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You are reading issue #15, by the way. So if you haven't caught up on the other fourteen issues, you can do so at literaryhatchet.com.

If you read something you particularly like, or are moved by, or think is cool as hell, write us and we will pass along the compliment to the author. If you have a criticism of the magazine itself, write us, and we will take your thoughts under consideration and thank you for your input. All correspondence should be sent to peartreepress@mac.com.

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

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We really would love to read your work.

Stefani Koorey Editor and Publisher

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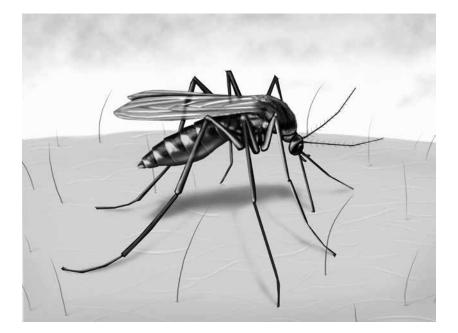
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THE GROCERY STORE

by rick mcquiston

Larry sat in his car. Sunshine streamed in through the windows, effectively heating the interior to an uncomfortable level. He couldn't turn on the A/C—the car would overheat.

Glancing at the clock on the radio he realized that Sally had been in the grocery store for nearly thirty minutes.

"Come on, already," he groaned. "I'm dying in here."

He contemplated calling his spendthrift wife, but decided not to. It would only delay her more, and that was definitely not what he wanted.

Forcing himself to look away from the clock, Larry pulled out his ever-present paperback novel. He always kept one handy, just in case he had time to kill.

He looked up from the pages when he heard the noise.

It sounded like shopping carts colliding—a metallic clanking that cut through the relative peace of a grocery store parking lot on a Sunday morning.

He saw two women, one who had been walking into the building and one who had been walking out of it, lying on the asphalt. Their carts were butted together. One was full of bags, the other empty.

Larry was about to see if they needed help but decided against it when a small group of people quickly gathered around the women. Several store employees rushed out of the building.

Then something odd happened. The employees—three teenage girls and two boys—helped only the woman with the empty cart. The other woman, the one who was leaving the store, was basically ignored. She simply got to her feet and left the scene with her cart, never once looking back. Larry watched as the employees then ushered the other woman into the store.

A sharp chill slid down his spine when he saw the expressions on their faces—cold, eager, and hungry.

In seconds the woman was inside the building. The crowd gradually dispersed, leaving Larry with the nagging memory of the looks on the employee's faces.

He turned to see the woman who had left the store open her car trunk and begin to unload her bags. He watched her with suspicion. He didn't know why but he couldn't help himself.

Did she know something?

The woman finished putting her bags in the trunk, pushed the cart away, and then straightened up. She closed her eyes and stood motionless for nearly a minute before shutting the trunk, all seemingly without emotion or thought.

Larry felt his gorge rise. He'd seen something that should not have been there. But it had been there.

A hand. He saw a hand. It was poking up from one of the grocery bags, its stubby, pale fingers curled in rigor mortis, its nails bent and cracked, droplets of blood dotting it from fingertips to palm.

The woman turned and got in her car without a glance at her surroundings and drove off.

Larry felt panic grip his body. He grabbed his cell phone and fumbled trying to call.

9-1-1. He had to report what he saw. Someone had been killed.

As he pushed the nine an incoming call came in.

It was Sally.

"Sally! You have to come out now! There's a woman—"

"Calm down, Larry. I'm coming out now. I just wanted to make sure I didn't forget anything."

"No, listen to me! The woman had a severed hand in her—"

The line went dead; Larry stared at his phone.

Sally literally sprinted out of the building. She pushed a shopping cart in front of her and wore an expression of indifference, like she didn't care that her husband was freaking out.

She shuffled up to the car, and before Larry could say anything, popped open the trunk and began tossing her bags inside. Then she slammed the lid shut, scuffled around the car, and flung herself in the passenger seat.

"Let's go," she commanded.

Larry was lost for words. He tried to understand his wife but couldn't. He'd seen something frightening, and she was acting as if nothing unusual had happened and nothing was wrong.

"Sally! You have to listen to me!"

The look his wife gave him froze the blood in his veins.

"I said...let's...go," she repeated.

Before Larry could react—a tentacle, a pale-blue tentacle glistening with slime

shot out of Sally's mouth and wrapped itself around his neck. It twisted with the strength of a python, efficiently cutting off the airway until Larry slumped forward, his head coming to rest on the steering wheel.

Sally stared at her husband. She pulled his head back and withdrew the tentacle from around his neck. Glancing around to make sure no one was watching, she then inserted it into his mouth, the bulbous tip nudging past his lips and slithering down his throat.

She watched as the tendril pulsed. A syrupy, blue fluid coursed through it and into Larry. A low hum filled the interior of the car.

Again she looked to see if anyone was watching.

Satisfied no one was seeing it happen, she leaned back in her seat and waited.

Larry's eyes popped open and the tentacle immediately withdrew from his mouth, leaving a trail of goo across his chin. He looked over at Sally, and she back at him. Together they stepped out of the car and made their way to the trunk.

"Open it," Larry said in a monotone voice.

Sally popped open the trunk.

Larry reached inside and opened one of the grocery bags. He lifted the item inside, exposing the severed head to the warm Sunday morning before slipping it back into the bag.

"It should supply us with adequate sustenance for several days," Sally said in the same monotone voice as Larry.

"Good," Larry replied as he closed the trunk. "We'll need the energy. I'm sure others will contact us shortly, and then our recruitment duties will begin." A fly landed on his chin and crawled across the trickle of ooze. It promptly stiffened and fell to the ground.

"Yes," Sally said quietly. "The recruitment is essential. We will be ready."

The couple then casually got back into the car and drove off.

The man finished stacking the boxes and stood back to admire his work. Being an employee in the grocery store, he was among the first to be assimilated into the grand scheme of things.

He noticed blood leaking out of the boxes, but paid it no heed. It was unavoidable when dealing with body parts.

He walked over to the loading dock door and slid the latch-bolt to the side.

The door squeaked as it opened.

In the alley, nestled between pallets and trash cans, was a metallic object the size of a large coffee table. Ribbed with ornate carvings, the craft was weathered from its 775,000,000 light-year journey.

The man signaled for other employees in the loading dock to stop with their duties and come help him. Their masters within the ship wanted to be brought inside the building.

Two other young men shambled up to the craft, and together the three of them wrestled it from the crash site and into the loading dock. They set it down carefully, being ever mindful of the frailty (as well as the ferocity) of its occupants.

Finished with the task, all three men went back to their work.

As he continued stacking more boxes, the man felt sharp pressure grip his neck. He grasped the pale-blue tentacle but could not get it to release its hold on him. In seconds, he fell to the grimy floor, lifeless.

The tentacle slithered from the body and raised itself four feet off the ground, wavering like a cobra flexing its venomous capabilities.

The other employees, seeing their coworker dead, gazed at the hovering tentacle with wide, unblinking eyes. One of them stepped forward.

After a minute of motionless silence, the tentacle withdrew back into the craft.

The man turned toward the body of his coworker. He pulled out a box cutter from his pocket, and bending over the corpse, began to dismember it. His masters had selected another expendable minion for nourishment dispersal, and he needed to properly prepare the food for the customers in the grocery store.



[poetry]

welcome home

His faint silhouette, consumed by the shadows and shrouded in rags.

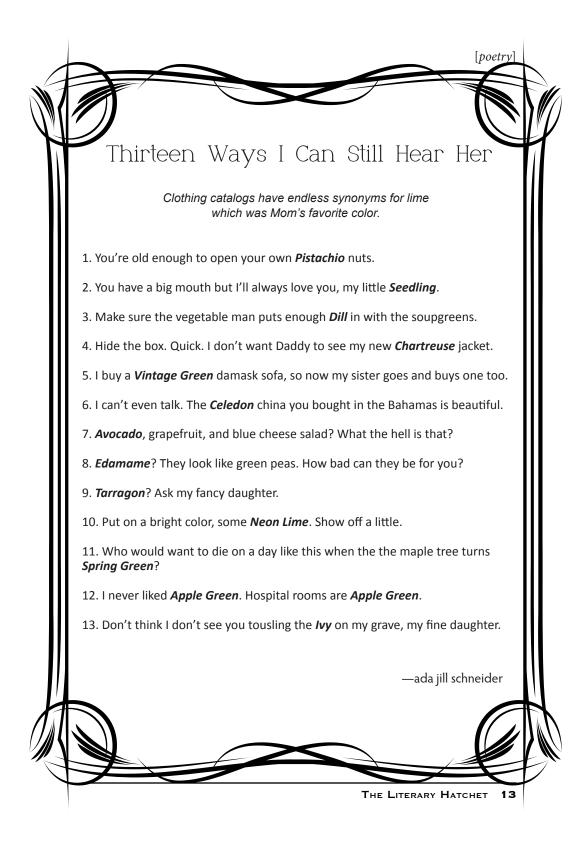
The delicate fragrance of sewage and pheromones wafting through the night.

Upon a bed of newspaper and leaves he builds his evening nest.

Drifted gently to sleep with the whispering murmur of ambient sirens and harmonious screams.

Welcome home.

-c.m. werner







Indialand

by barry price

I had just finished auditioning for *Hamlet* at the DC/AC Arts Center Theater in Adams Morgan, (a popular Greenwich Village-style ethnic neighborhood in Washington, DC), and I was just wandering around the second-floor art show, letting the accumulated pressure from the audition bleed off like steam from an overloaded nuclear reactor.

The title of the exhibition was "Laser-Cut Greeting Cards from the Ort Cloud," and it was, to put it mildly, out there like fucking Pluto.

There's nothing new about laser-cut greeting cards, of course; they've been around for decades. But these "greeting cards" were distinguished, first of all, by their grotesque *size*. Every one of them was at least eight feet high and ten feet wide, and there were only five of them in the display because they couldn't fit any more into the space. They were arranged around the wavy plank floor in a circle, standing on their edges in landscape format; much like one might set up a group of Christmas cards on a table.

But the really astonishing thing about the giant cards was that you could *walk right into them*, like some kind of life-size diorama. More, the public was invited to step into the cards and *stroll around*.

Well, I thought, I'm not in a big hurry here...maybe I'll give one of these babies a peek. I checked my watch. Right...plenty of time for a quick look-see.

I glanced around the room, and the card that beckoned to me most strongly was the largest in the exhibition. It was titled, *Indialand*," and it was by far and away the most extravagantly ornate card in the exhibition. It stood right in the middle of the floor in a pool of bright, afternoon sunlight, its border illuminated with vividly painted images of Hindu gods and scenes from the Bhagavad Gita.

I stepped a little closer and peered into the thing. The vast depth and detail of the interior images were astonishing. It was as if I were looking into a huge, intricately detailed 3-D photograph of a large city in India. I lifted my view into the distance, and the crowded detail of the picture never diminished or grew indistinct, as might be expected in even the most ingenious matte painting or diorama. My strong impression was that I was looking through a clear window into the actual city itself.

And then I noticed that the people and animals in the picture were actually moving around. I was stunned. I had never seen anything like this before. It had to be some kind of computer generated hologram, and a profoundly skilled piece of work.

Finally, unable to contain my curiosity, I stepped across the threshold and into the card itself.

And suddenly...I was *there*, right in the middle of this vast, sprawling Indian megalopolis; awash in all the noise, crowds, and smells of the place.

The city that lay before me, which I later learned was the Holy City of Varanasi, stretched to the horizon and beyond. It was high noon, with the sun blazing down from a clear blue sky and the humidity nearly annihilating. Countless multitudes of people—more human beings than I've ever seen in my life—churned and whirled around me in a babbling maelstrom of sweaty bodies.

Still a little disoriented by the abrupt transition from downtown D.C. to an alien civilization on the other side of the world, I decided to fall in with the throngs moving downhill toward the Ganges River.

We ended up on the *ghats*, (stone stairways at the river's edge), where great crowds of people were busy intoning prayers, rattling tin instruments, meditating, burning incense, consulting gurus, burning dead bodies, and bathing in the holy river Ganga, (as the Indians name it).

After a short time wandering through the mobs at the water's edge, the blinking glare from the river, the stifling reek of incense, and the incessant clangor of cheap tin noisemakers were giving me a headache, so I turned away from the uproar on the stairs and pushed my way back up to the main street.

The first thing I saw when I got to top of the slope was a gigantic red stone pyramid rising in the distance, about a mile away. Immediately drawn to see this pyramid up close, I started walking. After going a hundred yards or so, I began to notice a deep, subterranean hammering sound beating up through the ground. As I continued along the road, the thumping got so loud and powerful that the street trembled under my feet, like an earthquake just beginning to roll. Small pebbles danced and clattered on the cobblestones, and bits of paint and plaster skittered down the sides of the surrounding buildings.

Finally, I reached the base of the great pyramid and looked up. The towering edifice was made of huge blocks of carefully dressed and fitted red sandstone; and at its summit, one hundred feet above, was a flat, open, circular courtyard about fifty yards in diameter. Standing at the far end of this courtyard was an elaborately carved and painted Hindu temple about fifty feet high, also constructed of dark red sandstone. The entire structure, pyramid and temple combined, rose to a height of one hundred fifty feet. The vast dimensions of the thing reminded me very much of the Aztec and Toltec pyramids of pre-Columbian Mexico, and especially the colossal Temple of the Sun at Teotihuacan.

I backed up a few paces to get a view of the summit, but the structure was too tall to gain a proper view. But it was clear the hammering that shook the ground under my feet was coming from the summit above, and I was determined to see what was making this noise. I scrambled up on a flight of stairs that ascended the pyramid and started climbing.

I was about twenty feet from the top when I halted to catch my breath. The stairs were steep, canted at a 60 degree angle, and my legs were shuddering with the strain of climbing. But in addition to the physical exhaustion, a dark intuition was growing in my mind that some terrible, inhuman *thing* was making this noise, and maybe I didn't want to see it after all. In a few minutes, though, curiosity overcame caution, and I pushed on to the top.

As I got close to the edge of the square, I was careful to stay out of sight, in case my suspicions proved true. I popped my head up for a split second to take a quick peek...and there it was, big as a house, hopping up and down in the middle of the big stone circle.

I ducked down and lay back against the stone steps, my mind reeling with shock and disbelief, certain that I had gone stark, staring mad. The thing I had just seen simply could not exist—not in any sane universe.

After a few minutes, I gathered my courage and crept up to take another look. I had to make sure I hadn't gone hopelessly insane or stumbled into some horribly distorted alternate reality. I rose up and looked again.

It was still there, alright; hopping up and down and shaking the pyramid right down to its foundations.

First off, it was big...*real* big. And not even vaguely human. The thing in the middle of the circle was about the size of a bull elephant, stood upright like a man, and appeared to be made of the same red stone as the pyramid. It had one head, with three faces equally spaced around its circumference - one black, one white, and one red. It had three arms and three legs, also equally spaced around its girth, and it held two of its legs up directly against its torso with two of its arms while it danced up and down on the remaining leg, rotating endlessly round and round like some lunatic, one-legged merry-go-round. It was vividly painted in the gaudy Hindu spectrum of primary colors, and it must've weighed twenty tons, given the terrific pounding it was delivering to the stone circle.

Worst of all, this impossible *thing* dancing directly in front of me just a few dozen feet away was hideously, terrifyingly *alive*. And aware. I could feel its powerful, inhuman mind ranging hither and yon, reaching out to find an accessible consciousness. I ducked down out of sight, but it was too late. The thing's terrible, glittering eyes had spotted me. I was *caught*.

I turned to run headlong down the stairway when I felt my mind roll open and release, like the tumblers of a lock falling into place, allowing a secret door in my subconscious to swing open. And as this door opened, I felt that godawful *thing* staring into my innermost thoughts.

There was no point trying to escape its notice now, so I stood up and looked directly at it, reaching out with my mind to directly engage the strange being. And I asked it a simple question:

"What in the hell are you?"

There was a pause as the thing continued to thump up and down like a twentyton pogo-stick. And then it spoke; not with a corporeal voice, but directly into my mind:

"I'm dancing your world into being. Now go out and conquer it."

And that was it. The stone colossus continued to hop up and down, offering no further comment or clarification. I made a few more attempts to communicate with it, but to no avail. It had answered my question and moved on. Transmission concluded.

I turned and stumbled back down the stairway, my mind spinning from the bizarre encounter with the monster. Once I got to the bottom, I sat down and sagged against the base of the great pyramid, sweating and palsied with exhaustion.

After about an hour, the crowd noises and the stifling heat brought me back to reality. I stood up and glanced around. The crowds of people continued to swirl past on the road, and the heavy concussions kept on unabated, shaking the ground under my feet.

Well, I thought, might as well keep moving; maybe somebody around here can tell me what the hell I just saw. I walked back up to the main road and joined the crowds moving northwards along the line of the river.

After a mile or so the land began to slope upwards, and the level of the road rose gradually to a terraced cliff projecting out over a wide green valley. A humid breeze swept over the precipice, wafting the grass along in slow, undulating waves. I stepped up to the edge and took in the view.

The valley below was shaped like the head of a spear, a mile wide and five miles long, oriented northwards along the line of the river. Filling this valley from end to end was a great multitude, hundreds of thousands strong; all swathed in black cloaks and mantles that fluttered and snapped in the breeze. And they were all silent...waiting for something.

A few seconds passed, and then a gigantic shout rose up from the host in the valley, terrible in its passion and power.

They continued to shout and cheer, over and over again. I looked around to see who, or what, was inspiring this uproar. It was then that I noticed that the people around me had backed away, leaving me alone at the precipice.

I turned again to face the host in the valley, and another great cheer went up. Then it dawned on me, finally, that it was *me* they were cheering; I was the object of their wild adulation.

I backed away from the cliff and turned to flee, but flight was impossible; the crowd behind me had moved up, and in a matter of seconds I was surrounded

by a wildly cheering mob, marching around me and waving their arms in the air, working themselves into an hysterical frenzy. I began to fear for my life.

But they were careful to keep at least ten feet back, in spite of hundreds of bodies pressing up from behind to get a better look. Then, all at once, they fell to their knees and began kowtowing and chanting obeisances.

Now I was getting really scared. I had no goddamned idea why they were doing this—the crowd in the valley and the crowd surrounding me—they were all praying and groveling before me like I was some kind of freaking Hindu god.

I looked around for a path of escape, but I was completely surrounded. Just then a delegation of three black-cloaked men from the valley stepped up onto the plateau and moved toward me.

The man in the middle of the group was carrying a black mantle across his outstretched arms in a gesture of offering. The crowd quietly parted to let them through. The three men stopped in front of me and stood silently for a long moment. Then the man holding the mantle spoke:

"You have seen and spoken to Nataraj, the Lord of the Dance at the Great Pyramid. That is a sign that you are to be our guru and leader. Please take this mantle and put it on, and then come with us to the cliff and show yourself to the host in the valley. That will be the sign that you have accepted this position and have consented to be our leader and guru."

What the hell was I gonna do with that? I didn't even know exactly what that monster cavorting on the pyramid was, besides being Nataraj, the Lord of the Dance, as I had just learned; and I sure as hell wasn't going to be the guru or 'Great Leader' of people I knew nothing about. They might be terrorists, lunatics, drug suckers...who knew? I had a sudden, grim recollection of a cult in India known as the "Thuggees," a maniacal sect of cruel assassins and devotees of the bloody and obscene goddess Kali, who demanded the endless slaughter of innocents dispatched with the garrote, the favored murder weapon of the Thuggees. These people in the valley could be of that persuasion. There was no way to know. And I wasn't thrilled with the idea of being answerable to that abortive monstrosity hopping up and down on the pyramid, either.

On top of all those hideous possibilities, the worst of all was that if I accepted their offer, I would have to stay in India, probably for the rest of my miserable, muck-eating life, and be forced to *deal* with all these jabbering lunatics. There was no way I was going to have anything to do with *any* of that bullshit.

More than ever, now, I wanted to get the hell out of this deranged, intergalactic freak show and back to the good old USA. But I couldn't just turn and beat feet out of here. I'd be stomped like a rat in a closet before I got two steps off the mark.

The crowd began to mutter impatiently. I had to come up with something quick. Then it hit me. I held up my right hand to quiet the mob:

"My people," I said, "I feel it is my duty to accept this great honor you have offered me. But as I am new to this country, I feel obliged to ask the God of the Pyramid for permission to accept your offer, and assume my place and duties among you. With your consent, I will now go back to the pyramid and make obeisance to the God and receive his instruction. And as I will need solitude to contemplate what I will say, I beseech you all to remain here and await my return."

There was some confused murmuring among the mob, but at length the three black-cloaked men nodded their assent. I gave a short bow with palms pressed together, then turned and walked away, slowly, back toward the pyramid. The crowd parted before me, bowing and muttering prayers as I passed.

So far, so good.

I kept walking, moving away at a steady pace, carefully maintaining a calm demeanor. I couldn't let these crazies think even for an instant that I was trying to escape. Any false move or sign of haste would bring them down on me like a pack of hyenas.

I made my way back down the road, keeping a tight leash on a violent urge to run like a bastard. As I got closer to the bottom of the hill, I slowed a little and took a quick look around. The crowds along the sides of the road had thinned out to pretty much nothing, and the area around the pyramid was deserted. Perfect.

I looked back toward the crowd on the hill. They were all watching me in rapt silence, but not making any move to follow. Not yet, anyway.

I arrived at the side of the pyramid and made a deep, reverent bow, then moved toward the stairway leading to the top. As I passed out of sight of the main road, I ducked down behind the wall enclosing the structure. I took a quick peek toward the crowd on the hill.

No reaction. Good.

I dropped into a full crouch and, taking care to stay under cover, made a zigzagging run down to the river side. The crowds were still swarming thick as flies on the *ghats* by the water, but there were many alleys and narrow passageways winding around through the buildings along the river, and I used them to stay hidden as I wended my way back to the place where I first stepped into this madhouse.

Once I got near the top of the rise, I cut back onto the main road and broke into a full-tilt sprint. A terrible howl went up in the distance, like ten thousand werewolves in a meat-frenzy. I looked back over my shoulder, and sure enough, the horde on the plateau was racing down the hill after me now, their feet flapping on the road like a million flat tires. I had maybe five minutes before they caught up with me.

The adrenalin slammed into my system like a ton of crack, and I flew up the hill like a Hellfire missile. When I got to the top, I searched desperately for anything that looked like the giant card-portal I had stepped through back in the DC Arts Center.

But there was nothing. All the buildings were festooned with pictures of distorted Hindu gods and Sanskrit calligraphy; all of it utterly indecipherable to me. Then I heard a violent hooting and shouting coming up the hill; the loonies were getting closer. What the hell was I gonna do now? They were less than ten seconds away. I was fucked.

But maybe not. I caught sight of a large, fresco-style painting on a wall across the street, unlike anything else I had seen since I stumbled into this nightmare. It was a large mural, ten feet high by twenty feet wide, depicting a tranquil, sunlit gallery full of paintings by Edward Hopper and Andrew Wyeth. And it was titled, in English: "The DC/AC Arts Center".

This has got to be it, I thought. But the picture was painted on a very solid brick wall. I looked back down the road, and the crowd of lunatics was fifty feet away and closing fast. It was now or never; either I stepped through this solid brick wall, or I got ripped to bloody tatters.

I backed up a few paces, took a deep breath, and dashed at the wall at a dead run, fully expecting to slam head-first into the bricks and drop to the street with my brains knocked loose.

Instead, I found myself back in the serene, whitewashed DC Arts Center, in the midst of a Saturday afternoon art crowd. I leaned on my knees, panting out of control and shuddering with adrenalin and exhaustion. A few of the patrons gave me quizzical glances as they strolled by, but I sensed no serious discontent.

But the noise of the mob was still echoing in my head, and I could still smell the heavy incense from the *ghats*, so I peered into the 'Indialand' card to see if the loonies might suddenly burst through the wall and yank me back into nut-job land.

Well, they were out there alright, shouting and gesturing wildly, looking high and low for their fugitive guru. But the barrier between the lunatics in Indialand and my side of reality was absolute, like a movie screen. I could see them, but they couldn't see me; and they couldn't figure out where I had got to.

And even if they did figure it out, there was no way they could step foot through a brick wall. I was safely out of it. It had been a savage, rat-bastard nightmare, and a very narrow escape; but it was over now.

I walked out of the exhibition and down to the street. My red Camaro was waiting for me right where I had left it hours ago, just off the main drag. I climbed behind the wheel and turned the key in the ignition. The big, 300hp engine rumbled to life, and I pulled out onto 16th Street and headed out of town.

Out on 295, in a calmer mood now, I smiled as I thought about my crazy adventure in "Indialand." I figured I'd just keep mum about it, because who'd ever believe a cockamamie story like that anyway? Hell, I was beginning to doubt it myself.

Besides, my sanity has always been held in question by a great many of my friends, and I knew if I told them this story, they would just shake their heads sadly and suggest I have my head examined. Or call 911.

But it happened, folks. And maybe, one day, you'll walk into an odd art exhibit in a strange, out-of-the-way neighborhood, and there will be a huge, laser-cut card titled, "Indialand," inviting you to step in and look around.



[poetry]

The Primal Sympathy

Dedicated to the spirits of William Wordsworth, Robert Frost, and Dr. Seuss.

I miss a thing that never was. I miss it most, in fact, because It never yet has let me down— But then, it has not yet been found.

It's like a thing within a dream Or in a painting, though it seems That really it's what lies behind The images that come to mind.

For instance, not the looming cloud That serves the painting as a shroud, That tries to keep the battered house Protected, as it would a mouse.

And not the golden stalks that part Before the plowman and his art. But maybe something in the way A window in the house was made.

A streak or two of darkest hues Is what effects the comely ruse That from that shadowed window pane A face looks out in fear, in vain.

It may not even be the case That I was meant to see a face, Yet there it is for me to see, Imagined or compulsory.

Or looking past the painter's brush, I find the same unbidden hush. In lyre and drum, in tales of yore— In acting, dance, and others, for ... It's not the notes upon the sheet That fill me up with kindled heat. It's how they're played and what's between That tells me what they truly mean.

And when I read the truest words, It's music like I've never heard, A kind of song that will not wage Its restless wars upon the page.

A sculptor, I've been told, need not, Know how to sculpt an aspect sought, But only have the smarts to know He's done it when the clay is so.

And if no art is near at hand My curiosity might land Upon the works of Nature's will: From dale to wood to sea to hill.

Though hidden mostly in the night, By day few things give more delight. Just as the moon and stars by day Are hidden but at night are gay.

I miss a thing I cannot name. I miss it though it never came. It speaks to me without a sound Yet seems to make the world go round.

-pete mesling

Your Obituary

If you haven't already composed one for yourself, mentally, on the way to someone else's funeral, how does this one suit you?

"Passed into eternal rest three days ago, beloved friend, mentor, sibling, teammate-or whatever it was, exactly, you were trying for. We feel the loss in our hearts. You were a private person, forced into a more public life than you wanted. At least that's what your lack of style in clothes and haircut implied.

A person of unrealized potential and missed opportunities-and we won't go into your annoying habits, until the reception at which, we should add, there will only be a cash bar, in the spirit of some secret knowledge of the cheapskate you really were."

-charles albert

[poetry]

Roderick Ushers' Syndrome

after: The Night Cafe by Vincent Van Gogh, 1888

Having stood nose to nose with horror, migraine bruised by gaslight's infectious lure, paint writhes like bile from an acidic shore swallowed with whiskey and the stench of more. Yet, the room must be paid, in blood and gore.

The air malodorous, not a drape moved; a third-eyed vision tilted tables and stools; dregs rose in the refuse absinthe fueled.

Click, tock, went the wall clock, the lamps snickered pool balls rolled, black-holed open mouths concurred; such a waste, a waste, hours passed; no one stirred. Scrape, the palette knife rasped blood red transferred cross a canvas discharged which day light adjured. Forward falling, fish-eyed drunks-deluded-conferred. Stiff bristled brushes, wood handled leapt, each overheard

Pay the Piper, the landlords slept unstirred by the plight or blight, night crept undeterred. Poisoned by gases that rose ghostlike, blurred, madness misnamed, reputations injured.

Yet, the room must be paid for *don't you agree*? I paid with my art and melancholy.

—deborah guzzi

The Copse

Having come to the mill from the workhouse, I was expecting nothing more than downturned noses but when I arrived and saw the endless rows of girls all diligently waxing bobbins with rough, red hands I knew most were no different than I. These were the forgotten few, and I knew that in time I was to be forgotten along with them.

The beech copse growing alongside the mill loomed dark as I made yet another weary evening walk home. In spite of the trees' willowy limbs, their strength came from the whispered secrets carried off on their leaves. A little shivery breeze was all it took for the trees to start talking, and as the days grew shorter it seemed the voices spoke of something more than autumn chills.

It was on a cold damp evening that Rose Taylor caught up with me as I darted through the copse on my journey home. Her cheeks and nose carried a red tint as though she'd been running. In the waning light it was fair to say her features mirrored my own. Vanity, I had always been taught, was a sin. But was it a sin to appreciate the face of another? Rose smiled and I smiled back in greeting. "Let me walk with you," she said.

We chatted like sisters as we walked on toward the village. While I had never before spoken so amiably to Rose (and indeed she went ignored by the other girls) it is true that I had begun to detect her interest in me over the preceding weeks. At first her gaze would dart off if I chanced to catch her spying on me at my work, but eventually she learnt not to fear me and would occasionally offer a shy smile. It never occurred to me that she had noticed the similarities in our features too.

In time I discovered that Rose too had once come from the workhouse. Her brothers and sisters were all gone to sickness and she, like me, was alone in the world. Unlike me, however, she had an unnatural, impish delight in tricks and

by carmen tudor

naughty behaviours. It wasn't uncommon for her to seek me out and pinch me if I happened to leave for the day without waiting for her. On other occasions she would find a short-cut through the wood and choose the quietest moment of my solitary walk to steal up from behind and cry out in my ear.

If Rose's ill temper was a thing to be noticed, so too was her contrition. On seeing my hurt expression she'd soften as though seeing herself hurt, and taking my hand would implore forgiveness from her newfound sister. At first I was moved. Such sadness could not be overlooked, and to ignore such a thing was surely a sin. Soon enough, though, something in the girl's dark eyes struck a different chord. I remember well the moment Rose's hand, as it gripped mine tightly, felt like more than a sisterly bond. The nails, I was sure, cut a little too close to the skin. The beech leaves fluttered high above us and as the sun made its slow descent I marvelled at how unlike my hands Rose's were. Where the skin on mine was rough from long days of repetitious work, hers was soft like a child's. Where mine held on in friendship, hers gripped as though they were seeking a saviour.

"Rose," I said, "I feel it a duty to tell you, as a friend, that John Hughes has made me a proposal of marriage." I waited and kept my eyes focused on the path ahead. The little leaves above danced and flittered as a cool gust of air trailed through the copse. The steady sound of our footsteps seemed to disappear in the fluttery sounds above. The rooks had already retired for the night and everything around us was quiet.

"What did you say?" she replied. "Surely not yes. I know you want your freedom as much as I do."

I walked on a few more paces, still attached to the other me at my side. "I haven't answered him yet."

"But you mean to accept?"

When it seemed that Rose's grip tightened, I cleared my throat and tried to hasten my steps. "Yes. He has opportunities in the south."

All at once Rose's hand slipped away from mine. The separation left a cold, clammy space where her hand had been and I detected her steps quicken. "So be it," she said. "But John Hughes. And a lathe operator too." She laughed as she said the words. My face flushed crimson. John wasn't a handsome man, but he was decent. His brother worked away from the mills and wrote of clean air and happy families. He knew of a situation for John that was there for the taking. I had kept him a secret from Rose for reasons I could not quite explain. I had very little to call my own and perhaps it was selfishness on my part, or a fear that a truly good thing might be taken away as my own family had been. *Poor Rose*, I thought. So *like me*. Before I could say another word she was away from me and disappearing through the copse. Her fading image lingered before me long after she was gone.

Rose was absent from the mill the next day. I sought her out but to no avail. It was only a day or so later, however, that I caught a glimpse of her once more. As I made my evening journey home I heard laughter from somewhere in the copse. My mind wandered as my feet drifted forward so it was a surprise when I caught a sight from the corner of my eye that wasn't, as I had initially expected, a simple murmur from the golden beech leaves above.

Rose leaned against a tree trunk. From my position her form was small, but a girl so similar to me—another me, in fact—was a sight I couldn't mistake. She threw her head back in another fit of laughter as John leaned in.

Surely it is a mistake, I thought. I should have looked away, but something drew me in and I stared with wide eyes as the two exchanged familiarities I wasn't prepared to witness. Then, as though it came from the darkest recesses of my imagination, Rose turned coyly from John. She smiled at me for only a moment before taking his hand and leading him farther away from me.

The sun was setting fast. The air was cold and as I made my way back on the rough path the leaves whispered truths with no uncertainty; I heard them all, for I listened intently. I made up my mind of what must be done. It was my freedom Rose was taking. My error, too, to misread a mere man so completely.

The copse still grows tall and resolute alongside the mill. Its leaves whisper new secrets now, but whether there exist listeners for such things is altogether irrelevant. A little upset patch of ground is all that hints at the resting place of a dear, decent man. It is a shame, to be sure, but I like the reminder as I make my morning and evening walks. Of course, it's not terribly pleasant, loneliness. Not terribly pleasant, but not unmanageable. I managed before Rose's arrival and I manage now with her absence. It's funny, I think, that no one has commented on her absence. It is a hulking thing. It hounds me. And yet, there is something natural, as natural as the beech copse, about it also. As natural as taking in the sight of one's own face in the mirror and recognising, in reflection, the correct order of things.



—janne karlsson & emma-johanna henriksson

[poetry]

POISONED MINDS

Poison which runs afresh in our veins Venom which has enveloped our heads

A word worse than a bite A deed done just to spite

Poison which annihilates our minds Venom which will seep into our souls

A lamb in wolf's clothing While devils are gloating

A poison to which there is no cure A pain you no longer can endure

The perfect apple will rot away When a little worm comes out to play

A poison leaving a bitter taste It works in silence and yet with haste

Until truth is destroyed Innocence is dead And hate will win over

-kristyl gravina

Analysis

When listening too was turned into a specialty requiring an expert with degrees, or an office with a couch,

it was only a matter of time before talking followed suit, and then thinking. When I run into

a natural person now and then, share a cup of coffee or a park bench or a stroll,

who'll start me thinking Why isn't this one talking to more people? I sure listen. But the Good tend to live and let live;

while the Others tend to shout and rant their twisted analyses to make them trends. And the Poet gets

to notice, only, that the way the world spins is around and down, like melted opals through a thirsty drain

which burps as it drinks to make room for Other Good Poets to fill the basin over and over again and again.

—james nicola

DARK VALENTINE

For K. A. O.

O Sorcerer, dark love and skald extraordinaire, Your offer I accept—we'll make the finest pair. A vibrant moon above us shines with sweetened glee. Out in the fresh, chill night our presence makes fools flee. Together we shall drink on this most treasured night, To celebrate a darker shade of Valentine. This night is filled with magick in my knowing sight, And we shall come together; you, too, shall be mine.



[poetry]

the curtaín

Past the woven threads of emerald chiffon. I see thy silhouette-blue in shadow, red in candlelight-undressing for a midnight bath. Thy back sublime by soft bundles, curved rose petal flesh; thou are the flower ready to bloom under the full moon's shade. Thy murky hair doth wrap round thy slanted shoulders, feather waves brush and twist together as the milk gown collapses atop tile. My lips! Where escapes a naughty sigh: my eyes become full of thee, thine eyes turn to me. My heart burns, my cheeks flare, and my nose leaks fire!

My beloved hath noticed me!

Turquoise jewels expose my undeniable sin, I stand, whipped with my own embarrassment. Thy brows wrinkle in anger, thy fingers coil white, thy peach mouth open in disgust; thy thorns are blood purple and tear my insides to cloth.

Thee—do not cover thyself briskly, do not dash from the room to inform thy father! My dear, doth thou not understand? I shall be here tomorrow and the many nights after until my love hath reached thee completely.

-mckinley henson

ELLIE IN THE HOUSE

by bruce memblatt

Old man Charlie Ealing gazed out the window above the sink. Another dreary, cloudy day, and no eggs in the fridge.

The land outside the window— spotty grass, broken rocks, rivers of memories seemed to stretch forever into a distant tree line. On clear days he could almost see the birds on the branches. He could almost see his past twirling in the mist.

But today there were no eggs in the fridge, and the coffee tasted like swill.

Mornings in this kitchen when Ellie was still alive—the smell of bacon and eggs, the sizzle, the smiles, the wonder of this house.

Three years ago everything stopped. Cancer in the belly. She died on a Sunday afternoon, taking the world with her.

He reached in the cabinet for the box of sugar, and he brought it to the small oak table in the center of the kitchen.

He stirred. The sound of the spoon tinkling through the empty room made his stomach sink. He rubbed his belly, as if the pain was physical, as if he could push it away, and he reached for the milk.

A knock on the screen door. Mel's face popped in with the mail. "Hey Charlie," the large man with the receding red hair and the perpetual smile said, as he stepped through the doorway. "Got coffee for me?"

"I have shit for ya. Want a cup of shit, Mel?"

Mel threw his satchel down on the table and sat across from Charlie. "Isn't that all I ever get from you, Charlie? Say, why don't you ever smile?"

"There ain't nothing to smile about," Charlie said. He stood and he poured a cup of coffee for Mel, and returned to the table setting the cup down. They stirred.

"Ain't this grand?" Mel said. "Tinkling spoons in stereo."

"Ya know," Charlie said, pulling the spoon out of his cup, "Most mailmen just deliver the mail, and go on their way. Why am I so blessed?"

"Because you're special. But you know it's been three years. It's time to smile, Charlie. That's how Ellie would have wanted it."

"You don't know Ellie. She would've wanted me to be good and miserable like I am now."

"You are ridiculous, Charlie."

"Maybe so, but what am supposed to do? There ain't nothing for me, but the waiting to die too."

"Get a hobby. Make a friend. Go out. Plant a garden. There's plenty for you to do." "Go away, Mel!"

Mel laughed, standing from the table, reaching for his satchel. "You are ridiculous, Charlie."

"Well, where's my mail?" Charlie said watching Mel head for the screen door.

"You ain't got mail today."

"All this, and no mail? Damn!"

