian settled in for the night, kicking back on the couch and grabbing the novel he had been reading from the coffee table. He didn’t own a TV, and even if he did,

he wouldn't watch anything while he was on-call for the hotline. There was always the little fear in the back of his head he'd have the volume too loud, and he wouldn't hear the phone ring. He propped his bare feet up on the arm of the couch and pulled his reading glasses from his shirt pocket, ready to dig into the story where he'd last left off.

Before he had read even a page of his novel, Brian's phone rang and the screen lit up with the hotline's 1-800 number. Brian was used to mostly slow nights, but if he was getting a call less than ten minutes into his shift, it might be a busy one.

"This is Brian," he said. Even after a year, he was never sure how to adjust his voice when he first answered the phone. He had heard stories of operators being asked to sound more cheerful or less cheerful, depending on who was directing the call to them.

"Hi, Brian," the voice on the other end of the line said. "This is Samantha with the suicide hotline. We have a call coming from a caller named Geoffrey. Can I patch him through to you?"

People who called the hotline were never given an operator's number; they were always connected to the call center first, then the call center would put them on hold (for as short a time as possible) and patch them through to an operator.

Brian prepared himself for his night before answering. He sometimes wondered if he was the right guy for the job he had taken on, and even considered telling the call center operator no, but he never did. This wasn't one of those nights.

"I'll take the call," he said.

"Thanks," Samantha said, and Brian was automatically placed on hold while she connected the two calls. There was a small click, and Brian knew he was on the line with Geoffrey, someone whom the only thing he knew about was that he was, at least to some extent, considering killing himself.

"This is Brian," he said. "I'm here to help, Geoffrey."

"You can't help me," Geoffrey said. He sounded younger than Brian, but not by much. He may have been in his early-twenties. Again, Brian would never know for sure unless Geoffrey explicitly told him.

"Then why did you call?" Brian often started with a tough-love approach, and though it may have been a little unorthodox, none of his supervisors had ever reprimanded him for it. Of course, how would they know unless the caller called back to complain?

There was a silent pause on Geoffrey's end of the line, then, "Okay, I get it. Then *how* can you help me? I'm at the edge, man."

Brian pulled himself into a sitting position and slid the book to his side. He could tell this might be a long one, not that he was complaining.

"I understand why you feel the way you do, Geoffrey. I understand why you feel like no one can help you, but deep down, you know you called the right place. It's my job to help you, and if I'm being honest, I think I'm pretty good at my job."

"No one's ever been able to help me," Geoffrey continued. "I've been bipolar, schizophrenic, and narcissistic since I was ten. I'm a fucking ticking time bomb."

Brian paused for a moment. His training manual had highlighted the phrase

“ticking time bomb” as a possible warning the caller might not only be considering harming him or herself, but others, too. Brian had only ever encountered this once before, when he was fairly new at the job, and had been able to help, thankfully.

“Are you feeling like hurting others than just yourself?” he asked.

“No!” Geoffrey half-shouted, seemingly offended. “I’d never hurt anyone who wasn’t me. I’m the one who’s fucked up, not them!”

“All right, Geoffrey. I just wanted to make sure you weren’t considering putting anyone else in danger. It’s okay. We can handle this, just you and me.”

Geoffrey didn’t speak.

It wasn’t uncommon for callers to keep mostly quiet until prompted with questions, so Brian always tried to have some ready, but also cautioned himself on not being too invasive. The intricacies of his job were not something people usually thought about.

“Was there an event that might have caused you to consider harming yourself more tonight than on another night?” Brian never used the term “killing yourself” but always substituted it with “harming yourself” instead.

“I always want to *harm myself*.”

The emphasis he placed on the last two words told Brian Geoffrey had called the hotline before, and would likely be privy to the operator’s tactics and questions. He knew he might need to think outside the box if he was really going to help Geoffrey.

“Alright,” Brian said calmly. “Then why are we talking to each other right now?”

He winced after asking the question, knowing it was too open-ended for most hotline callers. But it was too late to take it back now.

Geoffrey’s voice began to crack as he spoke, though Brian couldn’t be sure if he was crying or not. “Everyone always leaves me, man,” he said.

“I’m sure that’s not true.”

“It is! My parents won’t speak to me! My brother acts like I don’t exist. My girlfriend pretended nothing was wrong until she couldn’t take it anymore, then she just packs her bags and leaves me while I’m not home! How is that okay?”

“It’s not okay at all, Geoffrey.”

“You’re the only person who has even listened to me in a month, and you’re only doing it because it’s your job!” Geoffrey shouted. “I can’t take feeling like this!”

The change in Geoffrey’s tone alerted Brian to the probable change in the conversation. Up until this point, the call had been about getting a feel for which type of caller he was speaking to. Now, the point of the call was to help Geoffrey figure out what he was going to do. With any luck, Brian could get him to do the right thing.

“Well, what are we going to do about it, Geoffrey?”

Geoffrey, whom Brian had thought might be hyperventilating, went silent momentarily, confused by Brian’s darkly open-ended question. “What do you mean?” he asked quietly.

Brian didn’t hesitate in dropping the soft-spoken, delicate demeanor he had presented for the majority of the call. This was his usual way of doing things: give



the caller a sense of security and trust, then switch it up on them fast enough to take them off guard and bring out their true feelings.

"This call is only able to go one of two ways," he said. "Either you take my words and help as a way to not hang up and kill yourself, or you take my words and help as a way to hang up and finish what you started before you called."

Geoffrey didn't respond.

This wasn't unusual, as the caller was normally taken aback by Brian's honesty. A lot of them hung up right then and there, but the ones who called because they were actually considering ending their lives, they stayed on the line. They continued the conversation to its end.

Brian waited.

"What do I do?" Geoffrey nearly whispered, possibly to himself and not to Brian at all.

"I can't make that decision for you," Brian said softly, though his tone was stiller darker than it had been before, more menacing. "I'm not you, Geoffrey. I have a happy life. Simple, but happy. I'm not medicated to the point of near-coma, and when I call, my parents answer the phone."

"How did you know about the medication?"

"The people who call this hotline, Geoffrey, they're always on medication. Doxepin, Clonazepam, Fluoxetine, whatever."

This was the part of the call where, had the caller chosen to stay on the line, there would be a lot of silence as he or she contemplated the different options. Brian never knew exactly what was going through their minds, but he assumed it was ideas of which ways to go would be the most efficient and least painful. If there was one thing he had learned, it was people who wanted to kill themselves always wanted to go peacefully and without pain. They seemed not to care about the fact they were literally ceasing their own existence, as long as it didn't hurt when they did it. Unless, of course, they were going for more shock value than efficiency.

"I want it to be fast," Geoffrey said. "And I don't want there to be a lot of blood or anything like that."

A slight smile crossed Brian's lips, though Geoffrey would never know. "Well, your criteria certainly rules out a few options, though I think we both can agree slitting your wrists or shooting yourself is a bit cliché anyway. And some of the more creative options, though quick, can be rather bloody and destructive."

"Kurt Cobain shot himself."

Brian sighed as he got a mental image of what Geoffrey might look like: long, scraggly hair, Converse tennis shoes, an overabundance of flannel shirts. "You're not Kurt Cobain, though, are you?"

"I guess not," Geoffrey said sadly.

"But let's focus on what you can do rather than what you won't. Hanging is an option, and though slightly more uncomfortable than others, it's tried and true."

"You think?"

"It's virtually guaranteed to get the job done if you're willing to withstand a few minutes of discomfort and panicked terror."

Geoffrey paused again. This guy was really thinking over his options, a trait Brian found respectable, even if a little tedious. “I don’t think so. I mean, isn’t hanging basically the same as drowning, but without the water?”

Brian arched his eyebrows, contemplating Geoffrey’s comparison. “Well, I guess if you want to look at it that way ...”

“I can’t handle not being able to breath.”

“It’s only for a few moments; you’ll pass out fairly quickly, and by the sound of it, you don’t have to worry about anyone coming home to find you before you expire.”

“Nah, I can’t.” Geoffrey’s tone was final.

“Understood,” Brian said, shifting to a more comfortable spot on the couch. This call was taking longer than he expected, and it was only his first one of the night. “I think there’s really only one option for you.”

Geoffrey’s voice perked up. “What is it?”

“Painkillers.”

“Painkillers?”

“Yes. They might be hard for you to procure, but once you have them, all you have to do is take as many as you have, get comfortable, and drift off to sleep. After that, you just don’t wake up. It might even be fairly pleasant and relaxing for you, all things considered.”

“Painkillers,” Geoffrey repeated as if clarity had settled upon him.

With this, Brian knew his job had been completed successfully once more. Geoffrey wouldn’t turn back now, as long as he could get his hands on the drugs. But there was always the not-knowing Brian felt slightly uncomfortable with. What if Geoffrey hung up and decided not to go through with it? There would be no way for Brian to find out, and thus no way for Brian to further help him. It was just a part of the job he had to live with.

“I’m going to hang up now, Geoffrey. I have other calls to focus on tonight, and I think I’ve done everything for you I can,” Brian said, returning his voice to the calm, cool, and placidly helpful tone it had been when he first answered the call.

“I understand,” Geoffrey said, adding, “Thank you.”

Brian was taken aback momentarily; the callers hardly ever thanked him before he or they hung up. He decided not to get too excited about it and to just end the call as he had hundreds before.

“I’m glad I could help. Goodbye.”



## Saya's Sneezing

A dry silence in  
the classroom  
may catch laugh  
from her loud  
sneeze – she  
fears.

Boys' attention  
is sitting on her  
elegance – a  
violent sneeze  
may damage  
her chocolate  
manners – she  
muses.

Essays she, to  
hold her breath  
stagnant – her  
right palm hides  
her nose and  
mouth – her  
eyes become  
wet – and a red  
shade spreads  
on her visage.

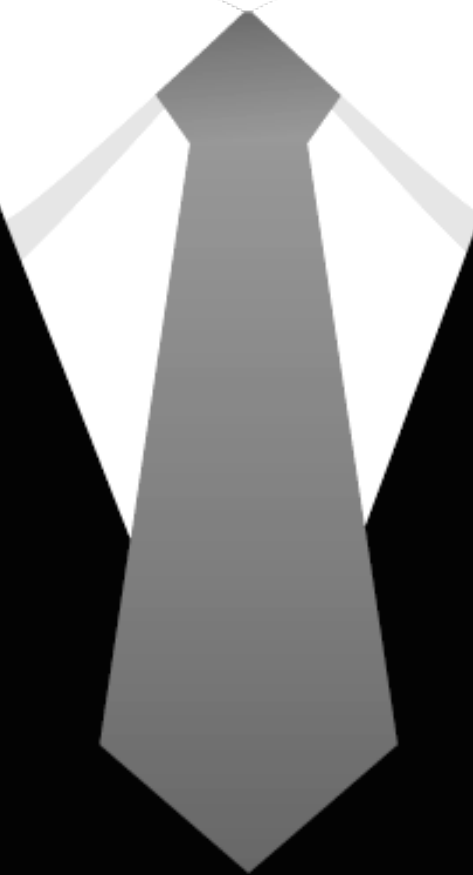
Saya could tame  
her sneeze, yet  
a suppressed  
sound came out  
as a firework  
cracked in a pitcher.

But before a relief,  
the second one  
follows – all her  
efforts are in vain –  
and ends in an odd  
clumsy sneeze,  
startling the pin-  
drop silence.

Everyone laughs,  
when one shrinks.

—fabiyas mv

[short story]



# SUITS

by shane fraser

Nothing made Brendan happier than hiking. Drinking was fun in moderation, school had its moments, but hiking was pure unadulterated enjoyment. If you were to ask him why, he would most likely tell you that nature made him at peace and that it was a great way to get exercise. Sometimes he would bring a friend or two along—others who had expressed interest in this seemingly archaic practice. But usually he went alone; the complete escape was a large part of the enjoyment. He had hiked many different spots, but he had an absolute favorite that took precedent among all others.

At eight o'clock this Sunday morning—nursing a light and hopefully fleeting hangover—he loaded his car with all necessary provisions, left his apartment, and embarked on the familiar trip to the favorite spot. He arrived at the location around eleven.

It is a preserved park, but one that is not popular with tourists because it is absent of mountains and large photograph-worthy animals. This park is situated in the mixed grasslands/desert biome; affixed with flatland, hills, buttes and streams—not overly glamorous but definitely not without its beauty—a hiker's utopia.

After navigating the winding treacherous dirt roads of the park interior, Brendan found an area he wished to hike. He parked his car on the side of the road and stepped out. He lathered on sunscreen, sprayed himself down with insect repellent, put on his hat and sunglasses, switched his casual shoes for over-the-ankle boots (rattlesnakes live here), threw his backpack over his shoulders, and set off into the untrodden land.

He didn't follow paths. "What was fun about a path?" he would say if asked. "Following a path is cheating nature." He believed that in places like this, men had to play by nature's rules. This was one of only a few places where nature still remained king, and men, entering into its kingdom, must abide by its unwritten laws or face severe consequences. You are at the mercy of the merciless king.

He started off through the lowlands; the dusty plains; with sage, cacti, and a multitude of short grasses scattered along the hardened ground. The sky was free from obstructions. The sun, in its purest form, blanketed the region in a healthy and customary glow.

Just minutes into the journey, beads of sweat had already formed on Brendan's forehead. He expected this, as it would be foolish not to, and had packed accordingly. He carried four liters of water in his backpack, and unless he planned on walking like Ray Garraty, four liters should be plenty, as he had never needed more in any of his previous hikes.

After walking a few hundred yards, he started to ascend as he entered the realm of the rolling hills. He looked back to try to locate his vehicle—which he did—to get a sense of his whereabouts before the hills overtook him. Once his view of the car is blocked, he must rely on a literal device to discern his location: a compass and basic GPS program installed on his smartphone. Thanks to this, he could hike without inhibitions.

Brendan made his way up the first major hill. Not unlike its flat predecessor, these hills have hard clay facings embroidered with rocks and low-growing

vegetation. He used the rocks for footing and grabbed the stems of the countless species of durable grasses for balance. He arrived at the top, struggling for breath and sporting a face plastered with tributaries like an Amazon map. Despite his exhaustion, he stood at attention and surveyed the area with a smile; it was all so beautiful. He removed his backpack, set it at his feet, and took out one of his two water bottles. He drank for about twenty uninterrupted wonderful seconds before packing away the bottle and continuing on.

Onward and onward he ascended and descended, all the while marveling at the largely untouched terrain. Rarely did he see other hikers, and if he did they were always very far away. The majority of these trips were devoid of human interaction, which is exactly what he wanted, as the vast wilderness is no place for small talk.

Although not a committed spiritual person, these excursions were spiritual for Brendan, in the sense that through hiking he could attain a level of tranquility that could not be replicated in any other situation. These were retreats: physical, mental, and transcendental. Retreats to a time without treadmills. Retreats to a time where only intelligent men survived. Retreats to a time when Earth ruled man. Here, you realize how small you are in this world and thus, how little your problems matter. Here, without distractions, your thoughts are unchained and profound, whereas amongst the organized chaos of civilization your thoughts are trapped in a cage with trivialities like homework, YouTube videos, and social networking. Here, when you've passed through nature's unbiased filter, when all your masks and cloaks have been dropped, when you are at your most primitive state, you are the most alive.

About two hours into his journey, he reached the top of a hill where a large boulder lay. As was customary on the top of each hill, he opened his backpack and drank from his water bottle—only this time he had the luxury of sitting down while doing it. From his boulder throne he drank mightily and came to the end of his first bottle. Noticing this, he decided to start heading back after his rest, as he usually did when the first bottle emptied. While he lowered the empty bottle from his lips, his eyes locked on the horizon. Something unusual assaulted his vision. On top of the hill directly in front of the one he now occupied, a tall black figure stood.

Brendan dropped the bottle, jolted upright and removed his sunglasses to get a clearer look. It was a man, but the man wasn't wearing any noticeable hiking gear. He appeared to be wearing a suit. Brendan wiped the sweat out of his eyes and looked again. The man stood unchanged and unmoved. Not believing his own eyes, Brendan reached into his pocket and produced his smartphone. He switched to camera mode and while focusing on the man, he zoomed in. The man was indeed wearing a black suit with an accompanying bright red tie. He appeared to be youthful and handsome with short dark hair and a chiseled jaw. He was watching Brendan, smiling.

While peering through the shaky phone, he waited for the man to do something. Many minutes elapsed and the man had not flinched once. Brendan eventually decided to take the initiative: "Hello!" he screamed. No answer. He repeated this

cry again to resounding futility. He questioned the man in the suit: “What are you doing?”

The man stayed idle.

Perplexed and struck by insatiable curiosity, Brendan pocketed his phone and sunglasses, swung his backpack over his shoulders and started down the hillside toward the enigma. He hurried down the slope and began climbing the man’s hill. As he neared the top, he tentatively looked over the ridge. The man was gone. Brendan climbed over and frantically searched every inch of the hill and inspected the ground below. He saw no sign of him.

Frustrated, distraught, and wondering about his sanity, he threw a fit, yelling and kicking rocks. Realizing he was childish, dangerously overexerting himself, he held his face and started wheezing. He knew he needed to calm down.

Normal breathing returned, and once again his eyes perused the horizon.

The man now stood on the next hill. He was in the same position; he had the same stance and cryptic expression. Brendan stared in disbelief. How was this to be understood? Maintaining the stare, Brendan threw his backpack on the ground, removed the second bottle of water, and quenched his thirst.

He crouched there for a few minutes before starting down the rocky hillside. He watched the man for as long as he could—trying not to lose sight of him—until the crest of the hill inevitably blocked his view.

He made it to the bottom and mustered the energy to go up again. Everything hurt: his eyes from the sun, his legs from the uneven terrain, his feet from cactus spines, his hands from sharp rocks and thorns, his chest from shortage of oxygen, and his head from lack of water. He took two huge swigs of water—which he was trying to ration with a growing sense of futility—and began another monotonous ascent.

Brendan climbed on. Every step was pain, every breath was pain; his body a vessel of suffering. Slowly and torturously he made it to the top of the hill, which the man had of course vacated. He dropped to his knees and started sobbing, as the man looked on from the next hill, smiling. He screamed at the man: “No! I won’t do it again! I can’t!”

Apparently responding to Brendan’s explosion of emotion, the man gestured with his hand for Brendan to come to him. Brendan was astounded, and with eyes wide and mouth agape, he reacted as if the man had just taken the form of Jesus himself. He took this gesture in good faith, and found the motivation to continue on. He clumsily threw his backpack at his knees and took two more swigs from the bottle. He packed his bag, stood up with the grace of a newborn giraffe, and stumbled to the edge of the cliff. With one deliberate step after another, he descended.

He was severely debilitated at this point: wheezing, coughing, and clambering on unsteadily. He lost his balance many times and slid the majority of the way down. He reached the bottom and had one small drink of water—only the bottom rung of the bottle was now occupied—and continued upwards. Every few steps he had to stop to rest; it took him twenty minutes to climb this, one of the smaller

of the hills. Once he reached the peak, he collapsed on the relatively even ground. Sideways, through red swollen eyes, he tried to locate the man, but to no avail. He was gone again, but of course Brendan knew where he was. He rolled onto his stomach and looked toward the horizon. To his surprise, he saw that that the runway of hills had ended; it transitioned into a valley. In the middle of this valley, dichotomous against the rustic landscape, a group of men in suits stood. They were watching, waiting.

Brendan got to his feet. He pulled the bottle out of his pack and swallowed the last few drops. He left bottle and pack behind him and started down the hill. Confidently and without error he descended; his eyes fastened on the congregation. He never looked away; he couldn't look away. His feet touched the ground and he started toward the men in suits. He walked fearlessly toward them ... 30 yards ... 20 yards ... 10 yards. There were nine of them all wearing the same pristine black suits with bright red ties and glistening black dress shoes. They were all facing him, standing the same distance apart in a 'V' formation, motionless and with those signature smiles. They were all the same height, same build and had generally the same facial structure—but their faces weren't completely identical.

With adrenaline propelling him, Brendan walked on. Nothing hurt anymore. Feeling was leaving him. Nothing existed but the men in the black suits. He walked toward the man in the middle—the man at the tip of the V, the man from the hills. In a curious instance of existential singularity, Brendan the man, and the sun—unnaturally low in the mid afternoon sky—were perfectly in line. He stopped a yard away from this man. He stared into the man's eyes; they were completely black. For what felt like hours they faced each other—statuesque and symmetrical. Suddenly the man took one large methodic step to the right, revealing another man behind him. This man looked shorter, older and greyer than the rest but was wearing the same attire. He walked slowly toward Brendan with his left hand hidden behind his back. Brendan did not flee. The man stopped within an arm's reach; he too had black eyes and an ambiguous smile. He exposed his hand and presented the object it was concealing: a suit. The same suit—the same godforsaken suit. It was expertly displayed on a silver hanger in a slick clear bag. Also enclosed was the ubiquitous red tie. The man held it out to Brendan.

All at once he regained his senses and clarity. He shook his head at the offer and stepped back. The man's smile instantly transformed into a look of disappointment, a look that appeared both human and otherworldly, a visage that seemed to come from a place where man had never been nor would ever comprehend. In one fluid motion, the man reached into his waistband with his free hand and pulled out a gun. He shot Brendan fatally in the heart. The men synchronically arched their heads and peered down at the lifeless body, all with the same disappointed expressions. As the rest stared, one of the men produced a shovel and began digging.

The sun continued to shine.







[poetry]

deathbound

Haunting hourglass  
Ghostly sand  
Locking time  
From leaden hand

Hollow dreams  
Emptiest wish  
Ebbing echoes  
Coldest dish

Face of pallor  
Weakest plea Heart of  
phantoms  
Blackest sea

Eternal corpse  
Wrongly marred  
Endless sleep  
Forever barred

Fair veneer  
Worm at core  
Glowing gold  
Curse of yore

Falling fractals  
Dwindling dawn  
Meteors crashing  
Pawn by pawn

Reaping sickles  
Death'sheads  
Dying shingles  
Norns' threads

Lavished love  
Passing pleasures  
Rusted bonds  
Drastic measures

—shawn chang

# PRISON GIRLS

by aaron polson

I

The Virginia Inn, even with sour layers of cheap paint, a pot hole-marred parking lot, and a dingy, flickering sign, offered Isabelle more than she'd had at the Best Western or Rodeway Inn closer to the highway. Isabelle, sure whatever they'd find behind the door was worth the extra \$200 a week, watched Mary, her new supervisor, fumble the keys. She needed no training to clean hotel rooms, the only job she'd had in the past five years, but Mary insisted on a tour.

"Here we are," Mary said. Grey and wrinkled, she could have been anywhere between fifty and seventy. She had the steely look of one seasoned with bleach and long hours on her feet. Her voice sounded on the other side of too many cigarettes. "You won't be ready for what we find."

Isabelle shook her head. "I understand. I've been doing this for—"

"No," Mary said. "You won't be ready for what's behind the door. I don't care about what you've done before, little girl. This is different. You could have cleaned ten thousand rooms, but this one will be different."

The words "little girl" hit Isabelle like an open slap across her cheek, but she nodded. An extra \$200, she reminded herself, was worth a few comments from a worn-out old thing like Mary.

"Okay then." Mary pushed the door open. The smell came first, a pungent assault of blood and grime, rot and time, urine and shit.

Isabelle caught her nose and turned away, gasping.

“You can never be ready.”

Isabelle brought her eyes back to the open doorway. They adjusted slowly, gradually finding the dim shapes of a hotel room with the lights out. A coat hung from the hook by the door. She stepped forward, reaching for the switch inside. Mary hadn’t budged, but as soon as Isabelle’s hand lifted toward the switch, the old woman caught her with a grey-fleshed talon.

“You turn on the light, and there is no turning back.”

Isabelle thought of \$200 a week. The lights clicked. She blinked. Her eyes focused and unfocused. A convulsion rode through her body, and she staggered into the hallway. Mary laughed.

Isabelle’s coffee had gone cold without a sip. She sat in the Virginia Inn’s office. Her forearms rested on the laminate tabletop with eyes fixed on a bank calendar on the opposite wall. A ceiling fan stirred the air and played with the corners of the morning paper while groaning in slow circles. It sounded sick, as though it might break loose of its fixture. The droning was almost hypnotic.

Mary entered rubbing her hands on a rag. She approached Isabelle, drew a white envelope from her apron pocket, and dropped it on the table.

Isabelle’s gaze dropped to the envelope. “What’s this?”

“Your pay.”

Isabelle touched the edge of the envelope, running her fingers along the flap. She pulled them away, suddenly aware of the broken, nibbled nails and feeling a hot flash of shame. “I didn’t... do anything. I won’t be able to keep the job. I didn’t do anything. That room—”

“That room is what we do here, little girl. I wasn’t sure you could handle it.”