"That's okay, I brought you something better," Mel said, waving, closing the door behind him.

The screen door shook in the wind. Charlie felt the breeze edge his nose, and then he heard the water running in the sink. Above the sink, the window turned bright with a sunny haze. Then something through the glass. A shadow on the grass for just a second, for a split-second.

He stood. He turned the water off. Nothing there. Just the same old view. The grass. The rocks. The trees. Yesterday.

He was about to turn away, when something else.

Someone walking toward the house. A woman. Faint. He could hardly see her, but a woman. And then she vanished. He saw her vanish. A trick of the light. Must be the sun. The clouds. The trees. Mingling. His mind, too distant, stuck in yesterday. He was about to walk away from the sink when the water came on again.

Something strange.

He felt a sensation in his belly, cold and frightening. And the flicker of another quick shadow. Then the change of light on his skin. The awkward feel of someone else in the house. And the sound of the radio going off in the bedroom.

The alarm. Set wrong. He must have set it wrong. But he hadn't. Someone was in the house.

He stood in the middle of the floor in the kitchen shouting, "Mel, what are you doing? Are you playing some kind of game with me?"

He called Mel again and again, but there was no answer.

The radio was driving him crazy. He ran through the living room, and down the long hallway to the bedroom, past the double bed, and he hit the small black clock radio on the night table.

Nearly out of breath, he lay in the bed. The walls. The light streaking through

the bay windows. The sound of his breaths. Too nervous to stay in the bed, he stood.

The mirror on the wall. He caught his reflection. The grey hairs. The balding scalp. The aging skin. It wasn't him. It was some old man invading his reflection. And there she was, but it wasn't her. It was her shadow, what was left of her. Her ghost. A reflection in the mirror. A speck of her standing next to him.

He turned around and she was there. Her face. Her hair. The devil in her smile. She whispered, "Hello, Charlie."

"You are really here. I can't believe it."

"It's true."

"You were always one for big entrances, Ellie."

"Exits too, apparently. Sorry, Charlie. I didn't mean to leave you."

Charlie smiled. His jaw calm and steady, his eyes clear and stuck on Ellie's memory. "How does it feel, Ellie? How do you feel?"

"Nothing. I can hardly feel a thing." She moved toward him, flickering.

Sunlight streaked across the mirror on the wall making it almost disappear. Like Ellie, just almost there.

"So," Charlie said to her, "not much has changed. I've been thinking a lot lately, and I've come to realize, all those years we spent together, and I still hardly knew you, Ellie. You are a cold fish. You always were."

"Same old Charlie. Always looking for a fight."

"Same old Ellie. Always changing the subject."

She stepped back, and spread her arms like she was about to dance. "So why did you miss me so much, Charlie? That's why I'm here, because I felt you missing me so strong."

Charlie walked away, and he sat down on the edge of the bed. "I don't know. I think I thought I missed you, Ellie."

"No you did, you did!"

"I think it was just your reflection."

"What?" She said, traveling toward the bed. She was just something in his head. "The idea of you."

"No, Charlie. It was me. You know me, Charlie!"

She suddenly looked distressed, as if she were alive. Charlie noticed it and he felt something—a connection. She was really there. But she couldn't be. She was a memory. A thing of his dreams. The noise in his head.

"I know nothing. Even when you lost the baby..."

"What? What, Charlie?"

"Even when you lost the baby, the next day, Ellie. It was like nothing happened." "I was just trying to be strong for us."

"Why, Ellie? I didn't even get to take care of you. Didn't get to mourn the baby. All I got was you making plans, cleaning the house, as if you had lost a hangnail."

"You know, Charlie, I think I was just in shock."

"Whatever it was, it was weird," Charlie said, "You're weird, Ellie. Well, you were." He stood from the bed. He saw her flickering, fading, dimming. "I'm sorry, Charlie."

"What's happening?"

"I'm losing power. Getting faint."

"No! Ellie! No!" Charlie said, waving his hands in the air, beginning to panic.

"I can't help it. You don't want me here."

"I do! I do!"

He watched her memory dim and disappear. A tear fell from his eye. Why did he always do that? Always make a mess of things. He really did miss her. No matter what he said.

He wiped his forehead. It wasn't her anyway. A trick of the light. A trick of his mind. The days slipping away. Too much time. Too many memories.

He left the bedroom, and he headed down the hallway to the living room. The pictures on the walls. Ellie and him. Yesterdays. All these reminders. Everywhere. No wonder he was half insane. Tomorrow they'd all come down. All the pictures. All the memories, every last one. Every last frame.

But for now, the living room opened before his eyes. The long brown couch clothed in a multi-colored afghan. The coffee table with that green glass elephant. The tan oval rug beneath the table. The heavy wood floors. The beams and rafters above. A sturdy strong room, and in the corner, the big oak desk, and in the desk, more memories.

He opened a drawer and pulled out a photo album. Him and Ellie. Their honeymoon in New Orleans. The cruise they took around Alaska. That day at the beach, when Ellie nearly lost her top. He grinned. And there, just a simple picture of her in the bedroom combing her hair. It was all a dream. Her beautiful eyes. Her empty smile. Why did he even care? He cared because the house was so empty now. Whatever she was, she was always there.

A knock on the door pulled Charlie out of his obsession.

He turned from the desk. The photo album fell to the floor. Sunlight streaming through the room. The feel of a rug under his shoes. The empty umbrella stand next to the door.

He pulled the latch open. A little girl stood there, sunshine all around her, holding an envelope in her hand.

Reading from it she said, "Hey, Mister is this 21 Houser drive?"

She was so small, but the thing was her eyes... Ellie's eyes.

"Yeah, why? Who wants to know?"

The girl, serious as stone replied, "I want to know, Mister. Is this 21 Houser Drive?"

"Yeah, why?"

"I'm not certain, Mister. All I know is I woke up this morning knowing I had to be here."

Charlie's eyes widened and squinted in confusion, "Well that is odd, and just what were you supposed to do when you got here?"

"I'm not exactly sure, sir."

Waving her through the doorway, he said, "Stop calling me sir, and come inside."

Following Charlie's lead she stepped through the doorway cautiously. Her eyes looking everywhere, they stopped on the portrait of Ellie above the couch.

"Who's that?"

"Before we go any further, tell me, do your parents know what you're doing? Where you are?"

"I am an orphan," she said. Her eyes stoically locked on his face. Charlie felt a bit uncomfortable and he ran his finger up and down his chin.

"Well, where do you stay? Who takes care of you? You're just a little kid after all." "Don't worry; they think I'm at school."

"Okay, okay." Charlie said, leaning over, leading her by the shoulders farther into the room toward the portrait. "The deal is, you get in any trouble I don't know a thing. As far as I'm concerned you're a little girl selling Girls Scout Cookies. I know nothing. Okay?"

She peered up at him. "Okay, Mister."

They stopped in front of the portrait.

"This was my wife Ellie. She died of cancer three years ago. This is what she looked like. A few years before she died."

The girl stood and stared at the portrait. "She looks familiar."

"Uncanny," Charlie said, "You have the same eyes, and more."

Then the girl turned away from the portrait and pointed at Charlie's face. " I look a little like you too."

A look of recognition flashed across Charlie's wrinkled eyes and he said, "Say what?"

The girl's voice became louder, more determined like she'd suddenly aged thirty years. "I said I look a little like you too."

Charlie began to step away from the girl. He walked toward the couch fast. He needed to calm down. Something inside him began to churn.

The girl followed him, and she said, "Don't you know who I am? You must know by now. You must!"

He began to sweat. Needed to get away. He headed toward the hall. "Leave me, alone! Please!"

She continued to follow him. "I just want to let you know how much she mourned for me. Mommy did mourn for me terribly. She wants you to know how much. Daddy, please!"

Charlie almost at the bedroom door, turned around and screamed, "Go away! Go away! I can't take this. I can't take this kind of shit! Please, I beg you go away!"

Then he sat himself down on the hallway floor, and he began to cry. The taste of salt on his chin. The feel of the walls closing in on him. The feel of the past catching up with him. The sunlight from the bedroom fading. The memory of Ellie's last breath.

Moments passed, and he could sense it. The house was empty. She was gone. He was alone again. Just him and his crazy mind.

He stood. Every last picture was coming down. The portrait in the living room would be the first to go. He cried in the hallway. "You put her up to this. Didn't you,

Ellie? It was you who put her up to this!"

Then he felt a wind rush through the hall. It nearly knocked him back to the floor.

"Fuck you, Ellie!" he said, and pulling himself together he took their wedding picture off the wall, then he took the next picture off, and then the next, as he headed down the hall toward the living room.

He wouldn't sleep tonight. He might never sleep again. He didn't care.

As he entered the living room, Ellie's portrait in his eyes, he dropped the pictures to the floor. A pile for the floor. A pile for the floor the fireplace tonight.

Then he sat down on the couch, and he stared at the room around him. The things. The windows. The green glass elephant on the coffee table. The empty coat rack. The shadows on the walls. The sound of nothing happening. The silent sound of hours passing into hours forever. He fell asleep. He didn't wake till the next day when he felt the morning around him.

His eyes fluttered. He saw the portrait of Ellie above. The pile of pictures he threw to the floor yesterday. Still there. The scent of coffee in the air.

His breath halted for a second.

The scent of coffee in the air?

He stood from the couch, stumbling, scratching his head, pulling in his shirt. He headed toward the kitchen. The smell of coffee got stronger. The crick in his legs reminding him how time went so quickly. He saw the light coming from the room He heard something sizzling. The sound of the toaster popping.

Finally at the archway, straining for a breath, he peered into the room. Coffee percolating on the stove. A plate of eggs, toast and ham on the table. The empty kitchen without a soul in sight. The drop of his heart.

Ellie's not there, yet she is.



[poetry]

Minor Ghost

The cat walks a well-kept lawn, not even a ghost to keep her company in this suburb land of in-between and nobody's home.

On a crumbling country farm, perhaps she could find at least a minor ghost blowing piteous notes around rickety buildings left standing for just in case.

Sometimes the cat walks down the street to seek company in an echoing warehouse filled with little but air and broken cement and sometimes a lover cat ready to pump life back inside her. But she sees no one else ghosts don't take well to concrete surfaces that flatten their spirit-homes of long ago, and everyone else has moved uptown.

Then she returns to wait, watching for the return of spirits that once moved and cared for places on earth but who find it hard now to shift their way into this unhidden space not yet five years old, kept free of holes and cracks and uneven spots where ghosts seek out a place to hold, no history in which to make a home.

And this undeathly tranquility haunts her with its lack of ghosts, sensing perhaps the coming of eventual apparitions.

—steven petersheim



[poetry]

Coup De Grâce

First went, my sight. It was blurry, Slow moving. The lights of The city This city I loved, this city you loved, Blurred together Then disappeared All together. White. My hearing went next. LQÚD, It was Fast. Angry, Hurt. But then nothing. A world -My world Of nothingness. You would've thought that My taste buds would've went First. Logical, It seems Being that the gun was placed Inside my mouth. But no. That feeling went right Before my thoughts, Thoughts of you, of us, HAPPY (?) (!) after the second Right Bullet tore threw My temple. A mercy killing. pap de grâce -joe russo

Something Good on a Cold Night

by charlie bennett

Mark looked into the mirror which was stuck to the fake-wood paneling with a heavy adhesive. His was the bigger bedroom in the back of the trailer. His granny had always slept in the smaller bedroom even before he'd moved in. That put her closer to the trailer's side door and near the kitchen. He carefully lined his eyes with mascara. His face was pale with powder, his lips only slightly reddened in lip stick. His hair sprang lively in all directions, plastered in place by White Rain hairspray—his, not his granny's.

He put the mascara down and picked up his guitar case. No need to pack his tiny Gorilla amplifier. He had his slightly larger Fender amp at Jason's already. It was a four-mile walk across town to Jason's so he had to leave his primary amp there in The Cold's rehearsal space in Jason's parents' basement. The most affable of any parents they knew, the Clays never complained about the electricity usage and only asked that they stop at a reasonable hour, before 7 p.m., so the neighbors wouldn't complain. The Cold played moody synth rock that didn't tend to get offensively loud anyway.

He shielded the February wind with a black scarf wrapped around his face and wore a heavy black trench coat over black sweat pants that covered jeans and ended in elastic rings around combat boots. In the pallid February landscape he was the essence of night blowing through the predominantly white trailers in the court that was streaked in patches of lingering snow that had fallen four days before. Most of it had melted in the sun of the previous days but the remainder stayed frozen in place on this overcast day during which the temperature remained at least several degrees below freezing. He kept his eyes fixed to the cracked gray street as he went through the tunnel of trailers showing brown streaks of grime and rust on the white sheet metal until he'd reached Grove street which led to Lexington Avenue, the main thoroughfare into downtown that ran by the trailer court making traffic noise the sound of existence, even inside the trailers. Television or music was usually sufficient to drown the cars. Sitting in the trailer without music or television left him lonely and depressed, so he rarely did so without one or the other.

He knew the way he dressed and wore makeup attracted disgusted stares and lit the fires of gossip in his little eastern Kentucky town, but he'd decided he had to be himself, even if it meant standing out. Besides, having an unusual look would draw attention to not only him but to the band. He knew it wasn't exactly original but what was anymore? Everything seemed derivative, including the music they tried to create. But he'd decided he couldn't let that stop his artistic drive or he'd never do anything but suffer in silence. Maybe originality could be stumbled upon eventually. That was his hope. Until then, he could merely aspire to the part of his hero, Robert Smith of The Cure. The Cure's "Why Can't I Be You?" evoked embarrassing shame for him, so he skipped that song when he listened to The Cure's *Kiss Me, Kiss Me, Kiss Me* album.

About a half mile down Lexington Avenue he came to the PDQ Market, its brown paint scraping off under the yellow-plastic-bubble lettering of the sign. The smell of candy was powerful as always upon entering through the glass door. They had the best candy selection in town. He grabbed a slender sleeve of Skittles, a package of orange Lance peanut butter, crackers, and a Mountain Dew. He threw the little brown bag in his pocket and headed back into the cold after readjusting the scarf around his face. He thought about the new song they'd been working on since their last practice. You, you released me back down into the darkness of deep, deep cold water... It was an original. They did a few covers but mostly enjoyed creating their own material. They'd played Dr. Pizza five times on Friday nights over the previous several months-the full extent of their gig history not counting a birthday party Jason's parents had let him host which ended with Mark drunk, puking a rancid stew into the bushes outside the basement door. Despite their lack of stage experience, the constant practicing had made them a tight band, able to anticipate each other's playing. They'd developed a sound that ran consistent through their growing catalog of songs. Only Mark was out of high school. He was 19. Jason was 18 while Doug and Chris were 17. Jason, Doug and Chris were all seniors. Mark didn't go to school and didn't work. His granny told him to get a haircut or he'd never get a job. He hadn't tried too hard, putting in applications at K-Mart and Walmart before losing steam and confidence. What little money he ever had came from his granny overpaying him for running errands.

Inside the warmth of Jason's basement, Mark's nose ran a slow drip that he kept wiping with a black and white checkered bandana from his front left pocket. He'd called his girlfriend Eve, who lived in Jason's neighborhood, and told her she could come over to watch them practice if she wanted. Mark felt awkward though when she came to practice, imagining what John Lennon may have felt like with Yoko Ono sitting in on all the Beatles' later sessions. But he didn't get to see her enough and besides, what were the guys going to say? He was the principal songwriter of the band and the singer. Anyway, she was eye candy for them. None of them had a steady girlfriend, despite being in a band. Playing music in their town only made them different, and it wasn't a town that valued different. The town was a forgery in which all form of human life was inserted and melted down into homogenized shape. Mark and Eve were impervious to the flames. She came in the basement door in her black dress over black-and-white-striped tights, her hair a metallic blue and bobbed. Black leather jacket. She looked detached and bored, like she'd have rather been in church. She waved at the guys and took her place in the chair in the corner of the room with her Stephen King novel.

The band worked through several songs, perfecting verses and inserting an atmospheric bridge in the new song; they took a break when Mark broke a string.

"Let's take a smoke break, babe," he said to Eve. She followed him out the door and into the chill. The world was beyond gray, opaque and unalive to both of them. It was a cold and cruel town made by and for the complacent working. The town didn't hold a summer or fall festival like so many other towns. There wasn't enough joy to support a festival. There were a few small factories, a hospital with a couple of doctors on-call, and a city jail like all the other tiny towns had. Budget grocery stores that made staying alive affordable at least. You could live cheap in their mountain community and that was really the only reason to live there, if you were accepting enough to call it living. At least that's the way Mark and Eve saw the town and the way they talked about it. There may have been those who saw the place as a Shangri-La. And they would have been the happy, the content; the ones Mark envied if he'd been honest enough to admit it.

Eve gave him a Marlboro Light. She always had cigarettes. Mark just smoked them. He didn't have the money to buy them. Eve worked at Pizza Hut and earned her cigarettes spreading tomato sauce and cheese and varieties of meat and vegetables over dough. She brought a pizza home every night and sometimes brought one by to Mark and his granny after work. They'd usually lock his bedroom door and fuck while listening to Depeche Mode, New Order, or The Cure. She'd ride him like a storm on the ocean. Sometimes he'd put his hand over her mouth to muffle her ecstasy. Then they'd come out and eat pizza with his granny while watching whatever her show was at that particular hour of that night. She had a show for every hour of every waking day and night. Detectives were her favorites. What she wouldn't have given to have gotten her hands on that Remington Steele. The way she saw it, there were no men of daring like that in the mountains. Only the working stiff or happy-in-poverty bums. She wasn't proud of where she came from and had passed that on to Mark.

Mark looked across the street at the silent houses with vacant driveways, the ephemeral steam of his breath floating away.

"How do people work all the time just to have this?" he asked.

"Mark, we're going to have to work all the time just to survive, not to have any of this shit. The older you get, the more it just becomes about survival and fear. That's what I think. By the way, did you apply down at the Dollar Store?"

"Eve, when we make it big with the band, there will be no more real work for either of us, okay? Yeah, I filled out an application down at the Dollar Store. I don't think they cared for the looks of me."

"You didn't wear makeup in there did you?"

"No," he said and threw down the cigarette. "I just don't think they liked my face. I think you're the only one who does."

"Ahhhh, who wouldn't like this tragic face?" she said. She gently ran her hand down his cheek before kissing him.

"Seriously," he said, "with everything the world has to offer, who could be content to just get up and work day after day just to be able to afford his own little lot in this shithole town? I mean, there's just too much in the world, but you can't get to it when you're stuck in a place like this."

"There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy," Eve said in a stilted voice with British accent.

"You guys still studying Hamlet in Miller's Shakespeare course?" he asked.

"We just finished," she said. "We've moved on to Romeo and Juliet."

"O, teach me how I should forget to think," Mark said and kissed her deeply.

Eve left to get ready for work. The band practiced another hour and a half and ran out of steam. They took off for home on foot including Mark who had the longest walk of them all. He didn't care. It would give him time to think about the chorus of the new song. He couldn't help but think it could be better rhythmically somehow.

The day's light was dying. He would have to walk briskly to get home before dark. He could make it though. He'd developed a sense for these things. The cold would keep him motivated. His muscles would stay taut and ready in the winter chill.

There were woods between Jason's neighborhood and town, where development hadn't sprawled yet. Mark didn't like walking by them in the dark. It seemed like there was something in them that he didn't understand. *There's more in heaven and earth*...

He made it to the woods by twilight. He would make it beyond them by dark. The weeds through this section of the road stayed littered with McDonald's cups, lids and straws, torn Bud Light half-case boxes and jettisoned empty bottles. It was an orphaned stretch of highway. Those weeds caught everything and hid a lot of it.

As Mark neared the end of the woods, still 150 to 200 feet from Jo Etta's Beauty Shop, the first business you came to, he heard what sounded like a large old pickup slowing behind and before he could turn around he heard the aggressive familiar voice.

"Stay out of the road, you goddamn queer motherfucker."

It was Randy Turner. Football player, Neanderthal, dumbass Mama's boy. Mark

had seen his face as he went by but he'd have known that truck and voice anywhere. Mark did what came naturally to him when he was insulted. He gave him the finger and held it there for several seconds. Turner must have seen in his rearview mirror. He quickly pulled the truck into one of the parking spaces in front of Jo Etta's Beauty Shop, jumped out of the truck, leaving it running, and walked briskly toward Mark.

"You have something to say to me, you little faggot motherfucker? I'll whip the absolute dog shit out of you. Fucking sick faggot fuck."

Mark bolted through the weeds for the woods. As much as he hated life, he sure had a hell of a natural instinct for survival. He knew instinctively he could not handle Turner head on. He'd be pounded into a bloody mess, if he were lucky—if the psychopath didn't kill him.

He got into the woods with Turner running at least fifty yards away still. Darkness had already set in under the thick forest. Only the faintest gray light came in still in places. Mark spotted a cluster of brush between two large trees and dove behind it. His chest felt distended with fear. He tried to hold his breath. He knew he'd gotten a good jump on Turner into the woods and felt he'd been able to dive behind the brush before Turner could have spotted him.

"I'll find you, Mark. I'll find your queer little ass and then you'll be sorry you fucked with me. You should know better. You know I've wanted to beat the fuck out of you for a long time. I'm going to enjoy this. And you know what? Nobody in this town is going to give a shit. Everybody's embarrassed to have you walking the streets of this town anyway. Fucking faggot."

He could hear fallen branches cracking under his hunter's feet. He didn't know what he'd do until he spotted a fortuitous rock about the size of a softball just three feet to his right. His eyes were starting to adjust to the diminished light. He reached over and gripped it with his right hand. He'd put his guitar down beside him. It first occurred to him to use the guitar as a weapon but it'd make noise removing it from its unwieldy case. He clutched the rock and listened with the ears of a stalked animal. He cocked the rock, ready to strike with it.

Mark decided he must be the aggressor. Couldn't just sit there and wait for Turner to pounce on him. That was a losing game, one he'd been playing his whole life, just waiting for something to go wrong. He raised just enough to see over the brush. He could make out Turner about fifteen feet away, standing and looking in the other direction. He wasn't quite close enough that Mark could completely surprise him. He'd hear Mark and would have time to defend himself or make a counter-blow. Mark would have to hold his position and wait for a better chance. The crackling started again and Turner was suddenly a shadow directly above him to his right. He didn't even have time to register whether Turner was facing him, whether he actually saw him. He instantly rose and struck for the head of the shadow with his full strength. Turner made only a quick choking sound and dropped to the ground. He didn't seem to move but Mark had taken off running and hadn't waited to see how badly he was hurt. He'd dropped the rock after striking him. Mark ran through the trees raising his feet high to avoid weeds and vines. He fell once but jumped quickly back to his feet. He suddenly realized with horror that he'd left his guitar. He'd have to try to circle back around from the other direction to find his guitar. He couldn't lose that guitar. It meant too much to him, and besides, if Turner was badly hurt, or worse, all roads would lead to Mark when the guitar was found.

He ran through the tree line to his right and circled back to where he imagined he'd been. He didn't circle far. He'd done it in only a few minutes. He was being careful, quiet. He didn't want to take any chances. Turner would surely kill him now if given the chance. He took light steps, sneaking from tree to tree. His dark clothes were at least a bit of help he figured, though it was so dark it was minimal at this point. Then he noticed the brush he'd hidden behind. He saw Turner's body lying supine, like the still subject of a war photograph, on the ground beside the brush. He was little more than an outline. He didn't seem to be moving at all. Too dark to tell if he was breathing. Mark crouched forward, almost silently though he'd heard his right knee pop, grabbed his guitar off the ground and tiptoed out of the woods, back in the direction of the road, looking back over his shoulder a few times at Turner's motionless form.

When he reached the edge of the woods, where the weeds began, he had the thought that he didn't want to be seen. He looked through the trees, up the tree line and could see the smoke coming from Turner's truck still. He ducked back into the woods and walked quickly to where the woods came out on Broadway, on the back side of downtown. He came out there behind the First Baptist Church in about ten minutes and took the back streets of downtown in a circuitous route so that he had only a short distance on the busy Lexington Avenue to walk to get to Grove Street and back into the trailer park. The frigid night air might as well have been the thick air of summer, for he felt nothing. He only moved with the determined fear of a soldier realizing he was lost behind enemy lines. A quest for solution, for survival, fear motivating the way only fear can.

He thought how lucky he was that it was such a bitterly cold night. Most people were probably staying in. He only saw four cars for the short time he'd had to be on Lexington Avenue. He'd only encountered a couple more on the back streets. He didn't recognize the cars. Would they remember him? Would they think about seeing him when the news broke about Turner, whose abandoned truck would be found with the ignition on? When Turner's body would probably be found by a search party in the woods? Did any of them who'd seen him walking know him? Surely a few of them noticed him, but would they remember?

The trailer park was frozen in silence. He came in the door softly.

"Mark, honey, is that you?" his granny called out from the couch.

"Yeah, it's me, Granny, back from practice. I'll get us some dinner going; does that sound good?"

"Lord, yes, child, I'm starved. Fix us something hot."

"In a jiffy. Give me a second to put my things up and to knock this chill off."

He closed the door to his room and leaned the guitar case in the corner. He took off his coat but left his boots on. He felt like he needed to be ready for anything.

The thought flashed through his mind that he should sleep with his clothes and boots on.

He walked over to the mirror and looked into his eyes, still outlined in black. He knew he saw fear. But he didn't see regret. He mouthed the words he'd had to memorize in Miller's Shakespeare course during his senior year.

"...there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."

He washed his face in the bathroom with hot water and took one of his granny's Xanax pills from the medicine cabinet. He washed it down with water from cupped hands.

He emptied two cans of SpaghettiOs into a medium sauce pan and put them on the yellow electric stove's burner. He stood over them, looking down into the rusty red sauce, occasionally stirring them with a large metal spoon. Metal on metal. Steam began to rise from the pan and the sauce began to gurgle. He turned down the heat and prepared garlic bread with sliced Kern's white bread, garlic powder and butter. He placed the bread in the oven he'd preheated to 375 degrees.

He went back to his room and took off his clothes, put on fresh sweat pants and a clean t-shirt and placed the clothes he'd been wearing with some others in the washing machine in the utility space in the hallway, poured some laundry detergent on them and started the machine. He then went back to the bathroom and quickly washed his body with a wash cloth before returning to the kitchen. He was running through his mind the same question over and over. Should he tell Eve?

His granny smiled at him as he gave her a steaming bowl of pasta and a small side plate holding her bread.

"You have your tea, don't you, Granny?"

"Yes, honey, I do. I'm fine. This smells good."

"Something good on a cold night," he said and got himself situated on the couch beside her.

"I bet you about froze walking home didn't you, honey?"

"Nah, I walked fast," Mark said and stuffed a spoonful of the canned pasta in his mouth.

"Wheel of Fortune's fixin' to come on, honey. You can help me try to guess 'em."



Omoshiroi

Gentle acrid wind stirs the silken *tatsu* panel hanging askew behind a labyrinth of sliding *shōji* Before, lantern light diffused to engorge shadows of dragon-play, ominous and captivating entertainment for honorable guests who had come to admire the painted dragon of the silken panel, views of Mount Fuji to grace the observer with life-long good luck

Each room made humble and inviting, *tatami* mats of crisp rice straw, for warmth that allowed a room to breathe encouraged a carpet of fire to spread Bamboo ceilings that once drew admiring gazes upward amidst oohs and ahhs of kindled envy now sizzled, steamed, popped with anticipation Subtle yet stunning *washi* had made each glance a masterpiece, a treasure no longer treasured by those suffocated in advent of conflagration Unseen heat from the spreading inferno singes the silken panel within the *tokonoma* Now, serpent-fire makes the shadows dance ominous and captivating, inescapable No one noticed the painted dragon had taken flight

The gods will weep for the loss of such beauty omoshiroi of destruction yet they do not deflect blame for inspiring man to create such flammable dwellings Each home, a new temple to sacrifice when the dragons are unleashed once more

—ash krafton

[short story]

OUTSORCERY

by joshua viola

The slug smashed into the back of Pagey's skull and knocked him face-down onto the ground. A brutal kick to the ribs flung him onto his back and he saw his assassin.

Bet he's not even twenty, Pagey thought.

This is how little the Don respects me—by sending out a kid on his first whack? A boy out to make his bones? Well, fuck him sideways, then. I'm glad I took all that money.

The kid smirked at Pagey as he brought the gun's muzzle to his lips and blew away the smoke.

Smug little prick.

Pagey said, "Who the hell do you think you are—Billy the Fucking Kid?"

Seeing a presumably dead man talk spooked the shit out of the kid. Spooked him so bad, he reflexively pulled the trigger. Unfortunately for him, the barrel was still aimed at his own face.

Unable to move just yet, Pagey nevertheless heard the kid's body drop dead beside him, and he really wanted to shake his head. *Young assassins these days were all so high-strung*.

Amazing anyone gets whacked at all, he thought, and grinned at the bright blue sky overhead.

A moment later, Pagey's wound closed and feeling returned to his limbs. Bada, Pagey thought as he picked himself up, bing!

Pagey sat slouched at a small table in a dark room, his gaze following bizarre, ritualistic drawings on the ceiling and walls. Several bookcases crammed with old tomes and artifacts loomed over him. This place always reminded him of that cartoon where Bugs Bunny pretended to be a swami.

He started whistling the Looney Tunes theme.

A large woman entered through a beaded doorway and joined him at the table. Her heavy face bore tattoos of slithering snakes. A bone necklace hung below her throat.

"Hello, Pagey," she said.

Pagey straightened himself and smirked. "There she is, my little miracle worker."

The woman rolled her eyes. "I see you've returned unharmed—just as I promised."

"I gotta say, Juma, I'm feeling pretty damn good for a guy who got his brains blown out today." He pointed to the back of his skull.

"Would you like to make the arrangement permanent?"

"You better believe it! This immortality racket is great."

Juma held up a warning finger as she brushed dreadlocks from her eyes. "I told you, I cannot save you from dying. You signed your own death warrant when you stole from your employers. I can't stop them from attacking you."

"Right, right," he said, barely listening. "Whatever they do to me, happens to them. I remember. I took a bullet to the head and don't even need an aspirin. I feel like the fucking Highlander over here. There can be only one!"

Juma frowned. "God help us if there were more than one of you, Pagey."

He smiled. "You know you love me."

Her expression softened a little. "All this trouble over dance lessons?"

"If my little girl wants to be a ballet dancer, then I'm going to make sure she's got the best teachers money can buy. It's her sweet sixteen present, after all. You should've heard the Don when I asked for the money. He told me to send her to Arthur Murray like he did his own kids. 'Don't get above yourself, Pagey,' he said. 'I've had this talk with you before. You ain't better than me and you never will be.' All that after the work I've done for him? After all the loyalty I've shown? Hell, thirty-five grand's hardly a scratch in their monthly take."

"It seems they noticed your embezzling quick enough."

"Yeah, well, cooking the books isn't as easy as icing some babbo, I guess. What can I say?"

"You could have just asked me to cook up a spell to make her a great dancer."

Pagey's eyes widened. The color drained from his face. "No, Juma. I know how your magic works. She'd dance well for a day and end up a quadriplegic. I won't risk it with her—not after Carol's death. You got that?"

Juma nodded.

"I'll take the consequences for myself, but not her," Pagey said.

Juma leaned forward and took Pagey's hands. "Magic's repercussions are always a tad unpredictable. But this promise I will make, the death your associates plan for you will not last. Whatever method they employ against you will fail, and their own intrigues will rebound against them tenfold."

"How long will the spell last? Two weeks?"

"What's special about two weeks?"

"It's when all the Families are gathering. My Don's hosting it for the first time in years. He'll want his house clean by then. That means my head on a platter, just to show the others he knows how to deal with a rat, no matter how valuable I've been in the past. The next fourteen days are going to be rough and I—"

"Forever."

"What?"

"You ask for two weeks. I give you forever. As long as these people come after you, you will be protected."

Pagey nodded. "I like the sound of that."

"Then let us draw up the contract?"

Pagey extended his arm and barely winced when Juma slashed his palm with a stiletto, and sealed their bargain in blood.

Pagey's mother gave him the nickname when he was a boy because he always had his nose in a book. She would have preferred the Bible, but unfortunately for her, his reading tastes dipped into esoteric topics like alchemy and black magic. It was nice to think of a world where you could whack someone from a distance by uttering a simple chant and brewing some leaves in a pot. But he never really thought any of it was real until he happened upon Juma and her shop.

He'd already made his bones before meeting her, but Juma's magic had made him a bit of a legend in the Family. It worked like this: the Don gave him someone to kill. If it was an easy job, he'd do it himself. Sometimes there were complications, though, and that's when he needed Juma's help. She charged a hefty price, but her magic always did the job and, of course, Pagey got all the credit. Just a simple bit of outsorcery.

The first time he ever actually used her services for personal matters was two years ago, when Pagey's wife was threatening divorce. He didn't want to be known as the divorced guy. The Family looked down on that, but even the Don couldn't talk his wife out of it. Desperation drove Pagey to see Juma, and she promised the divorce would never happen. She also gave him a firm warning. Meddling with strangers was one thing. When magic was used for reasons closer to the heart, there could be unforeseen consequences. That was just the way it worked.

And Pagey found that out fast.

His wife was run over by a semi-truck the next day. She was sunbathing on the beach when it happened. The rig careened out-of-control from the highway, plowed through the sand, and flattened her. Made the newspapers and everything.

After that, Pagey was a believer.

After that, Pagey knew there was magic and then there was magic.

Pagey was met one afternoon by two hoods he knew well, Willie the Can Opener and Neil the Jackknife. Both goons with a capital G.

About time I'm getting a little respect around here, Pagey thought.

He walked sandwiched between them, his hands in his pockets as they went to a ten-story building the Don owned downtown. There was a hole in the roof and several other structural problems. Willie and Neil told him all three had been asked to check it out. That was a hoot. As if any of them knew a goddamn thing about building maintenance.

Pagey couldn't help feeling a thrill of anticipation as he tried to guess how they were going to off him. Would Neil attempt to gut him like a fish? Maybe slit his throat? The garbage bag-over-the-head trick was a good one, employed by Pagey himself a few times.

Or hell, maybe they'd simply club him to death like a seal.

"The roof's got a bad leak and the Don's getting pissed," Willie said as they made their way up ten flights. When they stepped into the breeze, Pagey knew what the plan was. "Seems like the contractor's been cutting corners."

Neil laughed. "Hope not. Or he's going to get some of his own corners cut."

God—Pagey was getting bored. He almost said, "Shit, fellas, I'd rather jump to my death than listen to any more of your bullshit." He took several bold strides to the edge of the roof.

At least they chose a classic, tried-and-true hit, he thought. They must really respect me.

The sudden shove between the shoulder blades pitched Pagey over.

Hitting the alley hurt a hell of a lot more than taking a bullet to the back of the head, but he was surprised to find how quickly he could get back up. Just in time, too.

The building started to collapse, and a few minutes later Willie and Neil were splattered about his feet like ripe melons.

"Wow," Pagey said, stroking his chin. "Talk about cutting corners. I guess the contractor forgot to use quality steel."

Pagey kicked and thrashed as Mickey the Skeptic shoved his head into a toilet bowl. Mickey screamed, "This is what you fucking get when you steal money from the Don, Pagey!"

Drowning actually proved to be far easier than getting shot or being thrown off a building. But the toilet smelled just awful and all Pagey could think was, *Jeez, Mickey, couldn't you have given it a courtesy flush*?

Mickey didn't even bother to take Pagey's head out of the bowl. He just left him there once his body went limp. Pagey waited several minutes before pushing himself up. He scrubbed and dried his face before leaving, hoping his car would still be in the lot. It was. He got quite the chuckle when he drove home and the radio broke the news that a sinkhole had opened up, swallowing a car. Its single passenger had drowned in a sea of raw sewage.

Guess they can call you Mickey the Septic from now on, Pagey thought, and honked his horn in triumph.

With three days before the Families were to meet, Pagey knew the efforts to off him were really going to heat up. He could just imagine the Don's frustration that his little traitor was still alive, so there was no doubt the next effort was going to be overkill.

But a steamroller?

Now that's some classic Looney Tunes shit.

He didn't know the four guys who kidnapped him that night and hauled him off to the construction site on the edge of town. The Don had more than a few bodies planted here—the real troublemakers—and Pagey couldn't help thinking he'd gained a measure of respect at last. Figuring it had to be the last attempt made on his life before the gathering, Pagey felt a little flamboyant. It didn't help that he'd been dosed with enough heroin to off a racehorse.

"Seriously, fellas," he said, slurring his words as he dropped his trousers. "A shotgun straight into my asshole. Really wedge it up there. Don't even bother with lube."

The four men looked at each other. "Can you believe this guy?"

Juma's words echoed through Pagey's mind—"Their own intrigues will rebound against them tenfold." The idea doubled him over with laughter and he fell, clutching his stomach.

"Get the little freak into position," one said.

The men had West Coast and Southern accents, and he guessed they were heavies who worked for the other Families, all in town extra early just for him. One grabbed him by the ankles and dragged him into a ditch. Then they announced he'd be pressed flat and have hot tar dumped over him.

"Maybe they'll call it the Pagey Malone Memorial Parking Garage."

A fat guy pulled up in the steamroller. Its lights were glaring but nowhere near as bright as the guy's smile. He shifted and jammed his foot against the gas pedal, the engine shuddering as it approached. Pagey's body went flat as a pancake. Being crushed was a strange sensation and he felt an intense heat surge through him. Or maybe it was just the heroin.

With as much as they'd shot into him, it was hard to believe they had any leftover for themselves. But they must have, because the driver OD'd on the spot, leaving him dead with his foot wedged on the throttle. The other guys somehow never saw it coming. Maybe they were too busy gaping at Pagey's body as it began to reform itself. Regardless, the steamroller pressed them into a uniform thickness less than most books Pagey read.

But then, Pagey always liked thick books best of all.

Nothing happened for the next couple days, but Pagey didn't have any illusions about being left off the hook.

They made their move the night the Families gathered. Everyone was dining in a private room. Being the paranoid fucks they were, the heads of the Families brought their own chefs, their own food tasters, and assigned their own people to act as servers.

Being a waiter wasn't the job for a made man, Pagey thought, and he realized this humiliation was probably the only reason he was allowed to attend at all. No one spoke to him, least of all his Don, who stared intently at him the whole night. The last few weeks had been a strange game of pretend. Sort of cute and old-fashioned in a way. Pagey was supposed to act like he had no idea he was on a hit list, and the Don acted like he hadn't heard so many of his best guys had met bizarre, inexplicable fates trying to wipe Pagey out.