“I didn’t handle it.”

Mary smiled. Yellowed teeth showed between thin, pale lips. “You’re still here.”

“We should call the police—”

“No.” Mary waved a wrinkled hand. “No police here, little girl. Our job, housekeeping, is to go in, assess the situation, and call the correct team.”

“The police...”

“Is it not enough pay?”

Isabelle felt the envelope’s thickness between her fingers. Two hundred extra a week... nearly a thousand a month for her sister and brother, for her grandmother’s meds. Clouds filled her head. She closed her eyes.

“Look. Cash. Always cash, always paid each day.” Mary sat in the chair next to Isabelle. The plastic feet squeaked against linoleum as she scooted closer. “Tax free.”

Isabelle opened her eyes. Her mouth felt full of mud, icy slush from the banks of an autumn stream. She blinked, and a dead man lay on the hotel room carpet. She blinked and Mary smiled. She blinked again and stared at the envelope of money in front of her—cash, tax free, more than she’d had in a long time. Her fingers shook. She rubbed a thumb over a broken nail. It would be nice to have a little extra, maybe something for herself after feeding the family and making sure the electricity kept flowing.

She blinked again.

"It is an easy job, little girl. We call the services and fix the room when they are done. It must be lived in—not fresh and perfect like the work has been done. We 'unclean' a little. We freshen sheets and leave new soaps in the bathroom. You do not touch the bodies."

Isabelle swallowed.

"This is all we ask. This is how it works at the Inn. People come here to die in all sorts of ways, and your job is to call services and let them do their business."

Isabelle shook her head. She saw the dead man's eyes and a dark stain near the wound at his temple. She'd merely caught the glimpse and staggered away. There should be police, she knew. She knew the police would need to be involved. Murder might have happened in that room, not just death. Mary continued to smile, content it seemed to allow Isabelle's brain to work through the puzzle set before her. She thought of Gabe and Elena and shook her head.

"I can't."

Mary clucked her tongue. "Oh, little girl, I see. Take this envelope. Take this too." She slid a slip of paper between bills. "In case your mind changes."

## II

"Izzy," Elena said, catching her big sister in a rib crushing hug. "I missed you."

Only nine, Elena stretched just past Isabelle's waist. She'd always been more of a daughter than sister, a dark-haired and dark-eyed mimic of their mother, a reminder of grief and long nights, candles at mass and the quiet sobs of Grandma during those first months after the accident. Her cheeks were too lean now, too lean and hungry and reminders of the gash torn in their lives.

"Hey sweetie," Isabelle said, hugging her sister with arms only because her hands clutched the market bags. "How was school?"

Elena stepped back and wrinkled her nose. "A red-haired fourth grader tried to kiss me at recess. He smelled like old socks."

"What did you do?" Isabelle asked.

"Ran away. I don't want to smell like socks." Elena poked a finger at the bags. "What did you bring us?"

"Dinner. We're having rice and chicken like Mama used to make. Special for tonight." Isabelle had stopped by the market on the way home and bought a scrawny frying chicken roast in the tiny apartment oven. It wasn't much, but the windfall in her envelope stirred wishes for better things, wishes for her sister and brother and grandmother in the tiny apartment. "Where's Gabe?"

Elena nibbled a lip. Her feet drew circles on the floor.

"Did he come home with you?"

"He walked me home," Elena said. "Then I don't know."

The tiny apartment filled with roast chicken, a poor little bird which dripped away too much fat but still tasted wonderful. Elena gobbled seasoned rice by the spoonful. Gabe, fifteen with a bottomless stomach, devoured half the bird alone.

He'd come home while Isabelle cooked and little Elena played checkers with Grandma. He wore his surly cloak, a dark shadow which hunkered over his body and Isabelle hoped was more adolescence than their mother's death.

Before the meal was over, he mumbled an excuse, dropped his plate in the sink, and disappeared into the bathroom.

"He's a boy," Grandma said. Her watery eyes fixed on Isabelle. A gnarled, claw-like hand touched her arm. "He's a boy and you are not his mother. I see the trouble in your eyes."

"It's not that," Isabelle said. She glanced at Elena. The girl was too busy with her plate to notice.

"You are troubled."

Isabelle's head was blotted with fog and memories of the death-stench in the Inn that afternoon. She steadied herself against the table, took a breath, and started clearing dishes. Ten minutes later, her hands deep in warm, soapy water, she shuddered.

What had she seen?

What had she done by walking away with a stack of money?

"You'll tell me now?"

Isabelle looked over her shoulder at Grandma. The old woman sat alone at the table, her arthritic fingers wrapped together in her lap. Their mother had been robbed of an opportunity to grow old like Grandma. The man in the hotel had been robbed of his life—he couldn't have been much older than their mother.

"It's the job?" Grandma asked.

"Yes," Isabelle said, wiping her hands on a dishtowel. "Yes. It's the job."

"You are no stranger to hard work, Isabella. You and your mother both. I dreamed of you having more than this, more opportunity than this, and perhaps you will."

"But... This is too much."

"Hush. Sometimes the work is difficult."

Isabelle shook her head and sank her fingers into the water. "No," she said. "Not the work..."

"Isabella. You must understand gifts when God hands them to you. Is the pay better?"

"Yes."

"Are you selling your body? Are you breaking a commandment?"

Isabelle stared at the soapy water. The suds were almost depleted, leaving a thin, rainbow film over the surface. Her hands looked too white, too bloated and distorted. She wiggled her fingers. The man was dead already, and Mary said someone would take care of things. Her job was simply to get the room ready for another tenant.

Only the word "victim" slipped through her skull and lodged in her brain. Victim. She thought of an envelope full of money. She could horde a little each week, stash it away and eventually have enough for classes, perhaps a nurse's assistant certification in the future. Whatever allowed Mary and the Inn to pay so

well could fuel her future and the future of the family. No good could come of bad.

"Isabella?"

"No, Grandma. It's a rough neighborhood is all."

"And you will be careful?"

Isabelle nodded and pulled the stopper from the sink. Water swirled into the drain with a loud, sucking gurgle. "Of course."

Isabelle dreamed of the dead man that night. She opened the hotel room door alone and stood over his body, surveying the entire scene, even more than she'd been able to take in that morning. His eyes opened and he rolled over. This did not scare her in the dream or when she woke. His mouth opened.

"You didn't do this," he said.

"I know," she said.

"You didn't do this to me."

After waking in the morning, Isabelle called Mary.

### III

Each morning, as she made the rounds at Virginia Inn, Isabelle looked for the bodies. Sometimes they were like the first, a middle-aged man, white more often than not, with a stab or bullet wound. They typically wore business clothing, wrinkled suits or chinos with shiny shoes. The bodies usually lay in a heap at the foot of the bed or between two double sized beds in the larger rooms. Sometimes they smelled. Sometimes the room still held the fresh-scrubbed odor and the lump of dead flesh was the only reminder of the horror the room had witnessed. She followed procedure. She called the office and notified Mary who in turn brought the men with the plastic bags, the carpet men, and they made the room new again. Isabelle swept inside with bleach and scrub brushes and new sheets and made it clean, not new, but ready like a hotel room should be.

On days without a body—most days—she came home with an envelope of cash and relaxed, loose shoulders. She came home with extra food and extra change and slid a few dollars into a shoebox hidden under other boxes on the floor of the closet she shared with Grandma. Those days were good. On those days Isabelle could pretend she was a simple housekeeper in a simple, but drab, hotel.

But the days with the bodies mounted, five in one week toward the end of March, and Isabelle began to dream again. She walked down a hall with doors open. The hallway didn't belong to Virginia Inn, but somewhere cleaner, nicer with brass-fitted wall sconces and plush carpet. Numbers on the doors grew in sequential order, brass numbers which matched the sconces. Each counted a body, one, two, three... she stopped at a door with no number, a door which should have been twenty-four.

A voice sounded inside.

"Izzy?"

A rush like water filling a pool assaulted her ears. The dream-world roared. Isabelle opened the door and found Elena sitting on the edge of the bed, half

her face split open to reveal bone and bits of brain. The carpet was bloodless, the comforters unstained and clean, and Elena smiling from half her face. She held a small, brass number in her hand--twenty-four.

"Izzy, you've come. I'm glad you could be here."

When she woke, panting, Isabelle stumbled from bed, staggered across the hall, and scooped her little sister in her arms.

"What... Izzy?"

"Shhhh..." Isabelle held Elena close, rocking back and forth while the darkness watched.

"I don't' think I can do this anymore," Isabelle said to Mary in the morning. "I don't think I can—"

"Dreams?"

Isabelle nodded. "Yes, dreams. A nightmare last night."

Mary smiled her old-woman's grin. She held a crooked finger to Isabelle and reached under the counter with the other hand. She produced a slip of paper, grabbed a pen, and scribbled.

"This will help you understand. For later, when you are ready." Mary folded the paper and laid it on the counter.

Isabelle felt her stomach sink as if it were laden with a stone. What she needed was to be done with the hotel. She needed to walk away from the work, the bodies, the money... but that last piece kept her there. The money was good. Too good. Did the cash come from the dead men? Along with the stone, a sudden wash of hot shame bloomed in her neck and crossed her cheeks.

"We need you, little girl. We need someone who can do this work and keep going. We need someone with the courage to face death and the horror and understand it is part of life. You were built for this." Mary's words came with a sweet lilt in her otherwise raw and rough voice. "Tell you what. Today is a vacation day. Paid vacation. You'll have double in your envelope tomorrow when you come back. You take my little note and some time. You will understand. I know what it is like to care for such a family."

Isabelle nodded. The old woman hypnotized her with the soft way she talked. She spoke with conviction and empathy. When Mary said she knew, Isabelle did not doubt. Isabelle plucked the folded paper from the counter and turned for the door with a tiny wave. The stone in her gut slowed her feet, but the shame already felt lifted, like the drawing-back of heavy curtains in a hot room.

She floated through midday, eating a tasteless taco from a stand before sitting in the park for what felt like several hours. Children, all younger than Elena, played with their caregivers on bright, primary-colored slides and ladders. The sun warmed her, made her feel almost like a human being. The slip of paper from Mary waited in her pocket. She drew it out, but would not unfold it. No—not until she was home and safe and far away from the awful Inn and its impossible nightmare world.

She carried the paper in her hand on the bus ride home. It felt smooth and cool

against her skin, even though she was sweating. She carried it and did not read until closing the door of the apartment—gently so as not to wake Grandma. And then, carefully, she opened the paper and read:

Why did you dream of Elena and room 24?

The stone flushed through her stomach and felt as though it turned liquid, a bath of just molten rock carrying her liquefied innards down her legs. The apartment was too quiet. Her knees buckled. She dropped her purse and made for the kitchen.

“Elena?”

The tiny living room had been empty and now the kitchen. She hurried to the hall, her heart pounding. Images of the dead men piled in front of her. There hadn’t been a child in the lot—not one. Her hands trembled against the doorknob to the room Elena and Gabe shared. She inhaled deeply, held the air, and opened the door to a dark room.

No Gabe. No Elena.

“Elena? Gabe?” Her voice began to rise and take on a high-pitched, frantic quality, the underlying screech of panic. She spun to the hallway again and flicked on the bathroom lights. She shared the only remaining room with Grandma, and the old woman stood in the doorway.

“You’ve rattled the walls with this, Isabella. You’re so early, too. What is the matter? Did you see the kids?”

“Grandma... Where’s Elena? Where’s Gabe?”

The old woman blinked. “They came for you. Elena’s idea. They were going to ride the bus to your hotel, ride with you and walk home. She’s missed—”

Isabelle closed her eyes. A dead man lurched to life from a hotel floor. Elena with half a face smiled. Isabelle’s eyes jerked open. “Not the hotel.”

“Yes. It’s fine. Gabe went with her. He complained, of course, as boys of fifteen will do. It’s hard for him to share that room with his little sister. Maybe—”

“I’m sorry, Grandma. I must go. I need to find them. Now.”

Isabelle thundered from the apartment, snatching her purse on the way out of the door. Grandma continued to chatter, but she scarcely heard a word—only Elena and Gabriel’s names and something about dinner. Blood started to pound in Isabelle’s head, the tin drum beat of a looming headache, a massive thundercloud of a headache behind her temples. She made too many mistakes, too many choices, too much death brushed aside in weeks of housekeeping at the Virginia Inn. She noticed the slip of paper in her hand as she slid the bus pass through the meter.

Why did you dream of Elena and room 24?

## IV

She rode the bus in a fog, missing the buzz of mid-afternoon traffic and a haze of colors. Her hands shook after the last stop. Her fingers still clutched the slip of paper. Feet moved under their own volition, carrying her one tap of sidewalk after next until she rounded a corner and faced Virginia Inn’s lobby awning. The whole place stank of death, of feces and blood and sweat and something else, something ancient and buried.



Fear.

Mary's words, "They've come here to die," thickened Isabelle's blood.

Not Elena. Not her little sister.

Mary's grey face lifted from the lobby desk and beamed toward Isabelle as she entered. The ambient buzz of Mary's television in the lobby office filled the room, and the air was warm and stale. It was a place to come die, a sad, lonely place for men with no dreams to come die—or men with the wrong desires to find death. It was no place for a little girl, no place for Elena.

"Oh, hello," Mary said. She smiled, yellowed teeth flashing.

"My sister."

Mary's smile shifted into a questioning grin. "Yes. Your sister. What is it, Isabelle? Has something happened?"

"Where is my sister?"

Mary did not speak, but her grin, her dark, sparkling eyes told enough. She turned behind the counter and tapped the little slot which should have held the key to room 24. Her fingers withdrew, and the empty space swelled, growing into something monstrous filling Isabelle's head. "You'll need to use the housekeeping master, I guess."

"If you've hurt her..."

Mary shook her head. "I do not hurt any of them. They only come here to die."

Isabelle spun for the door. She burst outside, squinting in the sudden sunlight. Number 24 would be on the lower level, around behind the lobby. She began at a trot and found herself running, nearly sprinting as if speed could stop something set in motion while she was on the bus, even before the bus ride back to the Inn. She found the unit, 24, and realized it was the first one in which she had found a body—the first room Mary showed her. She fumbled with her housekeeping keys, slid the appropriate master into the lock and clicked. Isabelle held the door open by inches.

"Elena?"

No answer returned. The air inside felt hot and stale on Isabelle's face, much like the air inside the lobby. She hesitated, her body tingling on the threshold, an invisible line between imagined horrors and horrific reality. Warmth and a cleaner smell than Isabelle expected came from inside. The moment supplied hope. She pushed the door and found that it wouldn't open all the way.

Something prevented it from opening fully. Something that gave a little as she kept pushing. She found the light switch and the room filled with yellow light. She scanned the room. Her eyes gobbled the scene while hope and fear traded places at will. Isabelle's gaze finally fell to the door and the shoe blocking the door, a black dress shoe. A man's shoe.

Behind the door, another one of them: middle-aged, white, wisps of grey hair at his temples and a full bloom of blood on the carpet from under his belly.

"Elena?"

Isabelle stumbled farther into the room, her feet like balloons and her head still swimming in humid air. She pushed the door shut with a click, and the

outside world's noise cut away. It wasn't totally silent though. Someone was in the bathroom, a tiny whimpering someone. She hurried.

Her little sister, knees clutched to her chest, trembled in the empty bathtub.

"Jesus, Elena..."

"Oh... Izzy..." Elena continued to tremble. Her tiny, pale face turned toward Isabelle, eyes wide and black. "Izzy..."

"What happened?"

"Izzy... that man. He's..."

"Where's Gabe?"

"I was looking for you..." Elena shook her head. "Gabe left to meet some of his buddies. He left me at the bus stop. Said to find you here."

A noise sounded from the room behind Isabelle, the click of a door and soft footfalls. Her body tense, she turned.

Mary stood just outside the bathroom. "You've found her."

Isabelle's tongue went heavy in her mouth. She wanted to scream at the old woman, wanted to tear her to pieces with words as if words could draw blood like the pool underneath the dead man. She wanted to break her, make her pay for the quivering bathtub jelly which had been a vibrant little girl. She wanted these things, but all her mouth could form was "why?"

"This is how it is," Mary said. "This is the way of things. There is no going back. No changing how it is."

"How what is?" Isabelle asked. Her nose filled with the blood's subtle odor, and she steadied herself against the towel rack. "What do you mean... no going back?"

"This little one. She's seen what happens here, and now she must learn what to do in a room with one of the dead men." Mary's wrinkled hand opened toward Elena, and the young girl's tears slowed. "We need angels like you. Angels of death who can help in this place of death."

Elena took a shuddering breath and wiped her cheeks.

Isabelle's hands knotted into fists but unwound a moment later, limp and weak. "Why did you do this to her?"

"Oh, no, sweet one. This is only the way of things. She entered this room of her own will, looking for you. And now... she's one of us."

A sob swelled deep inside Isabelle, an ancient sadness she'd carried since her mother's burial. As she leaned against the wall, the air filled with Elena's whimpers, she knew the same prison—the blood, the garish fluorescent bathroom glow—had held Mary for a long, long time. For the first time, she saw love in Mary's wrinkled face. She found her future and Elena's too. Isabelle staggered forward and wrapped her arms around Mary. In a few moments, they would teach Elena how to prepare the room, how to make it right once the men came, but now, they shared the bitter joy that the three were now kin.



## Waiting in vain

It's a voluntary widowhood.  
Whipped by Neeli's tongue,  
he's gone to harvest Dirhams\*  
in Dubai desert – lest the embryo  
of their new home won't grow up.  
She's alone in a temporary shed  
behind the basement on the bank.

Indian Postman passes by like her  
days flashing 'No' with his fingers.  
She looks into the distant desert  
through the window of nostalgia.  
Fear creeps on the walls of her  
heart at night - even a Norway rat  
becomes a ghost rattling in kitchen.

Years slip into the chasm of past  
leaving behind the doldrums on her  
countenance. Time partitions her  
basement – mongooses, bandicoots  
and rats get their shares – holes and  
chinks. Now her dreams with streaks  
of love have shrunk like her womb.

\*Dirham – currency of the United Arab Emirates

—fabiyas mv

# THE RULER OF MANY DESTINIES

by benjamin cooper

“Excuse me, God, may I interrupt?”

With a lofty sigh, God pried his weary eyes away from the rows of screens suspended above his mahogany desk. “Of course, my most trustworthy servant. What do you require?”

“I am accompanied by your successor.” God’s startled eyes drifted to the striking young man beside his head servant. His face was narrow, his cheek bones and jaw line pronounced as if chiseled from stone—the face of a true God. His eyes sparkled with nervous energy, darting back and forth, reflecting the barrage of video from the screens. After a slight hesitation, he bowed respectfully.

“It is a pleasure to meet your acquaintance, God,” he greeted congenially. God eyed him warily. He was dressed in a simple white robe, and remained steadfast, his placid expression revealing nothing.

“Likewise!” God replied with a wry smile. “When did you appear?”

“Two days ago, but your servant had advised not to bother you. I have been busy studying behind closed doors.”

“I see. There has been a minor crisis involving the United States and China. That will have to wait, though; you are now my main priority. You should have interrupted me earlier and introduced yourself.”

"I did not want to come off as presumptuous," he replied hastily, noticeably flustered, his poised demeanor cracking. "I took the advice of your servant to wait until the proper time presented itself."

The head servant interjected, "May I be dismissed?" God nodded cordially, and he left them to their business.

"I have much to teach you. I have been anticipating your arrival for quite some time," God remarked, seemingly undeterred by the daunting notion that his presence marked the inevitable dissolution of his reign.

"Is that so?" the successor responded, intrigued.

"Yes, I could feel my time nearing an end, my focus becoming more difficult to maintain. My awareness and perseverance have been slipping with each passing day. I have been growing weary of constantly watching over this planet called Earth. This past century has been both complicated and full of conflict. There is much uncertainty about their future, but only time will tell if their fate holds a cataclysmic ending such as that of the dinosaur."

Reluctantly, the successor sat on a small stool, giving his undivided attention to his teacher. "The previous Gods lasted much longer than I," he continued. "However, it must be said they had a less complicated job. There were no convoluted political issues, nuclear threats, or terrorism. Those intuitive mammals are getting smarter by the year. Take the Internet, for example. Quite remarkable! They are a class five species already! I trust you have learned the class system?" The successor nodded. "Other Gods are quite taken with the rapid progression of these humans. As their intelligence grows, however, so does their vulnerability for calamity. Soon they will be expanding their presence from Earth, to other planets and planetary systems. You would then have to watch and guide other human colonized planets as well as the world assigned to you, Earth. I predict your term will be even shorter than mine. You see, the more energy we exert overseeing Earth, the shorter our lifespan."

"Yes, God," he acknowledged respectfully. "After I arrived your servant briefed me on the planet's history. But our focus was mostly on Gods ruling other races, which seemed to truly fascinate him. Most of them are below the technological level these humans have achieved, however. It must be difficult for you to maintain control."

"Indeed! And it will be even harder for you," God warned sternly.

"I am completely prepared and eager to take over, God," he replied with unwavering bravado.

God let out a bellowing laugh, doubling over. "You are eager, but naive, young one! I recall the day I took over for my predecessor. I was a boisterous, inexperienced being. I have faith that we can channel your confidence into a solid work ethic. There is much to learn, but it is not an impossible task, for I know others who rule planets that are much more advanced. Some races have expanded over such vast territory that it is unrealistic for one God to maintain stability. As a result, the ruling God has sub-Gods to assist with his consuming work."

"Amazing!" the successor exclaimed, flabbergasted.

“Yes, multiple God scenarios are quite interesting. How would you like it if you appeared only to find out you were to be merely a sub-God?”

“The situation would be disconcerting, to say the least. It is possible, I suppose, to appear only to discover one was merely a servant.”

“True. We all have our roles to fill. But you appeared *knowing* you were a God. Servants harbor no resentment or jealousy toward others, for they are here to fulfill a purpose, and they find satisfaction in their work. I digress. We will have plenty of time to discuss such daunting scenarios later. Your education must commence posthaste.

Let us begin with the introduction of these very chambers, the observatory. These monitors in front of me are my many eyes to the world. In the control room there are several thousand monitors. The meticulous and devoted servants filter the content by importance. If you desire other angles, audio adjustments, internal analyses, simply request it via the microphone here.” He then demonstrated this skill numerous times, speaking to the control room, asking for additional information or modifications to the video feed.

“For my last example, I will highlight the President of the United States,” he professed. The successor was fixated on God’s work, in awe of how he seamlessly filtered and shuffled through the continual streams of video, his fingers a blur of movement on the touchscreen monitors. “At the moment this country has the most influence over the world’s affairs. A decrease in nuclear arms agreement is about to be signed at a peace conference.”

In an assertive, confident voice, God spoke into the microphone, “U.S. President, nuclear arms internal feed.”

Instantaneously, the word “*truth*” appeared in green letters transposed over the President’s image. “His word is true, he means to uphold the agreement, no need to intervene. Of course, you do not yet know how to control these complex powers. It will take much practice to gain confidence and be able to trust your intuition. With time, your instincts alone will guide you. It will become second nature.”

“Excuse me, God, but you mentioned intervening. Do you intervene often?”

“Hundreds of times daily, some on a larger scale than others. When the humans recognize such acts they refer to them as miracles, divine intervention, or God’s will. The humans frequently mistake random occurrences for miracles. I can interfere with minor affairs that do not affect the course of human history, if I so choose.

By the way, the control room never sends images that are of little importance, you must request them. For example, yesterday I was observing a celebration in a high-rise abode in the city of Chicago. There were two guests in attendance, strangers to each other at the time. They would have merely flashed a passing smile from across the room, not even engaging in conversation, if not for my intervention. I insured they met each other’s acquaintance. As they were perusing the appetizers I made sure he accidentally splashed his drink on her dress. That unfavorable occurrence marked the beginning of their life together. For you see, I

could sense that they would make each other happy, and would have children who would do much good. If not for my intervention they wouldn't have interacted.

My point being, when time allows, disregard the usual video feeds and explore the world at your leisure. Remember, you are to guide the entire race, not simply the individuals with the most power and influence. To fully comprehend humans you must empathize with common man. Then, and only then, are you able to serve as the steward of their interests."

God arose from his chair with a grunt. "It has been a long day. Let us eat." His successor appeared at his side, alert and attentive. They left the confines of the cramped observatory, and strolled down the Great Hall, a long arched hallway lined with the statues of previous Gods of Earth, each with a plaque notating their accomplishments.