As the gathering was winding down, the Don himself approached Pagey as he filled a wine glass.

"Need you to get my car," he said.

"The Rolls?"

"A night like this, what else am I going to be riding in?"

The Don's words were slurred a bit, which surprised Pagey.

"Everything okay, sir?"

"Just peachy. I want you to drive me home. Mosso's been hitting the flask. He's denied it, but I saw it and took his keys. Here."

He tossed Pagey the keys.

Mosso was the only driver the Don ever trusted, and Pagey, like everybody else in the Family, knew Mosso didn't drink, do drugs, or fool around.

Which told Pagey how this one was going to end.

And wow, he was getting more respect than he'd ever believed possible. *The Don wants me out of the picture so bad he's willing to sacrifice the Corniche?*

Pagey found the car in the parking lot. He got in and put the key into the ignition.

Bada bing—

He turned it.

Bada bang!

The car exploded. A million fragments of Pagey flew through the air.

In an instant, his body fused back together, just in time to feel the pain of landing hard in the parking lot. But all in all, he just had a few bruises.

Which was a lot more than could be said for the Family members inside the restaurant when it blew a minute later. Police and fire investigators blamed a gas leak. Forensic scientists couldn't find more than an occasional limb, torso, or head in the remains, and the reporters and editorial writers said the explosion was the biggest disruption to organized crime in a century.

Guess it's all over with at last, Pagey thought. He could look forward to just living his life now. He'd do it pretty well, too, since he had a good idea what death felt like.

Pagey knew where the records were kept, where the cash was stowed, and in the confusion following the blast, he got his hands on both, and set himself up nicely.

Very nicely.

He wouldn't have any worries, and neither would his daughter. Not even expensive ones. He soon began looking to see if there were an even more expensive dance studio for his daughter to attend.

After all, sweet sixteen was just around the corner.

Pagey was smoking a Gurkha on his new leather chesterfield in the grand foyer of his new home when the door behind him opened. Smiling, he knew just who it'd be.

"How were dance lessons, sweetheart?"

"I hate it. I don't want to be a dancer anymore, so I quit."

"What?" Pagey said, dropping his cigar on the sofa. He jumped up in a burst of rage. "Do you have any idea what I went through to—"

Pagey's daughter removed a katana from a display of weapons mounted on the wall and pointed it at him.

"I think I've got a different career in mind, Daddy."

"Please, honey," he said, taking a slow step toward her. "Put the sword down. You don't know what you're doing."

She tightened her grip on the haft. "Sure I do. Before he died, the Don offered me a chance to make my bones by taking you out. I decided not to, but now that he's out of the picture, you're the only one standing in my way."

Pagey frowned. "What are you talking about? In the way of what?"

His daughter closed the distance between them.

"The chance to become the head of the new Family."

She moved closer.

Their own intrigues will rebound against them tenfold.

Pagey raised his hands. "You don't understand, honey! You need to put the sword down. You can't kill me."

"Of course I can, but I'd appreciate it if you move a little to the left. Don't want to get any blood on that lovely sofa."

If he could keep her talking, Pagey thought, he might be able to convince her to drop the katana. And if he couldn't do that, maybe he could get close enough to disarm her.

"You don't have to do this. Everything I have is already yours—"

Pagey felt cold steel slice his chest.

And a moment later, quite à propos of nothing, ten bloodthirsty ninjas broke in through the windows, and Pagey's daughter's dancing days truly were over.



[poetry]

Divinations I Know About

At the church, I lose a soulmate to magic. She clutches the hand of her new suitor tightly, and together they take off like long distance fliers, birds who know olive branches wait for them. My part in her love story? A casual flashback scene; another bubble of personal tragedy floating in this town. Dear Joe, stay at the prison where you are: things ain't looking up yet mate - divinations began to happen without you; services performed in your absence. Soul of Bamiyan, we bulldozed your idol and put up a new one: the chopped off human head. We call it the red fountain of dreams. It's art for us, you know. We fill the streets with blood and sweat, and our mouths stink with the slogans we gulped. The tree has never been more silent: without leaves, tongues rather. Life is tough brother, I still have only a slice of tomato in my bread, and call it a sandwich. I know it ain't different in your prison; we struggle to outlive the tube, web, and our dreams. Weird, the ones with diamonds in their shoe soles thirst for the blood of those of us with empty pockets. It's everywhere mate: India. America. China. You name it. I've stopped running. Faith, a ladder we climb to reach elsewhere. We read Basho, we read Manto, we walk the alleys of the song with Agha Shahid Ali. We search for your prison, in our prayers. There is no good news yet dear, no good at all.

—aditya shankar

in and out of focus

your image seems at times to be as sharp and vibrant as a tiger that's escaped its cage stealing my breath away making me realize that there's no chance I can keep up or escape with lines so clearly defined and you freshly stalking the world that exists as your prey

and then there are the times when you appear aloof and treacherous as a mountain shrouded in a haze so thick that the scope let alone the outline are clouded in obscurity and I can't imagine ever clearly seeing you at all

—allan rozinski

Fast Forward

by bruce costello

Patrick Black brushed past the usual crowd of school children waiting in the Ministerium foyer for the start of Sensitivity classes. A few glanced at his misshapen back and quickly turned away. One girl, who looked about six, stared at him open-mouthed. A bald teacher, maintaining the regulation distance of half a metre from her, spoke to the girl and wrote something in his notebook. She reddened and shrank into herself.

The Heads of Department meeting was due to begin at 7:30. Patrick hurried to the lift. A blonde woman and a redhead broke off an animated conversation about lipstick shortages. He greeted them in his usual jocular manner. They responded in the same tone, and then stood silently side-by-side against the rear wall of the lift, staring ahead.

"In new age New Zealand," its loudspeaker blared, "national wealth is no longer measured by outmoded concepts such as the availability of consumer goods, but by happiness. Sensitivity is the key to happiness."

"We are very fortunate to be living in the year 2084 in a country where the Government cares about us," said the blonde, loudly.

"Yes," said the redhead. "Sensitivity is truly the key to happiness."

"That is so true," the blonde replied.

Patrick left the lift on the 29th floor and walked quickly to the meeting room, where he sat at a round table beside a large woman with a tattooed neck. This was Ms. Schmidt, CEO. She wore big, yellow-framed tinted spectacles, which struck

Patrick as giving her a cartoon appearance. From her pocket, Ms. Schmidt took a box of matches, leaned forward and lit a stick of incense in a brass dragon censer. A wisp of smoke curled upwards from its jaws and the scent of jasmine filled the air. The meeting was due to begin.

"Good morning, women and men," Ms. Schmidt said. "Who would like to share first?"

A woman with a ponytail raised a hand, her wheelchair whirring as she moved closer to the table. This was Azeen Azziz of Human Resources, who had joined the Ministerium staff under the Legless Refugee Employment Scheme after two years at the Immigration Indoctrination Immersion Centre, where she had learned to speak almost perfect English.

Placing a spreadsheet on the table, Azeen cleared her throat. "In line with the Ministerium policy to employ staff in numbers proportional to their representation in the population, I am pleased to announce that this has been fully achieved for every ethnic group—with the obvious exception of the Australians detained on Stewart Island—and for almost all social minorities. To take a few random examples of the latter," she said, her eyes scanning the spreadsheet, "precisely 4% of our staff are visually impaired, 20% have serious mental health issues, and 16.5% are sex addicts."

Clapping broke out around the table.

"However," continued Azeen, after waiting for silence, "upon learning from Statistics that 0.3% of the population are compulsive Elvis Presley impersonators, we at Human Resources immediately employed one such individual on a part-time basis, but we do not have a position for him, and it appears he has no interest in learning other skills. Of course, we cannot fire the man."

A long silence filled the room.

Patrick pressed his lips together tightly as he saw Azeen blush crimson, like a small girl ashamed of blushing and consequently blushes still more.

"I remind you, Ms. Azziz" said Ms. Schmidt, removing her tinted glasses, "that firing an employee is not only illegal but the thought of doing so is legally unthinkable."

Patrick shivered, struck by the cruel set of Ms. Schmidt's lips and the baleful look in her dark eyes as she transfixed Azeen with her gaze.

"I also remind you, Ms. Azziz," Ms. Schmidt continued, her voice brittle, "the law states that any person, whatever their characteristics, not excluding Elvis Presley impersonators, given enough assistance, can be motivated and trained to do any job." Her voice rose. "Which is precisely why we employ brain surgeons, psychologists and alternative therapists and operate our own staff rehabilitation institution, as you are well aware!"

"Good morning, staff," sounded the ceiling speaker, "Health and Safety remind you that the Ministerium is a stress-free environment. All staff are now required to practice relaxation techniques for 15 minutes. Staff with mobility issues may remain seated. All others must lie on the floor, close their eyes and enjoy the following visualisation." With the exception of Azeen, who remained in her wheelchair, staff left the table and lay on the maroon shag pile carpet.

"You are at the foot of a waterfall. The sun is shining..." continued the voice.

"A serious matter has come to my attention," said Ms. Schmidt, after the exercise. "A most inappropriate notice has been placed on Netjobsearch by our own Human Resources Department!"

Across the table, Patrick saw Azeen start to blink rapidly, hands gripping the handles of her wheelchair.

"I shall read you what it says," Ms. Schmidt continued. "A person with initiative is required, not afraid of hard work." She looked around the table. "Well? What do we think of that?"

A chorus of voices rang out. "Awful!" "Disgusting!" "How insensitive!" "So offensive!"

Patrick said nothing.

Ms. Schmidt removed her glasses and stared at Azeen. Her voice rose. "Do you not understand that an advertisement for a person *with initiative* is terribly offensive to people whom nature has not endowed with an abundance of initiative?" She banged her fist on the table. "And can you not comprehend that an advertisement for a person *not afraid of hard work* is horribly insensitive to people who were born lazy?"

Patrick's chest was heaving and he was breathing heavily as he entered Azeen's office later in the day.

Azeen moved towards him in her wheelchair and took his hand. "Are you alright, my friend?"

Patrick attempted to speak, but coughed. He sat down. Two minutes passed.

"Sorry about that," he said. "The hump puts pressure on my lungs. When I'm stressed, it affects my breathing."

He stood and stretched, raising his hands above his head, which highlighted the hump on his back. He walked around the room a couple of times, then sat and began to speak, gazing at Azeen.

"I couldn't bear seeing you treated the way you were in the meeting," he said, slowly. "It really got to me. Tell me, honestly: how are you feeling after that?"

Azeen nodded. "I think I'm okay." She fell silent, and then continued in a mournful tone. "When I heard about New Zealand's social reforms, your country seemed like the answer to all my prayers. A society where the government cared about everybody."

"Attention all staff," boomed the loudspeaker. "You are advised that the women's toilets on floor 29 are working again. Female staff needing to use the facilities should do so immediately, as holding on for too long may be injurious to health, or lead to accidents and cause issues for staff decontaminators."

"I know," said Patrick. "It sounded like a dream. New legislation, and an agency set up with the sole aim of keeping us safe, promoting equal opportunities for everybody, whatever their differences or disabilities, and completely eliminating prejudice and all forms of insensitivity. "

"My bum!" said Azeen.

"My arse," said Patrick, "is the colloquial expression."

"Whatever," replied Azeen, frowning. "The agency got carried away by its own rhetoric, called itself the Ministerium and turned into this deluded idiotic monstrosity. And we didn't notice it happening."

"It's the elephant in the room."

"I'm afraid we've turned into a nation of idiots."

"Present company accepted, surely. You and I are still sensible, aren't we?"

"Are we? How can we tell? We've been immersed in bullshit for a long time. Does a fish see the sea that surrounds it?

"You mean—we could've lost touch with what's normal?"

"Do you feel like sex?"

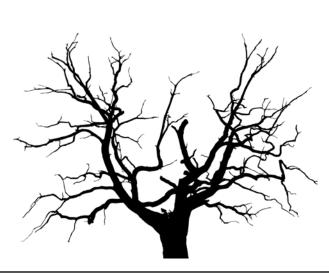
"No thanks, I've just had lunch."

"Oh," said Azeen. Her face fell. "I feel really disappointed. It's not all about you. Women have needs, too, you know."

"Okay, then," Patrick said. "Let's rock 'n roll."

Azeen's face lit up. Together the two left Azeen's office and proceeded along the corridor to Love Suite Two, one of the facilities provided by the Ministerium for staff with Sexual Addiction Disorder.

Azeen's wheelchair whirred loudly and Patrick had to run to keep up with her.



[poetry]

butterfly gland

Something is wrong with the butterfly sitting below her Adam's apple. Hormones destroy the metabolism of her life.

Anger-waves cause cracks in relationship; epicenter is in her neck.

Her black hairs fall unusually. Anxiety spreads before her vanity table.

Love dries in depression. Their bed becomes a parched garden.

Her unlicensed words hit his heart. A death rattle echoes in the throat of their family life.

A physician and pharmacist derive pleasure from her butterfly gland.

The poem portrays a lady with thyroid problems. Thyroid gland is in the shape of a butterfly.

—fabiyas mv

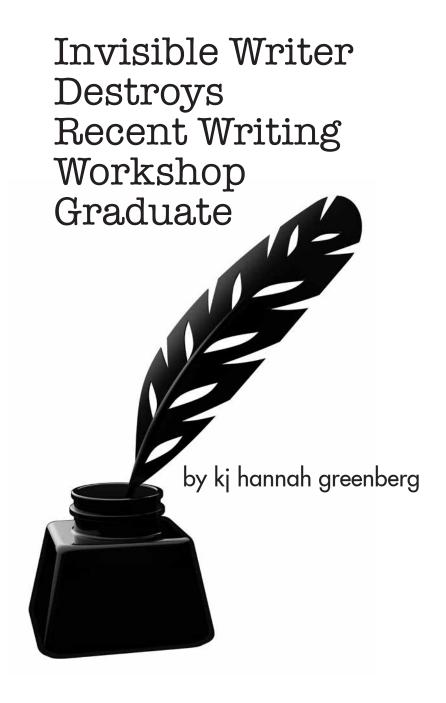
[poetry]

the golden knob

Laughter in the basement where a vicious ventriloquist dumps his dummies into a barrel & throws his raspy voice from a mirror's mouth full of cobwebs. I run with rats toward the awkward light at the top of the stairs, hope the golden knob of time will not mock me from a distance.

-darrell lindsey

[short story]



Prior to the funeral, web sites and apps didn't stop buzzing about the incident. It seemed so improbable that a staid grandma could have done such a thing. It seemed even more unlikely that someone of her era would have dared.

The guilty party had been a moldy oldie; vintage late 1950s, gray hair, saggy belly, misplaced vivaciousness. She seemed incapable of firing up media volleys. Surely, no one of her ilk ought to have been equipped to actualize social murder.

Yet, everyone has triggers. Sometimes, it's fame. Other times, it's fortune. Occasionally, it's exhaustion. At the time of the skirmish, the perpetrator had been run-down, very run-down.

That elder had just hosted all of her married children and their ill-behaved offspring for a week. She had cooked, cleaned, cleaned up after, and shopped until she had dropped. Ultimately, it was her bronchitis that pushed her past reasonable choices.

At the time, the family bank account was approaching zero, despite the fact that she had bought neither holiday clothing nor jewelry for herself. Plus, the cupboards were relatively bare, causing her adult son to peruse them and to complain about the lack of dainties, contained therein, at least four or five times per day. Telling him that she had fired the fridge fairy hadn't helped.

Moreover, given her suppressed immune system, she was covered with impetigo splotches (an id infection), had a bark like a sea critter, had a temperature to rival a sunbaked iguana, and had a mood to match a war-torn wombat. Heating pad on chest, thyme tea at the ready, herbal decongestant slathered all over her bosom, she lay under a thick blanket, wishing for more, not less, June heat.

A few days later, the time of the actual occurrence, her temperature had dropped enough for her to sit up for a few hours. Bravely, she put her pajamas aside and donned regular clothing. She brought a thermos of ginger ale to her desk and plugged her heating pad in next to her printer.

As the woman scrolled through her email, her husband called to announce that for at least half of a week, there would be no knife sharpening, no replacements of ratty underwear, and nothing to eat beyond the burnt, leftover cutlets she had thought to seal in their freezer. They were broke (as he had discovered while trying to pay for his lunch in a swanky joint near his office—he had let a friend advance him the money to cover his share of the cheque) and his next paycheck was more than three days away.

The grandma felt her stomach tighten and squeeze. She ran, for the third time that hour, to the toilet.

Exhaling mightily upon reentering the family apartment's common rooms, she

resolved to limit her computer use to email. She figured that she'd expend little or no emotional energy emptying her burgeoning box.

The woman, accordingly, clicked open one message after another. Mentally shrugging, she deleted adds for horseback riding and jumping clinics, features on Ski Lanka vacations, and alumni donation requests sent from the three universities that she had attended.

She sighed when reading one editor's wish for yet another head shot and nearly cried when she read that yet a different, more prestigious publication, had accepted an essay. Then she came to the first of the two catalytic letters.

A know-it-all, a former fisherman, upon who, somehow, had been bestowed the title of "fiction editor," at a venue for which the woman had been a regular contributor for more than a decade, had read a satirical piece of hers and had responded to it as though the piece had been written in earnest. From the safety of her home office, she flashed him a finger.

Allegedly, at around the same time, her adult child rapped, with urgency, on her office door. He was mad that the last piece of frozen salmon and the imported forest fruits jam had been made off limits. He complained about having to make due with cold cuts or P&J sandwiches.

In response to all of the stimuli, the silver-haired one begin to cough, a little, and then a lot more, until it sounded as if her gasps would surely recycle her lunch at her child's feet. Forgetting to close her office door, he bolted.

While the exhausted writer continued to sharply force air and various secretions out of her lungs and while she stared at the gaping aperture where, a moment earlier, her son had stood, her married daughter called. The married one wanted to engage her in casual dialogue. The woman, all the same, was still coughing and gagging as she tried to noise into the phone. Her girl heedlessly yammered on. So many words flew from the phone that it seemed as if the daughter barely breathed.

Finally, the grandmom caught her own breath and suggested that she continue with her daughter later. That offspring was still engaged in a one-way conversation about diapers when the woman hung up.

Slowly, the compromised woman drank a cup of ginger ale. Her respiratory hacking subsided, a little. Shrugging, she opened another screen and scanned the news.

Celebrities, who spent more money on their manicures than she did on monthly groceries, had been photographed at a "newsworthy" fete. Women were being raped in Europe by refugees from the Middle East. Mudslinging had gotten underway around the forthcoming presidential election.

Shuddering, she closed that screen. For a second time, reading email seemed the most relaxing option.

Deleting letter after letter from her mother-in-law, the woman again came to a business communication, the second of the two missives that increased the rate of her reactions to outlier goings on.

A young something, likely in her twenties or thirties, was writing to tell the woman that a submission of hers could be best identified as either "bogus" or "specious." In case the author didn't grasp the editor's intent, the editor added that the woman's work was "full of phewy."

The grandma began coughing, once more. She had taught, at the graduate level, the likes of the nincompoop who was berating her. Giving into a newly sourced sourness rising from her gut, she Googled the culprit.

As Granny suspected, that "editor" was a graduate of the same workshop as the journal's editor-in-chief. Maybe they were friends. Maybe they were lovers. It didn't matter; a quick search revealed that the audacious child, the one who dared to offer emotional reflection rather than constructive criticisms, had published exactly two short works in her entire life, one of which she had broadcast in the journal she edited. More specifically, that mentally handicapped other was not only unprofessional, but was also inexperienced as both a writer and as a publishing supervisor.

Hubby called back. His mother had pinged him that Wifey had not answered any of the fifty-six emails she had sent during the last half of a day.

The woman answered her Dearly Wed, coughing out her words. There would be no cooked dinner when he got home He, all by himself, would have to finish cleaning their grandkids' poo stains out of the carpet. Their unmarried daughter was buying auto insurance and meant to use it to drive the family's only car.

She added that if Hubby didn't pick up a pizza in route home, neither of them, their adult child, their younger daughter, or their high school son would have more than cold cuts or P&J sandwiches to eat. As per financing such fine dining, she didn't care if he robbed a bank. Up until that point, the woman hadn't thought it was possible to "slam" a cellphone.

Meanwhile, there remained the matter of the nincompoop editor. Her husband had routinely told her not to waste her resources yelling at simpletons.

Checking the color of the mucus she expelled, she weighed his advice. He was right; there was no need to get mad when she could get even. Immediately, Grandma contacted the junior editor's former advisor, who, himself, happened to have been a student of her own. In fact, that professor's successful tenure decision had been partially based on a letter she had written.

The girl disappeared from the masthead. A quick search, months later, revealed her to have morphed into a real estate agent in Tampa. Elsewhere, the woman's rejected piece got published. Eventually, it was also included in a Pushcart Prize anthology.

Time rolled. The hungry, adult child went to college, met a nice girl, married, and spent his prime years working in a corporate office. He sometimes sent his mother sides of smoked salmon. He always brought take out when his family visited.

The married daughter had five more kids, became run-down, herself (especially when her children visited her with their own children) and became addicted to cream of mushroom soup. She never had to ask her husband to clean poo out of their carpet, however, since he was a neatnik and as such always offered. What's more, that daughter claimed to have no memory of having talked inanely at her mother years earlier or of letting her own children run amok in her parents' home.

The teenage son grew up, became an IT guru, and bought his mother a new wardrobe. Furthermore, it became his wife's greatest joy to take her mother-in-law, weekly, to a beauty palace where fingernail paintjobs cost as much as most folks' electric bills. In addition, that daughter-in-law always treated.

The younger daughter did receive her car insurance. She never crashed the car. Rather, she married one of the hitchhikers she had picked up while driving. Consistently, she declared that he was smarter, more charming, and entirely more creative than any of the fellows she had known while being a medical student.

The husband cried unceasingly at his mother's funeral.

As for the writer, she avoiding hugging or kissing anyone with respiratory infections, hired help when her kids, her grandkids, or her great-grandkids came to visit for lengthy spans, and sold enough copies of one of her fiction collections to see her family out of debt. Even so, those changes in her self-care did not suffice to protect her health. Her husband wound up crying at her funeral, too.

It is believed, however, that he would not have shed so many tears had he read the testimonies about just how evil his spouse had been to a particularly unskilled young woman, a new editor who had made a pot shot at his beloved. For the same reason that the husband had expected his wife to glide through the pressures of: their mounting debt, their bratty children, and his occasional unbearableness, not to mention his mother's unendurable behaviors, and the family's permanently stained carpets, he expected her to be similarly saintly with career-related idiots.

In his esteem, his wife had possessed exceptional inviolability. There was no way, in his eyes, that she could have been culpable of destroying the calling of a recent writing workshop graduate.





EMMA & JANN -2015

—janne karlsson & emma-johanna henriksson

[poetry]

Condolences

Once, we thought Nature and her sister, Earth, endowed with minds; and hurricanes, volcanoes, earthquakes, floods, tornadoes and typhoons, as kinds

of conscious ministrations, like the slap on the bottom, or yell to a misbehaving child. An eclipse, someone trying to tell

us something, but through silence, as a soul might send a shooting star as warning of what's to come if we don't change. I now believe they're modes of mourning

and, as a bull's numb to the china's value, those howling ladies, at the wakes of children, lose some decorum, some restraint, as many a proper loving mother will.

—james nicola

Letiche

Letiche, Letiche, *mon petit choux*, What on earth has got into you? Illegitimate, unbaptised, abandoned by your mother, child, they say you grew up feral in this swamp.

Letiche, Letiche, *mon petit choux*, your skin's so pale and wrinkled now. Your hair, once so blonde and fair, is olive now and full of moss and mud. They say you've gone bull goose cannibal.

Latiche, Latiche, *mon petit choux*, your breath smells like a car parked in a barn for years, your belly full of kibbles and dead mice. They say you eat anything that moves.

Letiche, Latiche, *mon petit choux*, the bloodhounds are closing now. Will you rend them limb by limb or will you take a bullet soon? Oh, that the full moon found you in a swoon.

-richard stevenson



by jeff haas

The scientist was lonely, so he decided to create some little people to keep him company. He set up a Petri dish in the middle of the lab next to his high-powered microscope, grabbed a bunch of raw materials—mostly enzymes and stuff—and worked day and night until he was finished. Before long, he had fashioned a man and a woman who looked a lot like him, and he placed them in the middle of the Petri dish.

But, being a scientist, he decided he needed a control group. So he set up an identical Petri dish in a secluded part of the lab next to the graduated cylinder and the potted plant. He kept the control group far from the test group so they couldn't see or hear each other, and he placed a similar male and female in the second Petri dish. Then he left the control group alone.

At first, everything went well with the test group. The scientist talked to the man and woman on a daily basis, and they listened to everything he had to say with rapt attention. He enjoyed their company and they seemed to enjoy his. They had much to learn about the world, and the scientist was more than willing to teach them.

But things changed pretty quickly. As time passed, the man and woman seemed to need the scientist's advice less and less. They started to keep their own counsel, and when the babies came all bets were off. Pretty soon they were making their own decisions completely without the scientist's intervention. This made him sad in one way but proud in another. They were becoming their own people.

As much as it pained him, the scientist decided to give them the freedom they craved to make their own decisions and their own mistakes.

Unfortunately, this had disastrous consequences. After several generations, more and more of the Petri dish was covered with little people, which inevitably led to conflict. Brother started fighting with brother, and pretty soon small groups formed and fought with each other. Worse yet, no one was listening to the scientist anymore. Something had to be done.

The scientist tried many things to get their attention—shouting, shaking the Petri dish—but nothing seemed to work. Finally, out of pure frustration, he grabbed a beaker from the cabinet, filled it up at the vitreous sink, and splashed the lot of them with a cold dose of water. Surely now the little people would listen to reason.

But the scientist's rash act had unintended consequences. In his fit of rage he had emptied the entire beaker into the Petri dish, and most of the little people drowned.

He was mortified. Fortunately, enough of the little people survived to make it possible for them to start over. And the one positive result was that they started listening to him again, if for no other reason than the fear that he might drown them all the next time. Feeling great remorse, the scientist apologized to the little people and promised never to do it again.

So things went along swimmingly, so to speak, for a while. The original man and woman were long gone, but the scientist spoke with their descendants on a regular basis, until their selfishness overtook them once again.

But this time it was much worse. It wasn't just that they were spoiled children trying to test their wings; there was something more insidious in their willfulness. Instead of just ignoring the scientist, the little people were openly flouting him and choosing their selfish desires in spite of him. Some even had the audacity to claim that there really was no scientist at all. Something had to be done—again.

The scientist decided that the little people needed to be reminded, once and for all, that he truly existed. But, since he was so much bigger than they were, he couldn't go down into the Petri dish himself. So he created a little-people-size clone of himself and sent the clone down in his stead, placing him smack dab in the middle of the Petri dish.

Needless to say, the little people were a tad surprised to see the clone appear out of nowhere. But he seemed to be a pretty nice guy, and they got along with him well enough for a little while. The clone told them all about the scientist—how lonely he was, how much he wanted to talk to them—and the little people related their litany of pint-sized problems to the clone. Some people took the clone seriously and started talking to the scientist again. But most people were suspicious and resentful of the clone. Finally, in the end analysis, the little people killed the clone and thumbed their noses at the scientist.

At first the scientist was indignant, but eventually he resigned himself to the fact that the little people didn't want to have anything to do with him. He had tried everything, and everything had failed.

Now all he could do was watch as the little people made a complete mess of the Petri dish. Terrible wars broke out, and disease ran rampant. Finally, two entrenched factions waged a vicious, prolonged war that engulfed the entire Petri dish. The scientist looked on in horror as the little people destroyed themselves.

When he leaned over to confirm that they were all dead, a solitary tear escaped his eye and fell deep into the Petri dish, diluting the blood.

Suddenly, in his moment of utter despair, the scientist remembered the control group. With mounting hopes, he ran to the secluded part of the lab and eagerly examined the second Petri dish.

But the little people in the control group were dead, too. A large group of bodies was huddled together in a grotesque circle of death at the center of the Petri dish. This seemed suspicious to the scientist, so he decided to start an investigation.

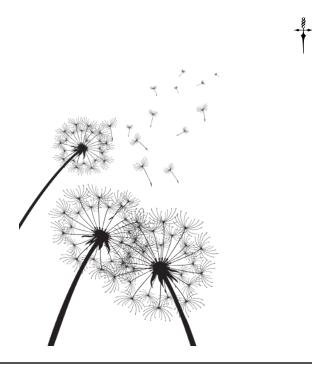
He observed, he hypothesized, he predicted, and he tested.

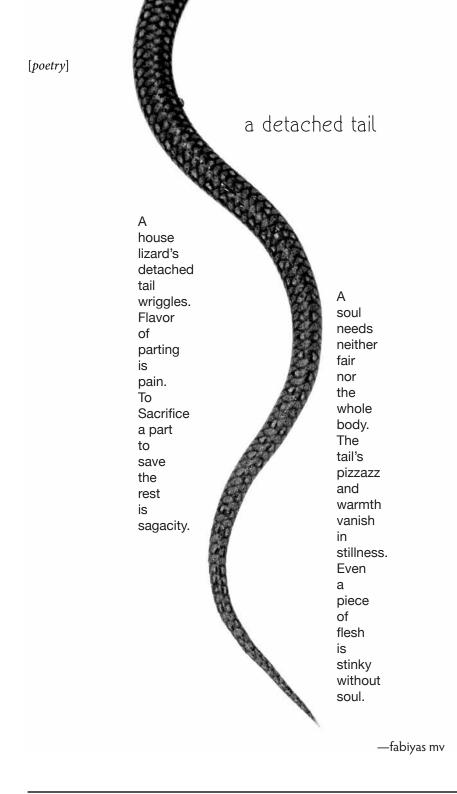
At long last, the scientist identified the control group's leader by his position in the circle of death. And buried deep in the leader's pocket was a tiny slip of paper. The scientist extracted the paper with a pair of tweezers and took it over to the microscope.

A note read: To Whom It May Concern, We are completely without hope and have decided to kill ourselves. Thanks for nothing. Yours Truly, The Little People

Fighting back his tears, the scientist carried the control group over to the test group, and then took both Petri dishes to the vitreous sink. He solemnly washed the gruesome remains of all the little people down the drain.

As he was placing the clean Petri dishes back in the cabinet, the scientist resolved never to perform experiments on little people again, even if it meant being lonely for the rest of his life.





[poetry]

Will You?

If I disappear into the dark recesses of my mind, Will you come find me? If I fall into the void that was once my peace, Will you reach down and pull me out? If I fall to my knees and scream until there is no sound, Until my throat bleeds and I drown in my tears, Will you be there to dry my face and quiet my fears? Will you?

—tina stickles

The Ghosts Remember

The ghosts remember shaping the world, sloughing off the world as it was, manpower to make the world in their own image: forget the reason for creating, for creation, just create, only make new, reform all things for they must be plastic in your grips, your iron-willing hands.

The ghosts remember, draw back again from their heady forgetting, recalling that endless empty life, full of words spilling, full of fancies being made real by thought with power to form, to shape the world while water unseen runs, trees unheard fall, thoughts unused wait. The ghosts remember clicking their tongues clanking their chains wanting freedom's bands, spittle dripping down. Where is the love they thought they knew, the examined life they thought they shared with each other and the many others? Were their lives not crossed?

The ghosts remember where they walked in full-bodied form close to each other holding always back and now their dumb mouths are closed words no longer dripping mortal life passed with never a second lost, except chance. And they had walked across the threshold daily through the weeds and nowhere else, afterlife unknown.

-steven petersheim

COVET

I always told you I would burn for you, die, as I pined for you, as I lusted for you, as I loved you, I swore that I would burn.

But when the fires came, when the armies marched on the broken backs of slaughter, when our bones were crushed into the asphalt dream,

as I watched you turn to liquid and your marrow soak into the earth, I found myself unburnt, and somehow, I remained.

-wesley gray

[poetry]

CORONER'S REPORT

I have known death To arrive with a smile As if it could erase All the sorrow it has sown

And I have known death To watch fireworks dancing On the wall where its shadow Lay waiting to strike

And I have known death To confront the darkness While bidding farewell With a final cigarette

And I shall know death When I see the crows gather To escort me to a place Unmarked on any map

—richard schnap

IF MEMORY SERVES

by rory o'brien

Memory-editing was an outpatient procedure, and as Carter made his way home from the doctor's, he was mildly surprised at how little it seemed to have affected him.

He remembered the route home, remembered the house, and remembered the dog that greeted him with a wagging tail. He recognized his wife and daughter smiling from photographs on the wall, remembered that today they would be home a little later than the usual time, and remembered what the usual time was. He remembered that he had a meeting at the office the next day, and that quarterly reports were due next week.

So far, so good.

He sat on the couch, sipping a cold drink and feeling better than he had in weeks. The weeks that led up to his decision came back to him with perfect clarity. Even now he could recall the uneasiness, the depression, and the pain. It had been clear to all around him that something had been wrong for some time, something serious. He remembered the afternoon he determined that a memory-edit was his best option, and the night he was up talking about it with his wife, Kate.

He had almost not mentioned it to her at all. What had been on his mind was personal and private, not to be discussed with anyone, not even Kate. Least of all Kate. It was his problem and it did not concern her. He had always been a private person and she knew this. He would not make his wife carry half his burden. But he did tell her about his decision to undergo the procedure.

Looking back on it, he couldn't even imagine what the problem had been. It was gone now, edited right out of his memory like a scene cut from a film and left on the floor, with all the emotions and associations that went with it.

He could remember being upset, but not what he had been upset about.

The troubled Carter of only a few hours before now seemed like a different person entirely.

None of his irrational fears about the procedure had come true. Old stories about patients in hospitals having the wrong limb amputated had been haunting him for the past week, but nothing of the sort had happened. Only the target memory had been excised, and all else seemed intact.

He wondered vaguely if the procedure had not somehow actually heightened his recall. His recollection of that morning stood out in sharp, bright detail. He felt that he could remember every question on every form he had filled out, could remember perfectly the receptionist's face, the talkative old man in the waiting room, the bland watercolors hung along the hallways, the smell of the technician's perfume ...

When Kate got home a few hours later, she ushered little Lizzie into the next room and closed the door behind her.

"How did it go today?" she asked quietly.

"Fine," he replied. "Fine. I got there around noon, they knocked me out, and I don't remember anything ..."

"Isn't that the point?" Kate laughed uneasily.

"I guess so," he returned the laugh.

"And whatever it was is-gone?"

"Gone. Completely. No recollection of it at all."

"Good." Kate smiled a little unconvincingly. "Do you have to go back or anything?"

"Next week. For a checkup. To make sure it's gone."

"Good. And you feel okay?"

"I feel fine," he said, and stretched. "Better than ever."

"I'm so glad, honey." She gave his hand a squeeze. "Really ..."

"Me, too."

"Your test results are all very good, Mr. Carter," Dr. Joachim said two weeks later, looking over his file. "Quite good. Do you have any questions?"

"Yes, I do. A couple of times over the past week I got a very strong sense of deja vu. Each time I was in a store downtown that I've never been in before or at least I don't remember having been there before. But it all seemed very familiar to me."

"That's common," she said, glancing at the file again.

She shook her head. "No. What you're experiencing is often called a phantom memory."

"Like phantom pain?" Carter asked uncomfortably.

"Paramnesia, actually; feeling that new experiences are familiar. It happens to everyone from time to time, even to people who haven't had a mnemectomy." She smiled reassuringly. "It even happens to me once in a while."

That made Carter feel better.

"I have heard about people having the work done, but something gets missed," he said, then caught himself. "Of course, I'm not saying that you—"

"Don't worry about it, Mr. Carter," Dr. Joachim replied.

"I get that question all the time. When I was giving you your checkup earlier I made sure I got everything the first time. It's gone. I'm very thorough."

"I have heard about memories growing back ..."

"I have, too," she nodded. "But I've never seen it, and I've never seen it documented in the twelve years that I've been performing this procedure." She gestured toward the wall of diplomas and certifications. "Memories that are excised do not grow back. It's not like cancer. You have nothing to worry about, Mr. Carter."

But he did worry, and just over a month after he had undergone the procedure, Carter began to wonder.

Exactly what memory had he chosen to have edited out?

There was no sense of having a hole in his memory, no feeling that something was missing, and yet he knew that something was. When coming back from the dentist, he thought, a patient not only knew that a tooth had been pulled, but could also feel the gap where the tooth had been. This procedure, however, had left him with the knowledge, but not the feeling. He kept closing his eyes and expecting to find some kind of mental scar tissue, but found none—only the understanding that there had been something that was gone now.

He began to second-guess himself.

In his office was a young secretary named Beth whose skirts were always a little shorter than company policy allowed. Beth was attractive and single and something of a flirt, and Carter knew he often smiled when he saw her.

"Here's the report you were asking for, Mr. Carter," Beth said one day, handing over a thick manila folder and smiling prettily.

"Thank you, Beth."

She lingered for a moment before nodding toward Kate's photograph on his desk.

"How's Mrs. Carter?" she asked.

"Fine," Carter said. "She's fine."

"Good. Glad to hear."

That half-minute of conversation raised a thousand questions in his mind.

He occasionally worked late; so did a number of people in the office and so did Beth. They sometimes worked together. Had one of those overtime nights gotten slightly out of hand?

Is that what he had chosen to forget? If it was ...?

And why had Beth asked about Kate? Why was she glad to hear that Kate was fine? Was it because of the supposititious late night or was it something else? What? Kate and Beth had never even met—at least as far as he could remember.

He shook these thoughts away and tried to get back to work. He opened the report Beth had given him and stared at it blankly for a long minute. He put it down on his desk as his mouth went dry. Then he went through it page by page, becoming increasingly alarmed as he did so.

He did not recognize anything in this report. It was not one of his clients, and it was not something he had handled.

At least as far as he could remember.

He was still staring at the report when Beth returned.

"Mr. Carter, I'm sorry. I think I gave you the wrong one," she said. "This is the report you requested. I gave you Mr. Petersen's."

"Thank you, Beth." They traded folders.

"Sorry about that."

"No problem."

Carter tried not to think too much about it. But he did anyway.

They were having guests over that night, so Carter picked up a few things on the way home. When he got in, Lizzie met him at the door.