"They call it fate, I call it a good deed," God reflected as he gazed upon the cedar beams in the ceiling, deep in thought. "Earth's first God was a humble, kind being. Read his plaque when you have a moment. All the Gods are represented here in the Great Hall, as will we one day; an homage to our unique lineage. The first God enjoyed performing random acts of kindness. Although, back then miracles were more noticeable as there were fewer people. Issues were simpler too, which allowed God more time to meddle in man's affairs. He made sure his successor would continue this tradition of miracles. It was his legacy, if you will. I admit I have not performed as many as I would've liked throughout my tenure. You will be sure to complete as many of these deeds as possible, yes?"

"Yes, God. But what is the result of such acts if the overall impact on Earth is negligible? Surely it is not merely for my benefit of relating to common man."

God stopped, the last of his heavy footfalls echoing down the Great Hall. "These acts not only instill faith in mankind, but humanity within you. After all, you serve mankind, and these deeds allow you to see into their souls by fulfilling their most intimate desires. This, in turn, makes you a better God. I advise you to complete many miracles early in your reign. This will further strengthen your resolve for humanity. In time, you will understand."

The pair continued down towards the end of the long hall. "Yes, but for them to appreciate your work they have to accept that God is part of their life and understand that God is watching over them. How can they confirm our existence? Will they not be skeptical about these so-called *miracles*?"

"I had forgotten that you know virtually nothing of mankind's religious background! Yes, you are correct in stating they must have a basic spirituality, an origin for these inexplicable acts," God emphasized with a pointed finger.

Servants opened the double doors, which creaked in protest, and the pair entered a magnificent dining hall; a fire blazing in the large hearth. A servant pulled out God's extravagantly ornate chair for him, and laid a napkin on his lap. As God rolled up his sleeves the successor noticed his dry, cracking skin. The successor paused, realizing he wouldn't be receiving the same courtesy. He walked around the extended oak table to the other side, pulled out a wobbly wooden chair, and sat across from his teacher.

"While we wait for dinner I will educate you on the religious history of our chosen planet," God began, eyeing the red wine in the glass decanter. "In every civilized world there is a certain format that's usually followed. Religion is necessary for any intelligent race. It provides not only solace that its followers aren't alone in the universe, but also something to rely on during tumultuous times. This, of course, varies from world to world, but the principle philosophy remains. In order for a particular race to acknowledge our entire system, to a degree, it is mandatory to create a foundation. This foundation is created early in the race's existence when they are uneducated in the workings of the universe. When done successfully religion is imprinted into their collective social consciousness."

A flock of servants paraded in and began serving an extraordinary spread. A wide variety of culinary delights from every corner of Earth were represented. God's eyes gleamed in anticipation. As soon as the servant had poured the wine, God took a long, satisfying sip. His successor seemed mystified by the foreign ritual.

"We do not need to eat, God. What is the point of all this?"

"You must taste what they taste. This wine, for example, is made of grapes from France, quite exquisite, indeed. Eating will become valuable in your upcoming work, I assure you. Besides, it gives me great pleasure to indulge in their food and drink! These are but a few of the courses humans feast upon. The meat is synthetic, but tastes authentic. We could not eat the creatures we created, now could we! Help yourself, everything is delicious. Eating relaxes the mind and satisfies the senses."

"I understand, God. I will eat."

"The lessons I teach you have been handed down for generations. I suggest you eat at least two meals a day. Use them as a time to pause and reflect upon your work."

"Yes, God. Would you mind continuing your lesson about this idea called religion? My studies have taught me the facts, but not how the various religions came to be."

"Why of course, I had all but forgotten, distracted by the sensational aroma of this delectable bowl of Thai soup. As I was explaining, the foundation for religion is established early in a race's history. Technically, the humans are still a fledgling race in the early stages of their progression. One would not think so, with their rapid advancement in such a short time. My job would be much more straightforward if their mental capacity matched their level of technology. Anyway, at the appropriate time, the reigning God planted the seeds that would sprout their faiths. It was all very complicated, but I will do my best to surmise."

He continued his explanation throughout dinner and explained how God created Jesus, how the bible came to be, as well as how countless other religions had formed in civilizations around the world. He explained how people have different ways of interpreting God. Thus, each religion had their own name for their God, or higher power, be it Allah, Buddha, or Shiva.

"Religion is everywhere on Earth. Wars are often fought over religious differences, but it is not your job to manage every conflict. Religion was not created to instill



violence, but to bond humanity together. One day the wars over religion will be but a distant memory to mankind.

In my opinion, it does not matter how God is interpreted or identified with, nor in what way we are acknowledged. Places of worship are insignificant, praying numerous times a day, only beneficial for mental fortitude. All that matters is their awareness that they are not alone, and that there is an unseen binding force in the universe. This belief in a higher power is crucial to the stabilization of civilization. An integral part of religion revolves around an individual's morals and values. Religion fosters an environment for people to better themselves, it creates goodness. The third God created the bible to teach humans certain lessons. Numerous other religions were also sparked during various time periods in China, India, Mexico, and other lands so a variety of beliefs exist. Although the presence of multiple religions continues to create much turmoil, greater tolerance should ultimately be achieved."

God had finished his meal, and glanced over to the successor's plate with a wary eye. He had pushed the food around his plate, creating the illusion of indulgence, much like an insolent child.

"The food is nothing to fear, I assure you," God quipped, smirking. "I am eager to resume my teachings. Come, accompany me back to the observatory." They walked in tandem out the door and down the corridor, a parade of obedient servants trailing behind.

"God, why let a tragedy such as the black plague occur?" the successor asked eagerly, after a moment of contemplated silence. "Why allow wars, poverty and crime? Why not intervene and prevent such evils?"

"I have delivered this lesson several times. You cannot control everything, doing so would upset the delicate balance of the world!" he emphasized, somewhat irritated. Composing himself, he continued, "I see you have not only been studying but philosophizing as well. Your question is both a complex and convoluted one, my successor. I will answer to the best of my ability, though perhaps not to your satisfaction.

On occasion, I do meddle in man's affairs, but they must learn to navigate with their own moral compass. There are instances where I do intervene, the Cuban missile crisis being one example. In every conflict, there is a lesson to be learned, in every death, an understanding to be gained. In every tragedy, someone curses God above.

Why let the world go hungry? Why let certain species go extinct? Why let there be hatred? It is not our job to coddle mankind through history, but to nurture and guide them. It is our responsibility to show the human race the true path, to provide them every opportunity to not stray down the dark and desolate road of evil. I cannot govern with an iron fist, for they must learn from their mistakes and lead themselves. They must grow accustomed to not relying on me alone for protection. But when they forget there is good in the world, a purpose to the madness, I will always provide solace."

Of course, the successor could not fully comprehend death, for he was an inexperienced being, still ignorant of God's heavy burden. "And you mustn't forget, you have the rest of the planet to watch over, in addition to the humans!" he added. "Do not be neglectful. The whole world demands your attention."

They arrived back at the observatory where God continued teaching his successor many invaluable skills. Lessons were demonstrated, many revolving around which scenarios to address and, more importantly, which to ignore. The successor was beginning to realize the tremendous responsibilities that were soon to be thrust upon him.

After many hours of intense study, the successor was ordered to retire to his quarters to study. A servant brought God his nightly mug of steaming green tea, a habit he had picked up years ago after watching the comfort the drink brought to so many around the world. The delightful aroma brought with it a sense of tranquility. He worked diligently throughout the night, determined to end his reign strongly.

The following morning, the successor found God at the head of the table in the dining hall, speaking with his head servant.

"Greetings my successor, how was your rest?" he asked cheerfully.

"Satisfactory. Forgive me for bringing up such a serious topic in the early hours of the day, but I have a question that plagued me all night."

"Of course," God said genially, picking up his fork and knife. "Let us discuss while we eat."

"If you are God of Earth, and I your successor, who is our God? Who created us?" he asked earnestly, taking a seat. God set down his silverware with a composed sigh.

"I asked myself the same question long ago to my predecessor. I will tell you, in his exact words, what he told me..."

Upon finishing their meal, they adjourned to the observatory to carry on with the day's work. The successor remained silent for a great while, watching with a keen eye. That day, God made many people happy. Transversely, many succumbed to heinous fates. The successor was beginning to grasp this concept of balance. Still, he was not satisfied with God's lack of effort on becoming a savior for innocent children and bringing the corrupt to justice; for he was God and his power was boundless, yet he was a subdued ruler. In his comprehension of God's role, this seemed counterintuitive.

Their routine was relentless: eat, work, study, and rest. There was no time for anything else. The successor felt an unknown force pressing his resolve, readying him for the encompassing role, as was his destiny. He could sense God bore this urgency as well. Gradually, he was adjusting to the tremendous responsibility of being groomed to run a planet with a history spanning millions of years. After all, he had appeared as God's heir, there was no other point to his existence.

Yet another impressive feast was spread upon the table. God heaped up his

plate, his eyes gleaming in anticipation of the grand meal. The successor, however, feigned interest as heavy issues continued to weigh on his mind.

"God, why don't you instill peace on Earth? Why can't humans exist in harmony? Why must there be war, violence, and sadness?"

"Damn you!" God fumed, his smile dissipating. "Why can't we eat without discussing topics that would take years to comprehend?" The successor cowered, fearful of God's sudden outburst.

He composed himself, his fiery temper subsiding instantly. "My most humble apologies, I do not mean to lash out. I have forgotten what it is like to be a young, inquisitive being. The only advice I can give you is this: for every birth there is a death, for every happy moment, a sad moment. I cannot disturb this natural balance, I simply maintain it. The world could not exist if none of Earth's creatures passed on. Balance, guidance, and faith; this should be your mantra."

"I am sure I will grow to understand, God. May I still join you, or do you prefer I retire to my quarters?"

"By all means, eat! The food is delectable and the drink refreshing. There are advantages to being God, you know. Every dinner is as good as a Thanksgiving feast! You probably don't recognize this analogy to the relatively new American holiday. Your learning curve will be steep, but you will gain much knowledge in the days to follow, I assure you."

For weeks the successor observed God. With much compassion, he saved lives and fulfilled dreams. But he also mercilessly crushed hope and ruined lives. These decisions were not made hastily. With considerable contemplation, judgments were handed down. As the days progressed, God seemed satisfied with the progress his successor had made and the lessons he had learned and allowed him to take the reins for stretches, in order to prepare him for the arduous workload ahead. The job came to him naturally, therefore God offered little feedback.

One particular day as God sat watching his successor seamlessly managing Earth with the grace of a seasoned being, he announced matter-of-factly, "When the rays of the sun break the dawn of the next day, God will be resurrected." The successor turned from the monitors to look him in the eye, and nodded slightly. Although he was filled with doubt, he did not question the declaration.

They spoke behind closed doors throughout the evening in God's private chambers. It was to be the last they would ever speak, and the successor aimed to take advantage of every moment, for God's wisdom was infinite.

"If the human race comes in contact with another race," God explained, "you should deliberate with that race's God to arrange conditions of jurisdiction, set rules of engagement, and so on, to be sure you do not interfere nor impede on one another."

Hours passed, and they could sense their time together was coming to an end. Although the successor's questions were endless, he quieted to allow God to

contemplate the inevitable end of his tenure. After a long silence, the finality of the moment reached a palpable crescendo. God finally spoke.

"I wish you well, my successor. I leave you with what I hope is a long lasting and successful legacy."

"Thank you. I am sure you would be proud of the fair and just God I will become. I apologize in filling your last minutes with more discussion, but I must revisit one last issue, if you are willing. I would regret it if I did not inquire again." A thin smile emerged from God's expression, as if he knew what was coming.

"If you are God, and all previous God's before you were God, and the first God created Earth and life, then where did the first God come from?" God shook his head dismissively. His prior response had apparently not satisfied his insatiable curiosity. It was a valid question, of course, for God's creator held the key to the creation of the Universe.

"My successor, I will explain all that I know, but I still may not arrive at the answer you seek. You ask who created all these Gods, who rules the lifeless worlds throughout all the galaxies of the Universe, since they have no God to rule them? When you had asked before I had instructed you to search within your soul and with time the answer would reveal itself. Alas, you are impatient. With experience comes patience, but I will elaborate further in the hopes of quelling your curiosity, fearing it could affect your job performance.

If I am God, you are God, and every creature is God, we are, for the most part, the rulers of our own destiny. We are each our own God. Who created us? The universe was the agent in allowing us to create ourselves."

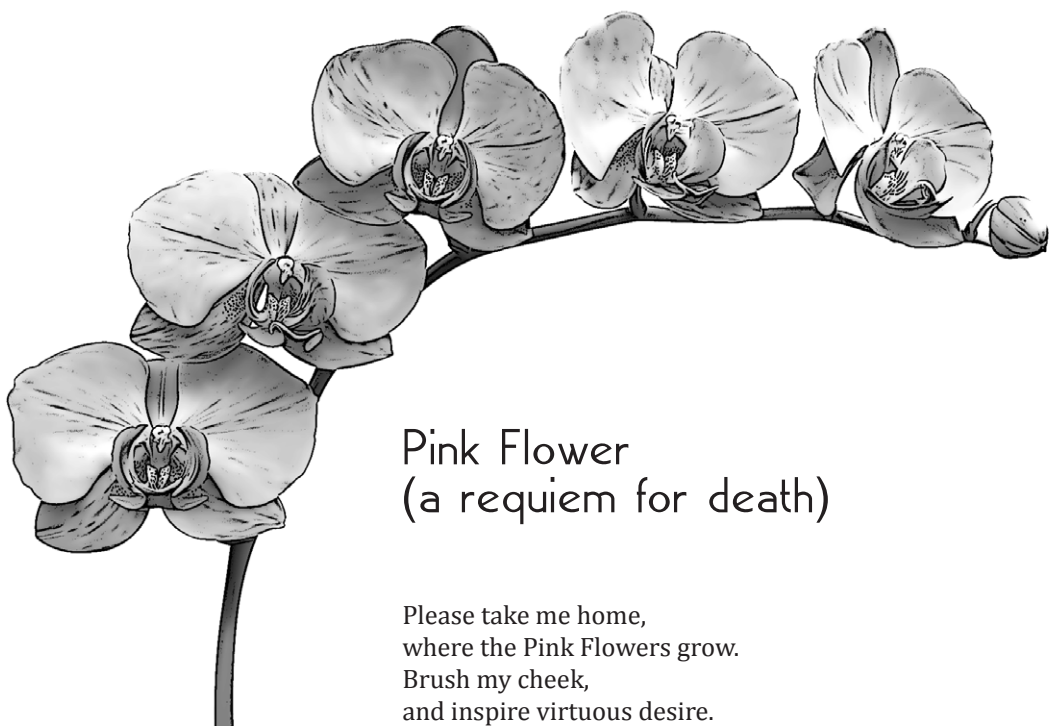
As if possessed by some unseen force, God's eyes widened, and he methodically rose to his feet from his armchair. "I can sense my transition approaching," he said softly. "I do not face the end in fear, but will embrace it, for it is destiny. The end is not death, quite the contrary. We are not meant for immortality, we are merely a larger part of creation."

A low rumble similar to that of an approaching thunderstorm echoed from above, rattling the furniture and chandeliers. Suddenly, a burst of bright light engulfed God. The successor jumped back, shielding his eyes. The light subsided quickly. God was gone, the only sign of his departure a faint swirling mist gliding over the hardwood floor.

"I am now God," he declared solemnly, watching the last remnants of the mist dissipating. "A statue will be erected in the Great Hall in his honor, as is tradition. Now I must waste no time, duty beckons."

The new God yanked open the double doors. A gathering of nosy servants were gathered outside, chattering amongst themselves. They looked to him with admiration, following as he headed to the observatory.





## Pink Flower (a requiem for death)

Please take me home,  
where the Pink Flowers grow.  
Brush my cheek,  
and inspire virtuous desire.  
Cast the dark away,  
allow the light aglow.  
Meld my spirit back,  
to life's eternal fire.  
Here I lie entombed  
deep in this hallowed ground.  
Listening for the sounds,  
of the shovel's infernal digging.  
The soul's awaiting its journey;  
but the sun's so warm and forgiving.  
Yes, please carry me home,  
where the Pink Flowers grow.

—ken allan dronsfield

## Kalabhavan Mani And His Folk Songs

His creativity develops as  
the flesh in a black oyster  
in the bottom of poverty.

Worms fed only on the flesh  
of generations.  
All genres of their experiences  
live in voice.  
Mani picks up their songs with  
suppressed dreams and pangs.

As he sings, the audience  
catches fire; they dance like  
flames in his voice.

He juggles like a wizard of  
emotions.  
Some lines are salty;  
some others juicy.

A village virgin  
blushes and blooms  
in the old lantern light  
in his folk song.

His liver and kidneys have  
turned as ant-eaten biscuits.  
Still he remains sweet.

He's an entangled firefly  
in a web  
with a spider drawing near,  
yet he emits light.

—fabiyas mv



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[short story]

# LOST LAND

by samira hibbler



Johnny did not see the man with the ax hand and the black eyes and pale face.

He did not anticipate the feel of the cold air as the man would approach. He did not know that he would soon be headline news for five months after his death, that all of America was desperately looking for the man with the ax hand and the black eyes and pale face. Little did they know he was not a man at all and that he did not reside in this world, but in a world where hell is real and all things evil kill and play. Lost Land.

The man in the black hood stood against the dimly lit street lamp, a cigarette held firmly between his perfectly white, sharpened-to-the-point teeth.

He sucked in the bitter smoke, letting it out through his nose.

The night was silent, still, so black.

Black enough to where even if you stood just inches from the man, you would not be able to see him, or sense that he was there.

The man slowly took the cigarette from his mouth, throwing it to the side and into the empty street.

The air was very cold and very wrong. A sickening type of cold that made you shiver and want to crawl into yourself.

The night was empty. No people, no sounds or sudden movements. Just the man in the black hood.

He stood there for a moment, sniffing the air for any uninvited visitors.

There was almost always just one, that one unlucky soul who strayed a little too far from home like a lost puppy.

The man smiled. There was most defiantly one here tonight, and she smelled sweet like vanilla, but bitter like cigarette smoke.

He could hear the *click, click, click* sound of her heels against the sidewalk, as she walked closer, the sound getting louder and louder.

The man stuffed his hands in his pocket, feeling his hand slowly form into a small ax. He stood where he was for a second, stepping further into the darkness, watching as she walked past, her long black hair blending in with the pitch blackness.

He licked his lips, tasting blood there. His nose was bleeding again, the perfect excuse to approach her. He laughed to himself, covering his mouth so as not to be heard. He mustn't be heard—not yet.

He didn't stop smiling as he walked behind the girl silently. He was just inches behind her now—the urge to cut off all that hair, head and all—filled his mind.

Not yet, Not yet.

He covered his bloody nose with one hand, seeing red cover his pale white hand.

"Excuse me, ma'am. I'm terribly sorry to bother you, but do you happen to have a Kleenex I could use; my nose has started bleeding," he said, his eyes looking worried, his mouth smiling widely.

She turned around, hardly looking startled.

"Of course, it really looks like a gusher," she said, smiling, turning slightly as she rummaged through her bag for a Kleenex.

He smiled even wider, blood flowing, dripping onto the sidewalk.

"Here we go, one Kleenex coming ..." She hardly had time to finish her answer, before the man with the pale face and black eyes and the ax hand sliced her hand off in one swift motion.

He smiled as he did it, looking into her shocked bright blue eyes, her mouth in the shape of a capital O.

Blood gushed out of the stump where her hand used to be, dark red spilling onto the sidewalk, the empty streets.

The man finally worked up the nerve to laugh out loud. And he laughed, and laughed, and laughed until he was falling.

Falling down into the woman's dark red blood. He was laughing in it, watching as the woman tried to scream.

"No sense trying to scream, baby doll; no one can hear you out here," he said, laughing even more, laughing because the woman had no hand and her mouth was in the shape of a capital O.

Soon she fell onto her knees, down, down, down onto the blood-red sidewalk, her eyes wide, and her clothes red.

There were tears in the man's eyes now, his hands shaking with laughter as he wiped his water-filled eyes. His grin was wide. He was standing up, blood dripping down his black coat and jeans, giving them a dark glistening look.

His hands were covered in blood. He looked at them happily, turning toward the woman on the ground.

She made no noise, but he knew she wasn't dead—not yet.

"Get up sweetheart, we're going for a ride," he said, and by ride he meant a slip into his world, where the demons and the monsters of Lost Land would get a fine meal out of her.

He kicked her side gently, hearing her groan in pain, blood streaming down her lips to her chin.

Her eyes were closed and her lips were moving, struggling to form words.

"No sense trying, honey," he whispered, as he grabbed her waist, feeling her struggling to get away. He held her firmly, picking her up, placing her gently over his shoulder.

He hummed as he walked into the darkness, into the alleyways where no one would see.

Soon he stopped at a dead end, a big brick wall that looked old and eroded.

He put his ax hand out in front of him, drawing an X in the air. He mumbled a few words, soon hearing the clicking sound of a door opening.

A door with the words *Lost Land* in Latin printed in big red letters stood idly in the empty alleyway. The door was partially open, revealing nothing but pitch darkness.

"Welcome home, sweetheart," he whispered, as he entered, disappearing into the dark.

His voice sounded wrong and his body radiated ice coldness. The pain in her

arm seemed to get worse as this horrifying man walked further down an empty, dark hallway. She heard silent whispers all around her, whispering her name over and over again.

*What is this?* Her eyes closed shut, the voices seeming to inch themselves into her ears and into her mind.

*I'm going to go insane in here.* She kept her eyes closed, careful not to let the man know she was alive. Little did she know he could feel her breathing and hear the *thump, thump, thump* sound of her heart.

He could feel her all right, every inch of her, to her medium-sized breasts and her nicely shaped ass. He smiled to himself, as he finally reached The Grove, the place where demons live. It was a highly forested place filled with bare trees and sharp black vines, fog covering every inch of the land, making it hard to see, perfect for humans to get lost in.

He could hear them smiling, whispering. They knew who he was, he was almost considered famous actually.

*"He has come back."*

*"Oooo a treat Mr."*

*"Doesn't she look tasty?"*

He smiled, seeing their black eyes appear in the fog, their long black bodies slumped forward, their tongues licking their lips hungrily.

"All for you, boys, but I'm taking her somewhere special first," he said, winking.

*Somewhere special he said.* She couldn't open her eyes, wouldn't open her eyes. She didn't want to see those things, the way they would look at her. Her arm hurt even more here, making her want to pass out and scream at the same time. She wanted to cry, but no tears came.

He smelt wrong; all of them did here, wherever here was. All of this felt wrong, all wrong.

It would take at least an hour to get to The Raven's Skull house that resided high up in the hills of Lost Land. He realized the woman was getting heavy. He didn't want to set her down though, not until they got there.

"Are you going to kill me?" he heard her whisper, the first words he ever heard her utter, her voice soft and silky.

He didn't answer; he had a feeling she already knew.

"What is this place?" she asked, hearing her breath deep and slow.

"Lost Land," he murmured, not knowing how he should feel about this sudden conversation.

"What do you do here?" she asked, as if it weren't already obvious.

"It'd be nice if you didn't talk, it'll make it a lot easier to kill you," he said.

She shut up after that and all was silent again. They soon stopped at Black Lake Bridge, a small, broken-down bridge placed above a black acid lake. It smelt like black bitter tar.

He took each step carefully, not wanting to risk falling into the poison.

Once on the other side, he carefully set down the woman. Blood was still flowing heavily out of the stump where her hand used to be, and her eyes were slowly starting to look dead.

He smiled to himself, stifling his laughs once again.

His hand turned into an ax; he looked at it, admiring the sharpness of it.

"Sorry, honey, but I'm going to have to cut off another piece of you," he said, smiling widely.

He could hear her stifled cries, tears streaming down her pale face.

"Should it be a leg or an arm? Maybe a foot or some toes," he said, mocking her.

She tried shaking her head, but with no luck.

"I think an arm will do," he said, and so he took her right arm where he at first cut off her hand. Then in one swift motion he brought down the ax and cut off her arm.

She screamed, making the ravens in the distance fly away in fear.

"Please..." she moaned, blood running down her body, forming a huge puddle by his feet.

He laughed, looking at the one arm she had left.

"Gorgeous, darling; absolutely, gorgeous," he said, laughing hysterically.

"Please..." she said again.

He kept smiling as he picked her up again, putting her gently over his shoulder.

The pain was excruciating, impossible to bear. She was going to die, she knew. It was a simple fact, and she thought about her life at home, her boyfriend, her son. There would be no escape, nowhere to go, not anymore...

He was just a few feet from the house on the hill, where he would put her in the shredder, where with the others, her organs and blood would rain among Lost Land, where every creature would be able to enjoy her.

When he got to the door he spotted his only true friend here, Gatton.

"Grabbing a bite, eh buddy," he said, smiling.

"Yes, a real fighter," he said.

Gatton looked at the woman curiously, licking his lips.