"My very excellent mother just showed us nine planets," she gushed proudly. "What?"

"My very excellent mother just showed us nine planets," she repeated. "It's a noo—it's a m'noo ... it's a thing that helps you remember."

"A mnemonic," her mother said gingerly, not looking at Carter.

"Right. This is for planets—Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, Pluto."

"Very clever," Carter smiled. "Here's one I learned: Please Excuse My Dear Aunt Sally."

"What's that one for?" Lizzie asked. "You don't have an Aunt Sally."

"That one's for ..." Carter stopped short as he realized that he remembered the mnemonic, but not what it was supposed to remind him of. He could feel himself getting pale. Dammit.

"Order of operations, math class. Parentheses, exponents, multiplication, division, addition, subtraction. And speaking of school," Kate said, obviously eager to get off this particular subject, "Ellen and Jim will be here in an hour."

"I remember," Carter said testily.

Ellen had been Kate's roommate in college, and Jim was her new husband. Carter had only met him once or twice before and couldn't quite recall the man's face. Part of him wondered if he should worry about that.

But he knew Jim's face when he saw it. The moment the man came through the door, Carter thought, Of course; how could I forget?

Later, when Lizzie was put to bed and the four of them were having coffee, Kate and Ellen traded old college stories back and forth for an hour.

"Then there was the guy who lived downstairs from us, remember?" Ellen asked. "The jock? How could I forget?"

"Peter," Ellen said. "Peter Dixon. Wonder where he is now."

"Oh, do I remember Peter." Kate smiled. "Haven't thought about him in years."

"And then there was the time we got locked in the library—remember?"

"We were in there for hours."

Carter stared into his coffee cup. He almost envied their ability to summon up long-buried memories so easily, so effortlessly. It felt as though the two of them were showing off in some weird way. But he knew it was just him.

Later that night, after Ellen and Jim had gone home and they were getting ready for bed, Carter asked, "Kate, if you could lose one memory, if you could choose to forget something, what would it be?"

"Childbirth."

"No, really."

"No, really," she grumbled, sitting up in bed. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"No you're not. What's wrong?"

"Maybe I didn't think this thing all the way through. The editing, I mean," he said. "I'm starting to wonder about what I forgot."

"Well, you didn't forget it, you had it removed. Isn't there a difference?" "I suppose."

"Do you want to talk to someone about it?"

"It's my problem. I'll handle it."

"That's what you said before you went in for the procedure."

"Yeah. I remember."

He began to wonder at the significance of nearly everything; of the stranger who smiled at him in the street, of the little details that slipped his mind, of the faces and names he could not recall, or that only came to him after a few moments' thought.

He started keeping a journal, carefully recording each day's events. He spent half an hour a night writing everything down: What time he got up, what he ate for breakfast, what he and Kate talked about, what he spent the day at the office doing, what he had for lunch, what he and Beth bantered about, who he saw, what time he got home, what they had for supper, what Lizzie said when he put her to bed, what he and Kate watched on television. Having such documentation meant he would never forget anything again.

Carter went through all his old photographs, ones of his wedding and friends, of his vacations and family, and covered the back of each one with meticulous notes. Where, when, and who the people were. Every now and then he would come across a face he couldn't place, or a location he couldn't recall.

And it would keep him up all night. That Kate could not often remember some of these things herself did little to comfort him.

He began cataloging all the objects and furniture in the house in a spiral notebook. Where had each piece come from? Was it a purchase or a gift? Where and when did they buy it or who had given it to them?

Where in the hell did that green chair come from? he wondered. Why couldn't he recall? Did whatever it was he couldn't remember have something to do with the goddamned green chair? Was there something about it he had chosen to forget? What?

After a couple of weeks of this, he called the doctor and asked about the possibility of having the edited memory restored.

"No," was Dr. Joachim's flat answer. "No more than you can have your tonsils, your appendix, or your wisdom teeth put back in. As I told you before, Mr. Carter, the memory you asked me to remove is gone. Permanently."

"But you know what it is," he countered. "You had to know what you were looking for if you were going to edit it out."

"True enough. But you remember signing the waiver, don't you?"

He grudgingly admitted that he did.

The waiver was there to protect the patient, she explained. People underwent the procedure to forget, and she had removed memories of abusive relationships and abused childhoods, of traumatic accidents and their aftermath, the grief of loss, and of long, lingering illnesses. Having relieved such pain, she argued, it would be against her Hippocratic Oath to re-inflict it, and the waiver signed by each patient insured that they understood that; it also released her from any obligation to reveal what had been erased. Both the Supreme Court and the American Medical Association were on her side.

"And it's been what, over two months since you came to see me, Mr. Carter? Closer to three? Personally, I don't even remember what it was too clearly myself. Nothing personal, you understand. I have a large practice. I had some notes to help me locate the target memory, but those notes are always destroyed upon successful completion of the procedure. It's policy. Everyone who performs memory-editing does the same. I'm sorry, Mr. Carter."

"Me, too," he said wearily. "You sound like you've been down this road before."

"I've been doing this for twelve years. I get a couple calls like this every month." "Sorry to bother you."

"It's part of your recovery. You're actually corning along right on schedule. You're in the penultimate stage, you know."

"My penultimate stage?"

"Second-to-last. Post-procedure patients go through a series of stages."

"Like Kubler-Ross?" he asked with a chuckle.

"You said it, Mr. Carter, not me. First is the relief, feeling free of what was bothering you. Second is uncertainty, about your memory of recent events and past ones. Then comes suspicion—why is that person looking at me like that? Did they have something to do with it?"

"I've been doing that," he said.

"Everyone does. Have you been keeping notebooks about everything?" "Yeah."

"Stage four, documentation. Trying never to forget anything. Second-to-last is the desire or even the attempt to recover the original memory."

"So what's the last stage?"

"Acceptance."

"Acceptance?"

"Yes. Looking forward, not back. Get on with your life, Mr. Carter. It's what you came to me for in the first place. Good luck."

That night Carter burned his journal and his spiral notebook. He glanced at the unfamiliar faces in the old photographs and decided that if he couldn't remember them, it didn't matter. He sat in the green chair, dog curled up at his feet, and his only thought was that this was very comfortable, that he was very comfortable. At last.

Kate came in from putting Lizzie to bed. He slid his arm around her waist and kissed her forehead. She smiled warmly and cuddled up close to him.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Yeah. Finally."

"Thought so."

"I'm sorry about the past few months—"

But Kate hushed him and they sat in silence for a while. "Did you ever meet Beth?" he asked after a long time.

"No," Kate said.

He laughed. "No, I didn't think so."

[poetry]

IMMERSED IN MYSTERY



Mr. Boddy's majestic mansion was a medley of incandescent colors – Regal library clad in scarlet drapes adorned with white roping, Garden conservatory iridescent as a peacock's tail, cherry ballroom Ready to pipe in music from an old revolving Victrola — it provided Elysian pleasures for curious kids long before Xbox transfixed all. Even the kitchen's secret passageway offered surreptitious delights. Never did we expect MURDEROUS deeds to be wrenched from such elegance, Death knifing through its stately hall like a clock tolling midnight. Intrepidly, in a race to discover the killer, we mustered discretely Dispersed facts, burning our candles at both ends in callow haste.

Invariably, plumbing the who-done-it begat mostly false accusations, The key clue for solving this *acrostic* mystery inevitably overlooked.

—rick blum

MY BABY, HORANCI (TICER)

My baby must be dreaming underneath the rocks, buried in a cheap cardboard box with yellowed plastic. Hips sunk thin, belly still cream and round, I wish I could be there next to him. Just—next to him.

He's not okay; I'm not okay.

I imagine the skin around his eyes must remain cold and thick, stuck to his corneas; the furry film absorbing his tears and ultimately taunting the worms to invade his bed. The maggots must tickle his irises brown like the weighed dirt covering his grave. I know they've made nests in his lungs and throat. It's why my baby can't wake up.

And I've wanted him to call out to me for so long now.

Bones bubbling by the teeth of savage little creatures, the muscle fibers devoured—this must be why he doesn't turn in his sleep, stretch his paws comfortably anymore. Or yawn despite his angled jaw. Sounds must become numb in his ears, for his whiskers are paralyzed to my short messages given near the dug ground. I know he can't understand me—hardened pale brain entirely rotted in the month of May. I want to forever flutter about in his memories as he does mine.

But I can't guarantee my precious baby thinks of me; for eternity I've cursed him to soil—a carcass sent to dream stiffly, lonely, only accompanied by the earthly insects that consume him raw. And I can't stop wandering, can't stop my mind chewing the morbid notions of his body becoming evermore so everyday—further away from me who keeps living, and so I lie. To myself. I lie to me who knows all too well:

my baby must be dreaming underneath the rocks...

He's not okay; I'm not okay.

-mckinley henson

Eye of the Artist

by stanford allen

Abraham paced his studio in front of the man sitting in the antique chair on the dais. Positioned between them was a blank stretched white canvas on the portrait painter's easel.

"This will have to be quick. I don't have time to waste." The sitter grunted.

The middle aged, grey haired, smartly dressed man had said very little since he had arrived at the artist's Victorian house at the top of a hill in Highgate, a suburb of North London.

The commission for the well-established portrait painter to produce an image of the business man, Sir Clause Hammer, had been arranged by the Company of Directors, as a tribute to the chairman of the most financially successful firm in the city at the present time. He had built a back street electronics workshop, employing three people, to an international company with a staff of over five thousand, in the space of less than twenty years.

"Was it difficult to get through the rush hour traffic this morning, Sir Clause?" The painter said as an opener, to relax his sitter, and try to find the real man behind the agitated and impatient fellow sitting in the chair six feet away from him.

"If Jones had listened to me and gone through the bloody park, we would have been here sooner." Clause Hammer's face grew redder. "That idiot never listens. I took over his failed business five years ago. Sacked his bloody useless staff and sold his factory to a property developer friend of mine, and out of the goodness of my heart, gave him the job he has now." He sat back in the chair, lifted his left leg over his right, and took the self-satisfied pose of a conquering hero.

The painter loaded a narrow brush with ultramarine, thinned with oil and turpentine, and made his first marks on the pristine canvas.

He's a bit sharp. Doesn't suffer fools gladly. Block in the background. Read his mind. There's more to him than his sand paper exterior. Green. Add yellow ochre to the blue.

Abraham was hardly conscious of his own thoughts. He was trying to see more of the man in front of him than simply the contours indicated by the deep lines in his skin. He felt the sitter was like a fox searching the environment, with quick movements of his head and eyes, never settling for more than a moment on any one thing.

Clause Hammer was calculating the value of the house and how much money the artist made in a year.

An hour passed and after Abraham had mixed several colours together, for reference, and painted them along the bottom of the canvas, he wiped his brushes and said to his sitter, "Thank you, Sir Clause; that will be fine for today. I will be ready to start painting tomorrow."

"Don't be bloody daft, man. You can do more than that. I'm not coming here to have you fart around so you can charge more money. I can get a decent photo in ten minutes for them to stick on their ruddy wall." Nevertheless, the knight stood up, accepting the instruction, and began to walk to the door.

"A camera will make an image of one hundredth of a second of your life. I hope to produce something that with show all of your life, and perhaps more." Abraham smiled congenially and added, "See you tomorrow. And I'll try to do a bit better and take a little longer to do it."

With a snort the stocky millionaire turned and departed.

When the sitter had left, Abraham made a series of pencil sketches of the man in a ten by eight inch drawing book that he always used as an aide memoir, to fix in his mind, not only the physical aspects of his clients, but more importantly, the lines that were relevant to revealing character. To the average person, the furrows in the brow might mean worry; lines at the corners of the eyes, laughter; a red nose possibly means excess. To the portrait artist these were only sign posts, points of entry to a deeper understanding of another human being.

Later and eight miles away, in the heart of London, marching through the third floor of a steel and glass tower office block, the royally dubbed businessman raised his voice for all to hear.

"Cranford. That is your name isn't it?" A twenty year old young man stood up and faced his employer.

"Yes, sir, Steven Cranford; I joined you last month. Can I help you?" The blushing lad held on to the edge of his paper littered desk.

"I know when I started to pay your wages. Your desk is a mess. Tidy it up. Smarten up and earn your salary. Nobody works for me if he does not produce a profit. Got It?" All this was said while he was still in motion. He reached the far end of the floor, where the open doors of a lift awaited him; he entered it, followed by two other men dressed in identical navy pinstriped suits. "How many engines did Colchester produce last week, Harry?"

Like a gunfighter going for his gun in a Western movie, in less than the blink of an eye, a smart phone appeared in the man's hand and he was able to say, "Two hundred and forty, that's five up on the previous week."

"I know what they did last week and it's not good enough. You had better bloodywell go down there and give 'em a kick up the arse. Tell 'em it's not good enough, and shut down the line. Switch over to the window frames for Granthams. We've got a firm order for a thousand of those." "But the engines are for the Sandfield Cutter Company. They need them or they'll go broke. The works manager told me last week that their survival was reliant on the new mower being in production by the end of the month." Harry knew he had said too much. His boss only smiled, and continued quietly, which was a really bad sign.

"Shame." He sneered. "If old man Sandfield goes belly up, it will mean one less idiot in the game, and we could no doubt buy him out for a song."

The lift reached the top floor and as the doors slid apart Clause Hammer and his other assistant moved out of the walnut and mirrored cabinet; he turned and with a raised open hand placed on Harry's chest said, "You go down. Get in your car and sort out Colchester. Toot Sweet."

Sitting behind his eight foot chromium plated tubular steel desk, with a one inch thick toughened glass top, Sir Clause swivelled to and fro in a well upholstered black leather chair. He held a cordless telephone to his ear and was shouting into the instrument as though he was addressing a mass meeting.

"Look, my dear sir. I am the frigging chairman of this company, and if you don't frigging like it I'll get someone who will." With that he threw the device along the length of the glass, pressed a yellow button on a small black box within his reach and a young long-legged girl entered the room carrying a notepad and pencil.

"Cheryl, take a letter." The attractive blond with a tight fitting dress that ended eight inches above her knees took a seat at the other side of the desk and proceeded to write each word that she heard. Back at her computer she edited the communication and another company was given notice that there was a shark in the water.

That evening the Knight's Rolls Royce motor car, immaculately polished and with the interior leather smelling of nouveau riche opulence, Sir Clause with his wife and their two teenage children, drove to the Haymarket Theatre, arranged by Lady Clause Hammer, to see a production of William Shakespeare's Othello. After fifteen minutes, watching a darkened stage and being lulled by the mesmerising voice of the actor playing Iago delivering the Bard's lines, Sir Clause fell asleep. An unseen hand woke him up a few minutes before the interval when he strolled to the bar, found his name on a tray on which stood two glasses of champagne and two fruit juices. Shortly into the second half of the play his eyelids became too heavy to keep open and again he enjoyed the performance in the arms of Morpheus. Screams from a few shocked females in the audience toward the end of the show brought Sir Clause back to reality, and after three curtain calls and applause in which he happily participated, they left their seats.

At the appointed hour, Jones collected the family, with the car stationed exactly in front of the centre doors of the playhouse, and took them to the Hawksmoor restaurant, where a table was booked for a late night meal.

Jones parked the car in close by Golden Square to wait, got out and lit a cigarette, down-wind from the automobile, not wanting to give evidence to his employer's feral sense of smell that could result in his instant dismissal. Once again the chauffeur brought the car to the place where he was expected to be at a given time, and without a greeting the family took their seats in the vehicle and in silence; they were driven to their Mayfair residence.

The next morning with Sir Clause in the studio at Highgate, suitably seated in the carved wooden chair and with only the formality of a "Good morning," little more was said.

Abraham loaded a half-inch-wide hog hair brush and proceeded with the task of making an image of the man he was beginning to understand.

The absence of compassion in the sitter was evident in his seated posture. Legs slightly apart, feet pushing the ground, his back straight, not reliant on the oak chair's slats for support, hands gripping each of the fashioned lion heads at the ends of the arm rests.

The man was alert and ready to spring forward. "Are you done? I've got things to do this morning." The first words he had uttered for an hour. "Yes," the painter replied. "I think that will do for today, and I am sure I can complete the portrait without you being here. If that suits you." In a somewhat disappointed voice his subject continued: "Er, yes that's fine. Thank you very much."

The sitter stepped down from the dais and with a lift of the corners of his mouth he formed something of a smile, and left the studio.

Three months later the President of the Company of Directors entered the Boardroom at Company Hall where the painting, in an ornate gilded frame, had been hung on the instruction of the artist, alongside the paintings of several previously honoured members of the Company.

"Oh, my God!" he uttered to the empty room, as he recognised the undeniable representation of the man he knew as Sir Clause Hammer.

It had taken the painter several weeks to complete the commissioned portrait. Each day took him further into the psyche of the merchant, to express him in line and colour. After a series of over-paintings the man had dark yellow eyes with the steely quality of a lion. Pink rouged cheeks and some white powder blotched his face, like a sad clown attempting to conceal any emotions that might lie below the surface. His suit was not the Saville Row tailored apparel that the sitter had worn on the two occasions he had visited the studio, but was of a rough tweed material of grey loosely woven fabric. A red satin shirt glistened with highlights at the collar and cuffs. A fluorescent green coloured tie, drawn tightly around his neck, accentuated a bulging purple jugular vein. The man's once manicured fingernails were now resting as pointed claws on the arms of the carved chair. The background was of thick palette knifed layers of intense red, green, yellow and blue.

The completed picture generated the sound of a very high-pitched whistle and a sense of dizziness in the mind of the viewer.

The President took a deep breath, steadied himself, and turned. He left the room and securely locked the door behind him.



ACROSS THE GREAT DIVIDE

It seems as though eons have passed. Glacial marches and ice sheets abound, and life, driven to seek food to quell

the gnawing hunger and to find cover in a desolate world, holds tainted hope for whatever scarce comfort is to be found.

Ice ages should drive bodies together for warmth, but not when the distance between them is so vast ...

... that communication is rendered sterile in the face of the howling winds, or echoes soundless across the great divide.

—allan rozinski

DEVELOPMENT

At last, after the development of centuries, the birds don't wake us up. The men still do, though, when they take the trash on Tuesdays. (It's more convenient to leave it by the curb than have to haul it yourself to the landfill, which is full, woods grown over it—and where, I just heard, some hiker said he saw a bird.)

Before dawn they will clang and clank garbage pails as loud as they can and holler, just to make us thankful when they're gone. Meantime, we pray for the day that they develop a way for us to do without the garbage man.

—james nicola



SONAM SNOW-SLIDE

by fabiyas mv

Avalanche warning rings out on the radio, but the soldiers don't take it seriously. Lance Naik Thappa keeps awake, while other warriors are fast asleep in their Arctic sleeping bags at Sonam post on the Siachen snow mountain, the highest battlefield in the world. Now the temperature drops to minus 45 degree centigrade, yet something keeps Thappa warm. His heart's warmth resists the chill of snow. He will leave the mountain next Saturday. He has been granted leave for a couple of weeks. Memory of his spouse flashes in his mind's sky like a plain's red light. His son's nursery rhyme echoes in the valley of silence.

11:10 pm

A huge avalanche—its width 850 feet and height 450—wallops their post in a jiffy. The glacier gobbles nine soldiers including Thappa. Sonam Post lies buried beneath the ice boulders. Fortunately, Thappa is in a big air bubble beneath the avalanche. He can breathe, though with difficulty. He lies curled up there. His voice message reaches nowhere. He gives up his attempt to get up, fearing that the air bubble will break and he will die from suffocation. The most wretched thing is that he cannot move in tune with his brain signals. He cogitates about his family's forlorn state. In the midst of dark musing, he waits for his army's helping hand.

Thappa's wife Pooja sits on the wooden threshold in front of her house. A dusty bulb sheds dim light just above her head. She is jumpy. She cannot identify the annoying force that passes through her mind's veins. It may be a telepathic wave. She gets up, slams her door, and goes to bed. Though she shuts her eyes, she cannot lock her mind with sleep.

After sunrise, the radio set at a nearby military post cracks to life. "Snow-slide, we're trapped, sir"—may be the last message of one of the lost soldiers at Sonam Post, uttered from the mouth of death. Now the army awakes to the disaster and informs headquarters of the tragedy. Indian army's avalanche recovery team, quick on the uptake, sets out to Sonam. The recovery team fails to find out Sonam Post, which vanished under the blue ice. They have with them avalanche tracker devices. Chetek helicopter brings digging and boring equipment like electrical saws and rock drills. Two jerry-cans of fuel are also brought to the spot.

Weather worsens, yet the recovery team goes on with their operations. They plod on the snow. It is an onerous task to find out the missing soldiers. Now that they can't move farther, they temporarily desist from their endeavors.

Day Three

Temperature drops to minus 70 degree centigrade. Thappa lies, 30 feet under the surface, like a fetus in snow-womb. Still he holds confidence. Bad weather continues. The recovery team can't find any one of the lost soldiers. Recovering the soldiers seems a Herculean task. Thappa loses his vigor.

Midday

Titto, a lop-eared black dog of the recovery team, barks at a telephone cable, which is partly snow-covered, five meters away from where they stand. They move to the spot at once. It is Cable JWD, a twine-wire black cable for communication. They become hopeful.

"This cable will take us to the location where the soldiers lie buried," the Captain of the recovery team speaks with élan.

Technical experts in the team essay to pass electric current, and thereby assess the length of the cable. But they don't succeed in their attempts. However, they begin to break the blue ice, which is as hard as concrete. Quite surprisingly, Thappa's feeble voice rings out on the radio making the recovery team vigorous again in their operations. Now they recover the frozen bodies of four soldiers. Their rescue operation is up to scratch.

Day Four

More officers join the recovery team. Weather is slightly favorable. They begin widespread search, which results in the recovery of four more dead bodies. They have to find one more. So they spend hours searching for Thappa, but in vain.

"Let's stop further operations. We've done our maximum. Besides, he's not likely to be alive", a senior officer in the recovery team suggests.

"We'll do a final attempt, tomorrow. Then, even if we fail, we'll return", the Captain discloses his plan.

Day Five

The recovery team digs deep. They use rock drill and electrical saw. Equipment is thirsty even in chilly weather and gulps fuel. Digging...digging...

They reach up to 30 meters down.

"He's here!" A young officer cries out from the bottom of one of the pits, which the recovery team has made in the glacier. Now everybody gathers around the pit. Thappa's body is taken out within a few minutes. Though frozen, his heart beats still. There is a rare spark in his half-open eyes. But he has been dehydrated and has a pale countenance.

It has been a clandestine operation so far. Only the army knows about the disaster. This news leaks and spreads everywhere. A large number of media persons gather in front of the Army Research and Referral Hospital, where Thappa has been admitted. A team of expert doctors struggle to save him. Life plays hide-and-seek in the ICU. Thappa opens his eyes, soon falls into coma again. His multiple organs are already dead. May be his inner craving to live with his sweet spouse and son, which keeps his heartbeat.

"Ma, when'll my dad come out?"

Pooja, who is imbued with anxiety, tries to suppress her son's question, hugging him and kissing on his forehead. They are waiting before the ICU. A TV channel camera swallows this sensitive scene voraciously. Newspaper photographers take photos of Pooja and her son from different angles. People pray for this gallant soldier. They recognize that they owe their serene sleep at home to soldiers like Thappa on the border. A virtuous lady from Thappa's village vocalizes her willingness to donate her kidney for him. She becomes a paradigm of patriotism and compassion in dailies.

Day Six

A newspaper boy paces up and down the railway station near Thappa's home village, holding a bundle of Deccan Chronicle and calling the headline, "Heroic Death of Lance Naik Thappa for the Nation." Newspapers have published his photos in military uniform.

Thappa's dead body is brought home to keep in tears and prayers for some time. The whole village comes to attend the cremation ceremony. Thappa's home is teeming with motley crowd. Pooja lies collapsed on the dark floor of her bedroom. Her only son Milan sobs with heavy heart. An old aunt tries to sooth him. Meanwhile, preparations for the cremation are in progress. The corpse is covered with dry mango logs. A young man sprinkles kerosene on the logs. Holy men chant mantras. A kind of awe lingers in the air. Twelve-year old Milan, who has put on a white dhoti and dipped in water as a religious ritual, lights fire. A pungent smell of human flesh spreads in the air. The crowd disperses quickly. Something new will come; people will forget the old.

Pyre burns, fueled by Pooja's old precious moments with him. She feels Thappa's smell and presence in the military uniform. Soon new soldiers will come to take up the charge of Sonam post. But no army can repulse her infiltrating and invading thoughts.

*Lance Naik - a rank in Indian Army.

[poetry]



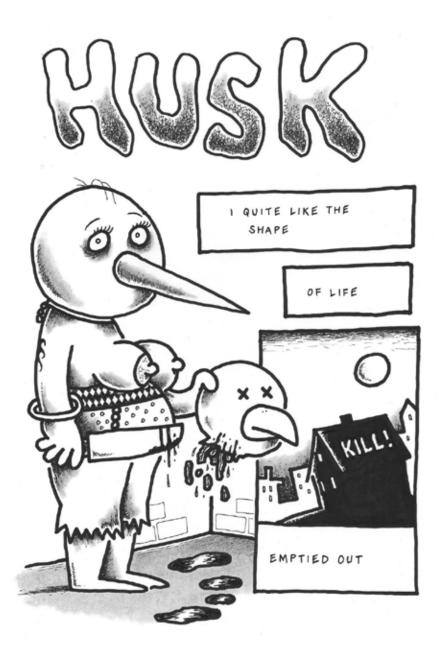
The dark is a smooth coffee the poets drink before composition, the mirror the muses do their make-up in

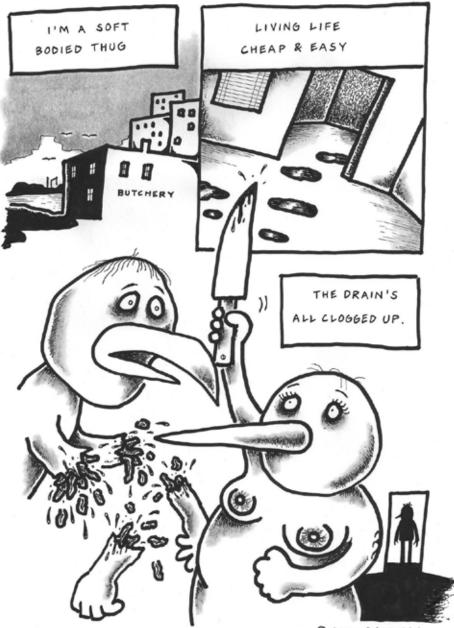
The dark is the Pandora's Box the writer wishes to open, the Devil's vision of a vacant Heaven

The dark is eternal slumber, the blanket that cloaks us when we close our eyes

The dark is Death in disguise

-stephanie smith





@EMMa & Janne '16

—janne karlsson & emma-johanna henriksson



Months of rain had bombarded the crops as it had for several years, smashing them into uselessness; what farmers could not salvage in time rotted on the stalk. The price of wheat had shot up again, for there was little left to sell. No grain meant no bread and thus, for most of the country, imminent starvation. Few possessed the space for keeping animals or the money to care for them. "God damn the King!" shouted Claret's mother, often. "Pray he and his house do not find us eating their flesh!"

Her mother's new husband did not appreciate having an extra mouth to feed in those times. Claret frequently overheard her parents' quarrels and thought it intentional on her stepfather's part. "She is well past marrying age," he argued. "Practically a spinster. We'll be lucky to get a twenty-year-old goose for her at this point. We'll be paying them to take her off our hands."

Lately he was abandoning his shop in the town square to laze about the house and complain she and her mother were not pulling their weight, despite Claret's having resorted to taking in laundry every week. People still needed clean clothes for church and for keeping away the miasmas that caused disease. No one could afford his new clothes or even his repairs anymore, or the rent to stay open in the first place.

"Go to your grandmother's house and get what we need," he commanded. "Don't come back until you do."

Claret cast a circumspect gaze at the cast-iron sky, the rain beyond her window as cold and hard as metal pellets. Theirs was one of the few houses to boast glass

by jennifer loring

over the windows instead of wooden shutters, but the glass did not open during more pleasant weather to let in fresh air. She'd have gladly traded a few insects for some. The house, despite soot-stained cloths draped over the walls, remained chilly.

She would catch her death outside—no doubt his intention. But she dutifully donned her woolen cloak, pulled up the hood, and gathered her basket in the hope that Grandmother might fill it.

Claret walked along the edge of the town square, where a throng of peasants flung themselves toward the priest, who stood atop the steps and handed out all the charitable bread the church had left. She winced at the snap of bones as the desperate horde trampled each other. Rain struck roofs, road, and skin like tiny hammers. Bellies swelled with hunger beneath threadbare shirts, and skin loose from lack of food hung like sallow, ill-fitting gowns. The thinnest began to drop of their own accord into what resembled piles of matchsticks.

At least they have died in the presence of God. Whatever we have done, surely He will end this famine now.

The priest wiped his red-rimmed, exhausted eyes and announced he had no more bread. Then he retreated into the church and shut the heavy wooden door. Those with the strength beat against it with a flurry of fists and feet. But most shoulders stooped with the burden that they would lose another child by next daybreak—if they saw daybreak themselves—shuffled away into the gray morning. In due time, the plague cart, clattering along the slick cobblestones, collected the dead bodies. Everyone talked about the children who died from starvation. Few spoke of the dozen or so who had simply vanished from the face of the earth. Rumors, no actual sightings, but the villagers avoided the forest and tended their flocks in pairs for a reason.

Away from town, a dirt road transformed into a river of mud replaced the cobblestones. Claret's saturated leather shoes were ruined, and she anticipated a beating for it despite the trip being his idea.

I hate him. I ought to chop him into little pieces and put him in a stew. Her belly voiced its opinion with an inopportune rumble.

People lay in the withered grass, with stalks poking from between their flaking, cracked lips. Their lungs wheezed with painful final breaths. She hurried down the road, mud sucking at her ankles as if a hundred gaping, starving mouths had opened beneath its surface. Her hunger faded like a forgotten dream. Near the edge of the forest, a horse with protruding ribs had fallen from famine-induced lethargy. Claret pretended not to see the pale shapes huddled around it or the red smears of their mouths. Nor the weary, feeble rise and fall of its side with its final breaths as the townsfolk devoured it alive. Good Christians reduced to ravening wolves.

What sort of test is this?

Claret found herself before the wood, its trees stark and black against the featureless iron sky. A single path in and out. Once an entire village lay within its borders, her mother had told her, but a terrible plague had beset it long ago. Only Grandmother in her stubbornness refused to leave, content to dwell amongst the ghosts of her youth.

Ghosts. The least of Claret's worries.

Her heart doubled its pace. She set one sodden foot before the other. Rain whispered through pine needles like sighing spirits, dripped from branches like the tears of the dead. She wished to be anywhere else, even if it meant a beating or worse. She'd grown accustomed to worse and had learned to turn off her mind as it happened.

"A crust, child. Have you a crust? Anything in that basket?"

Claret flinched and nearly dropped the thing. She hadn't noticed the man—if that were indeed the appropriate word for so wretched a creature. Filth more than his ragged bits of clothing attired him. Only bright scratches on his limbs and face, and oozing pustules of infection, stood out from the grime. Leaves and twigs decorated his bushy, matted hair and beard.

He stretched one skinny arm toward her. "Begging your pardon, of course. But I haven't eaten in three days."

"I haven't got anything in my basket just now." She tried to prevent her lip from curling in revulsion. "I'm on my way to my grandmother's house, where I pray there might be food. If she gives me some, I will share a bit with you as a Christian ought."

His wild eyes brightened. "Bless you, child. May no harm come to you on your journey."

Claret shivered and drew her cloak tighter, though she was soaked through. Now and then, between the trees, she thought she glimpsed the wild man following her.

She walked faster.

Grandmother's little stone cottage appeared at last, a beacon in the wood's dread darkness. Claret bounced up the steps despite the drag of her saturated cloak and knocked on the door. "Grandmother, it's Claret!"

"Come in, my dear! Come in!"

The thick wooden door swung open. Claret, thoroughly bedraggled, hauled herself over the threshold, trailing water as if she'd sprung a leak, and heaved the door shut. Grandmother, stirring her iron pot, crouched beside the crackling fireplace.

"What brings you all the way out here in this weather?"

"He made me come."

A grim shadow passed over Grandmother's kind face, a face no longer young but not quite old. "I see. Well, take off those wet clothes before you catch ill, and wrap yourself in one of the blankets."

Claret claimed a weighty quilt from the foot of Grandmother's bed. She kicked off her shoes, and then peeled away her cloak, her dress, and her stockings. Grandmother retrieved the sorry bundle and carefully draped them on either side of the pot, over the fire. She stirred again.

"I suppose he sent you for food."

"We're not as bad off as most. We still have fruits and vegetables in the basement. I don't know why..."

"Don't trouble yourself. Stir this for me, won't you? I need to fetch something from the kitchen."

Claret arranged herself by the fire and grasped the wooden spoon, swirling it through a greasy stew laden with pallid chunks of meat. When she glanced at the small, smudged window across the room, she almost convinced herself a ravening face was peering back at her.

But where does she get the meat? Almost no one has meat now.

She pressed a hand to her mouth. "Grandmother," she called.

Grandmother wiped her hands on her apron and sat beside her. She would have a reasonable explanation. She must. "Have you seen a ghost? You've gone so pale."

Claret gazed into her large blue eyes. "Where does the meat come from? Is it the man in the woods?"

Grandmother made a disappointed tsk sound. "Oh, Claret, you mustn't be so naïve, not anymore. You're getting too old for that. Your mother told me what you found in the shop."

Claret tried to put out of her mind what she had discovered while cleaning her stepfather's shop one day, in a cask meant to hold bolts of fabric. That too her brain had attempted to rationalize away as the work of their old enemy, the wolf. It hadn't occurred to her that perhaps wolves did not always turn up in their most familiar shape. "But why my father?"

"Because he was a lazy, selfish swine, that's why. Leave it to your mother to go and marry another just like him. She has all the sense God gave a goat."

Claret swallowed the lump in her throat.

"Listen to me, child. We haven't got any food. I know what you've seen on the way here." She cupped Claret's chin and forced her to meet her eyes. Claret wondered if her teeth had always been so sharp, her hands so large and rough. "What we do have a surplus of are people."

Claret's eyes burned. "The children."

"Their flesh is, I must admit, sweeter. And wouldn't you know their parents just keep on having more."

"They'll burn you at the stake," she whispered. Hot, fat tears rolled down her cheeks. "As a *loup-garoux.*"

"Then they'll have to burn most of the country, won't they? They charge us more and more for food that doesn't exist, paid with money we don't have. They did this to us. They forced us to eat the one thing they don't tax to extinction."

Claret covered her face with her hands.

Grandmother yanked her arms down and closed her fingers around Claret's. "Don't fool yourself, Claret. Everyone you know has at least tasted it. You'd be surprised what you'll do to save your own life."

"I can't...I can't..."

"Hush, now. You're going to take some of this home, just like that miserable creature demanded." Grandmother ladled the stew into a crock small enough to fit into Claret's basket. "The trick is to imagine it's something else. Soon enough, you'll even get a taste for it." She plucked Claret's clothes from the fireplace and presented them to her. "Go on home, before it gets dark. You don't want to be in the forest when that happens."

Claret dressed quickly, Grandmother's cryptic warning echoing through her head. There might be many wolves in the forest, cleverly disguised, with which trusting children would not give a second thought to going off. Claret lifted the basket and slipped into shoes that squished when she walked. She thought of digging her toes into the silt riverbed as a child. "Thank you, Grandmother. Until next time."

Grandmother smiled with some secret knowledge to which Claret was not privy. "We do what we must." She fastened Claret's cloak. "And so will you."

The rain had let up little, the sun on the verge of giving up its struggle. Claret wrapped both hands around the basket handle and held it in front of her as she tread the sludgy path back to town. Branches snapped alongside her.

"Begging your pardon," said the dreadful wild man. What she'd taken for dirt caked onto his arms and chest was in fact hair, matted against his flesh like the mud on her shoes. "Did she give you anything?"

"Yes. I suppose you can have a sip or two, if you like."

"Please, child." He loped out from the trees on all fours, seemingly incapable of

walking on two legs, and hunched before her. She set down the basket and removed the lid, then handed the still-warm crock to him.

"What happened to you?"

"They ran me out of town. Got no use for 'em anyway. Serves 'em right, this famine."

"And why did they run you out?"

He gulped down two large mouthfuls before politely handing back the crock. The gesture pleased Claret, until he began smacking his oily lips. "So tender."

Rain hissed ominously through the pines. Claret replaced the lid and tucked the crock into the basket. Fear gnawed upon her innards like rats. "I really must be going now."

"A man can't help his nature, for all he might try. God has forsaken me, though I asked for His forgiveness."

"Maybe God has forsaken us all. Surely you are no worse than anyone else."

"Surely I am, begging your pardon. Even now, I can't help but wonder what your belly or thigh might taste like. So fresh, so sweet. There is a terrible thing inside me, morsel, but you showed me kindness. Promise me, though, you will not return here, lest I am more beast than man when you do."

Claret dropped the basket. "Please, take it." White puffs of breath escaped her lungs as she edged around it, and him.

"I didn't mean to frighten you. You have been so kind to me."

Claret walked backward along the path as quickly as the mud would allow. Her hands trembled, and she jammed them into the pockets of her cloak. To turn from him was to invite death. The wolf was nothing if not cunning. Nothing if not a liar.

He dropped several meters behind her and matched her pace. "Please, I give you my word. Go safely. I am only saddened that you do not trust me because of what others have done to you."

She stopped walking. "How do you know that?"

He cocked his head toward Grandmother's cottage. "A better hunter than me, she is. She gives me meat when I can't do it myself. I get weak, you understand, when I haven't eaten. She talks to me sometimes. She gets very lonely, as do I. I hope you will not judge me harshly when you think of me." He held out his thin arms. "Sometimes the worst monsters wear their fur on the inside."

Claret gathered her skirt and made a dash for town, despite the mud's determination to imprison her. The trees broke onto pastures just outside town, onto dead sheep and horses. Her feet met with cobblestones at last, and she flew past the shut-up church, the plague carts accumulating more of the dead whose tumescent stomachs betrayed their miserable fates. Claret hurried into her house and hung up her cloak, then pulled off her shoes. She wiped her muddy hands on her dress and crept across the dirt floor strewn with rushes to freshen the smell of the place.