"A real beauty," he said, keeping his glowing red eyes on her.

"Got to go, Gatton," he said, getting angry. The way he looked at her, so hungrily, dissatisfied him.

"See you later, buddy old pal," he said, smiling widely.

The man stepped inside the house, instantly smelling the remains of death.

He saw the usual pile of bodies in the corner, piled so high it almost reached the ceiling.

He noticed others were there also, carrying various women, men, and children.

A loud bell rang, signaling the next shredding.

He hurried toward the pile, taking the woman off his shoulder, holding her at arm's length.

“It was nice knowing you, darling,” he whispered, studying her dead eyes and pale face.

He wanted to laugh again; oh, how funny she looked.

He threw her into the pile with the rest, watching her land on the very top.

He quickly exited the building, retreating toward the bottom of the hill, anxiously waiting to taste her blood, her guts, her heart.

He heard the final ring of the blood, hearing the *crush, crush, crush* sound of bones.

Everyone yelled in excitement—their meal of the day.

Soon it started; bits and pieces of flesh and blood began to fall from the sky—blood covering every inch of everyone’s bodies.

Everyone scrambled to get their piece of flesh.

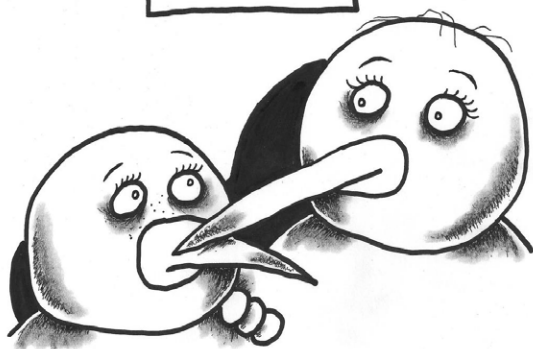
The man with the pale face and black eyes and ax hand just stared and stared at the guts and blood, smiling so widely his jaw began to ache.

He smiled for what seemed like forever before he finally left the hill, humming and laughing to himself.



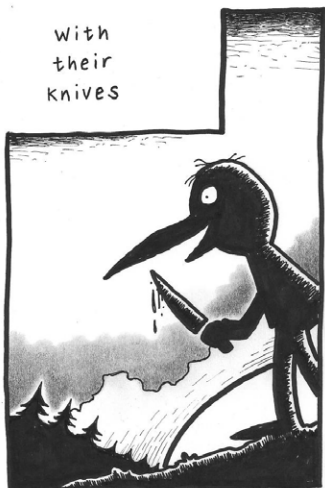
# SAFE WITH MOMMY

Trust  
me.





With  
their  
knives



and  
their  
bombs,

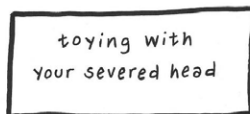
always

looking



for you, sugar.





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[short story]

# SQUARE PLATE PEOPLE

by  
david  
greske

Cove, situated on the shores of Woo Lake, catered to weekend boaters. Dozens of docks allowed wannabe captains and their mates to park their expensive toys while they ate on the large patio or in the air-cooled comfort of the dining room.

Charles and Louise Kipp thought of Cove as their place. It was here Charles proposed to Louise over a seven-dollar cheeseburger and endless basket of fries. Money was tight for Charles then and seven dollars, not to mention the five seventy-five for Louise's soup, was a small fortune. When Louise accepted, Charlie felt the money was well spent.

That was fifteen years ago. A lot had changed in those years, including Cove.

Charlie pulled his Ford into the rear lot of the restaurant. He wanted to park out front, closer to the main entrance, but the snooty little man in the tuxedo told them prime parking was limited to members only. Membership for a restaurant? Charlie and Louise had never heard such a thing. A country club, yes. But Cove was a far cry from anything like that.

Charlie stepped out of the car, walked around to the passenger side, and opened the door for his wife. He extended his arm and she graciously took his hand.

"I hope they still serve those tiny spiced chicken nuggets with dipping sauce," Louise said, emerging from the car.

"That was a long time ago, dear," Charlie said. "Restaurants like to change their menus. Keeps people coming back. Brings in some new ones, too, I imagine."

"Well, some things should never change," Louise said. "When was the last time we were here?"

"Must be four years ago. It was closed for a couple, remember?"

"That's right. We were so sad when we thought it shut down."

"Lucky for us it was only closed for remodeling."

"I wonder what has changed," Louise said. "Other than that stuck-up man at the front door."

Charlie wrinkled his face, squinted his eyes, and pursed his lips. "Parking for non-members is in the rear," he said, mocking the valet, "Kindly disburse yourselves to that area. And remember Cove is not responsible for lost or stolen items, though I highly *doubt* you have anything *in there* worth stealing."

Louise gave her husband a playful slap on the shoulder. "Stop it. That's mean."

"But funny."

"Yeah, it is."

Charlie pulled his wife close and kissed her cheek. "Happy anniversary, baby," he said and pulled open the restaurant door.

Gone was the red flocked wallpaper and white woodwork, replaced by

champagne-colored walls with gold-leaf accents. The multi-colored pendant lights had changed to large crystal chandeliers. Charlie was certain they were imported from Europe and not purchased at the nearby Menard's. The floor, once carpeted was now stained and polished concrete. Loon-etched glass windows had been switched out for the stained glass variety. Linens graced the tables. Cut crystal glassware—also imported, Charlie suspected—replaced the colorful drinking utensils of yore. Gone was the jukebox. Classic music drifted from speakers concealed in the ceiling.

"Wow," Charlie said.

"Wow, indeed. I don't think I like it. The charm's all gone."

"Yeah. Looks kinda...snooty. You wanna go somewhere else?"

Louise shook her head. "No, it's our anniversary."

"And I want it to be special."

"It will be as long as I'm with you."

Charlie gave Louise another kiss.

"Ahem. How may I help you?"

Charles and Louise spun around. A tall, effeminate man dressed in a white evening jacket and black slacks stood behind a crystalline podium. There was a diamond chip in his right earlobe and a diamond ring on his left index finger. Whenever he moved his head or hand, light prised off the stones in a colorful rainbow.

"We'd like a table," Charlie said. He wrapped his arm around his wife's small waist and pulled her close. "It's our anniversary."

The maître d' pushed his tiny round glasses up his nose, and then looked above the frames at the book in front of him. "Do you have a reservation?"

"No. I didn't think we'd need one," Charlie said.

Jerome, the maître d' sighed. "I figured as such. Non-members never do."

Charlie leaned forward. The cologne Jerome wore was sickly sweet. "It's our anniversary and I proposed to my wife here. We'd really like it if you had a table."

"Very well," Jerome said, snatching a pair of menus from the stack next to the podium. "This way please. And keep up, won't you?"

Jerome moved through the dining room at a speedy clip, weaving in and out of the tables like a snake slithering through tall grass. Charlie and Louise followed the maître d', tossing glances at each other as they hurried to keep up.

Jerome sat them at a table near the kitchen. This space was dark and dingy and sometimes the clattering of pot and pans from the kitchen overtook the conversation.

The host tossed the menus on the table. "Phillip will be your server. Enjoy." Then he turned and walked away.

"Not very friendly, is he?" Charlie said.

"No, he isn't. And I think he might be soft." Soft was Louise's euphemism for gay. "The way he swished through the dining room. If he held his nose any higher, it would've scraped the ceiling"

"Now who's not being nice?"

It was the better part of an hour before Phillip appeared at tableside. Like the *maitre d'* the waiter was tall and thin. His gray slacks and gray pin-striped shirt were pressed and starched to perfection. The apron around his waist was bleached white as snow.

"We were about to leave," Charlie said. The night was turning into one disappointment after another.

"We seldom use this table and I forgot anyone was sitting here," Phillip said, his tone somewhat dismissive. "At least you had plenty of time to look over the menu so I won't have to stand here like an idiot while you hum and ha over the selections." The waiter took out a pad and pen from his apron pocket. "So, what'll it be?"

"I'll have a hamburger and fries," Charlie said.

Phillip looked up from his pad. "A hamburger? Really?"

"Yes."

"Very well." Phillip looked at Louise. "And you, madam. I suppose you'll have the same?"

"No. I want the soup with extra crackers."

"Oh, good Lord," the waiter stopped writing, dropped the order pad back in his apron pocket. Placed his hands on the table and leaned forward. "With all the delicious selections you order a hamburger and soup? You should've gone to McDonald's."

"But that's what we had the night my Charlie proposed to me. It's our anniversary and we want the exact same thing"

Phillip straightened. "For the love of Pete," he said and walked away to recite the order to the kitchen.

It took another hour before Phillip returned with their food. In one hand he held a skimpy burger that looked only a breath away from burnt accompanied by a half-dozen limp, under-cooked French fries. His other hand held a small bowl of lukewarm soup with a pile of broken crackers on the saucer.

"Oh, dear," Louise remarked, looking at their food. "You use square plates. I don't like square ones."

Phillip's eyes grew large and his face paled. The plates slipped from his grip, crashing to the floor and shattering. Soup splattered the cuffs of his slacks. Bits of meat and wilted lettuce landed on his polished shoes. Crackers crushed between his soles as he staggered backwards. He covered his mouth with his hand, turned, and ran to the restroom.

The chatter of conversations and ringing of silverware against plates stopped suddenly. No longer was the clatter of pots and pans emanating from the kitchen. The chefs, a portly pair of twins holding butcher knives in their hands, stepped into the dining room.

Simultaneously, the diners slid their chairs away from their tables, the wood legs squealing across the floor. As one collective mind and body they stood and moved toward Charlie and Louise.

"Did I say something wrong?" Louise said.

The mob surrounded the celebrants.

"They don't like square plates," one diner said to another.

"We mustn't have that," replied a woman wearing a deep blue dress and pearl necklace. "We mustn't have that *at all*." She bent down and picked up a shard of broken plate.

A man dressed in a three-piece cashmere suit picked up one as well.

Someone else picked up another.

The chefs moved closer.

"Try not to make such a mess this time," the maitre d' said from somewhere in the room.

The diners attacked.

A pair of burly men pulled Charlie and Louise out of their chairs and slammed them to the floor.

Louise kicked and screamed and tried to bite the man's hand, but he smashed her face with his fist, breaking her nose and spraying blood.

"We got ourselves a fighter," he said and hit her again.

"Leave her alone," Charlie screamed as he struggled to get away. His captor kicked Charlie in the ribs. The sound of breaking bone was loud.

The brute kicked Charlie again in the gut. A *whoosh* of air expelled from the captive's lungs.

"Careful," one of the chefs said. "Don't bang him up too badly."

Blue Dress knelt and waved the broken porcelain in front of Louise. Beneath the lighting of the chandeliers the sharp edge of the plate glowed an eerie green. She licked her lips. Red lipstick streaked the surface of her tongue. Blue Dress leaned forward.

Louise stiffened when the keen edge pressed against the side of her neck. A second later, searing pain ripped across her throat.

"Louise!" Charlie screamed, his wife flopping and jerking on the floor. "Louise!"

Blood bubbles gurgled from a deep wide cut as Louise tried to breathe. A sheet of gore ran from her neck, staining the collar of her pretty blouse a vivid crimson. The bright lights of the restaurant made it appear she wore a necklace of glittering rubies.

Remembering what the maitre d' said: *Try not to make such a mess this time*, a third diner grabbed a table cloth, rolled it into a large ball, and pressed it against Louise's open throat. It took only an instant for the woman's blood to saturate the pristine white cloth, turning it into a sopping red mess.

Cashmere dropped to his knees alongside the brute. He smiled a broad Cheshire cat grin, raised the shard above his head, and plunged it into Charlie.

Charlie screamed. A poison flower blossomed in his chest, filling him with hot agony. The porcelain blade sawed into his ribs and worked its way through the soft flesh of his belly. Intestines, large and small, popped from the wound like ground meat bursting through sausage casing. A small fountain of blood sprayed around the organs.

Charlie reached out and grabbed his dead wife's hand as his life ebbed away into a pool of gore beneath him.



"I'm sorry," he managed to say.

The chefs grabbed the couple by their ankles and dragged them across the floor, a path of red trailing behind them.

Diners returned to their tables and finished their meals.

Those servers not waiting on diners cleared the table seldom used and cleaned the area around it, grateful that one thoughtful diner had managed to catch most of the blood from Louise. It made clean-up easier. But there was still a bloody mess. It was always difficult to get blood out of the cracks between the wood planks in the floor that covered this part of the restaurant.

The maître d' took the microphone from the podium and switched it on.

"People of the square plates," he said, his voice filled with excitement. "For those who have not yet ordered, the chefs have informed me of an unexpected special. Enjoy your choice of the freshest cut of meat Cove has to offer. Served with rosemary roasted fingerling potatoes and grilled asparagus, finish your custom cut with one of our three extraordinary sauces: bourbon mushroom, caramelized onions and cream, or apricot-mint. And remember no meal is complete with one of our sinful desserts. Thank you for choosing Cove for your dining pleasure. *Bon appétit.*"



# *a single shot*

by tracy blake

I seriously love my job. It isn't your typical job, but it is one I am great at. That being said, I hate my job today. Typically I don't take ones like this, but I have a personal investment in this one.

The hallway is empty, and ominously quiet, as I walk up to the hotel door. I slide the key card in the slot.

Red, no access. *Stupid door.* Let's try this again.

Red, no access. I kick the door with my steel-toed boot.

Frustration and anxiety have me on edge. My usual steely reserve is faltering.

Slower this time, I inch the key card into the door. *Green, YES... finally!*

I push through the door. I don't have any luggage, because I don't intend to stay.

The room has two beds, with little lamps above them. It looks like they haven't renovated since the 50s. There is a little veranda in the back which has an eight-foot privacy fence, a little glass top patio table, and chairs.

Perfect.

I walk to the small fridge which holds those little bottles of booze.

Definitely need a drink to calm my nerves. I pace back and forth and sip my drink, waiting for him to arrive.

I have a plan. I know what I am going to do.

A knock comes from the door.

Shit, it's time... game on.

I run my hand through my short black hair. *If I can get through the next twenty minutes, we'll be scot free.*

"Coming," I say. Opening the door, I take in a deep breath. There can be no mistakes.

He gives me a quick smirk and nods his head. He stands at least a foot and a half taller than I do. Clean-cut and handsome as in, *look at me, I have money and can pay to look this good.*

"Evening," I say to him.

"Evening," he says, not even offering me his hand. He walks through the door past me heading straight for the veranda.

I follow. Then it's straight to business.

As much as I hate this job today I know I am going to do it. I have to.

We sit around the small glass patio table to discuss business.

"Do you understand my terms, Mr. Green?"



His real name is not Mr. Green. I know this, but he doesn't know I do.

"Yes, Miss Brent," he says, sliding a manila envelope toward me. Inside are large bills, I assume twenty thousand, like I asked for.

Of course, he doesn't have my real name, and I know he knows this too.

"Good... good. It seems to all be here. When does your wife get home?" I ask with a causal, I-don't-care attitude. But I really couldn't care more.

"Around eight," he says with no emotion. I want to scream at him. But I can't, not now, not ever.

"I'll make it look like she just left. They'll never find her when I get done with her," I reply.

I look at him, trying to hide the hate on my face. *He is such a coward.* His solution to a cheating wife—well, a wife he wasn't even sure was cheating--just suspected was cheating--was to kill her--to make her pay in the ultimate way.

This isn't why I hated him though. I've killed for less.

"Would you like a drink?" I ask him.

"Yeah, I could use one."

I walk into the room, my eyes settling on the closet, as I give a brief signal of my hand in a wait gesture, making sure that Mr. Green hasn't seen it.

I grab a glass from atop the mini fridge. I hear the clanking of ice and the pouring of the mini vodka bottle. Distant... like I wasn't there doing it.

I watch the ice move as I'm walking back to Mr. Green, my right hand now behind my back. My fingertips touch the cold metal, as they close around it.

He has no clue he is my target.

I saddle up to him placing the drink in front of him. He looks at me for the first time, and my usual nerves of steel falter.

*Get it together, Roxy. You know him... You know his wife... This is fucked up... It's still just a job.*

I feel the metal, now hot, under my palm.

He grabs the drink and gulps quickly. "Thank you. Just what I needed to forget," he says with a grin on his face. "That bitch deserves everything that's coming to her, Roxy," he says, looking sideways at me. His grin now is a face of steel.

My anger implodes on itself, and I begin shaking. I swiftly place the nuzzle of my silencer against his temple. "Any last words?" I ask, void of emotion.

"Why?" is all he says.

With those words a shuffling is heard behind us as the closet door opens.

Out walks his wife, my girlfriend. She makes her way over to us. She walks with the grace of a gazelle, her tan in contrast to her long blonde hair.

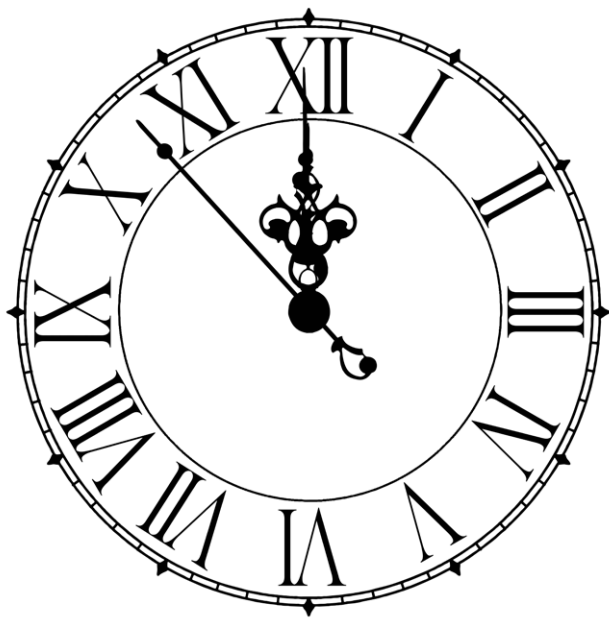
She places a kiss on my cheek. "Because, asshole--life's a bitch, and you married one too," she says with an equal amount of sweetness and venom.

Her hand comes up to the gun I have pointed at his temple. Her finger slips into the trigger and... *BANG!*

It takes a single shot.

He was right. She had been cheating. It just so happens he hired the wrong assassin.





## ILL O'CLOCK

A clock puzzles over spare time  
while that casual lunatic,  
now,  
wavers in awareness  
on improvised guidance  
and gifts secreted  
behind calendars, schedules,  
measures and meters:  
ill-clocks overlap  
essential circles  
of being's obscurity -  
traditions of hours  
forcing coincidence and madness.

—soren james

## Sali

Plowing the pages of textbooks,  
Sali's teenage sauntered away  
like a bull.

Her breath smelling chewing gum still lingers  
in the solitude of his soul, but he's  
forbidden to call up.

His free bird's died, getting a shock from  
the wire of life – worms of worries  
rot his mind.

He's been installed in an insalubrious office,  
where he gets itch from the file-ants  
and the bossy-words.

His spouse's spun a web for him –  
he always moves  
like a spider.

It's only when he babbles to his baby  
that he feels,  
'I live'.

He chews betel to reduce the level of  
his tension - stains increase  
day by day .

'Adult' is imprinted on his back  
to carry all on  
his back.

He jumps from counter to counter like  
a grasshopper with the bills  
in diverse hues.

And all his hopes are  
cast over a never  
homing day.

—fabiyas mv

# MONSTERS UNDER THE BED

My brother, Nick, is afraid of the dark and believes there are monsters hiding under his bed. He has been this way since our dad ran off with the waitress from Donavon's Bar, and our mother turned to drugs, drinking, and bringing strange men into our house at all hours of the night.

My brother is terrified. He screams in the middle of the night that there are monsters under his bed. He describes them as slimy, smelly, bugged eyed creatures with finger nails the length of kitchen knives. He sits in the middle of the bed, the covers pulled around him, his night shirt drenched in sweat, his eyes red, wide with fear, pleading for someone to rescue him.

I wonder how many more times in my life time I will have to rush into his room, turn on the light, and prove to him that there are no monsters under his bed.

Our father returned years later to tell mom he was sorry and begged forgiveness. He said he had realized he had been a fool and he wanted to make it up to her. Mom wasn't happy about our dad coming back, and the arguments went on well into the night.

Dad stayed on, more to make life miserable for us than for any other reason. He said he was going to hire on over in Cedarville, where they were building a new subdivision. But we had heard all that before. He was never was able to get hired-- or if he was hired, he got fired within a few days for drinking on the job.

Our dad didn't need a reason to get angry. He was always angry. He'd scream and holler until his face got all red and screwed up like some awful mask. He'd tell us how he had never wanted children. We were nothing but trouble, he said. When he'd get drunk, he'd talk about how good a carpenter he was. When it came to tools, he said I was stupid and wouldn't know the difference between a hammer and a screwdriver. I often wondered how he came to be a carpenter, something my mother questioned him about during many of their arguments. Our father was never sober enough to work at anything. Our mother was just as bad, though most days she was able to drag herself to the drug store where she worked.

by a.w. mckinnon

Most nights found my father and mother drinking, arguing, and throwing things. Nick and I would stay in my room until we were sure they were passed out at the kitchen table, and then I would walk Nick back to his room and turn out the light once he was in bed.

Hours later, I would awake to the screams and rush to my brother's room to find him sitting in the middle of his bed, shaking and crying. After I had turned on the light, and assured him there were no monsters under the bed, he would pull his pillow into a bear-hug and rock back and forth, still sobbing, until he fell asleep.

As far as I was concerned, the monsters lived in the house, not under the bed.

It came to me one day: I was the only one who could make it better.

Now, my father sits at the kitchen table and stares with unseeing eyes across to where my mother sits. He has not been angry or drunk for some time now. My mother rests her head against the back of the chair. She has not had a drink, or brought strange men to the house for months. She sits staring at the ceiling, her mouth open so the flies crawl in and never seem to come out. The blood on the floor beneath their chairs has dried and is hardly noticeable on the cracked linoleum.

Father would be proud of me. From his tool box under the sink, I selected two screw drivers, one a Phillips Head, the other a Flat Blade.

I was surprised to learn that one worked just as well as the other.

My brother lies in his bed, his eyes closed, resting for the first time that I can remember, even though the lights are off and his room is dark.

The Claw Hammer with the hickory handle had been the perfect choice.

The house has never been so peaceful and quiet. All the monsters are gone.

Tomorrow would have been Nick's birthday. I have given him an early birthday gift. He will never again be afraid of monsters under the bed.



[short story]

# THE SHOT



by steve coate

Christopher laid the tools of his trade out on the desk.

He wasn't supposed to be in here, but he'd had to find a good vantage point and everyone was gathered across the street to see the First Gentleman, anyway. It had been a simple thing for him to slip into an empty office once he found one that met his needs.

Christopher moved to the window and slid it open, looking across the city street to the stage upon which the First Gentleman stood. They hadn't even bothered with a lectern and stationary microphone. They had the politico wired for mobility as though he were on a talk show, trading jibes with Bill Maher or Steven Colbert. A sea of people surrounded the stage, expanding outward and into the street itself. Everyone thrilled to see the husband of the first female U.S. president. The city had planned for such an eventuality and uniformed policemen redirected traffic at the ends of the street.

The view wasn't all that great from this spot, but Christopher had a tool that would help with that. He checked his watch. The time was approaching. He moved to the desk and began assembling. As his hands busied themselves at their task, his mind followed suit.

He had long dreamed of making it in the big leagues, and this job would seal his place in the ranks of the greats in his field. He would be recognized as a true professional among professionals. A smile curled its way across his face.

Christopher moved to the open window, took note of the position of his target and lifted the viewfinder of the Pentax camera to his dominant eye. He fiddled with the telephoto lens until he had the range and focus just right. Yes, the telephoto zoom allowed for a much better view from this distance than the naked eye. Pristine, even. This photo was going to make his career.

"All it takes is one photo," a fellow shooter had once said to him when they were discussing their respective vocations. And he had been right. Zapruder had the Kennedy film. And he was just a regular shmoe. Tom Hanson had the Mohawk photo. And Charles Conlon had his Ty Cobb shot. All Christopher needed was one good photograph to get the ball rolling.

In the college photography courses he'd taken, the instructors always said not to set up your shots. You'll end up with people smiling at the camera or acting unnatural, they always said. Well that was a bunch of hooey. He'd been shooting independently for a few years now and in discussions with professionals, he'd learned that more than a few photos are posed. Some aren't, and they often turn out better than the others, but posed pictures are a fact in the field of photojournalism. Look at any newspaper, tabloid or magazine for the proof.

Christopher checked his watch again. Almost time.

The man checked his watch. He had set the alarm so that he could focus his eyes solely on the target when the time came, but he still found himself checking the display every so often. He'd done a few jobs of this type before, but nothing this big. This one would put him on the map. There was a certain prestige attached to the successful completion of an assignment like this one. He'd get more jobs as a result. Better jobs. And that meant better money.

Securing the apartment for temporary use had been a simple thing, really. He'd expected it to be empty, so was surprised when after he knocked, the owner opened the door straight away. He'd overpowered the man easily, gagged him, tied his feet together and then cuffed his arms around the base of the toilet in the apartment's only bathroom. The mask on his face had protected his identity and the gloves on his hands prevented any fingerprints from attaching themselves to the more impressionable surfaces of the apartment.

He killed only when he was paid to do so. The killer prided himself on this. It was one of the marks of a professional. The owner of the apartment wasn't included in the contract. He was just incidental.

The killer bent to the scope of the sniper rifle. The target was pacing back and forth on the stage, waving his hands through the air, as if illustrating whatever mundane point he was making. He swiveled the long gun slightly left and then right, scoping out the rest of the stage, as he had done earlier, when he had first set up the gun and tripod. The bodyguards were still there. Two behind the target a good three or four paces, and one on each end of the stage, to the target's left and right. These last two were busy scanning the crowd for any potential threats, be they gun-wielding madmen or crazed fans. The killer chuckled to himself at the thought of a fan obsessed with a politician. Different strokes, he thought.

He'd already mapped out an escape route. The tripod would have to be sacrificed, but the gun could be rapidly disassembled and stowed in the case on the floor and then carried out. Once he took the shot, he could be out and on his way to better things before anyone below even figured out from where it had been taken.

He spared a second to check the face of his watch. Half a minute, now. Back to business. The killer put his eye to the scope and with the long gun followed the head of the target as he moved across the stage. He began breathing deeply. After the third exhalation, the target halted in the center of the stage and turned to face the crowd. The killer inhaled once more and held the breath, the target's forehead dead center in his scope.

Then the watch alarm sounded and the killer squeezed the trigger.

At the appointed time, Christopher held the shutter button down on the Pentax and it cycled through a rapid series of digital shots, one after another. Christopher watched through the detached eye of the camera as the bullet tore through the First Gentleman's skull, trailing brain matter, blood, and bone. A spot of red blossomed from the center of the man's chest as a second bullet punched through the man's sternum.

And he got it all!



Every newspaper, tabloid and news network would kill for what he had on this camera. This was his ride out of the independents. He could write his own ticket at any news organization now. It was all he'd dreamed about for the past three years.

But time enough for that later. If he didn't get out of here quick, there could be some difficult questions asked. Clutching the camera as though it were a life preserver that had been thrown to a drowning man, Christopher exited the office and headed for the stairwell. At ground level, as he exited onto the street, the knowledge of what was in his camera bubbled up once more, threatening to surface, and Christopher had to remind himself to suppress his smile. He was finally going to get his shot!



# Mrs. Tamarray

by taryn marie harbert

The day Mrs. Tamarray picked the tomatoes from the vine it was a warm day, a day like any other. She took them into the house where she washed them and set them aside on her clean, marble counter.

It was the way she placed them, how she dried her hands. The way she folded the dish towel over the sink. It was the regularity of it. Her simplicity.

The way her small feet stepped briskly and quietly across the wooden floor of her home; her white Keds without the slightest blemish. Her jeans wrapped around her frame like a glove. Her shirt vibrant and red, like the tomatoes. Those perfect tomatoes.

She looked like a mother; a woman expecting her children to run through the door, going on about their day. How Mrs. Kettle made them draw pictures today. Can't you see it? It's a horse, Mommy, see the tail? How they ran out of chocolate milk during lunch and how Timmy took her seat on the bus.

But the house was quiet, and too neat. There were no children, you see. No toys hidden between couch cushions. No soccer schedule hung on the refrigerator door. No pitter-patter of bare feet throughout the hallways. Mrs. Tamarray liked a quiet home.

Mrs. Tamarray did not like children.

It all started because they ran across her yard. Coming home from school on a Tuesday afternoon, they wrestled and fell into each other, clumsy and carefree as children are. Stomping their Spider-man sneakers across her award-winning flowerbed. Oh, and how they laughed about it. With their filthy hands and their insidious giggling, and how she hated that sound; that barking of pubescent flesh.

*The audacity, she thought. Those little dirty bastards! Tramping through my flowers as if it was a sandbox.* She watched them through her living room window, her fury nestling itself into her bones. She began to rub her fingers against her palms in that nervous way. Felt the rise and fall of her small chest. Felt something stir inside of her.

In the middle of the night she knelt by her flowerbed and tried to mend the

tulips crushed mercilessly beneath their less than graceful footsteps. Her peonies with torn pedals and broken stems, ripped from their roots. She wept as she tore through the soil, removing every plant in a tearful fury. She would have to start all over again. There would be no awards this year, no prize-winning buds springing in her yard. No jealous housewives gawking in amazement at the beauty that was Mrs. Tamarray's front yard. All the while, that little voice inside of her grew louder.

The damage could have been fixed. It could have been covered up and mended, but she couldn't let them win. Don't you see? They ripped apart her garden and they would have to be taught a lesson. They needed to understand.

Mrs. Tamarray put her dead flowers into the black garbage container and was careful not to wipe her hands onto her unsoiled jeans. She was careful to open the door with just her fingertips on the handle. *Lest those little demons get the best of me and dirty up my home too*, she thought. No, she would not let them win.

It had been a while and she had been so good for so long, but the thing inside her had begun to fester. It was gnawing at her, digging its way under her skin.

"It's been too long," it said to her. "It's been too long."

Mrs. Tamarray's lips began their slow and rare ascent upward into her cheeks - a smile. She was captive to that voice inside her head, as she let it consume her and had begun to nod her head in agreement.

"It's been too long," she said. "What shall we do about it, Mr. Greco?"

Mr. Greco was not a man. He was a happening. The disturbing and crude thought that flew through your mind unexpectedly. *Oh my*, you thought. *I can't believe I just thought that!* You dismiss him, your shame pushing him out of your mind. Mr. Greco lives in all of us. He is the driving force behind that bad temper. The moment of weakness when an addict is asked if he would like another. He's the ill-founded logic when you slept with your wife's sister.

"It's just one time," he would say to you. "She will never know," he would whisper. He is the suspicion in your wife's voice when she asks why you were home so late.

Mrs. Tamarray listened to Mr. Greco as his words wound themselves around her pursed lips. She had no shame and no conscience to escort him out of her mind.

"You have to get them," he said. "You can't let those little fuckers get away with this. It's okay...you've been good for so long. You deserve this."

"And so do they," she said.

The aroma of freshly baked cookies swept from Mrs. Tamarray's open kitchen window and onto the street, as the children began their descent from the school bus. Their backpacks bounced against the small of their backs as they galloped down Dunsworth Street. Their legs began to slow down as the aroma of chocolate chip cookies filled their hungry nostrils. Mrs. Tamarray waved to them from her front door, a plate of warm treats in her hand. Her swift steps wrapped silently against her stone walkway. She walks like a ballerina, one of the girls thought. And her shoes, they are so white, white like snow.

"Kiiiids!" Mrs. Tamarray said in a yoo-hoo tone of voice. "I have a surprise for you!"

"Now, now," she said, pulling the plate away from their reach just in time. "This is our little secret, do you understand? I don't want your mommies getting upset with me for spoiling your appetite with sweets!" she chirped. One hand holding the plate slightly behind her back, the other with a finger pointed at the children mockingly.

"We won't tell!" they yelled, their faces alight with excitement. How the children loved secrets, and even more, cookies.

"Promise?" she sang as she brought the plate down to their reach.

"We promise!" they said in unison.

Their little paws did not hesitate to take from the devil's hand. It is only Mrs. T they thought. She is always so nice. She is such a pretty lady.

"Oh my, you hungry little rascals!" She said laughingly. Her soft eyes danced with eagerness and delight as the kids cleaned the plate. An attitude the children mistook for kindness, but it was a morbid pleasure. A satisfaction of what was to come.

The cars lined Dunsworth Street until not a single space was available. The people walked in and out of the homes dressed in black, the women holding Kleenex to their red-rimmed eyes, the men with their shoulders hunched, a true display of their defeated hearts.

"It must have been something they ate at the school," they said. "Such a tragedy, all those children..."

Her black flats tapped quietly against the sidewalk as she walked toward 159 Dunsworth Street, home of Natalie and Casey Anderson. Her tiny ankles bare beneath the hem of her fitted black scoop-neck dress. Mrs. Anderson opened the door with a small tremble in her hand.

"Oh hello, Mrs. Tamarray, so kind of you to come."

"Of course Mrs. Anderson, I just had to pay my respects. I'm so sorry for your loss," her eyes glittered with sympathy, and something else Mrs. Anderson could not quite put her finger on.

"Call me Catie, please." She said, standing aside to let Mrs. Tamarray in.

"Catie, thank you."

"What is that you have there?" she asked, nodding to the container Mrs. Tamarray held.

"Well, I brought cookies, chocolate chip. I thought it would have been something the kids would have liked. I hope that's alright."

"Oh, they would have loved them" Catie gasped. "They would have picked that plate clean," she said, a new stream of tears cascading down her face.

"Yes," Mrs. Tamarray said, smiling. "I suppose they would have."



# I AM THE NIGHT

I am the shadow of a previous life  
That now lies buried in an unmarked grave

I am the mirror with a thousand cracks  
That reflects a face that can never be made whole

I am the phantom with a skeleton key  
That grows ever fainter as if fading away

I am the creature waiting in the dark  
That strikes without warning with a ceaseless thirst

I am the candle that wavers and writhes  
That lingers on the verge of suddenly going out

I am the angel that wears a mask  
That does not reveal what deity it serves

I am the stranger in the coal black coat  
That seems like he's summoned for an unspoken task

And I am the silence of an empty room  
That knows how it feels to cry out in vain

—richard schnap

[short story]

# THE TENNET

by tonalea chapman

As Shawn stubbed out his cigarette on the face of George Washington, the tin ashtray clanged against the yellow-stained Formica table. He looked at the tips of his fingers now covered with cigarette ash, and rubbed them across the knee of his dirty jeans. A thread of smoke still rose from the tip of the dying cigarette. Shawn picked up the half-empty bottle of Schlitz's beer leaving a wet ring on the dirty table. He tilted his head back, held the bottle a couple inches above his open mouth, and poured the remaining beer down his throat. As Shawn finished the bottle, he leaned forward, allowing beer to run down his chin onto his dirty faded tee shirt. Shawn took the remaining few drops of beer in the bottom of the bottle and poured them into the ashtray, watching as the ash began to clump together making a gray black paste.

Shawn stood up, pushing his arms straight into the air as he stretched his slender frame, feeling every muscle in his body revolt against the movement. His fingertips touched the low ceiling, leaving marks in the smoke stained tiles. Taking two long strides from his kitchen table, he stood in front of the old Frigidaire refrigerator. Shawn pulled the heavy door open and, leaning into the almost empty box, pulled out another Schlitz. He could hear yelling coming from the other side of the paper-thin wall, and as he closed the refrigerator door with his steel toed boot, he reached for the little radio on top the refrigerator and turned the volume up. Janis Joplin did her best to drown out the yelling, but occasionally, he could still hear the "fuck you bastard" and "go to hell whore" that penetrated his walls. Two steps away from his refrigerator, he tucked his chair under the kitchen table. Taking another two steps, Shawn found himself looking out his dirt-crusted window into the darkening street below him.

The window was open and a little metal fan sat precariously on the window ledge pointed toward the kitchen. As the fan blade whirled, the fan cage slowly moved left to right trying its best to circulate the stale air around the room. Shawn pushed his slender frame through the open window onto the fire escape and seated himself in an old metal folding chair. He twisted the top off his beer and took a long slow drink. He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out his pack of Camels and the old Zippo his boss had given him for Christmas five years ago. Shawn flipped the cigarette into his mouth skillfully; while holding the Zippo between his thumb and middle finger, he flipped the top open and spun the flint wheel at the same time, producing a blue and white flame from the black wick. As Shawn touched the flame to the tip of his cigarette, he sucked a whirl of smoke into his mouth, opened his mouth, and inhaled the smoke through his nose and deeply into his lungs. Sweat rolled down his forehead to the bridge of his nose, and dripped silently onto his tee shirt. Shawn looked over his back yard, which consisted of a two lane blacktopped street filled with pot holes, and a set of four-story row houses opposite his window. Clothes lines were strung across the road between the buildings, pinned with sheets, diapers, boxers, and bras.

As Shawn lifted his beer bottle to his lips, he felt a small tremor roll through

his body, and his hand twitched ever so slightly, stirring the beer inside the bottle. He instantly pulled the beer from his lips and set it, with fingers tightly wrapped around it, on his knee. The sweat from the bottle instantly created a wet ring on his tattered jeans and the coolness felt good on his skin. Shawn studied the bottle and could faintly make out the movement of the beer as another tremor moved through him. Shawn closed his eyes and struggled to gain control of the tremors that were erupting from him. He had learned long ago how to quell the craving inside him by concentrating on other things. He scanned the streets looking for something to pump into his system, anything to calm his tremors. A close friend had once given him a tape of the works of Chopin, splendid piano concertos. The tape was so calming, when the urges became too much for him to handle through simple meditation, he would use the tape to calm the yearning. Some days, however, even that didn't work. Since Shawn had decided to give up his addiction six months ago, he had only backslide three times. The first time was only a couple days after going cold turkey. Shawn tried, but couldn't stand the tremors that turned into violent shakes and nausea. After hours of fighting the urge, he broke down and sought out anything to ease his pain. In his neighborhood, he never had to look far; every alley held at least one person ready and willing to give to anyone what they needed most. But the next day, Shawn vowed to go cold turkey again. This time with a bit more success, and now he could proudly say that he had been clean for three and a half months. He still fought for control of his body all the time, and as the sun began to slide behind the row houses, and the few working streetlights came on, Shawn always had to fight the hardest.

The night always pulled at him. He had always heard people say not to fear the night, there was nothing in the dark that wasn't there during the day, but he knew they were wrong. Anyone who watched the streets could see the change as dusk drew near. The voices and laughter of children as they played stick ball in the street or played with their Barbie dolls and toy trucks on the steps of the row houses was replaced with the older deeper voices of the thugs who had slept their day away behind drawn shades in hot rooms that smelled of sweat and old urine. Captain Kangaroo was replaced with Ozzie Osborn, and the sounds of mothers chatting out windows as they watched with a keen eye their precious children, was replaced with the sounds of street rods and drug deals. The night did indeed welcome many things that the sunlight kept out. The world changed at dusk, and regardless of what your mother told you when she tucked you in bed at night, there were many things to fear.

As the earth continued its revolution leaving the world of light far behind, the street also continued its revolution. Shawn recognized many of the figures that stood in the shadows away from the street lamps. The streets he had learned long ago were a thriving world of racial and sexual injustice. The hierarchy that had long since found its way onto College Avenue was won with blood, sweat, and tears. The whites had their place among the hierarchy, as did the blacks, Mexicans, and Chinese. Each inch of the sidewalk belonged to someone, and crossing the line between your section of street and someone else's could easily result in death.



Those who had earned their place among the elite could feel the constant tension. There was a fear that permeated the dirty sidewalks and uneven streets. One wrong move, a look the wrong way, shoulders bumping in the dark, the simplest of gestures--could mean the difference between life and death. Weakness was a crime that could result in pain and loss. Every person who ranked among the elite on the street had the scars to prove their worth. Every person who let down their guard, even for a second, could easily lose their place among the privileged few. Shawn could see the shadowy figure of Carlos as he leaned against the rotting row house wall on the corner. His dark sunglasses and long trench coat was his trademark. Carlos wore the coat summer, fall, and winter, regardless of the heat or the cold. Shawn had never seen Carlos without the sunglasses, and by coincidence, he had never seen Carlos during the daylight hours.

Inside the long tan coat were the wares of Carlos' trade--watches in the front, wallets on the side, knives and guns in the back. Seven days a week, Carlos peddled his wares on his corner, on his street, and if anyone tried to step into his space, someone would most likely be found floating with the fish on the Stillwater river. Robin had started her career three blocks away but now stood across the street from Carlos, her tall slender frame belied her age. She had started down her career path three blocks away at the ripe old age of sixteen, but over the last few years she had fought her way up the hierarchy to the best corner on the block. Robin's customers were her bread and butter; anyone who tried to bump her off her block would quickly feel her wrath. Her money came from all directions, sometimes from a car slowly cruising by, sometimes by the person who owned the piece of street below you. For the ladies of the night, the worst death came from the John that looked like the ticket off of the streets. The hope that followed him from the alley into the car, the hope that maybe this guy, this handsome rich guy, would see past the makeup, short skirts, and high heels, that's what killed the ladies. Hope can be a wonderful thing, but it can also be a lethal thing. Hope can make a person believe in dreams that can't and won't come true. Rachael had found hope once; she learned her John's real name, Michael. Michael told her that someday he would come and take her away from her life on the streets. Michael treated her like a lady. He was always considerate of her needs in bed, he always took her to a nice motel and paid for her to spend the whole night, he never hit her or beat her, and he always left more money on the bedside table than she had asked for. Then, the day came, it was a Sunday. Michael came to pick her up and take her to the ocean where she could spend her days lounging in the sun, and her nights lounging in his Jacuzzi. He pulled up in his Beamer, threw her small suitcase in the trunk, and they drove into the sunset. Rachael's body was recovered from the Stillwater River two weeks later. It turned out that her hope, Michael, had sold her to a group of prospective business partners, and in their excitement, they had gone a bit too far. The bruises were still visible on her body as she lay upon the slab at the mortuary. Hope... who needs it when you can get cold hard cash?

Shawn lifted the beer bottle to his lips and guzzled the remainder of the yellowish fluid, then stood and folded his beat up lawn chair, leaning it against

the wall of the fire escape. He stretched his tall body, bending backwards with his arms taunt over his head, and then slid his body back through the kitchen window. The heat was stifling inside the tiny room as the air hung in stagnant pools over the appliances. Shawn could still hear the yelling coming through his walls as he twisted the volume on the radio as high as it would go. Within seconds of hearing American Woman blast from the speakers, Shawn heard his neighbor pounding on his wall. A large wooden frame that held the picture of the all-American family bounced on the wall each time Shawn's neighbor made contact on the other side.

Though the picture was hanging there when Shawn moved in, he had grown attached to the family in a bizarre kind of way. The father was a middle-aged looking man with thick army regulation glasses and a crew cut, the mother was a younger dark-haired woman with a glint of anger in her eyes. There were three children--two girls who looked just like their mother, and one boy who sported the same military crew cut as his father. No one in the picture smiled, in fact; they all looked as if they had just come from a funeral. Shawn sometimes wished he could climb into the picture frame and sit down beside the oldest daughter. Maybe they would allow him to become a part of the family and be the older brother that could care for his younger siblings, or maybe he could even push Mr. Stuffy Shirt right out of the way and calm the anger in his wife's eyes. The picture continued to bounce with each new thump on the wall as Shawn smiled and turned his back on the frozen family scene.

His apartment was a classic three-room slum apartment. The kitchen was twice the size of his bathroom, but half the size of his living room/bedroom combination. Each of the three dingy rooms was lined with wallpaper that had long since bubbled across the walls. If you stood still and paid particular attention to the larger of the bubbles, you could watch them move as if they had a life of their own, which in a way they did. Shawn would often sit late at night and watch as the cockroaches crawled from one mini condo to the next as if they were just out for an evening stroll hooking up with old friends. When he first moved in, he had considered putting out roach motels, but soon realized that his efforts would be useless against the millions of tenants that resided inside his walls. Besides, he lived by the motto, if it ain't hurtin' me, I ain't hurtin it, live and let live. Shawn stopped at his little black and white television long enough to pull the on/off button into the on position, then turned off the radio, before flopping down on his broken-down couch. Usually by dark Shawn was heading to work but tonight there wasn't much work lined up so there was no hurry to get there. Shawn remembered when he had first started watching television, he used to watch the *The Munsters* and thought Herman Munster was the coolest. He knew that Herman played an undertaker, but he never really thought much about it. The show always had Herman trudging off to work with his giant lunch box, wearing clothes that didn't fit right, and leaning down to kiss Lilly as he stepped out the door. Once outside, his neighbors ran from him like he was a freak, then would pull their blinds on their fear. Funny, Shawn thought, how life never seemed to imitate the movies or television shows. His job consisted of caring for the dead, but he had never had a Lilly at home to kiss

goodbye, nor was there the giant lunch box, and the happy family. All Shawn ever had were the clothes that sometimes didn't fit quite right and the ugly neighbors that wouldn't look past their blinds. Shawn fell asleep to the sweet voice of Valerie Bertinelli, as Barbara Romano, telling Schneider that he needed to fix the drain in the sink before her mother, Ann Romano got home. Schneider hiked up his bell bottom navies, slicked back his hair, and readjusted the pack of cigarettes he had rolled up in his tee-shirt sleeve, and then Schneider faded away as Shawn's eyes fell into slumber. When Shawn awoke, he could feel the broken couch springs stabbing him in the back. Barbara and Schneider had been replaced by the Blue Angels as they flew their nightly pattern to sign off the local television station. Moments later, the Blue Angels were replaced with the silhouette of an Indian enclosed in various circles as the station gave their call letters and said good night to the listening area.

He sat up slowly, rubbing his aches and pains from the uncomfortable sleeping arrangements, then stood and flipped off the television. He stepped past the aluminum-covered rabbit ears that stuck out precariously from the television, and stepped up to the toilet to slap the piss out of his best buddy. Within twenty minutes Shawn was climbing down the narrow stairwell into his backyard with a small paper bag holding his lunch. He no sooner stepped into the street than his senses went into overdrive. Every sound became louder, the whispers in the corners and alleys sounded like yelling in his ears. The shuffling of feet on the sidewalk and street sounded like his neighbors thumping on his wall; even the slide or crinkle of cloth could be heard as people subtly shifted positions. The pupils of Shawn's eyes adjusted to the dark street as they grew in diameter and within seconds, he could see as clear as if it were daylight. He had long learned how and when to adapt himself to his surroundings. When he wanted to sleep, or felt no sense of danger, Shawn could easily turn off this heightened sense, but he had learned from past experience, that the streets were full of danger, and to never, ever let his guard down. If people saw him as he really was, it wouldn't take long before he would find himself floating in the Stillwater River with all the other missing persons. Shawn didn't see people the way other people saw them.

Each person carried an aura that surrounded them in different colors--some blue, red, pink, white, and then, there were the ones with the black auras. It was the ones with the black around them that Shawn feared the most; it was as if the people were surrounded by hate, anger, and pain. These people were often surrounded by death. Light blues or yellows surrounded most people, but occasionally he would find one surrounded by a beautiful white light, one so bright he felt in awe of their presence. Shawn knew who they were when he saw them, he felt them in his soul; he felt them in his mind. Within twenty minutes, Shawn was walking in the door of Chapman's Funeral Home and Undertaker. He had a key and always went in the back door down into the basement. The front door was reserved for patrons, people who wanted to see their dead who were sometimes their loved ones, sometimes just a name on an insurance policy. Shawn always thought it funny how humans memorialized their dead. A child is born, spends a lifetime growing, graduating high school and college, marries and has kids, and if lucky, they have

a loving family around them through it all. Then they die. The loving family goes through the mourning process not by putting flowers and crosses where they were born, not celebrating their loved ones' life achievements with celebrations or merriment, but by memorializing where they died or were buried as if that was their life achievement. The families come together over an empty shell of a body; spend money that would be best used for food and rent, to place the body in a hole in the ground. Every holiday, they put flowers on the empty grave instead of passing flowers on to some newborn child. Every day, they mourn death instead of celebrating life. So much pain and so much energy spent on death with so little energy spent on life.

Shawn had gotten caught up in the lifestyle of humans when he first came to earth. He had gotten pulled into the streets and back alleys, into the misery and pain that humans systematically put themselves through every day. Humans were such angry creatures and most of the time they took their hate and anger out on all the other innocent souls around them. He tried to save them, he tried to take away their anger, calm their pain but one day he realized that it was just the nature of the beast. When Shawn first arrived, he believed in his heart that he could save them all, that he could go to each one and they would give him all their pain and all their anger. Shawn truly believed that once they gave to him, they would become better more caring humans. But he was wrong. They would give him what he wanted, and then they would go back onto the streets in search of more pain and anger. Finally, he chose to give it up but soon realized it wasn't that easy; it had become a drug to him, one that he knew he would have to walk away from. Shawn stood over the empty body of a little blonde-haired girl of twelve—Donna, he thought her physical name was. Though her body lay on his table, he could see her standing in the corner of the room, surrounded by her white light. He saw them all when they passed through these doors. He saw the drug dealers surrounded by their black demons, the lost surrounded by their gray-blue auras, the angry surrounded by their red; sometimes he saw the innocent beauty surrounded by their white light. Children almost always had a white light around them, but the ones who didn't, those were the ones Shawn felt the most sympathy for. He wondered what the children had gone through to cause them so much anger or pain. He wondered, in this world with so many humans, how these children got so lost.