"Claret, is that you?" her stepfather called from the cellar. "Did you get what I asked for?"

"Yes. And then I gave it to a beggar."

"You insolent bitch." He marched up the stairs, the cellar's cool air fragranced with dried fruits and vegetables rising with him, his knuckles already facing outward in preparation for a backhand.

"Don't you dare touch me," she whispered. She kicked out at him, and it was enough. Enough to topple him down the stairs, to ensure his head would strike an edge just so. Then he lay on the damp dirt floor with blood pooling around his skull and wide, flabbergasted eyes, as though death had failed to meet his expectations.

Claret's mother returned home an hour or so after sunset. Malnutrition had taken its toll on her, as it had everyone, carving lines into her haggard face where none had been before. A simple woman, as Grandmother had indicated, but kind of heart. She had helped a neighbor tend to a sick child, for whom they had done all they could without falling under suspicion of witchcraft. Given the lycanthropy trials, that threat only grew. Claret set two hot bowls of stew on the wooden table near the door. "We have meat today, Mother," she announced.

Her mother glanced around the room. "Where is your stepfather?"

"He was gone when I came home." Claret stared out the window at the dark smudge of forest along the horizon. The sky bore no indication of relenting in its assault upon their ravaged country. She lifted a spoonful of stew to her mouth and chewed the meat thoughtfully. A bit gamey but similar to beef, and the *bouquet garni* she'd created from their cellar stores infused the dish with a pleasing, savory flavor. She'd not cooked such a fine meal in years.

"He might have left word. What if he doesn't come back?" Mother regarded the stew. Claret heard her stomach rumble from across the table. "It does look delicious. And smells likewise. Leeks?"

"Yes."

"No search party will take up in this weather. No wonder those children were never found." Her gaze met Claret's, searching for the explanation she feared. "What are we to do?"

"We do what we must," Claret said softly. "Eat your stew, Mother."





days pass as a dream shifting shapes turn to mist my life caught by a spell heart heaving fit to kill I taste the air catching breath into my hard beating heart

lying still to feel the night I reach to touch your skin sun light where we walked-long time since we talked strange to same swelters sweet tense haze of holding hard

white light pulsing fast turns to dim and fades away blessed dark gives me breath distant dream of glory death emptied of electric charge I pant, I sigh, and then I halt

-steven petersheim

confusion 2

I celebrate the 4th of July like every American libertylover drawn to loud noise, fireworks, hammy hollering, and franks and beans. But I was always confused, in history class, with the overt anomaly of those denied their freedom—slaves and women. It was as if Mephistopheles, in 1788 and -'76 had been up to his old bargaining tricks, and souls were sold for seeming victories.

Was freedom flawed, if not a downright lie?

I find myself not wanting to remember, the better to conflate the battle cry of one aroused I I th of September with rituals of all 4ths of July.

—james nicola

114 THE LITERARY HATCHET

[poetry]

TO THE PREDATOR:

Do you have a soul, Or are you an empty shell? Does the pain you cause Bring you joy, or dreams of impending Hell?

Do you derive pleasure From the innocent's falling tears? Do you gasp in excitement At her materialized fears?

Bask now in the warmth Of your sick delight. Enjoy today, the afterglow Your perversions incite.

The blood on your hands accuses The victims' tears brand your soul They cry out for justice, The ones your sins have swallowed whole.

A day of reckoning is coming. Payment will be demanded, justice restored, When the wolf's drooling form Crouches at your door.

—tina stickles

[poetry]

VANISHING RADIOS

Information and imagination are synchronized on its track.Voice

vanquishes miles, crossing borders without visa. Tuner turns on

feeling patterns. Tunes fall into heart, producing ripples.Tuning

and tuning, solitude and silence die; an old movie song wakes a love's

ghost up. Nostalgia echoes in the twilight. Sometimes radio serves siesta.

Now people are entangled in the Net. Fingers can't turn on radios.

Equipment appear and disappear through generations. Time mutes; man forgets.

—fabiyas mv

SHROUDBOUND

Golden apple Silver tongue Wooden horse Leaden lung

Silver lining Brick of gold Velvet voice Taboos told

Hop with hare Hunt with hound Jinx of Janus Wiles unwound

Foulest virtue Fairest vice Vicious cycle Throttles thrice

Mirrored mire Bare as bone Shattered shards Reaped and sown Wormwood waxes Honey wanes Withered welkin Bile of banes

Daggered smile Feathers, tar Ruthless ruse Evil star

Bow and arrow Bound to part Heartbreak-hunter Harvested heart

Smothered moth Stingless bee Lolling love Sealed at sea

Fallen fate Death cocoons Curtained corpse For two blue moons

-shawn chang

A HOUSE IN THE WOODS

ort stor

by john teel

"Yeah, man, you were right. I'm having a great time," Bob said, not even trying to mask his sarcasm. Jimmy ignored him, but he couldn't deny it anymore; they were lost. He didn't have a clue where the road was that lead to the general store where they'd parked the car and the rain was coming down heavier now, the drops as big as gumballs.

"What're we gonna do, Jimmy?" Bob was screaming over the sound of the rain as it smacked the leaves and the ground.

"I don't know," Jimmy said.

Night was on its way. The creeping darkness and the heavy rain made it hard to follow the trail.

"I thought you knew what you were doing."

Jimmy shot Bob an irritated look. He wasn't the one who had asked him to come along in the first place. Hiking was Jimmy's thing. He enjoyed the walks with nothing around him but the trees, the smell of pine needles and dirt, the sounds of birds and the occasional deer sightings. But Bob had kept asking Jimmy to take him along—practically begged him. Jimmy had finally agreed to bring him, but this trail was new to him. He had thought it'd be good for both of them to experience something new. It hadn't worked out the way he had hoped.

First of all, getting Bob to leave his phone back at the car had been like asking a dog to keep his tongue off of his own nuts. Jimmy never took his phone with him on hikes. People were constantly warning him against it, but Jimmy didn't need the distractions from anyone. This was his time to be at peace, far away from all the bullshit of the outside world.

Once they got going and Bob finally agreed to leave his phone behind, Jimmy was moving too fast for him. "Let's take a break," Bob said, twenty minutes in. He plopped his ass down on a large rock and shrugged his pack off of his shoulders, fishing around in there until he had his smokes. He lit one and took long pulls of it, flicking the butt onto the ground when he was done. Jimmy trudged over and stomped it out with the sole of his boot and put the butt in his coat pocket.

"Good job, Captain Planet," Bob said.

"Let's go," Jimmy said.

After a while, the trail became more like the rest of the forest and the deeper they went, the more turned around they became. They were walking in circles. Jimmy was calm, trying to find his way back to the trail. Bob, on the other hand, was panicked. He was smoking like a chimney and bombarding Jimmy with questions. And now there was the rain.

When it started it was only a drizzle, but within minutes it was torrential, making it damn near impossible to see anything ahead of them. They kept at it, trucking through the muddy forest until the trees opened up and spit them onto a winding road.

"Look," Bob said. He was pointing up ahead. It was a house. "The lights are on. Maybe they'll know how to get back to the car."

Jimmy smiled. "I have to admit, for a minute there, I thought we were in trouble."

"Well, Jim, I think this is my last hiking trip." They were both smiling now. They were safe. "Come on. Let's get out of this shit."

They quickened their pace through mud and grass and the crushed stone of the driveway, sidestepping a run-down Ford pickup. The house was old-looking with a porch wrapped around it, the sun bleached paint peeling away from the wood. The chimney was coughing out a constant stream of white smoke. On the front door was a knocker and Bob used it. There was a shuffling behind the door and then a muffled voice.

"Who's there?" the voice asked.

"We're lost," Bob said. "We were hiking in the woods down there and we got all turned around. We just wanna know how to get back to our car and maybe just hang here for a bit until the storm dies down."

Now there were two voices behind the door and the new voice was very enthusiastic. The chatter stopped and then a series of locks clicked and the door opened to reveal a man in his sixties. The graying hair he had left horseshoed around his head. He was strong-looking and clean, much to the surprise of both boys. Behind him, was an older woman, also in her sixties. She had the kind of face that said she'd been attractive in her younger years, but time and life had taken most of that beauty away.

"Where did you boys park?" the old man asked, his booming voice making them jump.

"In the parking lot of that big general store in town," Jimmy said.

The man was nodding his head. "I know the place. I'll take you back down there in the truck."

"No way," said the old woman. "You can't see a thing when it's a sunny day and every light's on in the house. You aren't going anywhere in this rain. I'll be a widow before morning. You boys bring your dripping selves in here and sit in front of the fire. I'll get us some tea going."

"Thank you so much," Jimmy said. The boys started through the doorway, but the old man thrust his arm in their way. He turned to his wife, his expression serious.

"You remember what happened last time, Eleanor," the old man said to her. Bob shot Jimmy a concerned look. She waved her hand at him and made a *pfft* noise with her mouth. She pulled his arm away from the doorway and ushered the boys in. She put a blanket on the floor in front of the fireplace. A good fire was going inside and the little house felt cozy.

"We won't be any trouble," Jimmy said.

She was shaking her head. "Don't mind grumpy over there. You boys go ahead and sit here and I'll get us some tea."

"We really appreciate this," Jimmy said, taking off his pack and sitting down on the blanket.

"Our pleasure," Eleanor said with a smile, bouncing off toward the kitchen to get the water boiling. In the other room they could hear her banging pots around and whistling. Behind them, the old man was still standing by the door, eyeing them up. "We don't get a lot of visitors up here," the old man said. "The few we have gotten, well, let's just say they weren't such good guests. You two ain't gonna try no funny business now, are ya?"

Jimmy and Bob didn't know what to say. Before they could answer, Eleanor yelled out from the kitchen. "John, leave those two alone. Come here and help me with this stuff."

John stared at them a few seconds longer and then went out to help his wife.

When he was gone, Bob grabbed Jimmy by the arm and whispered,"What the fuck was that all about? We literally just walked into the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. She's probably slipping something in that tea right now. And what was all that he said about remembering what happened last time? This is bad man, I can feel it. Get up Jim, we're outta here."

Jimmy pulled his arm away. "Would you stop? All day I'm listening to you bitch and moan about anything and everything and now you want to make something out of nothing with these people. They're nice people. Just relax. Sit by the fire and shut the hell up for once. Don't start your shit. We'll be back to the car before you know it."

Bob was shaking his head. "Fine. But I guarantee you that old broad will be wearing your skin later. I'm not drinking any of that tea either. This whole hillbillies with hospitality act ain't fooling me."

Eleanor came shuffling into the room. She held a tray with cups of tea, a loaf of homemade banana bread and a butcher's knife to cut it. John was next to her holding the sugar and milk, but judging by the look on his face he could've been holding a freshly squeezed dog turd. Bob couldn't stop looking at the knife.

"Tea is served," she said, handing each of them a cup. John placed the sugar and milk on the coffee table and sat in a big comfy looking chair. His eyes never moved from the boys.

They sat there, Jimmy sipping away, Bob holding the cup and never bringing it to his lips. Bob's eyes darted from the knife to Eleanor to John. Outside, a crack of thunder exploded, making him jump. The rain was really hammering the roof, like someone was dropping buckets of gravel down on it.

"It's bad out there, isn't it? I'm so glad you found our house. It would've been a sin for you to be stuck out there in a storm like this." Eleanor was still smiling. It was starting to make Jimmy a little uneasy.

Fucking Bob, he thought. Always getting in my head.

"Would it be alright if I used the bathroom?" Jimmy asked. Bob looked up from sniffing his tea and started shaking his head.

"Of course you can. I'll show you where it—"

"I'll take him," John cut in. He stood from his chair, "Come on."

Jimmy followed him up the stairs and out of sight.

Calm down, Bob told himself. Just calm down. *He'll be fine*. *You've just seen too many horror movies is all*.

Upstairs, John led him to the bathroom and swung the door open. "No funny business, remember?"

Jimmy nodded his head and closed the door. He looked in the mirror and saw how spooked he looked. He laughed in spite of himself and took a deep breath. He started towards the toilet, but his boots were still soaked and he slipped on the smooth tile. He tried to catch himself, but it was no good. Jimmy's legs slid out and then he was airborne, his neck coming down hard onto the side of the tub. It snapped like a rotten fence post, killing him instantly, and his skin bulged where the bone was pushing against it.

Bob heard the thud of Jimmy's body hitting the floor and stood up, spilling some of his tea on his hands. It burned him and he hissed and dropped the cup to the floor, shattering it. Shards of glass and hot tea spread across the hardwood.

"Oh Lord, are you alright? You didn't burn yourself did you?" Eleanor asked. "Let me clean this up." She hurried into the kitchen and grabbed some paper towels and a dustpan and brush. John was down the steps now and he and Bob were locked in a stare down.

"What was that noise?" Bob asked.

"How the hell do I know?" John shot back.

"Where is Jimmy? What did you do?"

"What did I do? I took his ass to the crapper. I don't like the way you're looking at me, boy." John was walking toward him with his fists clenched. Eleanor was back and she looked confused. Bob reached down and pulled the knife off of the tray and grabbed Eleanor by the arm. He put the knife to her throat and she screamed, the dustpan and brush dropping to the floor.

"You put something in his tea, didn't you? And your crazy ass husband here, took him upstairs and did something with his body. Am I right?" Bob had the knife pressed hard against her neck. "Is that what happened 'last time'?"

"Please, you're hurting me. I didn't do anything to the tea. I swear," Eleanor said, tears squirting from the corners of her eyes.

John was still walking forward, his hands in the air now.

"We didn't do anything to your friend, son. Honest. I'll take you upstairs and show you. Just please, don't hurt my wife," John said.

"Bullshit. You've been acting strange since we got here. That's why I didn't drink the tea. I'm not as dumb as I look. Now, take the steps slowly. And you," he spun Eleanor so she was facing him, "don't do anything stupid."

There was a loud bang and then part of Bob's forehead disappeared. A spray of warm blood painted Eleanor's face and she screamed. The revolver was still smoking in John's hand. Eleanor took one look at the gaping hole in Bob's head leaking blood all over her throw rug and fainted.

"Jesus Christ," John muttered to himself. He went to his wife and checked her pulse. She was still alive. John let out a sigh of relief. Shaking his head, he rolled Bob up in the throw rug he'd fallen on top of and dragged him outside, a snail trail of blood following behind. He left the rug sitting in the backyard, two hiking boots jutting out of one end, and went back up to check on the other boy.

His wife was starting to come to and John knelt down to her and helped her onto the couch. He wiped her face with a wet rag, cleaning her up the best he could. "Just wait here, El," he said and gave her a weak smile. She grabbed his arm as he turned to leave and said, "Why does this keep happening?" There were tears in her eyes and John scooped her in his arms and hugged her tight.

"Just stay here," he said and let her go.

He found Jimmy on the floor and stared at his body in disbelief.

"What in the hell?"

Jimmy's neck shot out at such an unnatural angle that John knew he was long gone. He wrapped Jimmy in the shower curtain and carried him to the backyard, dropping him next to his friend. John was trying to catch his breath and the rain was beating down on him like he was being pelted with marbles.

He opened the shed and pulled up a few of the floorboards. The old well that was there when he bought the house was too much for him to keep up on, so John knocked the bricks away until they were even with the ground. After that, he built the shed over top of it, just in case Eleanor forgot there was a hole and fell into the damn thing.

He grabbed a flashlight from his workbench and sent a beam of light into the throat of the old well. The bodies of two teens were partly submerged in rain water down below. They had stumbled onto his land, drunk, and Eleanor being the kind woman she was, tried to sober them up, show them some hospitality. Somehow they got it in their minds that John and Eleanor were cannibals that wanted to kill and eat them. John knew this because they'd said it and then tried to attack him with a fire poker. John pulled his revolver and did what had to be done. It was self defense.

He dragged the bodies of Jimmy and Bob into the shed and dropped them in the hole.

One of these days I'm gonna have to fill this damn thing, he thought. He set the boards back in place and locked the shed up tight.

John came in soaked to the bone and Eleanor was on her hands and knees with a bucket of soapy water cleaning hair and blood off of the floor. She turned and saw him there soaking wet. "Come sit down by this fire. You'll get pneumonia." John shivered and sat close to the flames. Eleanor took the bucket of bloody water and poured it down the kitchen drain. A clump of hair caught in the trap and she picked it out and threw it in the trash.

"What do we do now?" she asked, throwing a blanket around his shoulders.

"Nothing. It's done. I didn't have a choice. There's something seriously wrong with these kids coming up nowadays," he said, shaking his head. Eleanor put her arm around him and kissed his head.

"You're a good man John. I'll go make us some more tea. Let's just try and forget this ever happened," she said. She headed for the kitchen, stopped and stared at the wall. A dot of blood, no bigger than a tic-tac, stuck to the paneling. Eleanor wet her sleeve with her mouth and wiped it away. She sighed and disappeared into the kitchen to get the kettle going.



Obelisk

Ben finally invited Maria to visit him at his farm a few miles north of Potgietersrus. She was Portuguese and had never been to South Africa before; he was from Capetown and after seven years as a divorcee he felt finally able to manage both a farm and a lover. He was both elated and fearful at the thought of bringing a woman into his bed.

In the year since Elsie left him, Ben had been through phases of deep depression, but even at the best of times he felt devoid of passion, empty of desire. Elsie had taken his libido with her, so it seemed. Even in the night he no longer dreamed of women, felt no lust. He met Maria while researching ostrich feed. His expansion plan for the farm included raising ostriches, and she had raised ostriches in Swaziland for many years. She soon declared her love for him and wrapped him in gaspy, trembling embraces, insisting that he take her to bed. But even Maria, with her generous bosom heaving under his chin, failed to bring his manhood to life. Nonetheless he had asked her to spend a few days at his farm, laying his hopes on a candlelight dinner, wine, perhaps some hot musk oil, and the two of them rolling naked in front of the fireplace.

His house overlooked a grassy hilltop that he intended to convert into an ostrich run. The morning before Maria was to arrive he was clearing the land with a back hoe and uncovered a large stone column buried just beneath the surface. Thinking that it might be some kind of archeological find, he called Professor Durkin, who lived nearby.

Durkin took a glance at the stone object lying in its shallow grave and chuckled. "You've uncovered a fertility totem. They crop up in these parts occasionally, part of some forgotten Zulu cult. Zulu legend has it that if you offer two coconuts and

by cameron macauley

a manioc root to the totem, your virility is guaranteed." He creased his brow and prodded the monolith with his walking stick. "These totems are always found prone, buried in the earth. But it seems that they don't work unless they are, so to speak, erect. Which makes us archeologists wonder: Why are none of them still standing?"

Ben was intrigued. After Durkin left he put a steel cable around the end of the obelisk and with his truck, hauled it upright. As the dry earth fell away he realized that this stone was a giant phallus, ten feet tall and pointed at the sky on the lawn directly in front of his house. At first he was embarrassed, but then imagined that Maria might actually like it—certainly none of his neighbors had such startling lawn ornaments. And with that thought came a tingling in his groin that he had long forgotten.

Maria arrived the next evening in a flurry of suitcases, gaily wrapped gifts, and lingering kisses. She excused herself to dress for dinner and took her time in the bath. Nervous and impatient, Ben went for a stroll outside. The stone phallus stood bathed in moonlight like the roadside sign for some house of porn, annoying, insistent, but sweetly tempting. Noting that Maria was still busy with her ablutions, Ben fetched coconuts and manioc from the gardener's kitchen and laid them at the base of the stone. Looking up he said only one word: "Please." Just then Maria called to him from inside the house, and as he opened the door he felt a powerful surge of desire.

Dinner grew cold on the table, but the lovers engaged in full force on the sofa, groaning and grunting, thrashing and gasping. Far into the night they held each other in a sweat-slick embrace until they collapsed into sleep at dawn. At noon

they awoke, had coffee, and then made love again in the bath. Ben was insatiable, his passion ravenous after so many years. Maria tried to be modest at first, then gave in to the moment and relished in it.

But their dinner was marred by Ben's persistent advances, and afterwards Maria had to plead for some time to rearrange herself and rest. Within minutes he was knocking at her door, and unable to say no, Maria found herself pinned down for what seemed to be an endless night.

After a brief nap Ben woke again, refreshed, and horny. He looked around for Maria but she had called a taxi and was waiting for him in the back seat with the window open only an inch. "Let's give this some time," she said. "Things are moving awfully fast. I'll call you."

In his pajamas Ben wandered out to where the stone obelisk stood mocking him in the early morning sun. Ben's erection tented the front of his flannel trousers like the barrel of a gun. He looped the steel cable over the stone phallus' swollen head, got into his truck and pulled it back into the trench where he had found it. And at that moment, he felt something fade inside him.

Professor Durkin stopped by the next day. "That stone penis of yours might be of interest to the local historical society," he said. Looking at Ben's lawn he inquired, "Where is it?"

"I moved it," said Ben. "I need to find a better place to put it."



126 THE LITERARY HATCHET

[poetry]



I wish that I could give a cheer to the strong-man's-bell I sometimes hear or think I hear. But I am stuck here sitting as a cardboard duck. I think that I enjoy the boys enjoying rounds and winning toys, and do feel fortunate at night, but don't think I should take delight in what I've heard the people speak of if it is to be next week, when we're to be aimed at by One who won't be wielding a barker's gun.

Meanwhile if I could only talk (but I don't even quack or squawk) then I would ask the boss if he might take me on a tour to see the place the strong men ring the bell I've heard so long and know so well at least it's what they say they do. I'd like to know if it is true and maybe give a cheer or two.

—james nicola

THE FURNACE AND THE GARDEN

There's nothing but reflection now, on oxymorons, or a near oxymoron, in hopes that by parsing a paradox we find solace or knowledge, as in Zen

philosophy.The Furnace and the Garden, for instance, metaphors we once knew well from a Book long touted. One stood for Heaven, Eden or Paradise; the other, Hell.

But first there came a fall, of Lucifer, the champion of choice, so long ignored. He let it happen, it would seem, to stir things up a bit because He had grown bored.

His castigation of Adam and Eve for battles of angels, and us for their fulfillment of His will, made us believe we weren't to blame, but some ancestor, or star.

And now we've burned it all, consuming heaven and hell as one, conjoining fire and ice; Paradise being what we had been given; the other, what we made of Paradise.

—james nicola

rapturous chill

Nicotine stained walls pleading for a fresh splash of white wash. Gutter full of decayed leaves and the porch smells of earthen mold. The bread knife rests upon the old cutting board, loaves long since gone. Walk on a dirt and dusty kitchen floor dried dead mouse resting by the door. The basement stairs squeak and moan with each step while swaying to and fro. A voice heard whispering in a low groan, my heart beats faster, more dangerously. Audacious shrills and rapturous chills residing upon a noxious molded grin in a pig iron and saffron form while suspended between bristle cone rafters. Hasten to the outside door and climb out past the root cellar and beyond the tracks. Hear the muffled footsteps gain and stalk; a haunting adventure fades into the dark.

—ken allan dronsfield

[short story]



by george garnet

I'm a garbage collector and my duty is to empty garbage bins—to collect all the dirt from the streets and load it in my heavy truck. Easy, you may say. I agree pull the lever, lift the bin, tilt it and voila—the bin spills its collection of waste. I watch the little camera screen in the cabin as the garbage is piled in the big belly of my truck. Next, I punch the button and the giant moving wall closes on the pile, squelching it inch by inch.

With that comes the feeling of rebirth and joy—garbage turned into a squashed cube. No, not a cube but a piece of art, I would say. Although foul smelling liquid is dripping from the compacted garbage mass, I am happy. A feeling of overpowering relief. Filth compacted and ready to be burned and destroyed. Removed from the face of the earth.

This is how I live my life, night after night, as I choose to work the graveyard shift. You see, night time is a special time. A beautiful time. Most men lie in bed and sleep next to their beloved wives. Not me. I can't sleep at night time. Loneliness is a painful thing—won't let me lie in bed and relax and have dreams. My monkey mind is never tired; it jumps from one thought to another. Why did Mona leave me? What did I do wrong?

I was nice to her. I tried to make her happy in the only way I know—by taking care of her, buying her presents and flowers, taking her out. Like all the nice guys, as they say. Anyway, this didn't help much. Neither did my thinking. I guess I'll never figure it out.

One day she didn't return home. I found a little note in her handwriting, just a simple "I'm gone." Gives me headaches just thinking about it. And I still search the crowds on the street. I might spot her somewhere and she might come back to me. I can't stand the empty flat, the humming TV, the opened bourbon bottle. So I volunteer for night shifts.

The suburbs I collect garbage from are run-down with old wooden houses and shuttered buildings. Dying businesses and cheap dark bars, broken fences and bins lying on the streets. I often have to get out from the cabin and stand the bins up in the correct lifting position.

Tonight is not any different. I'm in another run-down suburb. The street is dimly lit; most of the lights are broken. On both sides are uneven rows of bins next to old parked cars—some of them rusty, without wheels. A loose skinny dog stops in the middle of the road, stares at my headlights, barks and runs away in the darkness. I lift the first bin, empty it, then move to the second, and the third. The fourth is beside a thick, dried tree. I get out of the cabin, put my shoulder to the bin, and give it a shove. As I turn to climb back behind the wheel, I see a couple. They are some thirty feet away down the street. The woman looks like my wife. Similar figure and proportions. My heart jumps.

Startled, I stare at the woman. The streetlight between us is burnt out. I rub my eyes, trying to penetrate the darkness. Suddenly the man, just a thick shadow, lunges at her and grabs her by the throat. The woman gurgles something.

My hands tighten into fists. I step forward and the woman's silhouette becomes clearer. She is a stranger. This is not my wife. This woman has a wide face and long dark hair. Her miniskirt is too short, her heels too high.

She stumbles backwards. A vein pulsates in my forehead, my clenched fingers hurt.

The man, bulky with a shaved head, yells, "Where is it?" His shouting overpowers the rumble of the truck engine. He raises his thick hand and slaps her across the face.

You see, the strong can beat the weak every single time. And why not? It's a jungle out there. No one is going to help you. A jungle. You don't know who is who and what they can do to you. The bones of my clenched fingers are crackling; the nails pierce the skin to bleeding.

"Hey," I shout, not having control over my voice. I don't have control over my feet that move on their own toward the couple, first slowly, and then faster and faster.

The stocky man turns toward me and looks at me for a brief moment. I'm nothing special, a short guy with ordinary features, not athletic or handsome; one of those insignificant guys. That's maybe the reason the man turns to the woman and slaps her hard across the face again. She cries out, her body pinched to the wall. The man is in control, leaning against her, demanding something.

I'm so tense my head hurts; my heart races. Following my feet I dash down the street toward them, my eyes fixated on the bulky figure. I'm just a meter away when he turns at me and hits me in the stomach. His punch is strong, full of power. Something explodes in my eyes, new stars on the sky, or it might be the Big Bang itself. My lungs burn as if in fire.

I gulp for air as a fish does when it is tossed on the sand. Like a fish, I definitely am the prey and a good target for the man as he hits me in the face, throwing me aside and forcing me to kneel down on the gravel. It's a jungle out there; they break you very easily. This last thought circles my mind as I dig my face in the dirt.

The sounds get muffled. I am that dying fish, thrown on the sand, watching only with one eye as the stocky man pushes the woman to the ground, his cowboy boot sinking into her chest. He grabs her bag and throws her things one by one on the ground. It looks as though he is not finding what he is looking for. He yells and tosses her bag on the ground, yells again, his neck bulging under the collar of his leather jacket.

I recognize the metallic taste of blood in my mouth. I've been crushed before.

I feel pain every now and then, but don't think I'm a hero or anything of the sort.

Still clenching my fists, I try to move as a fly with one wing.

The man now reaches for her cleavage, tears part of her top, sticks his thick fingers into her bra and pulls out a small bundle of bills. Money. Oh, yes. I try to smile with my cut lips. It's all about money. The jungle. You will survive if you have money. The more, the better. We've now come to the point. Money gives you security and power over the entire jungle. I try to laugh, but only a gurgle comes out of my mouth.

The bulky man slaps the woman hard one more time, growls something and looks at me for a moment. He clears his throat, spits on me, stretches the sleeves of his black leather jacket, and straightens his blue jeans. His shaved head glistens in the dim light and a tattoo of a blade is on his thick neck. He cocks his head and the echo of his footsteps fade in the distance. Finally, we are left alone. Alone in the jungle. No one is on their way to help. You have got to help yourself.

I turn and a sharp pain shoots through my left where the guy hit me. I manage a look at the woman. Leaning against the wall where the man left her, she is breathing heavily, her eyes closed.

I try crawling to the wall, thinking it may help me sit up. The ringing in my ears is dispersing and the rumble of the truck comes louder. The mixed odors of exhaust fumes and garbage wafts in the night air.

I reach the path. My knees feel the softness of grass. Help yourself and God will help you. You see what I mean. I try a smile and pain reminds me of my cut lip.

The wall is too far away—I won't be able to make it.

I startle as a hand touches me. I moan and lean away.

"Sorry." It's the woman.

Her hand is soft, weak, and gentle.

"Can you get up?" she asks.

She helps me stumble to my feet. I turn and face her. She is still breathing heavily. Her eyes are black and wide set. Her black hair covers part of her face. A weak waft of perfume. I close my eyes for a moment and inhale the sweetness of the fragrance. I open my eyes and meet hers again. Black deep eyes. Almond-shaped. She holds me by the shoulder.

"C'mon, I'll help you to the truck," she says as we start to shuffle.

Her hand is soft and weak and it crumbles with every wobble of my body. It's mostly a moral support, and for the moment, it's all I need. She tries hard to help me climb into the cabin. You see, I was wrong here—even in the jungle, you can get someone to help you. I am pleased that I was wrong. So, you never know.

"Can you drive?" she asks. Her high cheekbones and full lips make her Latina complexion perfect. Her cheek is bruised. She notices my stare and wipes the blood smear from her face.

"You better come with me," I mumble. "You should get out of the street. At least for tonight."

She considers it for a moment and climbs on the seat next to me. Her legs in white stockings are well shaped and healthy.

She pulls the torn bits of her short red leather top and covers the bra underneath. I ask her where she is staying and she tells me a place not far away.

"Did he take all your money?"

She nods. "Painkillers are expensive in the Dominican," she says without looking at me. "My little niece, she needs them, at least for some comfortable end." She pauses. "I told him, he wouldn't let go," she says as if it is a kind of mundane business. She turns away, so I can't see her eyes.

I clench my jaws. The pain in my body is clear and loud now. The pain is everywhere. The pain is even in the universe. I can even feel the pain of her niece a thousand kilometers away. A girl lying in a bed waiting for the end.

I reach for the wheel and release the breaks with effort. The truck wobbles and starts down the street with a rumble. We drive and the next streets are the same—dark and narrow from the old parked cars and rubbish bins, with dim lights and broken back street fences.

We head downhill, and the truck gains speed. My foot feels numb and the brake pedal seems too far away. I manage to take the left turn and the cone of the high beam illuminates a figure emerging from a car. It's a stocky man with a shaved head, black leather jacket and jeans. He turns, pauses for a moment and raises his hand to cover his eyes from the sharp beam. I think I see a tattoo of a blade on the left side of his thick neck.

"That's him, that's him," the woman yells, leaning forward and pointing with her hand.

My foot jumps on the gas pedal. It's a reflex. Like in the jungle when you have to protect yourself, you raise a stick and get ready to strike. I can't explain it—you just do it. Kill or be killed.

The pedal sinks to the cabin floor and the engine revs. The truck, with a violent force, lunges forward and hits the bulky man.

It's strange how similar it all looks to the movies or computer games. The man's face comes into contact with the cabin, his nose and left side flattens against the windscreen, all turning into a bloody pulp splashing on the glass surface. A crack in the form of a star appears on the windscreen. A big red star painted with fresh blood. The body detaches, becomes airborne, and lands on the roof of the closest car. I jam on the brakes and the huge truck skids on the pavement with a rumble. Everything is shaking and moving in the cabin; the emergency kit from behind lands on the dashboard.

I turn and look at the battered, unnaturally twisted body on the roof of the car. What a funny thing life is. So precarious, like a body hanging on a thin thread over a deep ravine. Any moment it can snap and then you are nothing—just a pulp of nothing but bones, tissue, and blood. Pretty useless stuff.

I look at the woman. Her clenched hands cover her mouth. Her fingers are bone white from squeezing. I say nothing. The broken body on the roof of the car is nothing. We are nothing. Everything is nothing. I look in the rear mirror, then in front through the windscreen, examining the street. I don't see anyone. It's a back street, with old houses without fences and insignificant people living there. Insignificant like me and the woman next to me.

I yank the door open and slide down from the cabin. Clenching my fists, I limp to the car where the broken body lies. Face unrecognizable, smeared in blood. One eye opened with a cold glimmer. Blood trickles down on the tattooed dagger. The body lies still like the trunk of a just-cut-down tree. This is all it takes—one strong hit. Everyone can turn into nothing. Even the meanest thug. His swagger gone, his rule of power evaporated.

Gritting my teeth, I pull the sleeve of the leather jacket. The body slides from the roof of the car and plops on the concrete face down. I kneel and turn him on his back. In his front pocket, I find a thick bundle of bank notes. A few thousand. This will help some poor little soul lying in bed thousands of kilometers away.

I limp back to my truck and climb into the cabin.

"Here," I say. I extend my hand with the money to the woman.

While holding the money, I examine her wide face with full lips, high cheek bones, and black eyes with long lashes. Her hair, cut in French fashion, gives her an even more exotic look.

"It's all yours. Please take it," I say.

Shaking, one hand still cupping her mouth, she reaches for the bundle. I inhale and close my eyes for a moment. My body relaxes.

With a steady hand, I reach for the lever and the giant metal arm comes alive. I position it over the body, open the metal hand, lower it and release the lever. It bites its huge metal teeth into the lifeless flesh. I push the "lift" lever and the body is raised and moved over the hatch on top of the truck.

I turn my eyes to the little screen and punch the 'release' button. The lifeless body, hanging like a rag doll, drops into the gaping hole of the hopper. I switch the small screen off, sparing myself the details of the squashing process. Although I don't watch it, my mind runs the movie of what is happening. The process of cleaning—after all, I'm a garbage collector. A small wheel in the big jungle. With that I try to justify what I have done. The picture of a little girl lying in a bed thousands of kilometers away emerges again. I ask why. No one answers me. As expected.

I look at the woman in the seat next to me. Her hands now cover her face. I just hope that little girl will be able to wait a bit longer for her painkillers. If the universe has a bit of patience she will definitely get her pills this time.

I release the brake and drive down the deserted narrow street. For the first time, I don't care that the bins won't be emptied on time.



Date of Birth

by b.c. nance

D.C. tapped his credit card on the counter, watching the elderly clerk tediously fold each garment. She must have been ninety years old, maybe 100. The clerk's hands shook as she tried to scan the bar codes on D.C.'s high-priced designer clothing. His friends Joey and Carl were giggling like little boys as D.C. rolled his eyes and tapped his watch. He never missed a chance to show off his Rolex, a gift from his father on D.C.'s first day at the office. D.C. was an executive at age 23, fresh from college with a bachelor's degree so generalized that not even he could give it a name. Everyone knew his father was a big contributor to the college, and no one dared give the son a failing grade.

"Are we almost finished here, granny?" D.C. said to the clerk. He turned back to his friends who burst into laughter, but Janet, his girlfriend, turned away, pretending to be interested in silk ties. Janet felt sorry for the old woman who was struggling now to steady her hand enough to slide the credit card through the stripe reader. It was the platinum card that D.C. used often and had never once seen a bill. They went straight to his father or his father's company, or who knows where. D.C. didn't care. Ever since his parents divorced twelve years ago, they had fought to win D.C.'s affection. They bought and paid for that affection until his mother could no longer compete. Then the victorious father showered his only child with lavish gifts just for the privilege of introducing him at boring cocktail parties and endless office meetings. It was a small price to pay for a high salary executive position that allowed D.C. to sit in his large office and surf the web, gamble online, and download pornography.

D.C. turned back to the clerk and whirled his hand in a gesture that said "Hurry up." He looked at her leathery wrinkled skin with obvious revulsion. Her purple dress was low cut and shorter than someone her age should be wearing. She had silver hair bundled up behind her head and held in place by an antique ivory pin that resembled a bird coming out of an egg or possibly flames. D. C. couldn't tell. The clerk was an inconvenience to him. She should be in a rest home where she would never again bother him.

"Danton Canaday Mills the Fifth," the clerk said, eyeing the card as she handed it back to him. He snatched it from her and scowled at her for the scattering of giggles that the mention of his full name had drawn from Joey and Carl. Even Janet smiled. It had taken D.C. the last five years to ditch that name and convince people to call him by his initials. Even his father had finally consented, but his mother never could, and that helped drive the wedge further between them.

D.C. grabbed his bag and looked again at the old woman. "Anything else?" he said derisively.

"Just one thing," the old clerk said. She reached over the counter and took his hand with her gnarled fingers. D.C. looked at her with wide eyes and started to pull away, but something about her eyes compelled him to look and listen. Her eyes were illuminated sapphires. The clerk leaned so close to D.C. that he could feel her warm breath on his face. There was hint of decay and mint. Her eyes stabbed him as she said, "May I have your date of birth, please?"

"What?" he said with quavering voice.

"Your date of birth," the clerk repeated. "May I have your date of birth, please?"

D.C.'s hand felt weak in hers as he stared into her gemstone eyes. His head began to nod and his mouth started moving before words came out, and then he blurted out, "September seventh, ninety-two."

The clerk drew her hand away from D.C.'s, her dry, brittle skin stroking the length of his hand until they were fingertip to fingertip. A spark jumped from one to the other. He felt a cold chill and drew his hand back. His friends stared in wide-eyed bewilderment.

D.C. turned to walk away then spun around and glared at the clerk. "Why don't you go back to the old folks home where you belong, grandma?"

Her reaction was not what D.C. had expected, and the smile that spread across the clerk's face gave the young man a queasy feeling. He strode toward the door, determined to never return, and his dutiful entourage followed close behind.

They had not gone far when D.C. slowed down, trying to catch his breath.

"Are you all right, D.C.?" asked Janet.

"Yeah," he said. "Just a little out of breath."

Janet ran a gentle finger across his temple where she noticed a stray silver hair among his dyed and styled coiffure. D.C. pulled away from Janet's touch and walked on, but his breathing was labored and he started to limp. His friends tried to get D.C. to rest but he refused and continued plodding along the sidewalk, fumbling in his pocket for his car keys.