But tonight Shawn saw the bright white light, and he smiled at Donna as he walked toward her. When she smiled back at him, the whole room began to glow the softest white light he had seen in a long time. Shawn knelt in front of Donna and held out his hand, and she clamped her tiny fingers around his fingers. Shawn stood and began to walk with her out into the warm night air. They stood together for a long time, looking up toward the heavens. Shawn noticed that Donna kept looking up at him so he knelt beside her.

She put her tiny hand on his shoulder while quietly asking, "Do they hurt you?"

Shawn was unsure what she was talking about until she pointed behind his back; then he understood and replied with a smile, "You are a very perceptive

young lady aren't you? But, to answer your question, they don't hurt, they just grow very heavy sometimes."

Unfazed, Donna asked him why.

Shawn continued to smile then leaned in a little closer to her and laid his hand gently upon her golden hair. "Because there are so few left here with such a beautiful white light in them such as you have. It makes me sad, and that makes them heavy."

Donna looked into Shawn's dark brown eyes, and asked if he could open them, if he could fly.

Shawn stood, and while looking down at Donna, his smile was replaced with a look of awe and concentration. "For you, beautiful one, I can open them, but they do not allow me to fly." With that, Shawn stood straight and tall, and as he raised his arms toward the sky, his wings unfolded and spread out before Donna.

Shawn looked down at her and saw her smiling up at him, and in a quiet innocent voice, she spoke to Shawn, "You are very beautiful. Are you my angel?"

Shawn smiled down on Donna, and nodded his head yes. He then folded his wings back up and knelt back in front of her. "Is it okay that I'm your angel?"

Donna took one of his hard calloused hands in hers and smiled. "I think you are a very handsome angel, and I'm glad you're here with me. I'm not scared anymore."

Shawn and Donna looked back up into the sky, at what looked like a distant star twinkling above them, but as it came closer, Shawn could clearly make out the distinct round gliding shape. He felt Donna step closer to him as if afraid, and he tenderly put his arm around her, feeling her soul grow relaxed and calm. The ship drew close enough that Shawn could clearly see the lights that made up the front and sides of the craft. The light was so bright that he felt himself squinting and he knew he had become too accustomed to the darkness on earth.

Shawn turned to Donna and smiled at her beautiful face and light. "It's time to go home now. Your time on earth is finished."

Donna held his hand tight and looked into his eyes, "Are you coming with me?"

Shawn smiled at her innocence, "No Donna, it's not my time yet, but we will meet again; when you're ready to come back all you have to do is pick a new body. If I don't see you here, I will see you at home." Shawn stood up, but continued to look into Donna's eyes, and hold tight to her hand. "Are you ready?"

Donna smiled up at Shawn and nodded her approval, "I'm ready Freddy."

They both laughed as the bright flash of light surrounded them but took only Donna when it slipped away.

Shawn stood a moment longer, and a pang of longing ached deep in his heart as he watched the ship disappear into the night sky. How he ached to go home—he had been here so very long. Someday he knew he would go home, when his job was done.

Shawn turned and shuffled back into the mortuary, looking over his shoulder for only a second as the door closed behind him. There was still work to be done.



[short story]

# Serial Killer Blues

by david stevens



Susan slipped into a head-achy half-sleep, leaning against the car window like a dog catching a breeze. In the few moments before she shook herself back awake, she remembered the dolphin.

Swimming in the surf with her brother, each daring the other farther and farther out from the shore, until they reached the point where neither could touch the bottom. If she didn't keep swimming, she sank. She thought of how sharks have to keep swimming, or they drown. At that exact moment something surged through a rising swell, kinetic energy tunnelling the water, torpedoing between her and her brother.

It was a dolphin, she realised after she had a moment to process everything, but that wasn't her first thought. *Shark*, she thought, but the animal was so fast the word only crystallised after it had passed. The tips were nonsense, she realised, all the crap her brother said he would do if a shark attacked—play dead, stick his fingers in its eyes, punch it. If it had been a shark, she wouldn't have had time to know. A moment's flurry, then oblivion. There was nothing she could have done.

The same now. Leaving her office, enough psychiatry dispensed for the day, Susan barely noticed the cleaning woman, a distant figure in grey down the corridor. She turned to lock her door, then registered the woman was suddenly beside her. A flash of time gone wrong, jumbled images, the weirdness of the woman's long silent sprint. Susan jerked back, confused, and then saw the blade in the woman's hand. It traced an exact arc through the air; sliced along Susan's cheek; and was gone. There was nothing she could do. First the shock of the cut, then she was bundled back into her office in a bum's rush.

The woman. Tired looking. Approaching middle age. Pale. Mousy hair in need of a brush. Nothing alarming in her appearance. The name "Alice" on a tag pinned to her chest. Susan looked away, as though to say, *I'm not collecting details to tell the police. Honest.*

"Sorry," the woman said, pointing to Susan's cut. "Had to check."

A slot machine ran in Susan's head, all the possible gambits, her training useless right now in choosing between them, in calculating the possible consequences of anything she did or said. Any reply, no matter how profound or inane, could be disastrous. Silence was as unsafe as everything else, but it was all Susan had.

"Take a seat. Please." The woman's voice was flat. Not panting from exertion, no inflection from excitement. Susan's heart was racing, but this woman, she runs the length of a corridor, cuts someone's face, and immediately afterwards presents as a bored usher. She held a first aid kit out to Susan, identical to the one she kept in her

desk. “That’s a nice red you got going there,” the woman said, pointing to her own cheek. “Go on, take care of your face.”

One, two, three heartbeats. A matching throb in her cut cheek. “Thank you,” Susan replied in a halting voice, and took the offered box.

Her attacker remained standing between her and the door. “I want something from you.”

Susan’s eyes flicked to the name tag. “Alice ...”

“Hon, of course I’m not Alice.”

She was surprised to find herself bristling at the “Hon”, but in the circumstances let it pass. “What should I call you then?”

“Alice will do”

“Alice,” trying to keep her voice measured, succeeding a little, “I write prescriptions, but there are no drugs kept here.”

A slight smirk. “I’m sure we could find something if we tried. Maybe next to the Smith & Wesson you have locked away. No, I want a different sort of professional assistance.”

“You could have just made an appointment,” Susan blurted, the pain coming through now, half her face on fire.

“I’m a special case.”

Susan pressed cotton against her face. The bleeding seemed to have stopped. Perhaps it would not be a bad scar.

“What do you want?”

“I’m a serial killer.”

*Fuck.* Not like those clients she had to coax along for four sessions, then. Nothing like straight to the point. Suddenly light-headed, she was glad she was sitting down.

“I’ve been doing it a long time,” the woman continued in her monotone. “The bodies—they’re all men, don’t worry too much—are never found. There is hardly ever a mention in the press. But I have a problem.”

*Other than the obvious?* Susan nodded, not trusting speech.

“I’m at a high risk of suicide. I know that. For people like me, there’s a good chance of a psychotic break. That’s what I want you to help me with.”

“And ... if I do?”

“You’re smarter than that. How can you trust the promise of a stranger with a knife? ‘I promise I won’t hurt you.’ Why would you believe me? I already hurt you. At the end of this, if it goes the way I think, I might be the least of your problems. I don’t think I’m the one you’re gonna be worrying about by then.”

Susan took a breath, decided. “Tell me then.”

“Where’s the fun in that? Everyone knows the rule is show, not tell. Hmm.” Alice mimed looking around, index finger to her lips, as though at a momentary loss. “Ahh! But wait—here’s one I prepared earlier.”

She pulled open the utility closet. The contents fell out, brooms, a bucket, a rolled up rug with a stain they hadn’t disposed of yet. No, it was none of that, Susan realised. It was a man, tied up. He fell hard to the floor and gapsed through his gag.



His head turned, seeking Susan, made eye contact with her.

Alice grabbed his hair and dragged him, ignoring his wriggling and muffled shouts. Susan was surprised at her strength, how she half lifted him from the floor.

A pale hunk of skin flapped loose from the man's cheek.

The man stared at Susan, his eyes pleading for help. He said things she could not understand. She stared back, frozen. She recognised him from the building. She'd seen him a few times, walking the corridors, crossing the carpark.

She realised it didn't matter. None of it mattered.

Alice wasn't even puffing. "See, there's this thing, and I want to know if it's just me."

"What thing...?" Susan began, but Alice wasn't listening. She had gone to work.

The blade was sharp, the man's shirt slit open in an instant. Susan noticed his paunch, and remembered her promise to herself to get to the gym more often.

His face bulged, stretching scarlet, and Susan realised the knife was already in his body. The woman looked up, straight into Susan's face. "Don't faint – I need your attention."

The man struggled harder now, feet drumming the carpet, rolling from side to side. There was no give in his bonds though, and the woman had him pinned beneath her knees. If she moved to assist him, Susan knew she would be joining him.

The man's gut resisted the knife. The blade had penetrated an inch, but was going no further. He arched his back, pushing up as though he could evict the knife. The woman pushed down with both hands, the strain obvious in her quivering arms, but not her face. Then ...

CRACK. Something gave, something that shouldn't have been there. The knife was in deep, and the woman was cutting freely. "Look!" she demanded.

Susan did as she was told. The woman shrugged off the outer layer of his skin like she was peeling a Christmas ham. There was no blood. Beneath the fat were toffee brown splintered shards that Alice drew out quickly, in her haste to get on with things.

The man's head flopped from side to side. Both hands in his gut, Alice tugged, and pulled out an armful of thick blue jelly, slopping it shaking onto the floor. "It didn't used to be like this."

The man's moans were inaudible, his motions reduced to brief jerks. Shivering, Susan stood up and approached him. She stared into the cavity the woman had dug.

"You see it too," Alice demanded.

"That depends."

"What depends? Whaddya mean, 'depends'?"

"You said 'too'. How can we ever know that another person sees things the same way we do? How do we know we even mean the same things by the words we use. There are limits to ..."

"What the fuck is all that bullshit? I'll tell you what you're seeing. He's a normal looking person until he's gutted, then there's all weird blue shit that I never ever used to see before when I did this—that's what you're seeing, isn't it?"

Susan stared, but her eyes were sliding over the scene, like it was a black hole in reality. Despite the years of medical school, the months spent inexpertly dissecting her very own cadaver, Susan saw nothing she recognised. She forced herself to look at it bit by bit, as though she could assemble it into some sort of sense that way. Something spun in there, suspended in the jelly. Staring hard, she could make out little wheels, hard to see because they were translucent. Sacks too, bladders maybe, but full of holes. No heart, no lungs, no kidneys. No bones or muscles. Like looking into the night sky and in place of stars, seeing distorted versions of household items. It was going to take a more creative mind than hers to create meaningful constellations out of this lot.

"I guess," she finally answered.

"You see it? Ha! You do!" Alice exclaimed, showing emotion at last. "See why I had to cut you? Why I had to check that you bleed? It's not a psychotic break, is it?" The woman leaned back, squatting on her heels amongst the remnants of her handiwork. "Well, thank goodness for that. I gotta say, it's a relief. This"—she pointed at the pile of the man's guts—"this has been happening a lot lately. More and more often. I was worried it was just me, seeing things. Ha!"

They had been driving for hours now. Susan's mind kept returning to that image of the psychopath squatting there in the mess of jelly, looking so at home. Did she reflect on the scene at all? Was she capable of insight? Did she pause to think, I'm not the only kind of alien walking the earth? The three of us in that room, each of us a different type of creature.

Alice let her bring the Smith & Wesson. *A gesture of goodwill*, she said. *Probably disabled. I promise I won't hurt you*, she said. *We're going to be Thelma and Louise. Bonnie and Clyde. You and me against the monsters.*

Promise.

*I need you*, she said. *For next time. To reassure me it's real, so I don't think that this time was a delusion. So I don't think that I imagined you.*

Years after the day at the beach, one Christmas with the family together, Susan had reminisced, telling her brother's kids about the dolphin. Her brother just stared, puzzled. *That never happened*, he said. *You've made that all up. I would have remembered something like that.*

Susan hadn't just taken the hand gun. She had grabbed a pillbox. She shook it now in her pocket, just enough to hear it rattle. She had taken a moment to slip in a tiny wheel from the floor. Tiny pale blue gelatinous thing, so small and clear it almost wasn't there. But it was. She heard it rattle.

Back there, all the tumblers of the slot machine had run again in her head, trying to find an explanation for what she witnessed. Special effects, an elaborate set-up. Her own psychotic break. The power of suggestion. *Folie a deux*.

How many people had to agree to make something real? Is three consensus enough? If one more person agrees, will that make what she saw real? It couldn't be a man obviously. Or a psychopath. It would have to be a professional, a woman she trusts. They'd have to check them out first. Make sure they bleed.

*“...this has been happening a lot lately. More and more often.”*

But what if they didn't pass whatever test they came up with? Is that a reason to ... ? And what's magic about the number three ... or five, or seven? Would a peer reviewed monograph based on blind studies suffice?

*Next time.* Susan breathed in the hazy night air. She rattled the pillbox again. They were well out of the city now. Next time—presuming there was a next time, that she wasn't just being driven into the countryside to be murdered and disposed of together with a hollowed out corpse and a bunch of weird blue glop—next time, would she have to take a memento again? To prove it all to herself, that she wasn't dreaming the whole thing?



[short story]

# JONES FARM



by tim waldron

Nate turned to Vic as they approached mile four on their morning run and mooded. Vic shook his head, took a deep breath, and increased his pace. The morning mist had settled thick over the valley making the world gray and poorly defined. Cows looked to be no more than silhouettes, as they lazily ate their breakfast, in the pasture of Jones Prison Farm. Vic doubled his pace as he hit the steep incline of Wilbertha Road. The distance between runners grew. Nate mooded again, but this time louder and with more bravado, it signaled his charge. The gap between the two runners closed as Nate's pace quickened. Vic had crested the hill when Nate's foot falls caught his ear, the sound made him widen his stride. Vic closed in on the gates of Saint Mary's church with Nate right behind him. He put everything he had left into his sprint, but it didn't matter; young Nate breezed by him just as he had done every other morning for the last year.

"I almost had you today," Vic forced his words out between deep breaths.

"Almost don't count."

"But you were worried."

"You're in good shape," Nate said. "For a guy your age."

"My age? Bullshit, I'm not that much older than you." Vic hobbled to his truck and opened the door. He reached into the center console and pulled out a bottle of water. He took a big pull then dumped the rest on his bald head.

"How many times did you say you saw the Doobie Brothers live?" Nate asked.

"Fuck you, Nate."

"You're an old man, Vic."

"Get in," Vic groaned as he slid into the driver's seat. "Don't forget to put a towel under you."

"Yes, boss." Nate did as he was told, then jumped into the truck. "What's on the menu today?"

"More of the same," Vic said. "Got a few new Milkers coming in." Vic pulled out of the church parking lot and drove toward town. The sun began to burn off the morning mist, a sure sign that'd it be another hot one. Vic pulled his truck into the 711 parking lot and let it idle while Nate jumped out to grab coffee and the morning papers. He fiddled with the radio until finding the morning radio show he liked.

"Look at this," Nate threw the morning edition onto Vic's lap. "Some hopped up undercover killed a woman last night. Single mom too."

"Jesus."

"Happened over on 31, our side of county line." Nate sat the coffee holder down between him and Vic. "Says the woman's name was Karen Kittner."

"Shit," Vic threw the paper to the floor.

"What's the matter?"

"Today's the twenty third, it's my Mother-in-law's birthday."

"Forget, did you?"

"Just about," Vic put the car in gear and steered his truck toward the prison Farm. "You're gonna have to cover for me today, I got to sneak out and buy a hydrangea or some such thing."

"Make sure to buy a funny little card too," Nate winked. "Maybe something with monkeys dressed as people. I always laugh when I see those."

"You're simple. Anybody ever tell you that?"

By seven thirty in the morning Vic and Nate had showered, dressed, and were on their horses. The Milkers were let out of their cells at seven forty-five for breakfast. They'd be working the Farm by eight-fifteen.

The population of Jones Farm changed from day to day as Milkers were mostly non-violent, first-time offenders. Their sentences tended to be short. A prisoner serving more than a year was a rarity. Jones Farm took a very select few, only the best of the worst pulled farm duty.

"What was the population of Jones Farm last night?" Vic asked Nate. They trotted past the prisoners' bunk house. It was called to The Coop by the officers, as it sat on the land originally occupied by the chicken coop.

"Two hundred eighty-two inmates in The Coop and twelve guards," Nate answered.

"And today?"

"Same."

"Good," Vic pulled on the reigns and stopped Mirabel outside the dairy. "Porter said he received paper work on four Milkers transferring in today."

"Not bad."

"Cover boy is one of them."

"What?"

"Says it right here," Vic pointed to his clip board, "Detective Mark McCluskey."

"You're pulling my leg."

"Fraid not."

Vic kept the new inmates in the processing room longer than usual. Most of his morning was spent on hold or being transferred from one representative of the Attorney General's office to another.

"Vic Roberts." The gruff familiar voice came to Vic over the phone, "Marv here."

"Marv," Vic said and leaned back in chair. "How you been? Jesus it's been an age."

"You know me, divorced, broke, back problems," Marv said. "But I can't complain."

"I hear you," Vic leaned forward and opened up McCluskey's file.

"Listen, Vic," Marv let out a deep sigh. "I know you're not happy about this McCluskey thing."

"Damn right, I'm not."

"Vic, I can give you the whole song and dance, but in the end you're getting fucked here."

"Is that a fact?"

"At this point, it's a goddamn foregone conclusion," Marv said. "McCluskey's your responsibility and he's a big deal."

"This is a real mess, Marv."

"It is what it is," Marv told him. "McCluskey has information on a case, a big one. He's been undercover for almost a year. Prison's too dangerous for him. He's going to need to testify on his undercover work. The people he's looking at could get to him inside."

"Marv, I could give a shit." Vic spoke up. "He's being held for vehicular homicide and he hasn't been processed? Just plain stupid. We don't take his kind at the farm. He'll run, I can feel it."

"Here's the word from on high: Detective Mark McCluskey is to be milking cows by noon or someone else will be running Jones Farm by the end of the day."

"So that's how it is?"

"The long and the short of it."

"Well, fuck you very much, Marv," Vic said and hung up. He caught sight of Nate at the door and waved him in. The phone rang before he had a chance to take his hand off the receiver, "What? Oh, sorry, honey. Rough morning. Yeah, getting pushed around a little bit. No, I didn't forget, I swear. Hydrangeas. Yes, I got her a card too. I don't know. It's got dressed-up monkeys. Dinner? I'll have to call you back. Love you too."

"You are an inspiration, Vic," Nate said.

"How's that?"

"The way you effortlessly lie to your wife, not even the slightest hesitation or stutter."

"It's a gift, Nate. I'm a problem solver." Vic took off his reading glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Can you take the three guys they brought in today and put them in the system? Maybe have Davis or Porter show them around."

"What about McCluskey?"

"Send him in here."

McCluskey looked sickly. His hair was long and oily, black, streaked with grey. He seemed too weasely to be a Detective, bad posture, and too skinny. Bruises and cuts peaked out from his prison clothes, his lip was split, and he had two black eyes. The finger print-sized bruises up and down his arm might be attributed to the accident in some circles, but Vic had seen enough junkies come through the farm to know better.

"Detective," Vic rose from his chair to meet McCluskey at the door. He nodded thanks to Nate before offering his hand to McCluskey. "My name's Captain Vic Roberts. I'm the steward of Jones Farm." McCluskey, still shackled by his arms and legs, gave Vic's hand a soft squeeze. "Please take a seat."

"You got a light?" McCluskey reached into the breast pocket of his jumper and pulled out a pack of cigarettes.

"You know you can't smoke in these facilities, Detective."



"Didn't ask permission, I asked for a light."

"You still drunk, Detective?" Vic leaned forward in his chair and put his elbows on the desk, "Maybe it hasn't set in yet, but there's a little girl that is going to grow up without a mommy because of you." Vic stared at McCluskey, waiting for him to respond, but he just sat there like a lump, with his head down. Vic put his reading glasses back on and flipped through the Detective's file. "I figured I'd extend the courtesy of letting you know that I don't want you here." Vic sat down in his chair and opened McCluskey's file.

"That makes two of us."

"This is a minimum security prison, only one of my guys has ever drawn his gun, and that was to put down an animal. The fences that border this Farm are only four feet high in most spots. We put them up to keep the cows from strolling into the neighborhood, not to stop convicts from escaping. Most of our guests here are doing short time. What I'm trying to say is that kids who get caught selling dime bags and accountants skimming payroll don't run."

"And you think I might?"

"Detective," Vic leaned back in his chair and patted out a drum roll with his finger tips on the arm rest. "I think a man who has so thoroughly fucked his life up, such as yourself, might consider taking a longer walk than we'd be comfortable with."

"I'm not going to run," McCluskey said. "You don't have to be an asshole."

"Well, I can't tell you how happy that makes me, Detective." Vic stood up from behind his desk and walked over to McCluskey. "I'll walk you out."

McCluskey shuffled slowly down the hall. Vic guessed the pain from the crash had just started to set in. The cars, as pictured in the paper, looked like scrap metal. McCluskey must have been passed out when he rear-ended Karen Kittner's minivan at the red light. Vic saw it as lousy luck of the drunk. They always seemed to survive the wrecks they caused.

"How about that light?" McCluskey asked.

"Stopped carrying a lighter when I quit."

"Good for you, how long?"

"About three weeks now."

"Think I might try to quit too." McCluskey took his pack out and handed it over to Vic. "You mind holdin' on to that, in case I can't make it cold turkey?"

"Sure," Vic called to the group of new arrivals. "Davis, I got one more for the tour."

"How'd it go?" Nate asked. He brought his horse to a stop next to Vic.

"Not bad," Vic replied, "Said he wasn't going to try to escape."

"Boy, that's a relief."

"I want him confined to The Coop while he's here."

"You got it, boss." Nate saluted.

"Can you mind the shop for the afternoon? I've got to find a gift."

"Will do," Nate said. "I'm just going to take her for a quick run before I stable her." Nate dug his heels into the horse to get her going, "Ha, Potahto."



"You don't get to name horses no more," Vic yelled before getting into his truck.

Vic's thoughts were elsewhere when Nate cruised by him on their morning run. He was thinking about his wife and how funny she thought it was that he lied about buying flowers. The hydrangeas were a disaster. He went to four flower shops before he gave up and bought a plastic arrangement. Judy burst out laughing when he showed the gift to his Mother-in-law.

"You're a real piece of work, Mr. Roberts," she told him.

"What's this?" Mona asked.

"They're hydrangeas Mona, your favorite."

"Oh, I love hydrangeas," Mona smiled.

"You are so bad," Judy whispered in his ear and then slapped his shoulder lovingly. "You shouldn't take advantage of my mother's condition."

"I'm a bad person," he said, and gave his wife a kiss.

Nate had finished stretching by the time Vic reached the parking lot. There wasn't much of the usual back-and-forth that morning, both kept quiet. Things were different today, McCluskey's presence made most on the Farm uneasy. By seven-thirty the prison was ready and waiting for the Milkers to get to work. Vic and Nate finished their preliminary rounds and walked over to the Coop.

"Any reason why you're walking 'round with a tray of breakfast?" Nate asked.

"Taking it to your man McCluskey," Vic answered.

"That might make the other Milkers jealous."

"It might," Vic answered. The two men approached the fifteen-foot fence that surrounded the Coop. Nate pulled his keys from his belt and opened the first fence, switched keys, and opened the second.

"Get off your dead asses," Nate hollered as he rapped on the door of the Coop's control room.

"Porter, Davis," Vic nodded to the guards. "Anything of note happen last night?"

"No sir," Davis, the oldest guard on the farm, tried to give Nate the finger without Vic seeing him.

"Well, we had a power surge," Porter added. He bit into an egg sandwich and ketchup squirted out onto his pants.

"A power surge?" Vic grabbed a hand full of napkins off the console and handed them to Porter.

"The lights flickered on and off," Porter said with a full mouth.

"He's been taking tech classes at the community college," Davis added.

"Fascinating," Vic said. "Did this surge cause any problems?"

"None," Davis said, "As far as we can tell."

Vic put the tray of food down and took his gun out of the holster. "Let me into McCluskey's cell first, and then take the Milkers to breakfast." He opened the desk drawer in front of Porter and dropped his gun inside.

"You got it, boss," Porter answered. He took a key from his belt and inserted it into the security panel. Porter turned the key and activated the locking mechanisms

on all of the inmates' doors. He then ran his finger down the panel until coming to cell 57, McCluskey's. "You're all set, boss. I'll buzz you in when you get down there."

"Thanks, boys," Vic nodded. Once he reached the door, Vic waved to the camera and Porter buzzed him in. McCluskey was sitting on his cot with his head in his hands. He looked up at Vic. McCluskey had a dead look around his eyes. He was paler than yesterday and damp with sweat. It seemed that a sober night of sleep didn't do him much good.

"Brought you some breakfast, Detective," Vic offered.

"Thanks." McCluskey straightened his posture. "Can't say that I'm hungry."

"Well, I suspect that will eventually change." Vic put the tray of food on top of the prison issued footlocker.

"I was drugged," McCluskey said. "The other night, when that woman died, when I crashed into her."

"My only concern is what effect you will have on my farm," Vic stated.

"Won't have any problems from me, hand to god." McCluskey raised his hand in the air. "I'm not a burn-out. I was set up."

"You weren't driving the car that killed Karen Kittner?"

"You're not listening, I was drugged."

"And who would drug you?"

"Alice's man."

"Bullshit." Vic had heard the name before. It was the name linked to many of the murders around the state. Every time a person of interest turned up missing or parts of a body were found, Alice's man was brought up. More of a ghost than a contract killer.

"I'm his drinking buddy," McCluskey replied. "That's my cover, or was until the other night. I've been working him for a year and half, drinking at the same bar as him. We bowl together, even went fishing with him once. But he caught on to me. The guy admitted he made hits for the mob to me and then dumped something in my drink."

"If you were such good buddies," Vic said, "why'd he want to kill you?"

"The guy kills people. It's not a big thing to him," McCluskey said. "He works at a nursery during the day and murders people for money on his time off. He's a fucking sociopath. Funny as hell though."

"Why haven't they picked him up?" Vic asked. "They'd have him on attempted murder, a cop no less. Plus, he admitted to being a contract killer. Weren't you wired?"

"We hollowed out a cell phone, put a flash drive, and mic inside it. They even set it up so it would ring every now and again. Couldn't make calls though, so I'd fake talking to my mother or girlfriend. It worked great. I'd throw it on the bar with my car keys and just yammer away with Alice's man. They didn't find the thing in the crash."

"And that's why they need you so bad?" Vic asked. "It's your testimony or nothing."

"My testimony's not worth much at this point."

"You shouldn't be here," Vic added.

"No argument here."

"I'm locking you down," Vic told McCluskey. "I'm told that someone from the AG's office will be coming to speak with you tomorrow. It's my hope that they will take you with them. Until then I'm confining you to your cell, a guard will bring your meals."

"Still think I want to run?"

"Yup."

Vic sat on the back porch of the guard's quarters sipping on a glass of lemonade and watching the planes land at Mercer County Airport. The hot evening was quickly losing light. A twin engine Cessna took off like a bullet from the runway. Vic figured it was getting less and less likely, with each passing day, that he was going to take flying lessons. However, the possibility of it still gave him some idle satisfaction.

The air-horn cycled up and every light on the farm came up. The alarm had gone off before, many times in fact, but it was usually for a drill or maybe an animal had wandered off and tripped a motion sensor. Vic grabbed his gun belt and ran as fast as he could to the Coop. He caught sight of the open gate and ran harder. Vic could barely stop his forward momentum and slammed into the Coop's entrance. Vic fumbled with the keys on his belt. Neither Porter nor Davis was at their post. Once inside Vic drew his gun for the first time in his career. Porter's keys were still dangling from the console. Vic hit the unlock button for the main door and left all the cell doors closed. Once in the cell block, Vic moved purposely down the hallway with his gun trained dead ahead. The alarm had riled the Milkers, they banged on their cell doors demanding to be let out. Davis and Porter had their faces pressed to the glass in McCluskey's cell. Vic caught sight of them then grabbed for his radio and ran back to the control room.

"McCluskey has escaped," he said into the walkie. "Everyone is on this, copy?"

Vic slammed his hand on the button that unlocked Porter and Davis then took off out the door. Once in the cow pasture Vic stopped. He thought about McCluskey, he thought about the farm, and what was just beyond its borders. There was the airport, there were the neighborhoods, and then there was the highway. Vic sprinted for the last option.

"Captain," Davis voice called over the radio.

"What the hell happened back there?" Vic asked.

"I'm sorry, boss," Davis said. "I forgot to check my gun in the control room. When I leaned over to put his food down on his foot locker, he jumped me. He said he'd kill me if Porter didn't let him out."

"He's got your gun?" Vic faded from his sprint. "Shit."

"And my car keys," Davis added. Vic stopped dead in his tracks and turned to the parking lot where he saw Davis' beat-up Cutless creeping toward the exit with its lights off. Vic took a deep breath and broke into a sprint. He would be able to cut him off on the dirt road before the exit. The engine revved in the distance and

the sound of dirt and rocks getting kicked up by tires made Vic's heart race. He was focused on the fence dead ahead. If he were to put himself in between McCluskey and the exit he'd have to get over it in one smooth motion. Vic trained his eye on the post, planted his hand on it and jumped. Vic got caught up by the top wire and was sent crashing down to the gravel road. He got up as fast as he could and drew his weapon. McCluskey had the drop on him, all he had to do was keep his foot on the gas and Vic would be guaranteed great parking for the rest of his life.

The car skidded to a stop. A cloud of dusk engulfed Vic. Short of breath from the run, he took in a lung full of dirt and began to cough. Vic wiped the sweat from his eyes, his gun still trained ahead.

"Out of the car McCluskey," he yelled. Vic side-stepped his way to the driver's door. "Hands on the wheel. I will shoot you." He heard McCluskey saying something, but he couldn't make it out. He moved closer and got a look at the man.

"I'm sorry," McCluskey said, his voice muffled inside the car. "Tell the little girl that I'm sorry about her mother. I didn't mean it." McCluskey raised Davis' gun underneath his chin and pulled the trigger. Vic collapsed as if the bullet had gone through him. He could hear the sound of sirens closing in, the gun shot echoed in his mind. These were the sounds of a life circling the drain. Vic sat there dumbly and shook his head in disbelief.

"You all right boss?" Nate asked, out of breath. He extended his hand to Vic and helped him onto his feet. The first car, sirens blaring, stopped a foot from the Cutless. The officer stepped from the car, gun drawn.

"He's dead, officer," Vic said.

"You sure about that?" the officer asked.

"Have a look for yourself," Vic said.

"Nate," Vic said, not sounding much like himself, "you've got the scene, okay?"

"Sure, boss."

Vic made his way back to the office and sat down at his desk. He was still and quiet for a moment then opened up the top drawer. Vic pulled out McCluskey's cigarettes. Vic took out his gun, then his badge, and placed them on the desk next to the cigarettes. He absentmindedly patted himself down for a light, but gave up after realizing he stopped carrying one. There was a knock at the door, the officer who was first on the scene entered.

"Scuse me," the officer said, "Captain Roberts?"

"Sgt. Nate Johnston can help you with anything you need."

"I'm afraid I'll have to ask you a question or two." The officer moved into the room. He was a big man, about 6'4", gray clean-cut beard and when he took his hat in his hands revealed a shiny bald head. "For the report."

"How about tomorrow?" Vic said.

"I'm afraid this can't wait." The officer was now at Vic's desk, dropped his hat on the chair and stood. "Lots of people want to know what happened and they want to know yesterday."

"You got a light?" Vic asked. The officer nodded and pulled a Zippo out of his pants pocket.

"I like to smoke a pipe from time to time," the officer said.

"They got a nice smell to them."

"That's not what the wife says," the officer chuckled and handed Vic the Zippo. Vic picked the cigarettes off the desk and looked in the pack. He just about went white after looking inside. "You all right?"

"I guess he wasn't that much of a liar," Vic said.

"Whatcha got there?" the officer asked.

"Guess this is what all the fuss is about," Vic held up a rectangle of plastic, no bigger than a piece of gum. "A killer's confession on tape, or flash, or whatever you call it."

"Well," the officer said, "that's a neat little thing." He moved around the desk and leaned down next to Vic. "Amazing what they can do, these days."

Vic smiled as he held the flash drive between his thumb and index finger, happy that some good might come out of this mess. His hand shook a bit and a white hot pain screamed from between his shoulder blades. The flash drive fell to the ground. Vic went face first onto his desk.

The purposeful foot falls of Alice's man circled Vic. The killer stopped for a moment then kneeled down and picked up the device. Alice's man moved to Vic, just inches from his face. His hot exhales filled Vic's nose with the stink of week-old coffee and stale air. His beard brushed against Vic's face. Vic tried to speak, the metallic taste of blood filled his mouth. He nearly choked on it. Alice's man put his hands around the handle of the knife and wiggled it a bit. Vic's eyes went wide open with pain.

"You might bleed out," Alice's man put his lips against Vic's ear and whispered. "You might not." He pulled the knife out of Vic's back and walked out of the room. The last thing Vic heard before blacking out was the sound of his own blood drip dropping onto the floor.



# The Contemptuous Wife

I had dreamt of killing my husband for years. It was innocent at first. I would be chopping vegetables in the kitchen and notice the knife. I would think of red on silver and consider it. Wondering how it felt to press a blade into someone's flesh. Would it be like cutting chicken? Then I'd think, *No, too classic. This isn't the Bates Motel.*

There is a growing disparagement in the covenant of marriage, in which one spouse finds the other sitting across the dining table, wondering if the marriage was a mistake. It didn't come suddenly, but grew over time, my contempt for this man. The idiosyncrasies, which had defined our lives, had consumed me. The way he forgot to put the liner in the trash can after he had taken the trash out. How he left his wet towels on the floor. His inability to sort laundry. How he wears socks to bed. *Seriously, who does that?* How he laughs before telling a story, and then prefaces it with "Well, here's a funny story," as if the laugh weren't message enough. *What am I, an idiot?* And then, one evening, four winters into our marriage, I sat across from him while we ate dinner, my fork frozen mid-air as I watched small spittle burst from his open mouth as he chewed, and I found my contempt stronger than my love. That was how it all began—my inability to stop thinking of ways to kill him. I guess you could say it became a bit of a hobby.

I would be driving home from a movie and find myself to be the first car lined up at the intersection. The engine would be idle, he would be humming along to whatever was on the radio, and I would wonder if I punched the gas pedal at just the right time all the oncoming traffic would hit his side. But that wouldn't necessarily kill him, it would just bang him up a bit. I wanted to go all the way.

He was putting up the Christmas lights, and asked me to hold the ladder. Damn if it didn't take everything I had not to kick it out from underneath him. I almost did once. I gave it a nice nudge with the toe of my shoe to see how easy it would be.

"Be careful honey, I felt the ladder shake," he said. "Are you holding it?" He looked down at me, hands filled with strings of light. *Do it now*, I thought. But then, I wondered who would be around to take the lights back down after Christmas. I damn sure wasn't going to. I'd have to hire Jose, the neighborhood handyman. He creeped me out. I decided I needed him around after all, at least into the New Year.

## by taryn marie harbert

I smiled. Obedient. The good wife.

“Sorry, baby, I guess I wasn’t paying attention. I have it now.”

We would lie in bed at night and I would look up at the ceiling, listening to his heavy breathing, just thinking about it. Thinking of a million ways to end the man I shared a bed with. It wasn’t enough to be quick, it needed to hurt. But I wanted it to be simple and clean; I’m not the type of woman who likes to get her hands dirty. I don’t do dirty.

One day it came to me. Just like that. All the years I’d thought about it and one day I’m stirring the aioli sauce and my hand stops. *Light bulb.*

I set the table and poured the aioli sauce in patterns across the asparagus. First mine, I make a few necessary adjustments to the sauce, then his.

He unfolds his napkin, as he always does, and lays it across his lap. He smiles at me. Reaches his hand out to me for grace. He closes his eyes and thanks God for this food. I keep my eyes open, smiling.

“Amen,” I say.

“Amen!” he responds, grabbing his knife and fork and cutting into his meal. I do the same. Wondering how long this will take. A new episode of *Scandal* is on tonight and I don’t want to miss it.

“This is delicious, honey; did you try something new?” he asks. I am exuberant.

“Yes I did, actually. Creamy, isn’t it?” I ask, thinking to myself, *You fucking idiot, you have no idea. This is going to be great.*

My hands start to sweat. I’m nervous. I keep looking up at him, waiting for some kind of sign. Did I use enough? Soon I’m finding it hard to keep a grasp on my fork. It falls onto the plate in a loud clank. I feel my heart beat heavy and rapid in my chest. I can’t breathe. There is no air in the room.

“Honey, are you okay?” I see my husband rise from his chair and rush around the table.

Just as black spots begin to cloud my vision and I can feel myself falling I have just enough time to think, *Goddamn it. I can’t get anything right. I gave him the wrong plate.*



# *Sisterly Love: The Saga of Emma and Lizzie Borden*

by sheila gazlay

*Sisterly Love: The Saga of Emma and Lizzie Borden* by Jordon Bollinger is a well written book that is a blending of the events surrounding the deaths of Abby and Andrew Jackson Borden and the trial of Lizzie Borden and an examination of facts, theories, and hearsay, including an attempt to find a different yet plausible answer to the question of who killed Mr. and Mrs. Borden.

The book starts out with an almost spooky or spiritual feel to it as it begins with the musings of a long-deceased Lizzie Borden as she lies in her grave 85 years after death, hoping to be released from her grave which, she muses, must be Purgatory—in order to go either to Heaven or hell. She feels the only way to be sent on her way is a retelling of the story—not only of the murders but also the secret she kept.

Lizzie retells the story of finding her parents' dead bodies, her trial and captivity, and her growing wariness of a sister she learns to fear. She tells also of how she spends her days in captivity. It is during this time that Lizzie becomes wary of her sister Emma's changing moods and some of her actions such as always talking of the gossip around town, seemingly to dash any hopes Lizzie may have at ever being free again.

The author's premise is the belief—to this day held by some—that someone other than Lizzie committed the murders. Throughout the book, we watch Lizzie's reaction to the strange behavior of her sister Emma while Lizzie is in jail. Emma's behavior starts out just a bit mean spirited and in the end, after Lizzie's release, becomes obsessively overbearing and cruel.

Facts from the transcripts of Lizzie's two days of testimony are skillfully woven into the story and make it not just a good whodunit but also an intelligently reasoned look at what some people believe to be the truth—that someone other than Lizzie killed her parents and that it could have been any one of a number of people.



Bollinger further solidifies her book with the intelligent use of details taken directly from Lizzie's testimony about the washing of windows by the maid and discussion of which shutters were closed on the day of the murders, the fact that the home, which had previously been two houses, had adjoining rooms and a back staircase. She uses information that furthers the author's underlying contention that Lizzie was not the only one who may have had motive and means to commit the murders. The author also uses life events of Lizzie, both documented in court transcripts and those that have never been proven to not only add facts to the story as in the case of the testimony of Mr. Lubinsky, but also hearsay such as Lizzie's contention that Uncle John molested her and possibly her older sister to demonstrate that there were others who may have had motive and means to kill the couple.

The climax of the story surrounds Emma's moving out of the house the sisters shared after Lizzie's acquittal. Though there was never any reason stated by Emma or anyone else why Emma left the house on Maplecroft she shared with Lizzie after the murders, there has been speculation that Emma told Lizzie that she'd committed the murders and that Emma was advised by a priest to leave the house. There's also a theory that Lizzie confessed all to Emma and Emma could not continue to live there knowing Lizzie had committed the murders.

An interesting notion hinted at in the book is that Emma and Uncle John may have had feelings for each other and that, along with feelings that they were both being slighted by Andrew at various times, led them to devise the murder plot.

The core of the book takes the reader on Lizzie's journey of relief at being acquitted and free to live a normal life though she knows that an acquittal is not the same as being found innocent. Little by little, seeing the strange behavior of her sister and having that witnessing turn into fear and suspicion and, finally, resignation when she finds out the truth about what brings on that behavior—that Emma has not one, but two deep secrets.

Details of Lizzie's life while living with Emma at Maplecroft are fascinating. The author tells how she resigned herself to being shunned by the people of Fall River who knew her identity, even after she changed her name to Lisbeth. The book also gives entertaining accounts of her travels and interactions with famous actors and actresses of the day.

Details of what lead to the real life confrontation between the sisters, which is the climax of the story, and what led to Emma leaving Maplecroft, are based on speculation. There are no writings, etcetera, to back up claims such as that Emma left after speaking with Reverend Buck about Lizzie's homosexuality or after learning that Lizzie killed their parents.

It is the use of facts like this that make this book—which is really more of a “what if” instead of a “whodunit” a great read.

*My Sister's Keeper* is not only a riveting page turner but also sheds a new light on a murder case that still intrigues and invites speculation.

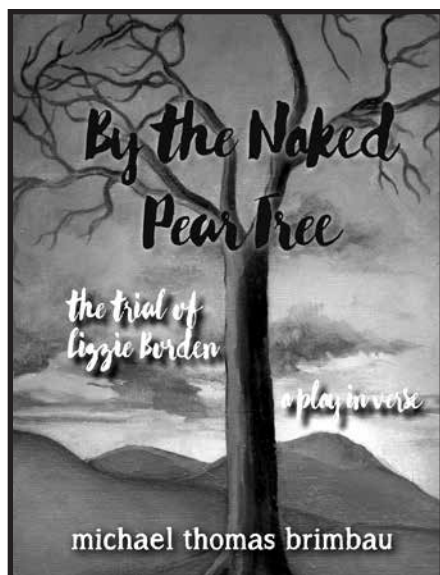


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# By the Naked Pear Tree

The trial of  
Lizzie Borden in verse

by Michael Thomas Brimbau  
\$12.00



*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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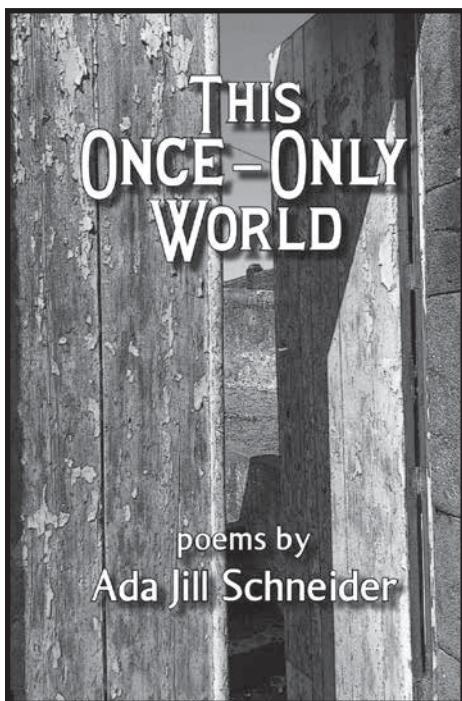
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# This Once-Only World

poems by Ada Jill Schneider



This *Once-Only World* is a collection of personal, yet universal, poems that dance on every page with gratitude and poignancy: poems that celebrate long love and reflect on family; poems that appreciate the world and plead for justice; poems that know what lies ahead for someone turning eighty but who insists, like Edna St. Vincent Millay, "I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned."

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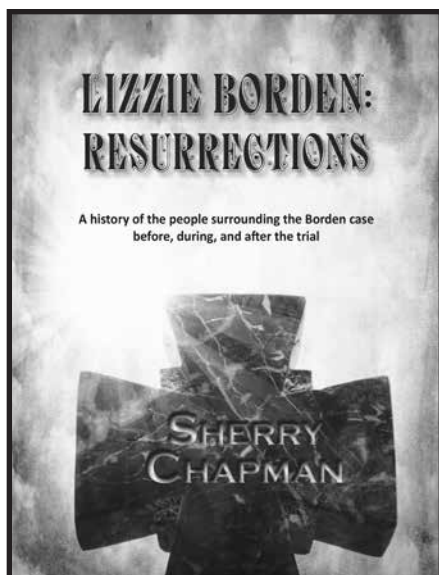
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# Lizzie Borden: Resurrections

A history of the people  
surrounding the  
Borden case before,  
during, and after the  
trial

by Sherry Chapman

\$21.95



Whatever happened to Lizzie Borden after the trial that accused her of bludgeoning her father and stepmother with a hatchet in 1892 Fall River, Massachusetts? It's all in here, and it doesn't stop with Lizzie. A plethora of persons were involved around her in some way. From her friends to her foes, from the doctors to the policemen; from her Manse to The Nance, at last comes the first book of its kind that tells what caused Officer Philip Harrington (who greatly disliked Lizzie) to die suddenly in 1893. What happened to neighbor and friend Dr. Bowen after the crime and trial? Why doesn't Edwin Porter, who covered the trial then wrote the first contemporary book on the murders, *The Fall River Tragedy*, have a gravestone – and who is buried with him? Not by him. Actually with him.

From original source documents, photos of the graves, obituaries and death certificates each on whom records could be found has their story told in details unknown until now. What were they doing before anyone much had heard of Lizzie Borden? What was their role in the case? When did they die and how?

Some of the results may surprise you, whether you read this book for pleasure or research. There are no legends here, but a factual telling of the stories of these persons who are today all gone but need not be forgotten. And with this book they may be hard to forget.

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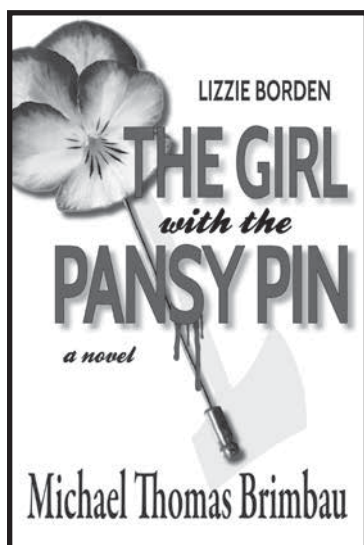
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# Lizzie Borden: The Girl with the Pansy Pin

a novel by Michael Thomas Brimbau



Lizzie Borden and her sister Emma lived a life of privilege and entitlement, with wealth and social status far greater than their neighbors. But it was not enough. In time, Lizzie and Emma grew restless, aching for a more opulent life—to reside on the Hill in a big house amongst their peers and Fall River's finest families.

But Father's riches were window dressing, dangling just beyond their reach—quarantined by a frugal patriarch who was unable or unwilling to change his scrimping ways. Andrew Jackson Borden had no intention of moving to the Hill and abandoning the home he had purchased for his second wife, or spending the money he had worked so hard for all his life. Now he

was planning to give it all away—to his wife, their stepmother.

In time, discord in the family began to ferment and fester—and there were signs that things were not as they should be.

On a sultry August morning, in the naked light of day, someone entered 92 Second Street and brutally hacked and murdered Andrew and Abby Borden. Soon the finger of guilt pointed to Lizzie. But she loved her father. He meant everything to her. The gold ring she had lovingly given him and that he always wore said as much. She would never have harmed him. Or would she?

*The Girl with the Pansy Pin* tells the gripping story of a desirable and vivacious young Victorian woman desperately longing for adventure and a lavish life. Instead, she was condemned to waste away in a stale, modest existence, in a father's foregone reality, with little chance of ever discovering love, happiness, or fulfillment. Now they have charged poor Lizzie with double murder.

Available **NOW** through [createspace.com/4343650](http://createspace.com/4343650) \$22.95

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# Fall River Revisited

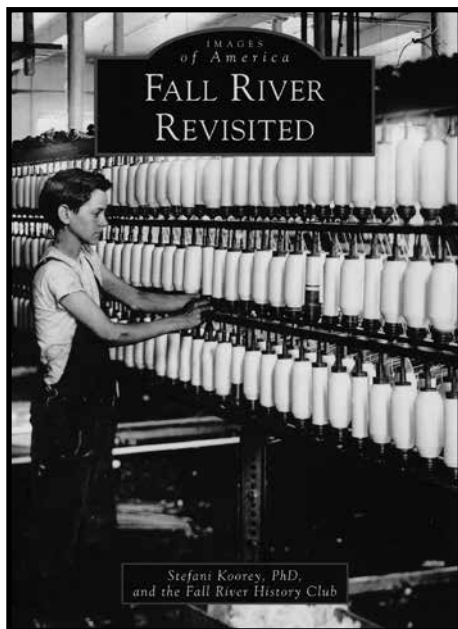
by Stefani Koorey and the  
Fall River History Club

Founded in 1803, Fall River changed its name the following year to Troy, after a resident visiting Troy, New York, enjoyed the city. In 1834, the name was officially changed back to Fall River.

The city's motto, "We'll Try," originates from the determination of its residents to rebuild the city following a devastating fire in 1843. The fire resulted in 20 acres in the center of the village being destroyed, including 196 buildings, and 1,334 people were displaced from their homes.