The young man had not gone far before he doubled over in pain and sank to all fours. His joints hurt, and his breath came is short puffs. He reached for Janet, but she gasped and covered her mouth. She backed away, and D.C. saw Joey and Carl staring at him.

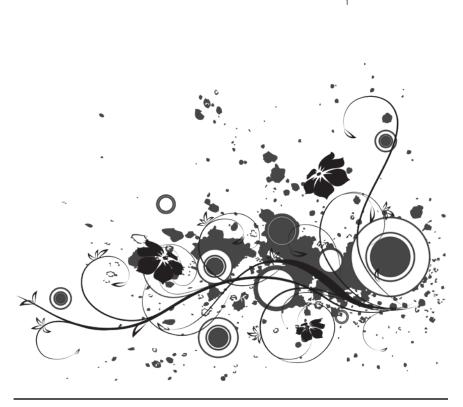
"What the hell is wrong with you?" D.C. asked with someone else's voice. He looked toward his reflection in a shop window. An old man with gray hair and

worn wrinkled skin looked back at him with forlorn eyes. When D.C. touched his chin the old man touched his own. He ran a hand across his head and the old man followed suit.

"What the hell is this?" D.C. gasped. "Someone help me," he cried.

A crowd began to gather, curious as to what was wrong with the old man and wondering why the three young people were not helping him. D. C. looked up and saw a young woman in her twenties walking by. She wore a purple dress with a deep V-neck. The short dress showed off her long silken legs, and long blonde hair fell about her shoulders. The woman stopped and bent next to him, and he saw in her hand an ivory hairpin shaped like a bird rising from...flames, he decided. She whispered, "Thank you." His mouth fell open as he looked into her bright sapphire eyes. The woman sprang to her feet and walked away, dangling D.C.'s keys from her finger.

He tried to point an accusatory finger at her, but all he had was a gnarled hand with fingers like dry bent twigs. D.C. began to weep as he watched the young woman stride through the parking lot toward his BMW, and out of his dimming sight.



138 THE LITERARY HATCHET



They muted us with a poisonous smile and political power. Then they beheaded our hills, massacred trees, buried ponds... We mistook their new concrete buildings for development.

They sit in the chill of a/c rooms with prostitutes. Venom from their deeds' fangs affects the earth's organs. Climate malfunctions. Embryo of rain dies in the womb of cloud.

Sand suffers from dehydration. These red wild blossoms are nature's fury, burning bright on the branches. This isn't sunlight, but a pyre. Life's wings are being burnt. Butterflies don't decorate plants. Flowers are like breasts of silent starving women. Even a tough crow doesn't dare to fly.

A poor peasant falls down, thrust with sun's arrows, in his field of parched dreams. Sunburn is our annihilation's developmental stage.

—fabiyas mv

[poetry]

FINDING PERGATORY

I woke not to find myself, and not in a dark wood, I wished to wake, but I stayed calm, almost comatose, I could not see a dark wood, though they say I should.

The right road was nowhere near my shuttered gaze. Was there such a way ever anywhere I wandered, or was the world no more than a mirrored maze?

I stepped forward and found myself sinking down, down into a world of words hurled across waters dark, down into a world where I was sent to drown.

When would I wake from my bitter dream? Was this sticky mire stuck to my mind or heart or soul? Was I simply seeing my last night stomach's psycho scream?

Then I woke, but I knew there was more that I had seen more than I could recall with my mind, for my body recoiled still from that dark infernal scene.

When I slept again, I found myself afloat, gliding with ease down a leaf-strewn stream. And was that my sainted mother in my boat? Not my mother but a younger friend from yesterday, and her friend who dipped his hands in the stream; we three drifted down an ancient waterway.

When we reached the electric crest of the waterfall, we knew nothing of it till the moment we rocked and swift as thought plunged down the water wall.

Spitting water, gasping breaths of air, we swam and shook and still we swam, till our bodies trembled every limb and we finally touched the mudbank beside the brook.

Then we stood in the water but the mucky ooze sucked us slowly down, and we lunged forward in fear, clutching to get loose of Death's tightening noose.

My friend was first to catch the grassy shore, and we followed close in her wake, grabbing hold, green grass in our hands and beneath an earthy floor.

We learned to breathe again and then to smile until he turned, started, and pointed up the hill we had lighted on from out the water's spitting mouth.

I woke again, purged anew as my curving way stretched out ahead with my companions offward into the tinted dawn of another darkish day.

-steven petersheim

Cocktails

by john w. dennehy

The drinks hit so hard I ended up strewn on the floor. My face pressed into the Oriental rug covering the hardwood of our upstairs study. Nose and chin had scraped the rough fibers, chaffing my skin. Lying there, the smell of ashes and copper wafted through the air. The night had taken a drastic turn.

We had settled into armchairs by the tall windows of our Brownstone. Wind rattled the panes, and frost covered the glass, but we were cozy and warm. She held a glass of Pinot Noir, as flames blazed in the fireplace.

Preoccupied, checking the daily trades, I never envisioned an argument might unfold. The evening was a tad dull, downright boring in fact. Nothing to indicate the subject of debauchery would ever be broached.

Her long, graceful fingers wrapped around the glass. A novel sat in her lap. The table between us held my gin and tonic. A bowl of mixed nuts was set neatly by my drink.

Everything was splendid, as usual.

Then she interrupted me from the paper. "Darling," she said, intently. An urgent discussion. "Sorry to trouble you, but we *must* talk."

"Can't it wait until dinner?" I replied. "Almost through the business section."

"I'm afraid it *cannot* wait," she insisted.

"Well, let's have it then," I said, ruffling the paper.

She flipped her book open. The legal papers were inside. My wife handed them over without any affectation. A cool countenance.

My betrothed appeared resolute in her actions.

"I've filed for divorce," she said in a matter-of-fact tone. Stern, as though the decision had been well considered, and final.

My heart fluttered with anxiety. Waves of panic and dread washed over me. Her family owned the factories, held the deed to our house, and wielded power. An entire fortune would be lost.

"But why?" I pled. "Why on earth would you do such a thing?"

"You've been stepping out with your little floozy."

"She doesn't mean a thing." Then I moved to the floor, kneeling before her. "You're what matters, only you."

"So, you don't deny it then." Her eyes were cold, icy, shooting daggers.

My thoughts raced with plans to change her mind. I half-expected I could move her, but she remained steadfast. Begging shifted to outbursts. "How could you do this to me?" I snapped, rising.

"You've done it to yourself," she replied coolly.

"You're going to ruin us. And for what? A two-timing cheap girl."

"Not my fault you picked such a tart."

Clenching my fists, raging, partly angered over the divorce papers, and irate from the reminder of my girl, who stepped out with younger men, my head swirled and I struggled for breath.

Turning my back on her, I stepped to the fireplace, grabbing the mantle, desperate to curb my fury. My fingers dug into the wood. The moment eventually began to subside. Simmering down, I planned another sortie at mollifying her resolve.

She laughed and called me a pathetic loser.

"Enough!" I cried. I turned and faced her, the wrought-iron poker in hand. She smirked. Uncontrollable rage swept through me, forcing my actions without foresight of mind.

Her look turned perplexed—aghast.

The poker wound back almost on its own like a baseball bat. Intent on wiping that smirk off her face, I swung hard and ferocious.

There was a loud crack of iron striking bone. Crimson shot across the taupe chair. She spun sideways, registering only shock. The carnage wasn't daunting. And somehow she remained seated in the chair.

I raised the poker, clenching it tightly in both hands, and drove it downward.

The hooked end split into her skull, cracking it open; bits of bone and brain matter exploded, spraying my face and the armchair. She flopped over and spilled onto the floor, twisted unnaturally on the rug. Blood and fluids leaked from her wounds; there was a jagged hole in her head. A gash had cleaved off part of her face.

Throwing the poker down, I stepped to my chair and downed the gin and tonic. She'd set her glass of wine on the table when handing over the papers. I reached for it and drank greedily, consuming the wine in a single gulp. Immediately I discerned the effect of drink-dizzy, light-headed, a queasy feeling in my stomach.

About to wretch, I rose and staggered toward the water-closet. My legs gave way, buckling. I stumbled, teetered, and fell to the floor.

She lay strewn on the floor just a few feet away, skull ripped open, but somehow eyes-wide, locked frozen in judgment. A tortured mess, my dear wife had fallen in a contorted heap; her leg was twisted with a calf protruding from beneath the body—its position so unnatural that I surmised the femur had fractured.

Blood pooled out from under her body, soaking the fine rug. My heart was almost saddened at the loss of her. *Almost*. The numbness squelched much of the guilt. Fear and panic gripped me as I lay prostrate beside my betrothed.

After dropping the blasted poker, I'd immediately felt remorse, regretting my actions. Temper had gotten the best of me. Driven by the stress of it all, I'd sought solace in the unfinished cocktails. Such a great deal of liquor, consumed in a brief amount of time, naturally led to dizziness.

Lying there, face in the rug, I came to realize just how prepared she'd been for our little discussion. This was not a spur-of-the-moment sort of thing. My sweet wife had plotted and planned, contrived against me. She'd met with lawyers and talked to her family, staging the evening discussion for days or even weeks.

The notice of filing could have been presented through a constable. Pride had gotten the best of her. Even if counseled against risk and volatility, she had wanted to face me alone. She had needed to drink in my reaction, watch me squirm and beg for mercy.

Her penultimate lifetime emotional experience, hitched to retribution, rather than joy or lust. And she had to have it.

My wife had been cunningly thoughtful. She had anticipated that I might overreact. She had always craved the last word. Now, prostrate and lifeless on the floor, a pool of tacky blood near her corpse—the fire burned to ashes—I realized she had never even took a sip of her wine.



witness to a schoolyard burial

Storm crows gather in the yard squawking devout resolutions, picking through the reddish dust of shattered brick, awaiting the feast.

Atomic children stir below the grasses, continuing their education in soil spit, dredged with the dirt into the pit, like so much unwanted snow.

Now, hear them scream. Listen! Listen as their voices tickle the hairs of dandelions; listen to their cries in the wind.

Listen, and hear them now, hear them gently screaming... we live on, we live on.

—wesley gray

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OUTER LIMIT

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Sunspots on the brain Burnt all the lies away Meaning of life hidden No ones lived that day

Most of mind sits static In a frozen state Waiting too come too life At a later date

Instead of looking at Place universe started Search the horizon where Galactic waves parted

A place were magic lives And light doesn't bend Wish to reach the fork Before we reach the end

-denny marshall

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soul circus and corn dogs

Behind midway lights live shadow souls waltzing through dreams, devoid of life. Excitement flares with the first customer as fair patrons hunt cotton candy stands. A favorite game of the screaming insane launch an arrow high into the night sky run around in wonder, where it will land. Perhaps in the sand, or your right eye. Tractor pull is on, rumbling the coffins tilt a whirl spins, grasping for dear life hide twixt the rides, young are smoking pick your own poison, puff puff, cough. Games shutting down, midnight is here. Dancing on the strip as the lights go low parking lot empty, as the masks come off swap out the booty at a corn dog stand. The hideous and dark gather stolen souls, stored in a dybbuk box; off to the next town. The trucks roll the back roads, moving slow, Summer in June, now down goes the moon.

—ken allan dronsfield

blood strain

A mesh of muscle and tendon blood and bone bound in skin, the human body strains against its several parts, always humming with raw energy until something must let loose

> a cough, perhaps or an impulse of blood standing out against skin that veils its sanguine color with other tones.

Headaches – coughs – heaving blows as if from running up a hill or down it all out of breath, they rush from out the body, leaving life within.

We know the causes of human pain since we've tested the body's mortal strain and gazed on the shape of the human brain, but when I pause, pause and turn my face, I carry on my bitter attempt to trace the curling path of the human race.

-steven petersheim

PRISONER ZERO

Behold, a Summer snowfall, ash caskets rain from Eden's skyline, overcast in a blanket of condemnation, as silent death creeps through prison corridors.

The clueless man rattles in his cage, a rabid dog decayed beyond his years, starved-out, crestfallen eyes, the sheep of his slumber sent to the slaughter.

A final denizen of Ground Zero shackled to the burden of forgotten crimes, his contemporaries have all left him, checked out of their cells decades prior.

Claws screech on the rust of iron bars, grating bone down to umber dust. He grins and plots his escape through crawlers and the ashes of worms.

—wesley gray



PERCHANCE TO DREAM

by scott merrow

A strange sense of dread nagged at Officer Anna Maria Rodriguez as her high heels click-clacked across the marble floor of the cavernous lobby. When she reached the elevators, she pushed the "Up" button and quickly scanned the building directory. There... Dr. Andrew Blevins, Psychiatrist, Room 1213. Damn, she thought, I'm actually going to see a shrink. Crazy me.

The elevator door swished open, and Annie stepped in. After she pushed the "12" button, she made a few minor adjustments to her blue dress uniform and gave her badge a quick polish with her coat sleeve. She looked sharp, the picture of a professional police officer. And a young one.

Exactly eight weeks ago, Annie, fresh out of the academy, had reported to the precinct house for her first day on the job. She'd been assigned a temporary training partner, Officer Dan Roberts, for her orientation patrol, and immediately after the morning briefing they had hopped in a squad car and hit the streets.

Five minutes later, a scratchy radio broadcast from dispatch came in: "Tango 314, and all cars in vicinity, 211 in progress, 110 Brookline Road, suspect is a white male, dark clothing. He's armed. Proceed with caution."

Annie keyed her lapel mike and replied, "Tango 314, 10-4," as Dan flipped on the siren and stomped on the accelerator pedal. The car lurched forward.

When they arrived at the scene, Dan stepped out of the car, and a split second later Annie heard a loud POP and watched Dan drop like a rock. She keyed her mike. "Officer down!" she screamed as she bolted from the car.

Then everything went black.

Eight weeks had passed, and she still had no memory of anything after stepping out of the car. That's why she was here.

That... and the dreams.

Dr. Blevins ushered Annie into his office and steered her toward a leather couch. Before she could ask the question he said, "Your choice, you can lie down if you want to... but most people just sit there." He smiled. "We're just gonna have a little chat."

Annie grinned and took a seat. He sat opposite her in a big overstuffed chair. He had a thick file folder in his lap, and he flipped through it while Annie waited. Then he looked her in the eye.

"So, Anna Maria..."

"Annie," she corrected him.

"Okay, Annie, tell me why you're here today," he began.

She thought about it. "Well, for starters, I have to be here. It's part of my rehab. They won't let me go back to work until you tell them I'm not nuts."

"Nuts?" He chuckled. "You tell me. Do you think you're nuts?"

I don't feel nuts," she answered. "But I still can't remember anything about 'the incident." She hesitated. "And I'm still having the dreams."

"The dreams," he reflected, "tell me about them."

"Nightmares, really bad ones. Every night. Usually somebody's trying to kill me... or I'm trying to kill myself."

He nodded and jotted some notes.

"And they seem real," she continued. "Sometimes I can't tell if I'm awake or asleep."

"Annie, that's not necessarily a bad thing," he told her. "Dreams often serve as stress relievers. Almost everyone has weird dreams when they're stressed out. And you've been through a lot."

"There's more, though," she said. "Lately, there seem to be things left behind from my dreams."

"What do you mean-left behind?"

"I mean left behind... in the real world," she said. She reached in her jacket pocket and pulled out a straight razor. She unfolded it and held it up for him to see.

"Last night I dreamed I slit my own throat—with a razor like this. I woke up scared and sweaty, so I went to the bathroom to splash some water on my face. *This* was on the sink. It's not mine. I've never seen it before."

Doctor Blevins took the razor and examined it closely. He got up from his chair and walked to his desk. "That's odd," he said. "I bought a razor exactly like this a couple days ago."

He opened his desk drawer and fumbled around.

"It's gone," he said, looking up. "Annie, did you...?"

"Did I what? Steal your razor?" she interrupted. "Geez, doc, why would I do that? How? I've never been here before."

"I don't know, Annie, but..." he stammered.

"C'mon, doc, you're supposed to be helping me here, not freakin' accusing me of stuff. How would I even...?"

"Okay, okay, Annie, calm down," he said, coming out from behind his desk. "It's just a very odd coincidence. Here, take your razor."

He held it out, and as Annie reached for it, he lunged toward her, like lightning, and slashed the blade across her throat. A fountain of blood spurted from the wound, drenching both of them.

Annie grabbed her throat and...

...she bolted upright, gasping for breath, heart pounding wildly, but safe and awake, at home in her own bed. *Phew!*

Heart still racing, she got up and hurried down the dark hallway and into the bathroom. She flipped on the light, gasped, and took a quick step backward. It was there, on the sink. The straight razor.

After a panic-filled moment, she picked it up. It still had a price tag attached. The price tag said, "Ephialtis Pawn Brokers." *Never heard of it*, she thought. *And I definitely never bought a razor there*.

The next morning, she found the address of the pawn shop and drove there. It was in a seedy neighborhood, and after a few passes up and down the street she spotted the faded sign, "Ephialtis," above the door of a rundown shop. She parked and went in.

It was tiny, dimly lit, and musty smelling. It seemed almost abandoned; there was hardly any merchandise—a few odds and ends scattered around, old musical instruments, and other worn-looking items. Everything was covered with layers of dust and mold and cobwebs.

No people, though.

"Hello?" Annie called out.

A man cleared his throat, and Annie jumped, startled. Her eyes flashed in the direction of the sound. There, behind a long counter, in a shadowy corner, an odd-looking man was perched on a stool. He was 60-ish, thin, and wiry looking with greasy hair slicked flat against his scalp. He stared at Annie without saying a word.

She laid the razor on the counter. "Sir, can you tell me anything about this razor? It has your price tag on it. I was wondering who bought it. And when."

He lowered himself from the stool, and Annie realized he was short, a dwarf, maybe four feet tall. He hobbled over to the counter with a pronounced limp, and he picked up the razor, examining it carefully.

As he stared at the razor, Annie noticed the large grotesque mole on his left cheek, black and hairy, about the size of a quarter. She stared at it, wide-eyed.

He handed her the razor, and with a very heavy eastern European accent he said, "I deed not sell you thees blade."

Still transfixed by the mole, Annie replied, "Well, is there someone else who might know something about it?"

"There ees no one else."

"But... there must be," Annie stammered.

"There ees no one. Only myself."

The man noticed Annie staring. An ugly, unnatural smile distorted his face. "Perhaps, my dear, you would like to... touch the mole?"

"What?" Annie asked, shocked.

"The mole," he answered, pointing to his cheek. "You would like to touch eet?"

Annie winced. "No! Why would I..."

The man gestured to the razor. "Or... perhaps you would like to cut the mole?" He quickly limped around the end of the counter.

Annie slowly backed away. "What the hell are you talking about? I don't want to cut... anything. Who *are* you, anyway?"

The man thrust his cheek toward Annie. "I am Lombard," he said. "Please, my dear, use the blade. I want to feel the cold steel on my flesh. Cut the mole!"

Like a cobra striking, Lombard's hand darted out and grabbed Annie's wrist. He pulled the razor toward his cheek.

"Jesus Christ!" Annie shrieked as she wrenched her wrist away. She shuddered and backed toward the door. Lombard followed, leering.

Annie caught her foot and stumbled, landing flat on her back. Lombard was on her in an instant, the mole inches from Annie's face. "Cut the mole!" he demanded.

She screeched, "Get off me, you freak," and she slashed the razor across Lombard's face, deeply slicing the mole. Blood spewed onto Annie's face.

"Oh, my God," she screamed, as Lombard cackled maniacally. Then...

...she lurched upward, coming instantly awake, heart pounding rapidly, lungs gasping for air. She immediately felt her face and checked her hands. No blood.

"Damn," she said, slowly catching her breath. "Damn, damn, damn."

But then she became aware of her surroundings. She was on the couch in Doctor Blevins' office. She was alone, and the room was dark. She stood up and realized she was wearing her pajamas. She walked quietly across the office, opened the door, and stepped out into the corridor. It was deserted. The fluorescent overhead lights flickered an eerie greenish light, and strange music wafted from a scratchy speaker in the ceiling as she padded barefoot down the hall.

When she reached the elevator, she pushed the "Down" button. "C'mon, c'mon," she urged.

When the elevator door opened she hurried inside and turned to push the button for the lobby. That's when she saw him. A man, crouching in the corner. A small man. Lombard! The mole was still gushing blood.

"Oh, no!" she gasped as the door slid shut. Without warning, Lombard leapt on her, knocking her to the floor. As they wrestled, blood dripped from Lombard's face onto Annie's. She could taste the foul stuff as it oozed into the corners of her mouth.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, Annie began to hear a faint sound. *Beep. Beep. Beep.* It grew steadily louder and faster. *Beep. Beep. Beep.*

A technician wearing light-blue scrubs stood in a sterile-looking control room, watching Annie through a one-way window. She was in a hospital bed, unconscious, an IV tube in her arm and an array of electrodes attached to a dozen shaved spots on her scalp. The electrodes were connected to various devices that allowed the technician to continually monitor her brain waves. *Beep. Beep. Beep.*

At the moment, she was thrashing about wildly on the bed as if she were battling

some invisible foe in her dreams. Suddenly, with an abrupt thrust of her arm, she tore the IV line loose from its holder, and a line of blood showered her face. Still unconscious, she licked her lips and winced.

"Damn," the technician shouted.

Although Annie, lying unconscious in the next room, had no way of knowing it, the technician was a dead ringer for Lombard, although his actual name was David McNeill, and he was taller. The mole on his cheek was only the size of a small pea.

He grabbed a medical bag and dashed into Annie's room.

He reattached the IV line and took a syringe from the bag. He injected a greenish fluid into the IV line, and Annie stopped flailing immediately.

Then her eyes snapped open.

The first thing she saw was "Lombard" standing above her. She cringed and tried to scurry backward. She pointed at the mole.

"The mole," she exclaimed, "it's ... "

"Don't worry," David McNeill said with no trace of an accent. He touched his cheek. "It's just a birthmark. Here...," he said, and he reached into the medical bag. When he withdrew his hand it was holding the straight razor. With his other thumb and forefinger he grasped the mole, stretched it taut... and sliced it off.

"Do you want it?" he asked calmly.

Horrified, Annie scurried further backward, against the headboard. Then she bolted upright, awake, gasping for breath.

She looked around. She was in uniform, sitting in the police cruiser. Dan Roberts was next to her, at the wheel.

Then she heard a raspy sound. Radio static. Followed by:

"Tango 314, and all cars in vicinity, 211 in progress, 110 Brookline Road, suspect is a white male, dark clothing. He's armed. Proceed with caution."

She screamed.

And everything went black.



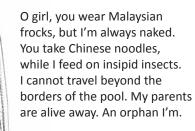
Dandruff

Dandruff spreads on my scalp in the parching wind blowing from the ocean of thoughts.White dust lies scattered as the ash of tension. Nails plow the scalp. Harsh pleasure rises from the furrow. My hair loses its vigor. A sticking friend looks for an existence. There is dandruff on the scalp of the world too. Hairs fall down dead.A new face grows above corpses.

—fabiyas mv

A RED DRAGONFLY

I'm here in the mossy pool, yet you never feel my presence. I'm a clumsy wingless child.



Time gives me wings as verse. O lady, I know you enjoy my red beauty, though through the key-hole of a wedlock. I seem not to see you watching me. My wings give me a sense of freedom. Now I owe all my charms to my wings and hue.

—fabiyas mv

beneath the chimney of lips

Sharuk's father's a prisoner in ciggy chains. Dad's lap, beneath the chimney of lips, is his favorite pillow, where he sprawls and sings. A dream-embryo develops in his voice. Curls of song and smoke rise up together. Dad's soul wakes up; Sharuk's death grows up; all in the same smoke. He's often tranquilized to sleep beneath the chimney of his father's lips. Last puff always tempts into the next. Sharuk's never a smoker, yet everything goes up in smoke. He gets love in plenty, but never finds poison coating on it.

Nicotine casts a gigantic shadow on his songs of innocence. Heart loses its rhythm. Internal pipes produce clot-tunes.

—fabiyas mv

CALL CENTER CANDY

by tim dadswell

Midway through the morning, Candy Johnson sits in her cubicle. A petite brunette, she is dressed in a navy blouse sprinkled with pink flowers, a black jacket and skirt. Her workstation is strewn with ornaments, soft toy animals, office gadgets and a cluster of quartz crystals, like royal tributes from adoring subjects. She opens her gold locket and kisses the miniature portrait photo inside. While her supervisor is away on a training course, she still has targets to meet. From the growing line of waiting callers displayed on her computer screen, she selects the one at the top.

"Good morning. My name's Candy. How can I help you today?"

"My name's Gus Grimshaw. I want to cancel my sports subscription. My customer reference number is..."

"Whoa, you're super-organized! Let me call up your details, Mr. Grimshaw. Have you signed up for our monthly email about what's coming up on the sports channels?"

"No. I only watched the football. My team sucks, so I can't stand anymore."

"What's the weather like where you are?"

"Wet and windy, here on the coast."

"It's dry and sunny here in the city. Some of us are having a picnic in the park



at lunchtime. I've brought a bottle of wine, a salmon quiche I made and Dad's groundsheet. It's all in the back of my brand new red convertible. Dad bought it for my thirtieth birthday. I'm still waiting for your details. Did you see *The Hot and The Headstrong* last night?"

"No, I never watch soaps."

"You missed an awesome cliffhanger. Sapphire Stefano was run over by a large truck on its way to the docks and is lying in a hospital bed. Her legs were crushed and there was blood all over the street. They don't know if she'll make it. And it was just before she was due to dance the *paso doble* with her boyfriend in a big competition. They'd been practicing for months. And there was a great episode in *The Wild and The Wicked*. Did you see that?"

"No."

"I've got your account details now, sir. It says you've had the sports channels for three months and there are nine months left on your contract. I like sports, don't you? I love the wrestling, especially when they argue and hit each other with metal chairs. Sometimes you can see real blood."

"Look, I've just been fired, so I need to save money. I had three months on free trial. They said I could cancel anytime."

"Let me see now. I can offer you one more free month, then a further three months at half price. I don't know about you, but that sounds too good to miss. Then after that, if you don't want to continue, just give us a call!"

Gus sighs.

"Okay then."

"I'll just push that through for you now, sir. Is there anything else I can help you with today? We've got a special offer on movies; \$10 a month for the first three months. And we have a horror season, starting Monday. They're great, aren't they? I love that one where the girl's head spins round and she starts talking like Christopher Lee."

"No, thanks. Been there long?"

"Five of us started together, six weeks ago. The boss came down to welcome us. I think the photo's still on the company web site. I'm enjoying it here. I've always been a people person. I always seem to know what they're thinking. And I'm a good listener. Gee, that reminds me, can I send you a feedback form? It only takes fifteen minutes. We like to know how we're doing and if we can improve. I've got your email address on my screen, so I can send it to you right now. Is that okay? Are you still there, sir? Mr. Grimshaw? Hello?"

One week later, Candy is standing beside one of her colleagues, who is sitting at his desk.

"Hey Bob. How come you haven't been to see me today?"

"Hey Candy. I've got a tight deadline for my next report. But I'll come round after I've finished this paragraph."

Minutes later, Bob shuffles hesitantly toward Candy's cubicle.

"How's it going?"

"Fine, I guess. I just had another guy ring off before I was finished. I always call them back, so I'll see if I can catch him later."

"Don't worry; you can't get a positive result every time."

She picks up a dark blue rubber object.

"Do you like this, Bob? Jake gave it to me. It's a stress reliever. You just have to squeeze it. How come you never give me anything?"

He looks shamefaced. As they talk, a paper plane sails over their heads, swiftly followed by a return flight and background laughter.

"Let me show you these photos. Look, kittens! Aren't they cute?"

"Yes, but why do they look like that?"

"What do you mean?"

"Bright blue. Like they're radioactive ..."

"Oh Bob, don't you know anything? They're supposed to look that way."

At the end of that day's shift, and one of the last to leave, Candy sprays on some perfume, picks up her bag and heads outside. In the parking lot, she rests her purse on the roof of her car, searching for her keys. Out of nowhere, from behind, someone covers her mouth with a white cloth. She manages no more than a weak struggle before falling unconscious.

When she wakes up, she is in a domestic garage with a high window at the back. There is no vehicle inside, only a few tools fixed above a dusty workbench. A man is standing over her, holding a tray. Bearded, thin, with a hangdog expression, he is dressed in a faded brown T-shirt and chinos, splashed with dried paint. A ceremonial dagger in a leather sheath hangs from his belt.

"Who are you?"

"You can call me Sam."

"Is that your real name?"

"Never you mind!"

"Your voice sounds kind of familiar."

He places the tray, which holds a glass of water, a plate of warm stew and a fork, on the floor next to her.

"Eat your food. You won't be getting much."

"Why not? I'm entitled to three meals a day. It's a basic human right!"

He grimaces.

"Tell me your Dad's number."

"Why?"

"So I can give him my demands!"

"I knew it. I recognize your voice. I don't remember your name, but you rang off before I'd finished with you. Let me think, it was some time last week..."

"Gimme the number!"

"Okay, okay. It's..."

He taps the number on his cell.

"Hello? I've got your daughter. I want \$50,000. Drop it off behind Greenways' DIY. No cops or you'll never see her again. Call me before you make the drop."

He holds the phone to Candy's ear.

"He wants to talk."

"Hey, Dad, I'm okay. Yes, he's for real. I'm tied up. I'm not sure where we are, but I can see a church steeple through the window..."

Gus snatches the phone away and ends the call.

"Whoa, you're tough, Sam. Have you done this before?"

"No!"

"You know, if you got a haircut and bought some new clothes, you wouldn't look half bad. My cousin's a stylist. Do you want her number?"

"Jeez!"

"I wonder if they'll be able to trace you."

"No!"

"I wouldn't be too sure about that. Some of Dad's drinking buddies are cops. They can pretty much get anything done. They came in very handy that time I was bullied at college. Do you have any parents?"

Gus has turned pale.

"My mother."

"How old is she?"

"Eighty."

"Does she still get what's going on?"

"Yes, she's a healer."

"She sounds nice. When she hears about this, she'll probably freak out."

Gus doesn't answer.

"You don't know how good you've got it, still having a mom."

Candy squirms, frustrated at not being able to reach her locket. As Gus heads for the door, she shouts after him.

"Can I have the radio on? It'll take my mind off the situation."

"No, the power's out!"

Three hours later, Gus returns to where Candy is sitting, her back against a wall. To amuse herself, she has been singing hit songs from the 1990s.

"Listen, Sam, is that a siren?"

"I can't hear anything."

"Okay, maybe not. How did you lose your job?"

"Bad attendance."

"Bummer! I wonder why Dad hasn't called you back. When he pays up, you can buy a new suit and get some interview training. It worked for me."

"Don't you ever quit?"

"Hey, what's that?"

Gus nervously strains to listen.

"The cops!"

"Why don't you give yourself up? You'll get a shorter sentence. I'll put in a good word, apart from your gross food. They have good programs in prison. I saw this whole thing on TV. Maybe you'll have a cellmate who'll take care of you."

Gus rushes through the door, into his house. After a few minutes, the sound of

boots can be heard on the path outside. Police radios and the shouting of orders follow. The front door is being forced. A cop bursts in through the garage door and looks around.

"Hey, Miss Johnson. You're okay now. Let me untie you."

He grumbles to himself as the ropes are tightly tied. Eventually, he works them loose.

"There you go, Miss Johnson. Stay here until I'm sure it's safe!" He leaves.

Candy stands, her head cocked on one side. Curiosity getting the better of her, she follows the cop into the house. She notices there are quartz crystals on top of each cabinet in the hallway. Climbing the step ladder into the attic, she sees a wooden chair lying on its side. Gus's inert body is hanging from a beam.

"No way! Why did he do that? We were just beginning to get along. I'm sure his name was Gus. Still, he looks at peace now, doesn't he?"

Streaming through the skylight, the sun hits jewels on the hilt of Gus's dagger. Candy draws it out of its sheath.

"Hey, this is cool. I could get it valued. He never used it, so you don't need it for evidence. If it's worth something, we could split the cash 60/40 in my favor. That's fair—after all, I've just suffered a devastating kidnap trauma. Do we have a deal?"

The cop stares at her, open-mouthed.





BROKEN

by l.k. taylor

Screaming.

A girl was screaming and weeping, the sound echoing off the concrete walls.

Vanessa opened her crusty dry eyes and focused her blurred vision in the direction of the fuss. The light was on. The light was only on for 'playtime'. Vanessa didn't see him, but she saw someone else.

There's a new girl down here.

Vanessa felt no fear, no sorrow, no empathy. Her emaciated body lay on its side, her head cushioned under her right arm. The tiny cage she was locked in didn't allow her room to sit upright or stretch her legs out and her muscles had long ago stiffened. She no longer felt discomfort or pain and hadn't since the last time he'd let her out.

When exactly had that been?

Vanessa tried hard to concentrate but the new girl's shrill voice pierced her brain and forced different memories to the surface. She'd screamed and begged once. She'd beat her fists against her cage's door as she'd crouched on knees and elbows, just like the new girl was doing inside her own cage that was identical to Vanessa's.

Once, many days ago, she'd had hope.

She wanted to tell the new girl to be quiet, she wanted to warn her that, as bad as being locked inside the cage was it was far worse being let out. Other memories tried to surface but Vanessa blocked them. It was easier now that she'd given up hope. A face floated inside her brain: a pretty dark-haired 18 year-old-girl dressed in a tight dress and high-heeled shoes. The girl was celebrating her birthday, excited and hopeful about her future. The girl had a great time with her friends that night, clubbing and dancing the night away. The girl never made it home. She never saw her family or friends again.

The girl? Me.

Vanessa closed her eyes and took a shallow breath. She remembered a time when her life had been filled with many problems and worries: What subject should she study in college? What career did she want to pursue? The boy she liked, did he like her back? If not, why? Vanessa took another shallow breath as a different face floated in her mind's eye. The face was disappointed, then hurt. That face had suffered a lot of disappointment because of Vanessa. The eyes had shed a lot of tears, both for Vanessa's actions and her cruel words spoken from a vile tongue.

It was the face of her mother.

A tear slid from Vanessa's eyes, tickling its way down to her ear. She was surprised she could cry, not because she'd all but given up, but because it had been so long since he'd given her anything to drink; she hadn't thought there was any water left inside her body. Since he'd stopped taking her out of her cage for bathroom, lunch and playtime, she'd been forced to toilet where she lay. At first the urine had stung her skin, making it itchy and sore. Then her skin had begun to blister and weep, the smell clogging her nostrils. He'd hosed her down a couple of times as he'd called her a dirty dog and she'd cried helplessly. He hadn't hosed her down for some time and the waste had long since hardened. It coated her body causing terrible infections, especially in the open wounds he'd inflicted on her with the pliers. Her once shiny long dark hair now hung from her scalp in oily filthy coils. The parts of her scalp where he'd burned her remained bald and scarred with not even a slight re-growth.

The new girl was getting louder, her voice angrier. She had crossed from terrified into furious.

Vanessa remembered that, too. The insult, the outrage—how dare someone do this to her? Vanessa forced her eyes open and tried to raise her arm. She needed to warn the girl to be quiet. The louder she was the angrier he'd get. If she continued to shout insults like she was he would fly down here in a rage.

She watched her arm raise up in front of her. She stared at it in amazement, distracted from her intention to warn the new girl. Her skin was filthy and full of open runny sores, her arm so thin it resembled a skeleton.

Am I dead?

The thought terrified Vanessa. What if she'd died long ago in her filthy cage, yet she was trapped here. Would she be forced to watch over and over again as he brought other new girls down here? Would the only noise she'd ever hear be the tortured agonized screams of helpless young women as they fed his sick fantasies?

The new girl's voice had gone quiet. After a few seconds of heavy silence, the new girl had started to weep again. She'd spotted Vanessa, the dying girl's waving arm had caught her eye.

Vanessa understood the girl's fear for she was the example, a clue to the horrors that awaited her as she cried helplessly in her cage. There had been a girl when Vanessa arrived she remembered, but she had been dead for a few days by then. He'd tormented Vanessa, telling her all the unspeakable things he'd done to the girl before she'd died. What had been her name? Vanessa couldn't remember. She did remember the terrible smell that emitted from the cage as the body decomposed within. She remembered the constant hum of the flies as they buzzed over the corpse, feasting and laying their eggs. For a time he'd enjoyed having the corpse there. When taking Vanessa out of her cage for playtime, he'd often give her a close-up of the rotting cadaver, taunting Vanessa with the promise that one day, her corpse would reside down here. The flies that ate this corpse would be the granddaddies and grandmummies of her flies, he'd say.

After a time, when the air became so thick with flies that it interrupted playtime, he'd removed the corpse and bleached the cage. He'd bleached Vanessa's skin that day too, she remembered.

As Vanessa concentrated on her breathing, assuring herself that she wasn't dead and this wasn't hell, the sound of a heavy door opening on rusty hinges filled the room. Determined footsteps on a wooden staircase slowly made their way down.

The new girl was screaming again. This time she was pleading, pleading for her life.

Your life is over, thought Vanessa coldly. She'd lost all hope for herself and she could muster none for the new girl. Knowing first-hand what was in store for the girl who knelt in her cage pleading for her life, Vanessa felt some sadness, though mostly she felt numb.

She watched for his feet as she'd done countless times before. In the past she'd hope and pray he was down here for a reason that had nothing to do with inflicting pain, but her hope had always been in vain. Right now, she didn't care what he did to her.

She knew she was dying. She knew this cage would be her temporary coffin and that her family and friends may never know what became of her. Not too long ago these thoughts had caused her far deeper pain that the various cuts, bruises, burns and bites inflicted by him, but now she felt only a sense of peace.

Vanessa had died many days ago. All that remained of her was this shell of a girl who prayed every time she closed her eyes that it would be for the last time.

A mean laugh caused Vanessa to force her eyes open. The scuffed laced-up boots were directly in front of her face. One of them raised and kicked her cage. Vanessa barely blinked.

Another laugh before the boots turned and approached the new girl's cage. Vanessa closed her eyes as the girl's cage door was opened and she was dragged out by her hair. From the sounds of the scuffle and yelps, the girl was being dragged toward Vanessa. Sure enough, when Vanessa opened her eyes, the new girl's face was inches from hers.

He was telling her to take a good look as this was what awaited her. He referred to Vanessa as dead meat before spitting on her, the glob of saliva hitting Vanessa's back. It was then that the girl muttered four words that almost broke through Vanessa's emotional block—"She needs a hospital."

A hospital? A place where people care for you, nurse you back to health? A place of hope?

Those four words almost broke Vanessa's emotional block. Almost. The thought of surviving something like this, the thought of having these memories beaten, whipped, bitten and burnt into her brain for the rest of her life made Vanessa want to close her eyes forever right then and there.

He was dragging the new girl away from her cage now and Vanessa prepared herself. Sure enough, the sounds she expected followed soon after. The sound of screams, crying, whimpering. The sound of flesh smacking flesh. The sound of tender flesh being whipped, burnt and slapped.

Vanessa passed out.

When she came to there was one word being repeated over and over again.

"Mum. Mum. Mum."

The new girl was begging for her mum. Vanessa saw her sprawled on the floor in front of her cage. He was crouched over her, rubbing her body with a white cloth. He was treating her wounds with antiseptic. Though one day he'd let her wounds become infected and painful, he'd treat them for now to make her last longer.

She watched him drag the quivering traumatised girl back to her cage and kick her until she crawled back inside. She curled up on her side as he slammed the cage door closed and locked it with a small silver key.

Vanessa expected him to turn and leave, but instead his scuffed up boots approached her cage once again.

More mean laughter followed by the sound of her cage being unlocked. When the door swung open, Vanessa braced herself for a kick, but one never came. After only a second's hesitation, he turned and walked away.

The sound of his footsteps fading on the wooden staircase; the sound of the heavy door opening and closing; the sound of the new girl's frantic voice as she begged Vanessa to let her out, to try and help her, all faded in one continuous hum.

Vanessa closed her eyes, waited for a short while, and then opened them again. *Not dead yet.*

Vanessa closed her eyes once more. And waited.



mushroom state

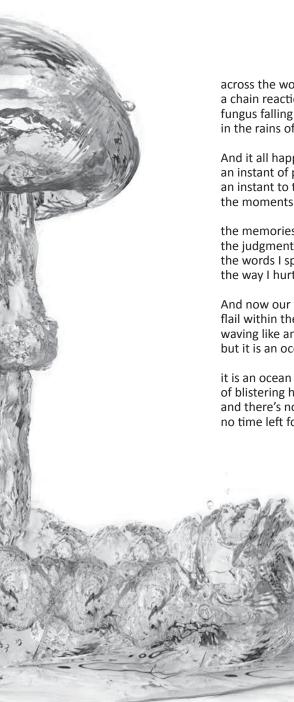
It started with a flash, like an exploding star igniting the nighttime kingdom of a changeling sky,

and the mushrooms we bore rose up from the distance, dark redeemers visiting our final bed chambers

in the skeleton hours to hand deliver the feast of our proclamations.

And more began to sprout, the spore heads spreading throughout the dark, across the nation,





across the world, a chain reaction, fungus falling upon us, awash in the rains of sacrificial tear drops.

And it all happened in an instant, an instant of pain, an instant to take back the moments of regret,

the memories, the judgments, the words I spoke, the way I hurt you.

And now our bodies flail within the flames waving like an ocean of enraged kelp, but it is an ocean of fire at high tide,

of blistering human wreckage and there's no time left for us in this world, no time left for us to wonder what we've done.

-wesley gray



by phoebe reeves-murray

Once a young boy lived with his grandmother, his mother, prescription drugs, and abuse. Then his mother vanished, and just his grandmother, the drugs, and the hitting remained. But that was home.

His grandmother frequently said his mother had had an oxy problem. He wondered what that was. He knew that ox meant hugs and kisses which was what his grandmother would give him in front of the caseworkers when she was angling to get them into a family shelter. As soon as they were accepted in and it was dark, she hit him.

He knew that xy stood for male, but he just couldn't figure out what the o was doing with the x and y, except as a zero. Zero was how his mother and grandmother always referred to him. He liked symbols and letters, and marks because unlike reading, which he wasn't good at, the symbols, letters and marks could mean anything.

One time during one of their shelter stays he snuck access to a computer. He typed in "oxy" and wasn't sure whether to select "oxycontin" or "oxytocin" from the choices that popped up in the search bar. Shelter staff caught him and blocked him. His grandmother told the workers: *The writing's on the wall with that one*. She punched him hard that night after lights out.

After that, he pushed the letters to the back of his mind and explored a cardboard box of battered books the shelter kept in the kids' corner. He loved a board book called *Baby Animals and Me*. Some child's teeth marks had eaten away the wings of the chick and the legs of the calf on the book's cover, but he didn't care. Inside were bright color photographs of all kinds of baby animals. He looked at the book over and over. He rescued a nest of tiny baby mice, but his grandmother found them and crushed them. He returned to the book, so determined to keep it that he tried to smuggle it out when they finally received temporary housing. (By this time, he had a job cleaning the barns at a local poultry farm.) But the book fell out of his pocket, and disappeared back into the box, and his grandmother punished him by making him walk to the new apartment. When he got there, she hit him. He bore it quietly until she'd settled down, drowsing after two doses of medication from her tightly gripped pill bottle.

"Where's the wall with writing about me on it, and what does it say?" He waited, hoping she hadn't passed out.

She muttered, "You're born, you live, and you die, and in between, there's a big wall, and everyone's got a spot on it, and you throw your best shot and hope it sticks! If you're lucky, someone notices, and you're famous."

She'd never told him so much before, so he pushed it. "But what about the writing?"

She gritted her teeth until he heard a crack. "I just told you, you have to make a mark!"

"But where's the wall at?" He could feel her fist coming at him in slow motion, and he closed his eyes and focused as hard as he could on finding this wall. Then he saw the wall. But as he reached out to touch it, he felt himself go crashing through it and land in a pile of rotten clothes, molded food, stained mattresses, old technology, soiled toys covering the base of an enormous old tree with snarls of roots twisting every which way. He scrambled off the mound of stinking trash, grabbing at whatever he could find deep in the heap. Grabbing something square and slippery, he yanked the object free of the knuckles of root, and instinctively swung it around to block the crumbling hole his body had burst in the giant dirt colored stone wall that stretched again before him. He shoved the object into the crumbling hole and the rumbling of the wall stopped. He stared. It was Baby Animals and Me.

The book fit perfectly in the hole, despite the fact that his entire body had broken through what felt like cement block or granite wall. His body ached, but he was lost in wondering how and what this tree and all this garbage was, and how it could be out here if he'd already been outside of the wall when his grandmother had punched him through it. *How could I go through it if I was already outside?* Everything went dark.

When he came to, his eye was swollen black like old meat, and he hung half off the couch. The plaster wall just above him bore a hole the size of his head. Shaking his head, he gagged and struggled to his feet. The world spun. He stumbled over the couch and made it to work at the chicken farm. On a usual day, he would have hurried through his chores cleaning the pens so he could hold the baby chicks. But several people had called out or just not showed, so he was told he needed to work a double cleaning crap.

He found bitter white tablets in a green bottle in the employee bathroom, took some, and the headache went away. To forget about the hunger, he pulled his belt as tight as possible. He took off his shirt and wrapped it around his nose and mouth, but the ammonia and dust got to him after two hours. He had a square shovel and an old golf club to break up the chicken crap. He leaned against one of the support beams. The windows were tiny and offered chicklet sized pieces of light and even less air. The fluorescent bulbs slowly came on as it darkened outside. Inside, the barn walls glowed white dim luminescence off the thousands of baby chicks.

He turned and faced the wall. There it was, his wall, its tan brick stone burning in the hot sun, waiting for his mark. He walked to the left and saw that the wall stretched on through the chicken barn and beyond into the night as long as he only looked at it sideways out of the corners of his eyes. When he moved too far from the spot on the wall next to the tree, it disappeared. If he tried to move to the right, the tree blocked any further access to the wall. Why did the tree have to block his access to the wall going to the right? Furious, he paced back and forth, crushing moving things under his feet. The ground turned slippery. He wanted more room to make his mark. But the tree and all its garbage stood right there in the middle of the barn full of chicks, and the garbage's reek combined with the chicken crap ammonia to burn all the way down his nose into his lungs.

Stamping his feet and sliding, he reached down and found dead baby birds. Crushing a handful of dead and dying chicks down the face of the wall, he made a tic. But when he stood back, he couldn't see the blood mark at all. He picked up a live chick and threw it as hard as he could against the wall. Blood bloomed. He picked up another and heaved it. And another. Until the wall was splattered. When his arm got tired, he lobbed still more chicks with the golf club. Finally, exhausted, he came out of his trance. The wall had returned to its same bleached tan brick as ever, no marks. *Well, you, Tree, are gonna make up for it!* He karatekicked the trunk, drop-kicked through the garbage covering its roots, determined to find something to make a mark. There was a potato launcher. Scratched and scuffed, it nevertheless felt powerful in his arms. He closed his eyes. When he opened them, the wall and the tree were gone, but the launcher remained snug in his arms. He cleaned up the dead chicks. Not wanting to return to the barn, he left the apartment early and stayed away late, desperate to find another job so his grandmother wouldn't find out. But she died not long after that.

With his check gone and with it, the housing, he sat in the cemetery for a long time after his grandmother's burial was over. He'd brought the potato launcher, but hidden it behind a tree at the edge of the cemetery. He tried to find his wall by lying on his grandmother's newly covered grave and focusing as hard as he could, but it remained hidden. When he got up after dusk, his potato launcher was gone. He started looking for it. When he went past the middle school, he saw a group of boys lobbing something round and luminescent over the back fence into the darkness where it hit something that made a *hoof* sound. Thinking of the chicks, he warned the boys, "You'll get tired—they're light, but they'll kill you eventually."

The boys stopped and turned to him. "Really?" said their leader and threw a softball, for that's what they'd all been throwing, right at him, hitting him in the head. "Who the hell are you?' they growled.

A zero. He rubbed his temple and struggled to clear his vision. He saw they had his potato launcher. "How'd you get that? The tree gave it to me."

They snickered. "No, the tree gave it to us, zero. Been tryin' to use it, but the piece of junk doesn't work. Show us how to use it, zero."

"Not a zero, I'm an xy like you all." He shook his head, not wanting them to mark his wall. "Find your own wall."

"Show us, oxy, or we'll use it on you." The only thing keeping him conscious was the wall that had risen before him. They pointed at it. He wasn't sure if they could see it, but he didn't want to take a chance. He saw a hole in the wall now, and through it something white against the dark field beyond. *I have to make my mark*.

He wasn't sure how many times he fired the softballs with the potato launch, but each time he did, a thwuck sounded like the backdrop of a batter's cage.

There was a white cow, standing in front of his wall. The cow was breathing heavily and slumping against the wall. He continued firing even after the cow toppled. Again, the wall was blank.

He flung himself at the tree as the boys disappeared. He burrowed around in the trash. This time, he pulled up a jar of clear, viscous liquid and a screwtop with a paste brush fixed to it. He opened it and breathed caustic paste. The toxic smell abated his anger enough for him to take it back to his squat in an abandoned house.

The next time he saw the boys, they gave him a pitbull puppy they didn't want. The litter had been all boys. Except for her. She was ugly, pinky bald white with a black eye. He let her sleep around his head, and she nuzzled his head and sucked on his hair. But then the boys came back and found them like that. They showed him the article about the cow and another about the chicks. "This your wall, zero xy? We're gonna tell the cops about you and the only wall you'll mark is the prison wall."

He froze. His wall had given him another chance to mark, and third time was a charm, his grandmother had said once. If they put him away, he might never find it again. He stared at the boys, then at the dog. She looked at him, and licked his hand. He touched his hair and felt the sticky slobber.

The boys pinned her down and brought him his "magic jar of paste."

"Make your magic work, zero x y! Paste her or we'll paste you!"

The ground rumbled. The sky thudded as though hit with a club. Through the increasing noise of the temblors, he caught one of the kids mouthing *stupid fuck* to another, so he branded "fuck" into her back leg with the acidic poison in the jar.

When he looked up, the boys were gone, but there was the wall. He tied the puppy to the giant tree, and it cringed and ran back and forth. He dipped his finger in her blood and touched it to the wall. The tree snapped, shrieked, and fell, crushing him against the wall and grinding him down the brick. He gasped, his nails splintering as he gripped at the wall. His blood spurted up and geysered across the wall in Rorschach patterns. He struggled, wheezing and gasping to grab something to push the tree off him—anything to get out from under the massive weight. His hands touched something; felt the chew marks, and somehow, he could see the titles *Baby Animals and Me*. He stared up the height of the wall, and now saw his marks everywhere, blood bloom after blood bloom flowing into the outline of one baby chick after another and finally the outline of the cow. Now their shapes rolled, dripping down the wall onto his face. Now he could hear their cheeping, their lowing—taste their terrible pain and terror. *O, X, O, X*, he sobbed, and struggled to free his hands to cradle and hug the animals. No breath would come, and all of the blood filled him, his last breath fighting it as it tasted their pain and terror. Then the dog curled around his face, whimpering and licking his tears, and he swallowed the blood flooding his crushed lungs and his heart burst.



moon on my face

Lunatics think they know what others pretend is not real. The moon in its fullest phase beckons them to walk outside asleep and wake as wolves. In London, they chained these would-be wolves to beds in Bethlehem, that so-called Hospital, while across the sea men and women rose at night to see the rabbit's shape in the face of the moon and sought wisdom from that all-knowing oracle in the sky whose earthling offspring eat herbs and grass and think no evil, but when maddened by hunger will drink the blood of their offspring.

I know what others pretend is not real, whether full moon or not, for I dream and wake as Mr Hyde, the evil in my heart which my Jekyll side cannot control at all hours foaming. When maddened by the soul's hunger, my smooth exterior drops away and opens a chasm of hell – I turn cannibal, destroying the offspring of my people, and I wake in a sweat, shrieking, "Oh God! What have I done?"

And then this moonish nightmare fading, I forget and tell myself my madness was only a dream in the night, a passing bit of gravy undigested, as Scrooge proclaimed to his unearthly visitors. For in the cool daylight my mind is settled and I know nothing of the night horrors that maddened me. The bodies hidden in caskets I will away and live only by the light of day for I am not lunatic, I say.

-steven petersheim

Sightseeing in Hell

"You're interested in one of our special package tours, is that right, Mr. Stribble?"

The woman at the Lenfer Travel Agency flashed him a dazzling smile as he sat down. He noted her name on a little black sign on her desk: Francesca.

"Yes," he said, returning the smile. "I've heard truly marvelous things about these tours. People say it's a once-in-a-lifetime experience. My friends are all very curious." He sat back, crossed his legs and admired Francesca. She had an exceptionally lovely face with piercing almond eyes, full lips, and silky black hair. Her skin was olive-brown with a hint of red on her forehead, as if from a sunburn. The rest of her was hidden behind a computer monitor, but his imagination was already at work.

"Please take a look at our brochure," she said, handing him a pamphlet with flames on the cover. "As I'm sure you know, Lenfer has opened these tours only after a long period of negotiations with the powers that be. They have finally agreed that tourism will improve spiritual relations and educate the masses as to the nature of the netherworld. There's so much unfounded nonsense floating around, you know." She smiled again and he could hardly tear his eyes away from her to look at the pictures of smoky caverns filled with writhing multitudes overseen by grim statuesque figures holding pitchforks.

"I understand that it's rather hot," said Stribble.

"You needn't worry; the tour is conducted in a fully enclosed, air-conditioned helicopter from which you can safely view the landscape and its inhabitants. And upon arriving at the nadir—the very lowest circle—you embark on a heated, wind-powered sail-sled which will carry you across the frozen lake to the hotel. How many nights are you planning on staying, Mr. Stribble?"

"Please call me Kirk," he said. "Three, I think. Do you suppose that's enough to see it all?"

"To see it all, Kirk," Francesca replied, "would take years. But in a week you'll get the highlights, enough to make you want to come back with your friends. Is there a Mrs. Stribble?"

by cameron macauley

He chuckled. "I expect she's already down there. But I would prefer not to run into her. There are certainly more interesting personalities that I'd like to meet— James Dean, Oscar Wilde, and Janis Joplin, to name a few. Are photographs permitted?"

"Of course," she said. "They're good publicity. As you can see from the brochure, the tour encompasses some of the greatest artists, warriors, and politicians in history, although interviews aren't allowed."

"That's disappointing. May I ask why not?"

"You see, these individuals are naturally in some discomfort and shouldn't be distracted. But we are in the process of negotiating tours for Purgatory as well, where interviews will certainly be permitted."

"And the other place?"

"Doubtful. Very little public interest, you see."

"Okay, let's talk money. How much for the whole package?" Francesca scribbled a figure on the back of the pamphlet and pushed it across her desk. He glanced at it, wrote out a check and gave it to her. For a moment their fingers touched and he felt the heat of a branding iron rising from her hand. A trickle of sweat ran down his forehead.

"Our limo will pick you up at your house at midnight," she said, putting the check into a drawer. "Don't bother packing, all your needs will be foreseen and provided for."

"Thanks, I can't wait," he said, getting up. The room had suddenly become stuffy and he was anxious to get outside. He nodded at Francesca, loosened his collar, and headed out the door.

"Federal regulations require me to inform you—" she began, but he was already gone. "—that the return trip is subject to cancellation without prior notice. Enjoy your stay."



Shadows of the Past

by mitchell hartshorn

The street lights were glowing. They were beacons to the few that were still roaming the area. The lights were to them as lighthouses were to sailors. A safe haven of sorts. Letting you know that the darkness would not take you this night. Not everyone was so lucky. They heard the rumors and thought nothing of them. The dark is an evil mistress that engulfs us all at some point. Be leery of the shadows. Do you see them move? Do they really move or is it all in your head? Even the virtuous fall prey to the darkness and the rain.

The rain had washed away the grime of the day. It came down in torrents. Ripping the scum from the sidewalks and shoving it into the over-flooding sewer drains. Your only solace was patience. Patience kept you in your car. Watching the rain drops streak your windshield. Uncomfortable in your seat, you shift side to side. Your seat broke in from the years of use now pressing into your rear. The shifting only made it worse. A thud from behind you startles the monotonous rain. Nothing there. Straining your eyes to focus through the downpour there's nothing to be seen. Your patience running thin, the torrent of scraping rain drops cease. It's quiet. The creak of the door breaks the silence like a thunder in on a mountain top. Your steps on the freshly cleaned asphalt echoes in the night. A black mass moves past the light on the porch. Maybe it was a bat. They've been in the attic for weeks. The pest control guy found nothing. Not much else you can do. A swooping shadow flows past your ear whining in the silence. Damn bats. Maybe its birds. Who knows?

The porch creaks under your shoes.

You have to get that fixed. The rotting wood is going to give one of these days. Needs painted too. The light blue paint is starting to chip away and you don't want to be known as that guy, do you? The guy that makes everything in the neighborhood worse. That would be no good. Mother wouldn't be proud. Look at that. The damn key is stuck in the lock again. You should've gotten that fixed too. Maybe if you took care of things then some dark things may not have happened. It's your fault. Everything. Kick the door. That always helps. Stop it. Use that brain for once. Want to go back to the car and start over? Get it right for once?

The door swings open and slams against the broken cracked wall. The wallpaper rolling up on it like shaved chocolate. It's dark. The floor creaks with each step of your tattered shoes. Where were those stairs?

Forget already, did ya? You never were the smart one. Your brother though. He had the brains. You don't even have the brawn. You didn't get any qualities. You shouldn't have ever been allowed to breath. You know it too, don't ya?"

The stairs feel like a welcome presence. They comfortably find your feet. The path ahead of you memorized. You've taken this path before.

So you do remember something? That's not what you told the man in the white jacket. I saw you lie to him. You did lie to him, right? Why would you tell him it was your fault? You wouldn't because you're weak. You can't take it, never could.

You find the switch. It blinds you as the brilliant light fills the room. Your fingertips find the edge of the medicine cabinet. The mirror on the front refracts the light sending beams behind you. Filling the empty hallway. The wallpaper seems to find its way back the way it was before. Filling the cracks and becoming once it was. You shut the medicine cabinet and you can only assume the hall goes back the way it was.

Found hope on the wall, huh? Stupid. It's never going back, you know.

The orange bottle with that damn tricky cap fills your hand and sends hope to your heart. As it presses against you palm the snap of the lid excites you. You shake two little red and blue pills into your palm.

Oh, those again, huh? Well, if you think it'll help. It can't cure your soul though.

You swipe them into your parched mouth. Twist the faucet handles and slop water into your mouth. Swallowing hard. They always stick. Peace...... for now.

Peace? Maybe, but not for long. There's always a way.

The light dims as you feel woozy. They act quickly. Your head spins. Your legs begin to buckle. Your knees no longer support your body. Your face meets the cold dingy floor.

Your eyes open. The rapping of rain drops on your windshield reminds you of where you're at. Patience is key. Waiting for that damn rain to stop. Patience and a nap in the car can always be helpful. Uncomfortable seat though.

The rain drops soften. Just in time too. Your legs were starting to go numb. The opening of the door brings the chill wind. Awakening your senses. It's quiet. The porch glows like hope in the heart of hell. It's been a long day. The grass moves. Was it the breeze or something else?

Something else.



THE DANCING BONES

There was a stone fountain in the corner. Water came out of a pitcher at the top, pouring in and out of other jugs and bowls as it cascaded down into the pool at the base. There was a rhythm to the sound of the water. He hummed along to it with an old song he knew.

White marble reminded him of bone. He loved bone. The design on the fountain was inspired by ancient Greece and he loved ancient Greece as well. The sculptors of that age believed that within each slab of marble there was a statue waiting to be freed with their chisels and hammers.

Just as he was hoping to free himself with this visit to a plastic surgeon.

It wasn't his first time here; it wasn't even the first surgeon he'd seen. The last one rejected him for the same reason that the one before that rejected him—his health. He felt fine, but the doctor's always told him there was something wrong with him. Blood pressure. Heart rate. Vitamin D. Vitamin C. All kinds of vitamins that he was supposed to have but didn't. He didn't believe them, he took vitamins. He had to; he didn't eat very much.

He looked around the waiting area at the other people that wanted bigger breasts or asses or cheekbones or whatever it is that people want more of nowadays. Those people that wanted to change their bodies followed the fads of the day. The ones that really bothered him were the tan ones. He hated the tan ones.

He himself was pale as the marble he admired in the corner. More natural, he thought. Smoother. More beautiful. He thought of himself as beautiful. But he knew there was more that he could do.

He was called into the surgeon's office. He stood up too fast; sudden movement often caused him pain. He put his hand on his chest and felt his fingers rest in the gaps between his ribs. No fat to get in the way, barely any skin. He hummed that old song some more. He felt better.

by turner dehn

He had spent months trying to get what he wanted. Surgeon after surgeon after surgeon with physicals in between them all when the doctors didn't like the results of the last ones. You can imagine his frustration when this surgeon, his fourth, told him the same things that he had been hearing since he started this journey.

Not healthy enough for this kind of operation. Unconfident in your body's ability to recover. Seek a nutritionist. Physical therapist. Psychiatrist. Whatever.

Next thing he knew he was in his car in the parking lot. He didn't remember leaving the office. Or getting in the elevator. Or leaving the building. None of it—he was just in his car humming that old song he knew.

He wanted to slam his hands against the steering wheel, but he bruised easily. He wanted to scream, but screaming made his throat bleed. He wanted to be beautiful in the way that he wanted, but the doctor turned him down like doctors always turned him down. That old song was blaring in his head.

He drove home. He tore through red lights, cut across three lanes of traffic on the expressway, sped past all the other cars until he got to his apartment. He didn't remember hitting the other cars in the parking lot. He didn't remember shoving the doorman out of his way to the elevator.

He didn't know what to do when he got in his door. He locked it out of instinct, but he was lost after that. He went to his kitchen. He opened his freezer. He pulled out some vodka. He poured it in a glass. He began to drink.

Who are these people to deny me? Why should they keep me from my goals? Why do I need them at all?

He was singing now-that same old song.

He looked in the mirror; his pale skin was pulled taut over his skull. He took his shirt off and his pale skin revealed every tendon and bone beneath. He saw the things that he liked about himself, the things that they said were wrong with him. He saw the things he hated about himself, the things that they said he had to keep. He wanted those things gone, and he wasn't going to wait for them to help him.

He poured some vodka over his hand and rubbed it over his ear. He had to be sterile. He didn't want to leave the mirror. He didn't want to chance that if he left the bathroom he would change his mind. He broke the glass on the sink.

He pulled his ear away from his skull with one hand and reached across his body with the other, broken glass in his grip. He wanted to look himself in the eye to be reassured that this was the thing he wanted, the thing he had wanted for so long. But all he could do was look at the ear. And the glass. And how close they were to each other. With a quick breath the glass met his ear and began to sever it. And then he felt the vodka enter the wound and sting and burn and engulf his mind in pain. But he stayed strong, he was vigilant and continued to saw with the glass until his hand pulled away the ear and he dropped it to the floor. It landed with a wet smack.

Now he saw it. The beginning. Half of his head was as smooth as he wanted it to be. As smooth as the skull beneath. He smiled as he hummed that old song; it was shaky now that he was in pain. But he wanted more. He looked at his other ear, and then he looked at his nose.

Blood was streaming down the side of his arm. It was collecting on the bottom of his chin and dripping at his feet.

He turned his head sideways, straining his eyes to keep contact with his face. His nose. His hideous nose. He put a hand on the sink to steady himself. He put his other hand with the glass up to his nose, where bone meets cartilage. He took another breath and plunged in the glass.

It was tougher than the ear. More resistance. More pain. Try as he might it wouldn't go through. Not with one hand anyway. He moved his hand from the sink to hold the glass in place; his other was raised above him to strike it through. He closed his eyes before he hit it. And he did hit it.

The end of his nose landed with the glass in the sink. The glass broke into smaller pieces. From the angle that he hit the glass he not only cut off the end of his nose, but also a gash from under his nose, through his top lip, and through his top gums. A front tooth was loose, bent inwards. He collapsed on the floor from the pain. His eyes remained closed. He curled up fetally.

He was losing consciousness from the pain and blood loss and alcohol. He was sobbing and grinning. He was singing that old song again, best as he could through the hurt. The song was from his childhood, a happy memory. An old cartoon of a skeleton dancing through a desert in the American Midwest. Dancing to that old song. He had it on a VHS tape as a kid; he played that one part over and over until the tape had stretched out and was ruined. He loved the way the bones seemed to be alive. As his body shivered and spasmed he believed he looked just like the dancing bones.

And he was happy.

Boating At Chettuva

Aesthetic sense opens on the wavelets. Our motor-boat moves through ecstasy, leaving behind wake of sweet vibes. Unity in diversity that people lost still exists in the mangrove, an arm away. Flora's green and sky's saffron are charming, though tainted hues with fanaticism. Black oyster collectors with bamboo baskets, fishermen's canoes with violet nylon nets, a girdle of coconut palms - all are beautiful portraits from life's bottom. They don't enjoy the vistas around, for beauty fades in familiarity. Reflection of a scene in the mind differs in leisure and labor. Our boat returns. Each sight seems a haiku from nature's anthology. Voyage strands in mind's sand.

—fabiyas mv

Phantom Limb

by cameron macauley

I lost my right arm in a car accident a year and a half ago. I don't remember the accident; I had what they call retrograde amnesia. The last thing I remember is saying good-bye to Jack, my best friend, and shaking his hand before I got into the car.

A few minutes later, a bus ran a red light and hit my car broadside. They had to amputate my right arm just below the elbow. I won a decent settlement and had good physiotherapy and a prosthetic hand made to order at Cardiff's Artificial Limbs. The therapist took me through a grieving session for my lost limb where I was supposed to cry, but all I could think about was how fake that new hand looked and how everyone was going to stare at it.

I couldn't stand the thought of going back to work. I'm a sports equipment salesman and shaking hands is important in sales. Plus you don't want to buy sports equipment from a cripple. So I stayed home and surfed the web, watched old movies, and read mystery novels.

After a few weeks I started waking up in the night with strange sensations in my missing hand. Sometimes it was ice cold and clammy with sweat, sometimes it tingled, sometimes it was on fire. My fingers throbbed, my knuckles ached, and my palm itched. I tried clenching my nonexistent fist but it didn't seem to help.

My doctor gave me some little blue pills and said that I could have an operation to remove scar tissue in my stump, but I didn't feel like being cut up any more. The pills didn't seem to do much, but now I could lie awake with my eyes closed and feel my hand again, just as it used to feel. I could feel the breeze from the open window or the heat from a cup of coffee or even scratch the stubble on my chin. It was creepy. Jack, my best friend, called me up one day to invite me to a dog race. "The kind you bet on?" I asked. "No, this is a different kind of race," he said, "for a different kind of dog." Jack is cryptic like that: he loves to surprise people.

So I went down to Jamaica Plain, where there's a park on the banks of the river. There were about 200 people there with their dogs, three-legged dogs. It was a race for amputee canines, which immediately struck me as incredibly dumb. They should have shot these poor dogs a long time ago, but here they were, hobbling around, wagging their tails.

Jack is there with Penny, his three-legged poodle who got run over by a car. He introduces me to a few of the other dog owners and their dogs. Ganja was a hunting dog that got shot accidentally, Jinx was a pit bull that ran afoul of a Doberman, Rocky was trained to detect land mines in Cambodia and lost his leg when one exploded, killing his trainer. The owners are mostly lumberjack types, bearded guys in plaid shirts, jeans and baseball caps, chewing tobacco. As far as I could tell, I was the only human amputee.

The races were set up separately for dogs missing a foreleg and for those missing a hind leg. There was a big difference in speed, said Jack. The dogs raced on a straight dirt track about 100 yards long, with a yellow ball on a wire that they were supposed to chase and electronic sensors to detect the winner.

Penny placed fourth in the hind-leg amputee race, and Jack was elated: Much better than he'd expected. Penny came dancing up to us wiggling her stumpy tail, so full of joy she pissed on our shoes. The winner was a bull terrier named Tank, who snarled at everyone except his owner, a bald guy with Hell's Angels on the back of his black leather jacket.

The foreleg amputee race started off, and Ganja was in the lead in front of a Dalmatian named Diablo. These dogs were faster than the hind-leg amputees, but a bit off balance, bumping into each other occasionally and stumbling. At the last minute a Russian wolfhound named Rasputin overtook Ganja to win the race. The dogs jumped all over each other at the finish line, barking and snuffling—just a bunch of happy kids. Watching them romp was more fun than watching the race.

I went up to Ganja and pulled on his floppy ears with my left hand. He leapt up to lick my face, his sloppy tongue redolent of Purina dog chow. Then he sat obediently and offered me his little stump, as if to shake. I touched the end of my tortured right arm to his, and for a moment I could feel a warm, furry doggy paw clasped in my phantom hand.



A Flame from the Last Day

by matt thompson

The harbinger of one's death appears as a blemish on the skin, either on the cheeks or splayed across the chest. On very rare occasions it manifests itself on the soles of the feet, but those to whom this happens usually take it as a sign they will be going to a better place, and their imminent demise is seen as a cause for celebration.

The mark resembles not a scythe, as might have been expected, nor a cross; not a Star of David, or even a Dianetics Triangle. It looks more like a sock, or possibly – if you squint – a boomerang. Once it appears death soon follows, although it is impossible to predict exactly how or when that will happen. Understand—the majority of fatalities occur as a result of natural processes or terminal illness, and come as little surprise. A minority of unfortunate souls, however, meet their ends by less predictable means—accidents, misdiagnosed medical conditions, murders, suicides and the like, and it is in these cases that prognostication becomes a fine art.

When the phenomenon first manifested itself a number of people thus branded reacted with shock and dismay—as you can imagine.

It made no difference.

Soon they, along with the elderly and infirm, were being lowered into their graves by weeping relatives or scattered to the four winds from an ash pot. Death, that great leveller, had migrated from the realm of the incorporeal to torment the lands of the living—or, in some sad cases, to egg its victims toward the cemetery in a mocking show of callowness.

Everyone got used to it in the end, and life continued as normal. One day, though, I received a panicked phone call from my sister.

"She's got it!" she babbled, once I had managed to calm her down enough to stop

her from hyperventilating. "Molly! It's on her, Nat, that symbol, that stain..." She tailed off in a fog of racking sobs, while I tried to think of something useful to say.

Nothing came to mind.

Molly, when I saw her, seemed unaware of her upcoming obliteration. Playing happily with her toys, she looked the picture of health, as small children usually do. The sock-shaped blotch that slashed its way across her left cheek merely mirrored the red birthmark on the other side. At first I thought Annabel had been mistaken. But, looking closer, there was no mistaking the mark. After all, I'd seen enough of them.

"So it must be an accident," Annabel sniffed. "But there's no mark on me, so it won't be a car crash. I think this has to be the one, Nat. The one they've got wrong." She looked so defiant I hadn't the heart to say anything. She knew it herself. Once the shock wore off she'd do what everyone else does and spend the last days with her child in resigned acquiescence.

The fashion, lately, had been to hold a farewell party. I was against the concept. No one wants to be the person who makes the newspapers by dying at their own pre-wake due to faulty wiring or salmonella-infused egg-and-cress sandwiches. One celebrity threw a "parting party" of such gaudy vulgarity it was a relief to all concerned when he choked on his own vomit in a toilet cubicle before the tentiered cake had even been cut. And for children? Clowns, balloons, and pass-theparcel just don't cut it when the sword of oblivion is hanging over the gathering, as a number of parents have found out to their cost.

Often the soon-to-die find themselves shunned, just in case their death occurs in such a manner as to cause damage to their immediate surroundings. You never know. I'll spare you the details, but suffice to say it's not unheard of. For Molly, Annabel eventually decided she would indulge her every whim until the last. Fairgrounds, toyshops, even a rapprochement with her estranged husband there was to be no expense spared. Privately, I rather thought Molly would have preferred to carry on with their usual routine. Since that would have involved exposing her condition to Annabel's circle of acquaintances, however, and the subsequent discomfort that would surely follow, maybe Annabel was right after all.

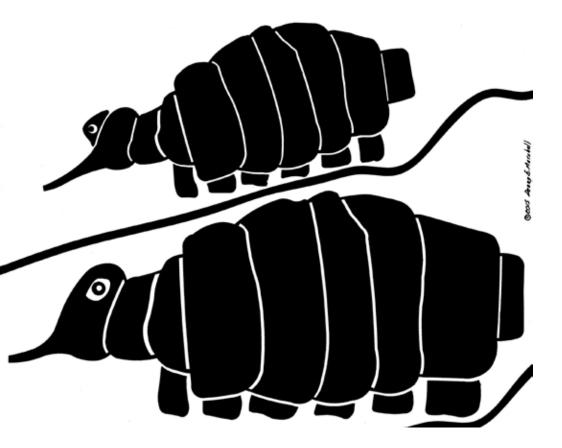
I left them to enjoy the remainder of their time together. "Bye-bye, Uncle Nat," Molly murmured sleepily as I kissed her goodbye. The blemish had a strange taste to it; it reminded me simultaneously of both loganberries and beech smoke. On my way back home I summoned up the memory of our father lying inert in his tobacco-infused hallway, blood pooling around his head from where he had hit the floor, his life force already evaporated. Would I have found peace in knowing when he would be taken from us? I supposed not. It would just have led to arguments and awkward silences, as ever, and a lingering sense of unfulfillment until such time as his heart finally gave up on him.

Maybe things are better now. The fatalistic nature of the phenomenon removes the crushing sense of guilt when someone dies as a result of others' lapses in concentration; conversely, it also validates the actions of murderers, suicides, and the morbidly-inclined. Who knows? We have no choice in the matter anyway. When I find that malignant flame flickering its way across my own skin, I hope I'll face oblivion with equanimity rather than fear or sentimentality. But if it so happens that I live out my last days in mortal terror, then I'll accept what I have coming to me. Better that than settling scores or pestering objects of unrequited desire, as others have done. I can rest easy in the knowledge that it's out of my hands, and even look forward to the sight of the out-of-control car careening toward me, or the wonky ladder teetering on its uneven leg.

Molly, by the way, died quietly in her sleep three days later of an undiagnosed heart defect. Annabel, after the funeral was done with and the wreaths were wilting, disappeared inside herself for a year or two before shacking up with her ex-husband again. The two of them are starting a business for the soon-to-bebereaved offering something they call Palliative Angel Care, which apparently involves beams of light and prayers to a higher power. It sounds ghastly, but who am I to judge? A Flame For The Last Day, they're calling it. Seems as good a name as any, although maybe replacing 'For' with 'From' would be more pertinent, given the apocalyptic hypotheses currently in vogue among those who enjoy searching for a reason behind it all.

Molly's grave has fresh flowers placed on it every week to this day. On the other side of the cemetery our father's final resting place sits largely undisturbed, unless by foxes or squirrels scrabbling at the mossy growths on his gravestone in search of sustenance. I'll probably have the body disinterred one of these days and sell the plot on to someone in greater need of it, someone who wishes to plan ahead.

Some people take comfort in certainty, after all.



—denny marshall



Dana and her colleagues were sitting around an old wooden table in the small kitchen on the second floor of Berlin's city library. The place smelled of tea, oranges, and a faint trace of a lemony washing-up liquid. The radio played soft background music.

In the summer, when it was warm, they loved to go to the nearest park and eat their sandwiches and salads under a big oak tree near the river Spree. In the winter, however, they preferred to cram into the cozy kitchen and enjoy each other's company, sheltered from the cold outside.

The women were a tight-knit little group. Their passion for books and a shared annoyance with their boss had brought them close together over the years. Apart from that, they were very different.

Dana was glad that they got along so well. One of her friends worked at another library and often told her about petty competition, backstabbing, and an unfriendly atmosphere. These days, coming to work and seeing her friends was the only thing that kept Dana going.

"Do you want one of my sandwiches?" Dana asked Christine who'd finished her lunch long before the others. "I've got two sandwiches left." She opened a plastic container, holding it out for Christine. Dana ate like a small bird but always brought extra food in case one of the others might like some of it.

"Yes, thanks," Christine said. "I could do with another cheese sandwich."

Christine, whose short pixie haircut made her look like a young boy, always accepted Dana's offerings.

"You can have one of my apples too," Zoë said.

"Did you see those new arrivals on the Bloomsbury Group?" Sandra asked Dana.

"I've seen them. I think I'd love to read that novel about Vanessa Bell."

"Isn't that Virginia Woolf's sister?" Christine asked from under the table where she was searching for a tissue in her gym-bag.