Once the capital of cotton textile manufacturing in the United States, by 1910, Fall River boasted 43 corporations, 222 mills, and 3.8 million spindles, producing two miles of cloth every minute of every working day in the year. The workforce was comprised of immigrants from Ireland, England, Scotland, Canada, the Azores, and, to a lesser extent, Poland, Italy, Greece, Russia, and Lebanon.

Available **NOW**  
\$22.00



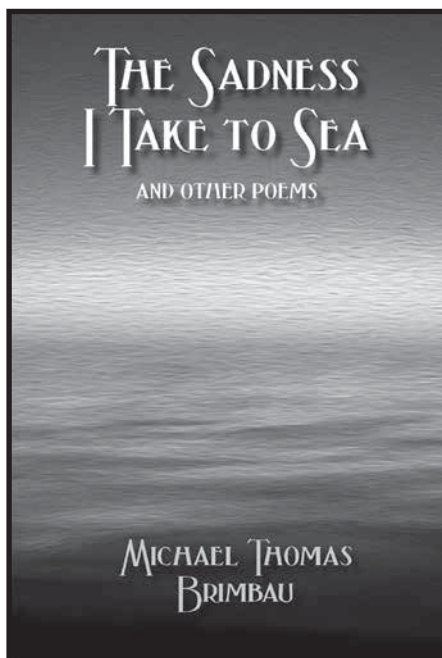


# The Sadness I Take to Sea and Other Poems

by Michael Thomas  
Brimbau

Putting pen to paper and allowing its ball tip to bleed and spill out is a good thing, and helps with the venting as well as needed healing. After all is said and done, following all the missteps and failings, to move on and search for lost love all over again is not only essential but the absolute specimen of a yearning and healthy soul—and the fundamental spirit conveyed in *The Sadness I Take to Sea*.

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# Do Come In and Other Lizzie Borden Poems

by Larry W. Allen

with a new Lizzie Borden  
sketch cover by Rick Geary,  
famed author and illustrator of  
*The Borden Tragedy*.

Lizzie Borden. For some, the name conjures an innocent young woman who bravely faced her trial with strength and fortitude. To others, she has become the icon of all things gruesome because of the bloody nature of the crimes for which she was charged. And yet others see Lizzie Borden as a woman who got away with murder.

These 50 poems trace the life of this enigmatic woman—from the 19th through the 20th century. We meet her as a young adult and watch her develop into an old woman living alone on “the Hill.”

*Do Come In* is a remarkable collection of poems entirely devoted to the Lizzie Borden story.

So *Do Come In*, and meet Lizzie Borden and other characters as diverse as Jack the Ripper, Bob and Charlie Ford, and Rachael Ray, in poems that range from humorous to horrific.

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# Lizzie Borden: Girl Detective

by Richard Behrens

Introducing Miss Lizzie Borden of Fall River, Massachusetts, a most excellent girl detective and the most remarkable young woman ever to take on the criminal underworld in late 19th century New England.

Many years before her infamous arrest and trial for the murders of her father and stepmother, Lizzie Borden pursued a career as a private consulting detective and wrestled unflinchingly with a crooked spiritualist, a corrupt and murderous textile tycoon, a secret society of anarchist assassins, rowdy and deadly sporting boys, a crazed and vengeful mutineer, an industrial saboteur, and a dangerously unhinged math professor—none of whom are exactly what they seem to be.

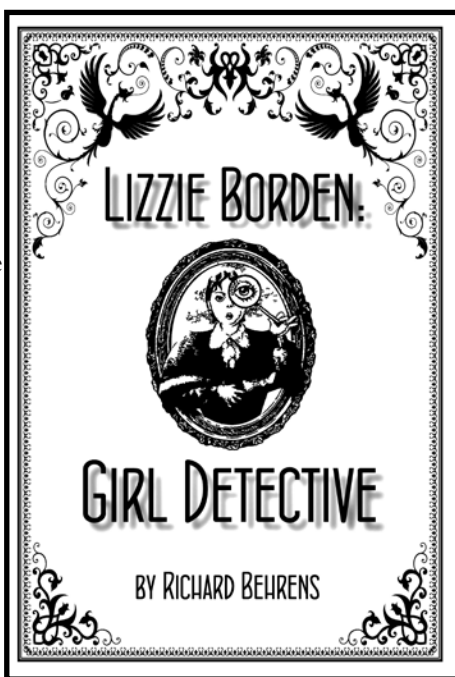
In these five early tales of mystery and adventure, Lizzie Borden is joined by her stubborn and stingy father Andrew; her jealous and weak-chinned sister Emma; her trusted companion Homer Thesinger the Boy Inventor; and the melancholy French scion Andre De Camp. Together, they explore Fall River's dark side through a landscape that is industrial, Victorian, and distinctly American.

You have met Lizzie Borden before—but never like this!

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# Contributors

**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](http://issuu.com/pearnoir/docs/revealing_moments). A short film has also been produced based on his short story, "Zen and the Art of House Painting." Wayne lives in Atlanta with his wife and can be contacted at [wvscheer@aol.com](mailto:wvscheer@aol.com).

**Jeremy Shane** has been published by *Pulp Modern* and *Dynatox Ministries* most recently.

**David Stevens** lives in Sydney, Australia, with his wife and children. His fiction has appeared, or will soon appear, in *Crossed Genres*, *Aurealis*, *Three-Lobed Burning Eye*, *Pseudopod*, *Cafe Irreal*, *Space & Time*, *Sci.Phi Journal*, some Australian literary magazines, and the anthologies *Love Hurts* and *At the Edge*. His short story, "My Life as a Lizard," received an honorable mention in the list of Best Short Fiction of the Year in *Clavis Aurea* in Apex.

**Rick McQuiston** is a forty-five-year-old father of two who loves anything horror-related. His work has appeared in over 300 publications. He has written three novels, six anthology books, one book of novellas, and edited an anthology of Michigan authors. Currently, he is hard at work on his fifth novel.

**Lana Bella** is a Pushcart nominee and has a diverse work of poetry and fiction published and forthcoming with over 130 journals, including a chapbook with Crisis Chronicles Press (spring 2016), *Ann Arbor Review*, *Chiron Review*, *Coe Review*, *Harbinger Asylum*, *Literary Orphans*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *QLRS* (Singapore), *Sein Und Werden* (UK), *White Rabbit* (Chile) and elsewhere, among others. Lana divides her time between the US and the coastal town of Nha Trang, Vietnam, where she is a wife of a talking-wonder novelist, and a mom of two far-too-clever frolicsome imps.

**Tracy Blake** is a 42-year-old student at Full Sail University. She currently is taking Creative Writing for Entertainment and the Fine Arts for her bachelor's degree. She is a mother of one, but a nanny of five. She has been published in *Down in the Dirt*.

**Bruce Boston** is the author of more than fifty books and chapbooks. His writing has appeared in hundreds of publications, and received the Bram Stoker Award, the Asimov's Readers Award, a Pushcart Prize and the Rhysling and Grandmaster Awards of the Science Fiction Poetry Association.

**Fabiyaas MV** is a writer from Orumanayur village in Kerala, India. He is the author of *Moonlight and Solitude*. His fiction and poems have appeared in *Westerly*, *Forward Poetry*, *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](https://www.facebook.com/poetrymanusa).

**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.

**Julie Campbell** is a teacher, musician, and writer. Finding fidelity to a single genre nearly impossible, she writes poetry, prose, and song that range from speculative, to contemporary, to historical. She is currently working on her second novel.

**Shawn Chang** lives in Canada and is a Grade 10 student. He enjoys writing poems, some of which have appeared in print.

**Tonalea Chapman** has written hundreds of stories and poems and has been published in fiction and nonfiction magazines. She has a BA in Liberal Arts and a Masters in Education.

**Steve Coate** writes and lives in sunny South Florida, where he struggles daily for dominion of the keyboard with his possessive tabby, Bigby. His short fiction also has appeared in "Coven: Masterful Tales of Fantasy," "Third Flatiron Anthologies" and "Bards and Sages Quarterly," among other publications. When not writing about fantastic space battles or caffeine-addicted elves, Steve works as a copy editor for the *Sun Sentinel* in Fort Lauderdale. For a full bibliography, visit [coaterack.blogspot.com](http://coaterack.blogspot.com). Follow Steve on Twitter @stevecoate for updates on his fiction. Readers can also drop him a line at [stevecoate11@gmail.com](mailto:stevecoate11@gmail.com).

**Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois** has had over a thousand of his poems and fictions appear in literary magazines in the US and abroad. He has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, The Best of the Net, and Queen's Ferry Press's Best Small Fictions for work published in 2011 through 2015. His novel, *Two-Headed Dog*, based on his work as a clinical psychologist in a state hospital, is available for Kindle and Nook or as a print edition. He lives in Denver.

**Janne Karlsson** is an artist from Sweden whose bizarre work is widely spread around the world. His books are available on Amazon or through his website [www.svenskapache.se](http://www.svenskapache.se)

**Joshua Dobson** likes to make his own fun, some of which can be seen at [joshuadobson.deviantart.com](http://joshuadobson.deviantart.com).

**S.L. Dixon**, former homeless hitchhiker and high school dropout, grew up in Ontario, Canada and his short stories have appeared in magazines, digests, literary journals and anthologies from around the world. He's married, has a cat and currently resides in a small coastal community in British Columbia, Canada. [sldixon.ca](http://sldixon.ca)

**Holly Day** has taught writing classes at the Loft Literary Center in Minnesota, since 2000. Her published books include *Music Theory for Dummies*, *Music Composition for Dummies*, *Guitar All-in-One for Dummies*, *Piano All-in-One for Dummies*, *Walking Twin Cities*, *Insider's Guide to the Twin Cities*, *Northeast Minneapolis: A History*, and *The Book Of*, while her poetry has recently appeared in *Oyez Review*, *SLAB*, and *Gargoyle*. Her newest poetry book, *Ugly Girl*, just came out from Shoe Music Press.

**Benjamin Cooper:** Amongst the long boxes of his comic book collection, aquariums, Union Civil War reenactment gear, and concert posters, published author Benjamin Cooper concocts his fantastic works of fiction. Having studied creative writing at the University of Iowa, he now aims to expose his creative mind to the world through the written word. Visit his website at [www.MindofBenjaminCooper.com](http://www.MindofBenjaminCooper.com)

**Bruce Costello** lives in the seaside village of Hampden, New Zealand. After studying foreign languages and literature in the late sixties at the University of Canterbury, he spent a few years selling used cars. Then he worked as a radio creative writer for fourteen years, before training in psychoanalytically-oriented psychotherapy and spending 24 years in private practice. In 2010, he semi-retired and took up writing. Since then, he's had over eighty stories accepted by mainstream magazines and literary journals in seven countries.

**Arthur Davis** says he has been fortunate to have found an audience in online and print journals including: *The Missing Slate*, *The Colored Lens*, *Crack the Spine* (Anthology), *Eunoia*, *Menacing Hedge*, *Front Porch Review* and *Black Fox Literary Magazine*. His "Conversation In Black" was nominated for the 2015 Pushcart Prize.

**Eugene Hosey** holds an MFA from Georgia State University. He has written articles, film and book reviews for *The Hatchet: A Journal of Lizzie Borden & Victorian Studies*. Also he has done editorial work for research documents, books, and personal journals. But he is primarily a short story writer, a regular contributor to *The Literary Hatchet*, and a fiction editor.

**C.R. Dobson** resides in Michigan.

**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.

**Shane Fraser** has had pieces published in several online and print forums—this includes a Canadian newspaper, which has hosted a weekly column of his for five years. The majority of his publications have been nonfiction, though he has had fiction published in *Beyond Imagination Literary Magazine* and previously in *The Literary Hatchet*.

**Sheila Gazlay** is a writer and virtual assistant living in the Pacific Northwest and has been published both on and off line.

**Sara Tantlinger** is pursuing her MFA through Seton Hill University's Writing Popular Fiction program. She enjoys writing horror poetry and can be found at odd hours of the night drinking tea and writing strange things. Find her on Twitter at @SaraJane524

**Ken Allan Dronsfield** is a published poet and author. Originally from Hampton New Hampshire, he now resides in Oklahoma. He has only recently been submitting his poems for official publication. Some of his published work can be viewed at: [thepoetcommunity.com](http://thepoetcommunity.com).

**David Greske** is the author of five novels and numerous short stories. Three of these stories: "Cookies From Mother," "Giggles," and "Adrianna 21" have appeared in *The Literary Hatchet* Issues 9 and 10. This summer his chapbook, *A Fistful of Zombies*, will be released as an audiobook from In Ear Entertainment. He lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and is currently working on his next novel, *The Whistlestop Witch*. His novels are available on Amazon.

**Evan Gorzeman** is a writer from Long Beach, California. After graduating from Loyola Marymount University with a B.A. in English and Political Science, he wandered the wasteland of Southern California eating Thai food and looking for stray cats. He has previously published works in the *Literary Hatchet*, *Criterion*, and *LA Miscellany*. His play, "The Sack Sisters" was performed in Los Angeles.

**Mark Thomas** is an English and Philosophy teacher (and rowing coach) from Beamsville, Ontario.

**Taryn Marie Harbert** is a technical writer and marketer for a consultancy firm with a true love for writing short story and novel fiction. Her favorite writers include Joan Didion, Kurt Vonnegut, Carson McCullers, and Stephen King.

**Jeff Haas** is a professionally published poet and short story writer who also teaches creative writing at Emory University.

**Jill Hand** has been published in several anthologies. Recently her work has appeared in *Aurora Wolf*, *Dark Gothic Resurrected*, *Heater*, *Nebula Rift*, and *Under the Bed*, among others.

**Samira Hibbler** is a new writer who lives in Georgia.

**Denny E. Marshall** has had art, poetry, and fiction published. One recent credit is interior art in *Bards And Sages*, January 2016. See more at dennymarshall.com.

**Sasha Kasoff's** poetry can be found in two self-published books and many anthologies, magazines, and other literary presses all over the world. She is currently earning her MA in Creative Writing at Oxford Brookes University in England. Look for her author pages on Goodreads and Facebook.

**A.W. McKinnon** dwells in a well lighted place where monsters fear to tread. All other visitors are welcome to his place. No reason to be afraid...honest.

**Joseph Rubas** has been featured in a number of 'zines and hardcopy publications, including: *[Nameless]*; *The Horror Zine*; *The Storyteller*; *Thuglit*; *All Due Respect*, and others.

**Deborah Guzzi** is a healing facilitator who uses energetic touch and the written word to assist in fostering wellbeing. She has written three books. *The Hurricane* published in 2015 is available through Prolific Press, Amazon, and other venues. Her poetry appears in University Journals & Literary Reviews in Canada, Australia, Hong Kong, Singapore, New Zealand, Greece, India and the USA.

**Alexander Leger-Small's** work can be found in *Mirror Dance* (Summer 2015) and *Beyond Science Fiction* Issue #9.

**Mary King** has read many things and written a few. Her favorite writers include Shirley Jackson, P.G. Wodehouse, and Ray Bradbury.

**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.



**Alan Meyrowitz** retired in 2005 after a career in computer research. His poetry has appeared in *California Quarterly*, *Eclectica*, *Existere*, *Front Range Review*, *The Literary Hatchet*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Shroud*, *The Storyteller*, and others. In 2013 and 2015 the Science Fiction Poetry Association nominated his poems for a Dwarf Star Award.

**Douglas J. Ogurek** is a dink. Though it has been banned on Mars, his fiction appears in *Bards and Sages Quarterly*, *Blood Moon Rising*, *BFS Horizons*, *British Fantasy Society Journal*, *The Literary Review*, *Litro Magazine*, *Morpheus Tales*, *Perihelion Science Fiction*, *Schlock Magazine*, and several anthologies. Ogurek lives on Earth with the woman whose husband he is. They are owned by a pit bull named Phlegmpus Bilesnot. Ogurek also reviews films at *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction*. More at [douglasjogurek.weebly.com](http://douglasjogurek.weebly.com).

**Molly Richard** resides in New Hampshire.

**Pat Tyrer** is a Professor of English at West Texas A&M University where she teaches Creative Writing, Film Studies, and American Literature. She writes and publishes poetry, essays, and short fiction. She recently completed a monograph on Evelyn Scott, an American Modernist and is working on a second novel about an English teacher in West Texas.

**Dennis Mombauer**, born 1984, grew up along the Rhine and today lives and works in Cologne. He writes short stories and novels in German and English and is co-publisher and editor of a German magazine for experimental fiction, "Die Novelle – Zeitschrift für Experimentelles" (<http://dienovelle.blogspot.de/>). Current or upcoming English publications in *Plasma Frequency*, *Geminid Press' Night Lights* anthology, *Third Flatiron's Ain't Superstitious* and *Heroic Fantasy Quarterly*.

**M.E. Purfield** has had fiction featured in *Ruthless Peoples* and *Broken Pencil*. He is also the author of *Party Girl Crashes the Rapture* and the Miki Radicci noir fantasy series. You can find him at [mepurfield.com](http://mepurfield.com).

**Brandon Nolta** is a freelance writer and editor who has appeared in *Stupefying Stories*, *Digital Science Fiction*, *The Pedestal Magazine* and a number of other publications; his first novel, *Iron and Smoke*, was recently published by Montag Press, and his story "Elegy for a Mountain" will appear in the forthcoming anthology *Selfies from the End of the World*.

**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>.

**Allan Rozinski** is a writer of fiction and poetry who currently resides in central Pennsylvania. He has had poetry and stories published or forthcoming in *Heater* magazine, *Twilight Times* magazine and the anthology *Muffled Screams I: Corner of the Eye*.

**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.

**C.M. Saunders** is a proud Welshman who began writing in 1997. His early fiction appeared in several small-press titles. Following the publication of his first book, *Into the Dragon's Lair – A Supernatural History of Wales* (2003), he worked extensively in the freelance market, contributing to over 50 international publications. In addition he has authored a succession of novellas and had over thirty short stories published in various magazines, ezines and anthologies. He taught English and creative writing in China for five years before settling in London where he works as a writer and editor in the sport, fitness and men's lifestyle sectors. He is represented by Media Bitch literary agency, and his latest book is called *Sker House*.

**Cody Schroeder** resides in Missouri.

**Aaron Polson** currently lives in Lawrence, Kansas, with his wife and six children. He's now at full sitcom. His short fiction has appeared in *Shock Totem*, *Shimmer*, *Bourbon Penn*, and under several unsavory rocks. Rumor has it he prefers ketchup with his beans.

**Jenny Santellano** is a poet who uses her pen as a potion for sanity. One of her poems was previously published in *The Literary Hatchet* #13 under the pen name Aletheia Adams. Her other poetry has been published in various anthologies and e-zines.

**Richard Schnap** is a poet, songwriter and collagist living in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His poems have most recently appeared locally, nationally and overseas in a variety of print and online publications.

**Kimba Rose Williams** currently studies Creative Writing in Orlando, Florida. She has dreamed of being an author since kindergarten, and has aspirations of being a screenwriter and filmmaker. She adores all things Sherlock, has explored Middle Earth, and has been published in *Down in the Dirt* magazine.

**Stanford Allen** is an author living in Greater London.



**Peter W.J. Hayes** has been shortlisted for the Crime Writers Association Debut Dagger Award and won the Pennwriters Novel Beginnings contest. In 2015, his short stories were published in *Shotgun Honey*, *Yellow Mama* and won the pennwriters short story contest.

**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*.

**Christopher Waltz** lives in Indianapolis, Indiana where he works as a middle school English teacher and writer. He has exclusively self-published his writing, but is hoping to make the transition into traditional and online publishing.

**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](http://www.MichaelSeese.com) or follow @MSeeseTweets to laugh with him or at him.

**Lee Clark Zumpe** is an entertainment columnist with Tampa Bay newspapers and earned his bachelor's in English at the University of South Florida. His nights are consumed with the invocation of ancient nightmares, dutifully bound in fiction and poetry. His work has been seen in magazines such as *Weird Tales* and *Space and Time*, and in anthologies such as *Corpse Blossoms*, *Steampunk Cthulhu* and *World War Cthulhu*. Lee lives on the west coast of Florida with his wife and daughter. Visit [www.leeclarkzumpe.com](http://www.leeclarkzumpe.com).

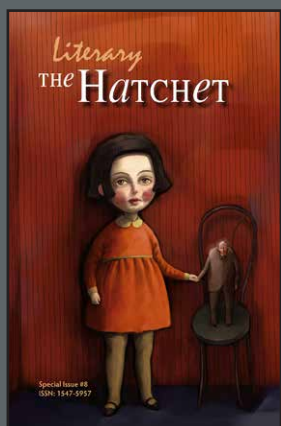
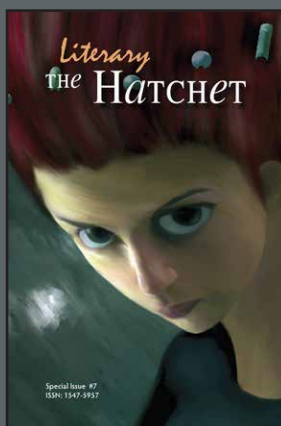
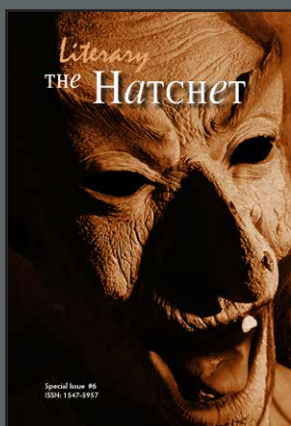
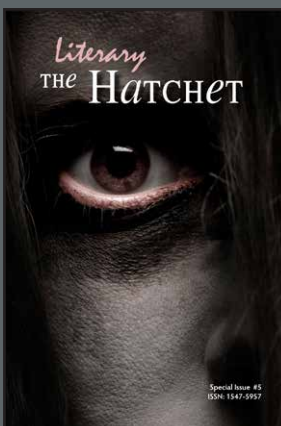
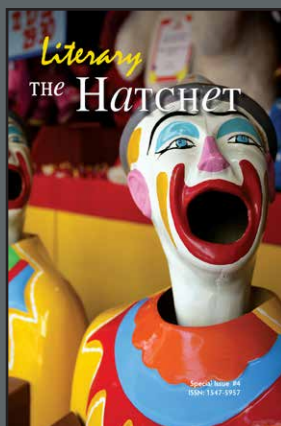
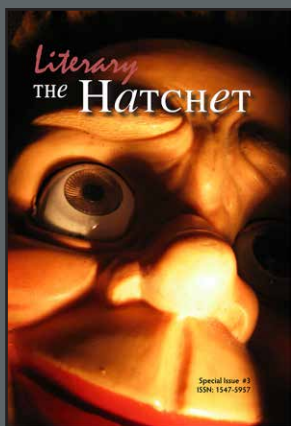
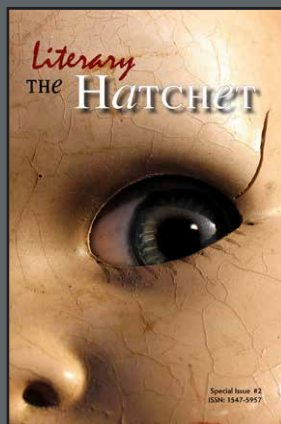
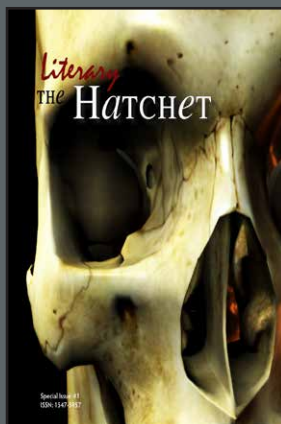
**Tim Waldron** is currently an online fiction editor of *The Literary Review*. His short-story collection *World Takes* is published by Word Riot Press. His fiction has appeared in *Bull Magazine*, *The Literary Review*, *The McNeese Review*, *The Serving House Book of Infidelity*, *Mud Luscious Press*, *Dogzplot*, *Necessary Fiction*, *Sententia*, *Monkeybicycle*, *The Atticus Review*, and *What's Your Exit?* He holds an MFA from Fairleigh Dickinson University.

**Gregory Palmerino's** essays and poems have been published in numerous print and online journals. Most recently, his work can be found in *The Road Not Taken*, *The Literary Hatchet* and *Autumn Sky Poetry Daily*. He writes poetry in Connecticut's Quiet Corner, where he lives with his wife and three children.

**Caleb Warner** was born and raised in the backwoods of Indiana, and the beautiful vistas and quiet solitude created the foundations for his interest in writing. Caleb primarily writes fiction with a focus on wilderness based horror stories and hunting narratives, though he does dabble in some dark poetry.

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