"Yes," Sandra said. "I love Virginia Woolf. It will be fascinating to read about her from another angle."

"I don't think that's for me," Zoë said. "But I spotted the latest by Sue Grafton. That's going to come home with me tonight."

"Don't tell us who did it this time," Christine said. "I might want to read it as well."

"Yeah. Sorry about that. I won't do it again." She'd swiped up the last of her curry leftovers from the night before with a piece of bread, and was applying a generous layer of orange lip-gloss to her pouty lips.

Dana had just finished her salad when the police interrupted the radio program for an announcement.

They were used to these warning statements by now. Ever since a killer had begun to target pretty young women, these messages had become a regular feature. The four young women had spent many a lunch break discussing the murders. The police seemed pretty clueless. There were no hints, no leads. All they knew was that the killer attacked his victims in quiet, unfrequented side streets of the town. He stabbed them, raped and tortured them, abandoned them somewhere, and vanished without a trace. By the time the victims were found, they had bled to death.

It was very disturbing that he was still able to find victims, in spite of the many warning messages.

"My brother is coming to get me tonight," Sandra said when the message was over. She moved her chair back and sat stiff and upright on its edge, fiddling with the zipper on her cardigan. "I'm not taking the bus anymore." She was a nervous, delicate woman at the best of times, but these murders really scared her.

"Me either," Zoë said. "I've asked a neighbor who works close by if he can stop on his way home and pick me up."

"I'm not scared," Christine said, munching the rest of her cheese sandwich. "I know enough karate moves to break anyone's neck."

"I might take the bus tonight," Dana said. She put the lid on her salad container and pushed it aside. "Paul will come and get me if he can free himself, but since his hours at the hospital are so erratic, I doubt he will. The other day I took a cab because he cancelled at the last minute."

"I wouldn't take any risks," Sandra said. "Make sure Paul drives you home."

"I would prefer that, of course," Dana said. "But what should I do if it's not possible? I can't afford a taxi every evening. Who knows for how long this will go on? Could be months. The bus station is so close to where we live and I have my pepper-spray." She took a small comb from her purse, got up, and went to comb her long blond hair in front of the small mirror over the sink in the back of the kitchen.

"I'm sure you'll be fine," Christine said. "Just be careful." She watched Dana comb her silky hair and automatically ruffled her short pixie-haircut.

"One thing is for sure," Zoë said. "I'm going to take a course in self-defense as soon as possible."

"That's a great idea," Sandra said. "Tell me when you go and I'll join you."

When quitting time had come, the others said goodbye to Dana, who was still sitting at her desk, trying to reach Paul.

"Should I wait for you?" Christine offered, but Dana just shook her head.

A few minutes later she tried ringing Paul once more, but when he still didn't pick up, she finally left as well.

The cold evening air hit her as soon as she was outside. Not many people were on the streets. She saw a couple, two or three solitary men, and several women in pairs and small groups. Dana hurried toward the bus stop, squeezed herself into a corner of the glass stand, and wrapped her big woolen scarf tighter around her neck.

She was glad she wasn't alone. Two other women were standing at the bus stop with her. When a single man arrived she saw that the others eyed him just as suspiciously as she did.

An icy wind blew and Dana was cold despite her coat. She looked at the naked trees, which stood on the other side of the street. Such a bleak sight. She really hated the end of November. It was just as bad as January and February. When it snowed, it was bearable, but those cold, grey days were depressing. And she hated the early darkness. If Paul had spent the evenings with her, it would have been different. It would have been something to look forward to. She would have loved to come home to a lovely apartment, share a nice dinner by candlelight, and then snuggle up on the sofa. Unfortunately that wasn't very often the case. Paul was an intern and worked long hours; he very rarely made it home before midnight. On top of that their apartment was anything but lovely. When they had moved in two years ago, they had been convinced it was only a temporary solution until they could afford something bigger and nicer. Finding a suitable apartment had proved more difficult than expected, and so this was already the third winter in the drab little place. What had seemed an acceptable solution at the time had become positively oppressive by now—especially since all she seemed to being doing when she was home alone was waiting for a man who got home later and later.

Dana was relieved when the bus finally arrived. She was frozen. She really needed a new coat. She knew that Paul liked this one because it was fashionable and formfitting, but it wasn't warm. No point in freezing to look sexy if he never even saw her in it, she thought.

While they were driving away from the city center, she noticed that the streets looked more and more deserted; the few people they passed were walking quickly, defying the northeasterly wind with their turned up collars and hats.

She could hardly wait to get home. Maybe if she took a long, hot bath and ate some of that delicious chocolate cake she'd bought the day before, the evening wouldn't be so bad.

When the bus arrived at her destination, she got off, turned around briefly to see if she was alone, and only when she had made sure that she was completely on her own did she walk in the direction of her house. She groped for the spray in her pocket and when she felt it she grabbed it firmly.

From the bus stop she had to walk uphill for a few minutes and then turn left into a narrow side street. When she saw a man coming out of that street, she felt herself tense up. She held the spray even tighter. She tried not to look scared when he passed her by. She was convinced that looking confident would discourage a potential aggressor.

At the end of the side street, she turned right and walked down a small lane. The aroma of cooking wafted from an open kitchen window in the first house; a faint light shone through the curtains. The other houses were dark. The streetlights shed only a sallow light. Dana hurried up. Her house was but fifty meters away. It was the next-to-last house on the street, which ended in a field road.

Just when Dana stretched out her hand to open the gate, she heard a sound. She stopped and listened. Someone was crying. When she looked in the direction from where the sound was coming, she saw that a child was sitting on the border of the field lane. The way the child was dressed told Dana that it was a little boy. He held his head between his knees and cried bitterly. Judging from his size the kid was about eight to ten years old.

How awful, she thought-that poor little kid, all alone in this dreadful cold.

She didn't hesitate to walk toward the little guy who was huddled on the field road.

"What is wrong with you?" she called, slowly approaching him. "Where's your mother?"

The boy didn't answer but kept on crying. When she got close enough to him, she could see that violent sobs shook his body.

"What is wrong with you? Tell me," Dana insisted. She was standing right in front of him, looking down on his small head.

The child continued to cry and sound even more desperate. Dana thought he might be afraid of her and bent down to get at eye level with him. It made no difference. The boy was still sobbing. Up close, she saw that his hat and jacket were shabby and that his gloves were full of holes. Poor thing. She touched him gently. He didn't react. She spoke to him once more, asking him if he needed help, but he didn't respond. She got up and was about to leave when the child suddenly lifted his head and looked her in the eye.

Dana stumbled backwards. She was so startled that she opened her mouth soundlessly. She wanted to say something, but didn't know what, and to her astonishment she couldn't make sense of what she was seeing. She only knew that whatever sat in front of her had never shed a single tear and that the bizarre and hideously scarred face most certainly wasn't that of a child. When she had finally recovered from her shock she felt anger.

"Do you think this is funny?" she asked. Indignation made her voice quiver. "How dare you pretend you're crying when there's nothing wrong with you?"

The dwarfish, misshapen man looked at Dana with a peculiar grin on his face. "Who says there's nothing wrong with me?" he said. His voice was astonishingly deep and sonorous.

Before Dana realized what a terrible and fatal mistake she'd made, he grabbed her with his fully formed, muscular arms, stabbed her with a hunting knife, and dragged her into the field where he did to her what he had done to the other young women before her.

It took two days before the women at the library could talk about Dana. They had been too shocked and their grief too intense. Christine could not forgive herself for not waiting for her.

"I still can't understand why she didn't use her spray," Sandra said. "All the other women were unarmed. She was prepared."

"Maybe he is gorgeous," Zoë said. "So gorgeous that you can't imagine he'd do anything vicious. He just looks at you, smiles, and charms you. And before you know..."

"What an uncanny thought," Sandra said.

"What a crazy thought," Christine said. "It makes sense though. James wasn't really there for her. She always tried to play it down, but I think she was very lonely."

"Yes, she was," Zoë said.

[poetry]

PANDORA'S PARADOX

Wavering near disaster From uncontrollable bastards We all need a fresh start It's time to rip out our hearts With the end coming on quick I'm not thinking this world's gonna stick Everyone is building bombs Predicting it'll keep us calm All of us standing still Like we can still stand with our own will It's our testament to the end A coda for the very last trend So let's know that this darkness And cold is righteous For we created our creator For we are our destructor Seeing our last collective work Come to take us and make us hurt The light is gone leaving us blind But the future is nothing and I'm feeling just fine Within our social partnership We turned our only place to shit And there no terra nova to go Just a jar on a table holding only hope

-grim k. de evil

A CHRISTMAS RARELY MENTIONED

by darin krogh

Mother forced us children to attend Mass every Sunday. On the weekdays she railed against the Church in a voice quivering with intensity. She was a high-strung Irish Catholic who decided early on that she would never bend a servile knee to any man who might pretend to be Head of the House. Or even to God, the Head of the Universe. One might lead to the other.

Mom could be forgiven of her blasphemy on account of her being a saint.

She worked a job out of the house and took other work into our home while diligently raising three daughters who never felt a lack for material things. She was a woman with pride.

This raising of daughters took place in the days when a single woman, stigmatized by divorce, was still viewed suspiciously. Especially a woman like our mother who welcomed her present marital condition over that of her former connubial arrangement which had included our father. Our mother reinforced his natural inclination with a two part ultimatum: GET OUT AND STAY OUT!

He did pretty much as told, never looking back except on our birthdays when he would send a birthday card with a five dollar bill enclosed.

Dad must have been busy at Christmas time because nothing was forthcoming from him during that season.

Our mother would always work extra hours, even on her days off during December in order to deck our halls and put adequate gifts under the tree for each of us girls. Our gifts always equaled the gifts under the trees of the Stevenson's next door or the Alden's across the street. Both of these families had a working dad and dutiful mother.

Mom had determined that her daughters would not feel the sting that comes from envy for the neighbor's Christmas. She willed every Christmas to be happy although the holiday was secularized a bit with a keeping-up-with-the-Jones's sort of concern.

I remember those Christmas seasons fondly. Except for that one Christmas. The one she never spoke of. The Christmas that my sisters and I rarely mention and never to an outsider, until now.

Christ's birthday season started out as usual that year.

People put up real trees back then. On that Christmas we decorated our tree with newly purchased ornaments, the latest flickering lights and hanging bulbs with patterns applied in white fuzz. Then we heaped thousands of thin strands of aluminum, called icicles, onto the branches until all the new ornaments were obscured.

We hung a wreath on the door. The whole house was decorated. Using aerosol snow and a putty knife, we applied a Michelangelo-size nativity scene onto the large picture window in our living room. Christmas would surely be wonderful again this year.

We went to bed early on Christmas Eve with warm yuletide thoughts in our little noggins.

As usual, the exciting prospect of new and wonderful Christmas presents worked against the duty of the Sand Man. My burning anticipation fired up with greed triggered the unfortunate events that would bring down that Christmas.

I was only 10 years old but had been wised up to the Santa Claus Fraud. After we went upstairs to bed, I imagined that every creak in our old house was my mother laying out the toys that had been purportedly dropped off by Santa on his global give-away.

My fear of our strict mother kept me in bed wrestling with my anticipation of gifts while keeping me from sneaking downstairs for a peek. Up to a point. I agonized for several hours before the urge overcame me. By now, Mother had certainly fallen into her usual deep sleep, typical of anyone working a full time job and taking in other people's ironing to fill her hours away from that job.

I eased out of bed and crept down the stairs to get a preview of all the booty designated to those of us who had been nice the whole year long, with only rare moments of naughty behavior.

My intention was to do a quick visual survey of the gifts, then return to bed. But my eye was captured by a certain item that brought my reconnaissance to a halt. I tip-toed over the beguiling gift and examined the name tag. It was a present for my youngest sister. Knowing my sister's disposition against sharing and her inclination to waste, I decided that now would be the only time that access and materials would allow me to enter into the manufacture of the popular soft plastic creatures known in those days as "Creepy Crawlers". My play would to be under difficult circumstances.

The dim light from the Christmas tree would have to suffice since I knew that my mother might be alerted by any bright light coming down her hallway. Under the low light, I tended to overfill the molds.

Very little of the multi-colored goo actually dripped onto the living room carpet because the front of my long nightgown soaked up error after error, although some forgivable amounts (mostly a greens and blues) did dribble over the other Christmas presents as I struggled to set aside my mistakes.

The disaster literally picked up steam when I began cooking the creepy crawler molds in the toy's heating unit. The problems created by the spills in the oven became daunting. I lost interest about the time that the odor of cooking plastic must have fallen upon my mother's olfactories which roused her from the bed. Suddenly, I heard someone exhale from above me.

You think you know your own mom. Until that night, I'd never seen her eyes vibrate in such a way. It was a terrifying specter for a child to witness. God would have forbidden it had he been there.

Mother spoke some unfestive words after which a sound spanking was applied to my poor young butt. I know it hurt her because my mother cried while she spanked me that night.

Relief was begged for and given. I was allowed to return to my room and join my sisters in slumber.

Horror awaited us in the morn.

At dawn, we sisters skipped down the stairs with the usual excitement of children with great Christmas expectations. I suppressed thoughts about my terrible nocturnal deed.

We did not expect to see our mother sitting erect in the chair by the door wearing her dress-up clothes.

Nor did we expect that every trace of Christmas would be removed from our house.

The tree was gone, the Christmas cards put away and the snowy Nativity mural scraped clean from the window. The gifts were nowhere to be seen. Even the wreathe had been taken off the door.

More than my sisters, I sensed that a point was being made. A terrible, terrible point.

My work-'til-you-drop, we're-all-in-this-together, keep-up-appearances mother had reached her breaking point.

"Get dressed for Mass," was all she said.

We children had not known there was an early Mass on Christmas Day. And certainly never guessed why anyone would attend.

But our young minds understood the power behind her ultimatum.

So we dressed and followed our mother out of our wreathless front door.

Two more shocks would be suffered by us on that dark Christmas morning.

First, our icicled Christmas tree lay pitched in the front yard for all the world to see, bulbs and a holy star still affixed at the top. I'd rather have died than live through the embarrassment of having the neighbors know what I'd done to cause this unthinkable event.

Second, our mother did not walk toward the garage where our car was parked; instead, she began to walk down the sidewalk. It took three blocks to realize that she meant for us to walk the ten blocks to church in the cold and then back home again after Mass.

Three valuable lessons were learned that Christmas day:

1. We are still all in this together. Mom never told anyone about my shameful act and covered up by telling the neighbors that the Christmas tree in our yard was tossed out because it was full of spiders.

2. The non-religious part of Christmas, the really fun stuff, is a creation of parents. However, that which is given can be taken away.

3. Most importantly, do not every trifle with a Christmas created by an Irish-Catholic-I-don't-need-a-man kind of woman who mutters a steady stream of obscenities while walking to Christmas Mass.

[short story]

THE FOX

by laurence sullivan

Fortunetellers had never been my thing, but a bright purple tent propped up in the middle of a market was a hard invitation to resist.

"Madame Eleştiri's House of Destiny," Amy proudly proclaimed. *"It looks more like a travelling drag show..."*

"Sounds like it too," I added.

Amy smirked up at me before cautiously sidling on up to the entrance of the tent. "Are you going in first?" she asked, glancing back toward me. "Or am I?"

"Wouldn't have thought it would be your scene..."

"It's not, but I can see by your face you're dying to go in!"

I nodded noncommittally and Amy pulled back the heavy curtain that acted as an entrance.

"After you, sir," she mockingly said, before bowing deeply at me.

The moment I moved inside the tent the stench of incense assaulted me. I didn't even have to turn around to realize when Amy was inside – the sound of her spontaneous asthma attack let me know she was right behind me. While I hadn't been to many of these kinds of places, I knew the sight that greeted me was pretty standard fair. A little table in the middle of the room with a chair either side of it, one empty, the other occupied by an old woman in an ostentatious headdress

that was probably meant to look mysterious – but came off more as camp. Then, of course, came the obligatory little crystal ball slap-bang in the center of the table, and the eponymous Madame Eleştiri was already waving her hands around it like she was trying to swat a tricky mosquito.

"You have come," the fortuneteller finally said. "Welcome, children."

"I'm thirty-two," Amy said, flatly.

"Amy!" I said, giving her hand a quick yank. "Don't be rude..."

Amy shrugged unapologetically and then moved over to the side of the tent like a petulant child.

"The boy has sense," Eleştiri said calmly. "He wishes to know his destiny."

"Yeah, I bet 'the boy' does," Amy spat out, a little too viciously for my liking.

"You cannot avoid your destiny," Eleştiri replied, even more calmly than before.

"Look, love, even if you *could* see the future in that prop ball of yours, what'd be the point?" Amy seethed, moving forward with every new word. "We'd just have to accept what'd be coming to us."

"You fear what you don't understand," Eleştiri replied, her voice finally taking on a slight hint of irritation.

Amy glanced over at me, her brow furrowing into a look of abject disdain. "Come on, Andy, are you really going to take life advice from a woman who only speaks in clichés?"

I opened my mouth to reply, but Amy just rolled her eyes and stormed out of the tent before I was able to say anything.

"She leaves because she fears what surrounds her," Eleştiri mumbled as if speaking to someone inside her crystal ball.

"Well, I don't," I said sharply. "She can wait outside for a minute."

I pulled the chair opposite Eleştiri from under the table and made myself as comfortable as possible. There was a moment of silence as the old woman slowly looked up from her crystal ball and smiled softly at me.

"Good choice, Andrew." Eleştiri gently unfurled my hand and began to run her leathery fingers across my palm as if they were dancing to some unheard tune. "Beware the fox," she said sullenly.

I pulled my hand away and looked the woman up and down. "Is that it? What does it even mean?"

"I tell you what the spirits tell me, nothing more."

I nodded half-heartedly and moved to stand up, casually placing a handful of coins down on the table. Eleştiri smiled again and quickly scooped the coins into a velvet bag, before giving me what seemed like a bow of respect.

Honestly, I still had a mouthful of questions but Amy was definitely right...The old woman did only seem to speak in clichés and her answers would probably have made me even more uncomfortable than I was already feeling.

As soon as I realized Eleştiri wasn't going to say anything else I just turned and left the tent. The brightness of the afternoon sun stung my eyes a little, no matter the quality of the actual psychic inside – that tent's walls were thick enough to block any hint of natural sunlight.

To my surprise, Amy had actually waited for me and even threw her lit cigarette to the floor at my arrival—rubbing the butt firmly into the ground. She rarely stopped smoking for anyone.

"How was your little 'reading', then?" she asked, smirking all the while.

"Beware the fox," I replied, doing my best to avoid eye contact with her—I knew if I dared look up from the floor, Amy would see how right she'd been about the whole thing.

"Right, brilliant, just what I'd expected. Complete garbage."

"Maybe, but you were still really rude in there."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Amy spat sarcastically. "Was I impolite to the mad crone?"

"You didn't have to be disrespectful..."

"Righto, I'll remember in future that just battering my eyelashes in a mysterious way is enough to drive you wild! If only I'd known before how easy you were to charm..."

I didn't even try to reply to that, there was never any point battling with Amy when she'd decided she was in the right. Maybe Eleştiri had a point; people who get this angry about something are usually afraid of it...

"So," Amy finally said, "are we going to look 'round the rest of the bazaar? Or should we just head on home, now that you've had your little date?"

"It's only here for the day, better make the most of it," I replied, choosing to ignore the extra little dig at me.

"Fab," Amy said, clapping her hands together. "Let's see what other wonders this creepy little carny set-up has to offer!"

We explored the bazaar for about an hour but almost nothing stood out to us. It was mainly just cheap plastic tat for sale, peppered with the occasional sweet stall or drinks stand. That was until something caught both our eyes at the same moment...

There—on the stall table in front of us—stood a little carved fox, its teeth all individually detailed, each one ending in a sickeningly sharp point. Without missing a beat, Amy dashed over to it and lifted it right up to my face.

"Hello there, Mister Hall!" Amy declared whilst flying the fox incredibly close to my eyes. "I'm here to eat your soul!"

"That's not funny!" I shouted, knocking the thing out of Amy's hand to the ground below.

The stall owner looked up from his magazine and started yelling at us in broken English. I instantly dived my hand into my pocket to pay for the damn thing, whilst Amy laughed uncontrollably.

"Are you actually kidding me?" Amy said through barely stifled snorts of laughter. "You're buying it?!"

"I have to, we damaged it," I replied, but directing myself completely to the stallholder.

"No, we didn't!" Amy lifted the wooden sculpture up from the ground and rubbed it with her coat, before placing it gently back down onto the stall again. "See? Good as new!" The storeowner shook his head disapprovingly, and so I still handed over the money to him.

"You're a coward, Andy," Amy seethed.

"We damaged his goods." I picked up the horrible little fox and placed it into my jacket pocket. "Not paying for it would be an insult."

The stall owner smiled respectfully and counted the money in his hand before placing it somewhere under the table. I nodded to him and he returned the gesture, before glaring at Amy. I think the look of sheer hatred she sent back to him sent chills down both ours spines...

"What about the curse?" Amy asked as we walked away from the stall.

"You said it yourself, just a cliché, right?"

"Right."

Nightfall was fast approaching and it was becoming apparent that the marketplace was poorly lit. Most of the stalls had their own little lamps but the majority of them were starting to pack their goods away—and their light sources along with them.

"Perfect time to head home," Amy said casually.

"Quick drink first?" I indicated a vague direction in the distance somewhere.

Amy nodded and winked at me, I think she knew I had no idea where I'd be taking us. We both knew the city well enough, or the part we lived in at least. This market wasn't well advertised or in the particularly nice part of town, but what else was there to do on a Sunday?

We'd been walking for a while when Amy suddenly stopped dead in her tracks. "I know somewhere close to here."

"But what about the place I was taking us?" I asked, trying hard to suppress a smirk.

"We both know you were just wandering, hoping to find somewhere." Amy patted my head patronizingly. "Don't worry yourself about it, I actually know a real place, come on!"

With that, Amy took my hand and scurried off into a narrow alleyway between two sets of buildings. The further we ventured down, the darker the world seemed to become. The sound of traffic grew increasingly distant until it faded into a whisper. I turned around to see how far we'd come and there was no sign of the streetlights that lit the road we'd started in. By the time I turned back around to Amy, I could see that she'd taken to lightening our way with her phone screen.

"Are you serious, do you really know a place?" I asked, slowly moving closer to her with each word.

"I do, I just thought it was closer than this." Amy's brow furrowed noticeably, but I could tell she was trying to hide her concern. "I thought this path would take us one street down..."

"It feels like it's taking us to China!"

"Yeah..." Amy stood still and took a long breath out. "I know..."

I wanted to tell Amy it felt like we were being followed, but I knew after the debacle with the so-called psychic, that she'd probably fly off the handle at the

suggestion. Instead I said, "Shall we just head back the way we came?"

"No!" Amy blurted out, and I quickly realized she was holding onto my jacket sleeve.

"Okay, shall can carry on, then?"

"Yeah, sorry, I think that's best." Amy took a second and seemed to calm herself. "It's just we've come so far already, that's all..."

"I guess you're right..." I forced a smile at her but she didn't seem to acknowledge it...She still seemed focused on something in the distance behind us. "You feel it, too?"

"What? No."

"How did you know what I was talking about, then?"

Amy's eyes widened as she'd realized she'd been rattled. "Okay...I admit it, I've felt it for about five minutes now." She quickly glanced back around behind us and her voice dropped to a whisper, "I thought it was just me...I didn't want to seem paranoid."

"After you'd made fun of me, you mean?"

"Yeah...Sorry, Andy."

"It's okay." I returned the patronizing pat Amy had given me earlier. "Let's just get out of this creepy alleyway first, yeah?"

We walked a little farther down the way when I suddenly heard the crash of something behind us.

"What the hell was that?" Amy cried, flashing her phone light behind us.

"Sounded like a dustbin falling over?" I replied, trying to sound as calm as humanly possible.

We both stood silent for a second, waiting to see if whatever it was would get any closer to us. I grasped Amy's hand which seemed to surprise her – as she let out a muffled squeaking sound – before realizing it was only me.

"There's nothing there, is there?" Amy whispered almost as if to herself.

I shook my head in response but I don't think she noticed.

Just then, another crash occurred, though this time it came from somewhere in front of us.

"Come on!" Amy shouted as she pulled me along with her down the rest of the alleyway. As she was running so quickly, her phone light was barely illuminating anything, all I could see was the occasional glimpse of the side of a building or a manhole cover – the rest was pure darkness.

"Where are we running to?" I sputtered out breathlessly.

"Anywhere but here!"

Just as some lights were becoming visible in the distance we could see a strange figure just a little ways in front of us. We both stood perfectly still at the same moment – like a couple of deer caught in headlights. Whatever it was seemed as motionless as we were, and looked to be watching us intently.

"It's standing on something..." Amy mumbled to me.

Sure enough, whatever it was seemed to be standing on top of something else,

but it was too dark to make out anything but vague shapes.

"Flash your light at it..." I suggested to Amy.

"What if it attacks us?"

"I think it would have already done that by now."

A second passed before Amy lifted up her phone light to reveal the bright eyes of a small fox standing on top of a slighter larger dustbin. The fox immediately dashed away taking the dustbin down on its side along with it. A third crash ensued.

"A fox...seriously?" Amy sighed audibly.

"So that's what was stalking us?"

"Seems unlikely, but I'm willing to accept that rather than anything creepier."

Amy stretched her shoulders and then tapped me on the arm. "But I'm not willing to stand around to see if anything worse comes, let's move!"

So Amy led me down the final part of the path and toward the lights in the distance. As the path finally got a little brighter, Amy switched her phone off and pointed at a building to our left.

"Looks like the back end of a pub, right?" she suggested, before indicating the plethora of people with drinks in their hands congregated around a door lit up with string lights.

"But there's no signage..."

"Of course, we're not on the street, Andy," Amy said, sounding just a little exasperated. "We're in an alleyway, this is probably the back entrance."

"I'd be happy to have a drink with the devil at this point..."

"Well by the looks of this place...you may just get your wish."

As we entered through the backdoor I think we could both tell this place was a total dive. A single shade-less bulb kept the place in a constant state of perpetual twilight, and just about every piece of furniture looked like it'd survived a bomb blast before being sent here.

"The backdoor really seems an appropriate place to come through now, doesn't it?" Amy whispered into my ear.

I nodded and led her over to a small booth by an incredibly dirty window. Part of me wanted to leave immediately, but after everything we'd been through just to get here, it seemed a horribly defeatist idea.

I glanced over to the bar. "I'll get the first round...the only round. What do you want, Amy?"

Amy shook her head violently and then flashed a forced smile. "Nothing, I'm fine. Just feeling a little sick after everything that's happened." She held her hand gently to her head in a slightly dramatic fashion. "Can we go, Andy? I've got a headache, I feel rough."

"Are you kidding?" I reached over to hold Amy's hand. "We just got here, and we came so far!"

"I know...it's just...please?"

"Just take a look at the drinks list, have one, it'll make you feel better." "Andy..." "Just one!" I flicked my hand up towards the menu above the bar, it was relatively clean compared to everything else in here but still quite difficult to read.

Amy looked at me before casting her eyes up to the menu. "Please..."

"She really got to you, huh?" I said quietly.

"It's just weird, the statue, the fox in the alley...and now we're in this place."

Amy quickly glanced out of the window. "I just want to go home, this doesn't feel right."

It didn't sit right with me either, and it was really jarring seeing how much Amy had changed since the start of the day. She was meant to be the confident one who laughed in the face of danger, it's not even that our roles had totally reversed—I think I was just as unsettled as she was.

"Andy," Amy whispered to me as she leaned across the table. "Are they...are those men doing a drug deal?"

Sure enough, as I followed Amy's line of sight it was clear that two men were sidling up to each other and discussing something heatedly. The taller of the two guys was flashing a bag of something to his probable customer, whilst his eyes kept scanning across the room methodically. The shorter of the men was starting to look agitated and jumpy, constantly checking something in his pocket and glancing over his shoulder. It didn't make for a pretty sight...

"That's it, Andy," Amy declared as she moved to stand up. "We're going!"

I didn't want to object, but I felt this might be my only chance to prove to Amy that I wasn't the pushover she thought I was. I reached out for her arm to try and persuade her to stay...

Without warning, Amy suddenly turned to me with a look of barely controlled rage. "If you're not coming, Andy, then I'll go alone!"

At that very moment the deal on the other side of the room seemed to turn sour and the shorter man from before pulled out what he'd been concealing in his pocket—a knife so long it verged on being a sword.

Before any of us knew what was happening, the shorter man stabbed the dealer with a single, swift motion. Not a second passed before he turned around and looked at all of us—a murderous glint in his eyes mixed with a heady dose of fear—like a cornered dog.

I tried reaching out for Amy but she and everyone else were already running for the front door. I moved to stand up and go to escape with her but she was already too far in front of me. A large man—clearly too drunk to have spotted the danger before—jumped up from his chair by the door and pushed Amy clean out of the way. I watched in horror as she fell limply to the floor, her head crashing against the back of one the booth chairs. The crack was so loud it was clear above the shouts and screams of the other patrons.

I raced to be with her and was finally able to hold her as more people fled the pub. I just held her in my arms, gently caressing her hair and reassuring her that help would come soon.

"Wallet, mate."

I looked up to see the short man from before, his knife pointed directly at me.

There was a new found calmness washing across his face, as if he'd done this a hundred times before—like this was the easy part of the crime.

I'd gone past caring at this point. I shifted my weight to grab my wallet but made sure to keep Amy supported and comfortable. As I pulled my wallet out and threw it at him, that hideous little fox statue came out with it—my house keys lodged between a couple of its sickening teeth.

"You've seen my face, mate," the man said as he reached down to collect his haul. "You say anything to the pigs, and I'll find you."

I nodded absently, not making eye contact with him but keeping everything focused on supporting Amy until help arrived.

"I've got everything I need right here, cards, details—all I need to know about you," the man spat out, I glanced up quickly to see a vicious smirk spread across his face. "The police come after me, I come after you."

I said nothing to the coward and he seemed to be irritated by my passivity, I refused to show him any hint of fear—I could sense he'd strike for the smallest reason.

"Oh, Kentish Road?" I flicked my eyes upwards to see he was looking at my identity card. "I know it well, bet you've got a pretty home..."

"If you don't go now," I said without thinking, my voice rising with indignation, "they're going to find you without anyone's help!"

I don't know how it worked, but it did. After nodding to himself a couple of times and scanning the room quickly for something, the man pocketed my house keys and wallet before bolting out the backdoor. He left the vile little fox behind.

As soon as the backdoor swung shut the barman poked his head out from behind the bar and let me know he was going to call an ambulance and the police. I was just amazed the short guy hadn't spotted him on his way out.

"Is she still breathing?" the barman said to me.

"Yes, it's a little erratic, but she is," I replied, calming myself a little at the realization that she looked so relaxed. "I think she can still hear us..."

"She took a nasty fall..."

"You saw that?"

"Just before I nipped behind the bar...yeah..."

We didn't talk much more after that, I just carried on whispering to Amy whilst the barman went to check on the victim who'd been stabbed by the short man. It turned out that he'd already died.

The ambulance finally arrived and the paramedics seemed incredibly worried about Amy's condition. I don't know if I was in shock, but all of their words seemed to wash over me like I was floating out at sea. The barman dealt with the police for me, and they said they'd catch my statement later. I didn't want to give them anything, not after the threat that guy had given me. He knew where I lived now, I'd never be able to rest easy until he was safely behind bars...I kept thinking about my wallet and keys, wishing I hadn't given them up so easily, that I hadn't given him that power over me. But I couldn't let myself keep worrying about any of that now. Amy had to remain my only concern. One of the paramedics asked me if I'd like to travel with them and of course I accepted. They checked me over as we got in the ambulance to make sure I hadn't been hurt without realizing it. I assured them I was fine and this seemed enough to convince them. Amy was their primary concern, too.

As we drove away from the pub, my eyes drifted away from Amy and toward the back windows of the ambulance. My heart sank to unfathomable depths as I caught sight of something in the distance, and I had to summon up all my strength not to collapse then and there. Amy needed their help now. I couldn't go fainting on them. Just above the door to the pub stood a sign flapping lightly in the breeze, a saccharine, orange painting of a canine stared back at me with the golden words emblazoned below it — *The Fox*.

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THE LAW OF CONTACT

by rory o'brien

Halloween came around again, and Scott spent the night answering the doorbell's summons, handing out fun-size candy bars to an endless parade of zombies, pirates, princesses, and at least two zombie pirate princesses. And every time he opened the door, a chill breeze skittered a handful of dry leaves into the front hall. Trick or treat. Every time he opened the door, he felt that little pang of disappointment, that little tiny dashed hope. But he knew, deep down, it really couldn't be any other way.

When the last SUV had spirited away the last overtired, sugar-rushed child, he turned off the porch light and poured himself a drink.

There was a knock at the door as he took his first sip. All night long, it had been the doorbell, but now a knock. And then silence. A knock this late. It probably didn't mean anything, he told himself. But when he opened the door, there she was. Finally. Impossibly.

Nola.

"Hi, Scotty," she said with that same shy little smile he'd always liked so much.

"Oh my god," was all he could say. "Is that really you?"

"In the flesh," she laughed. "So, can I come in?"

He blinked once, twice, then straightened up and said, "Yes, please, Nola, come in." He wasn't sure if he needed to say it quite so formally, but he did anyway.

"I'm not a vampire," she smirked.

She brushed past him, wrapped in a warm breeze, and he could smell spring in her hair as she went by. She paused and tapped the glass on the framed Doors of Dublin poster hanging in the hall. She'd bought it for him many, many birthdays ago, and it made her smile. She hadn't aged a day.

"Oh my god, Nola—It's been so long"

"I've only been gone a year," she said, a little defensively. "Just over a year."

"You've been gone fourteen."

She flustered—confused and embarrassed.

"Time moves differently there," she said after a long pause. "Everything's different there."

"With the Sidhe."

"With the Sidhe," she nodded.

There was something deep down in the notes of her voice—a change that was subtle and musical and strange and beautiful and it gave him a chill. She was like a traveler who had picked up a slight accent on a long trip.

He closed the door and they went down the hall and sat on the couch. She reached over and ran a surprised finger along his smooth jawline.

"You shaved," she said.

"It was going all gray."

"Fourteen years?"

"Yeah. Don't I look it? So ... it's only been a year for you?"

"Only a year. A little more. And you went gray. I'm sorry I missed that."

"Me, too."

She dipped her hand into the bowl on the coffee table, picking and sorting carefully through the candy. Scott remembered she didn't like the ones with nuts. After a moment she came up with one. Caramel. She slowly unwrapped it like a tiny present and brought it to her nose, inhaling deeply once, twice. She giggled, sniffed again, then put the little chocolate down on the edge of the table and sighed.

"Um, you can have that, you know."

"No, I can't. If I eat anything while I'm here"

"Then you can't go back," he said, realizing. "So this is only a visit?"

"Only a visit."

"Dammit, Nola-why even bother, then?"

The bitterness in his voice surprised them both.

"Scotty, I didn't come here to fight. It wasn't exactly easy to come, you know, not in any sense. I could have gone anywhere tonight and I came here and I don't want to fight. I just wanted to see you again."

Awkward pause.

"Every year on Halloween, I think this is the year. If she's going to come back, this is the night, this is the year. Every year, I feel it in my bones. And every year ... nothing. And now suddenly here you are and it's all a little ... unreal."

"Appropriate, eh?" she smiled.

"One minute you were here and then the next minute you were gone. Really gone. And I never knew if I'd ever see you again. Things with us were going really well there—remember?"

"I remember."

"I thought we were about to turn a corner together, and then I was here all by myself. Going gray. Without you. And I didn't know if I'd ever ever see you again."

He'd practiced and rehearsed this little speech every year, slowly and carefully polishing and burnishing each word, each phrase, and somehow it always sounded more eloquent and articulate when it was just in his head.

"I wasn't expecting it," Nola said. " It wasn't a plan. It just... happened. They extended a hand and I just had to go. It was right. I couldn't stay here."

"You couldn't stay here, or you couldn't stay here with me?"

"It wasn't that kind of decision, Scott. I think you know that. I told you, I only have tonight and I don't want to waste it fighting."

"For a long time, I thought you hated me. I thought you hated me and that's why you left."

"No, Scotty, no. It wasn't like that at all. I do not hate you. Never did, never could." She reached over to him and took his hand, their fingers lacing together in that smooth perfect way he always knew they would. After a moment, she glanced down the darkened hallway.

"You're here alone?"

"Yeah."

"You're ... alone?"

"Yeah. There have been a couple ... but nothing that lasted."

She was the same Nola he had known, and loved and confided in and listened to and had begun to move in that particular direction with. The same woman from that time that was one part so-long-ago and one part seems-like-yesterday. But she was also different, changed. Not the same. He realized with a smile how completely and comfortably she had settled into herself, seemed like she'd somehow gotten what she'd always wanted ever since she was a little girl, that secret heart-of-hearts thing no one ever even knew she wanted.

"So ... what's it like?" he asked after a long pause.

She leaned back on the couch with a warm sigh.

"It's always spring. It's every song you've ever heard, it's everyone you ever danced with, it's your first kiss, and the first time you woke up naked in someone's arms ... it's hard to describe."

"You just did a pretty good job."

"I had to go, you know."

"I know. The grass is always greener, right?"

"Yeah, except this time it really is."

"Yeah."

"Is Pasco's still there?"

Pasco's was a burger joint downtown that boasted over thirty varieties of hamburger. They went there together once a week, vowing to sample each one. It had been their thing for a while, and sometimes Nola couldn't keep track of which burgers she had tried and which ones she hadn't. But Scott didn't mind; the hamburgers weren't the point of those evenings anyway.

"It's a sushi place now."

She wrinkled her nose. She'd never liked sushi.

"I brought you something," she said after some more silence.

She reached into a little pouch hanging at her belt and drew out a long narrow golden leaf that glinted in the dim of the room. He thought for a moment it must have been metal, but it wasn't. She handed it over to him.

"It's from my favorite tree, at the bottom of the hill where I live. I spend a lot of time there, sitting under the branches, thinking. Thinking of you. Wondering how you are."

"Thank you, Nola. This is very thoughtful."

"You're welcome."

"Will this still be here in the morning?"

"It will. But I won't. You know that, right?"

"Yes, I know."

"Is that okay?"

"I guess it will have to be."

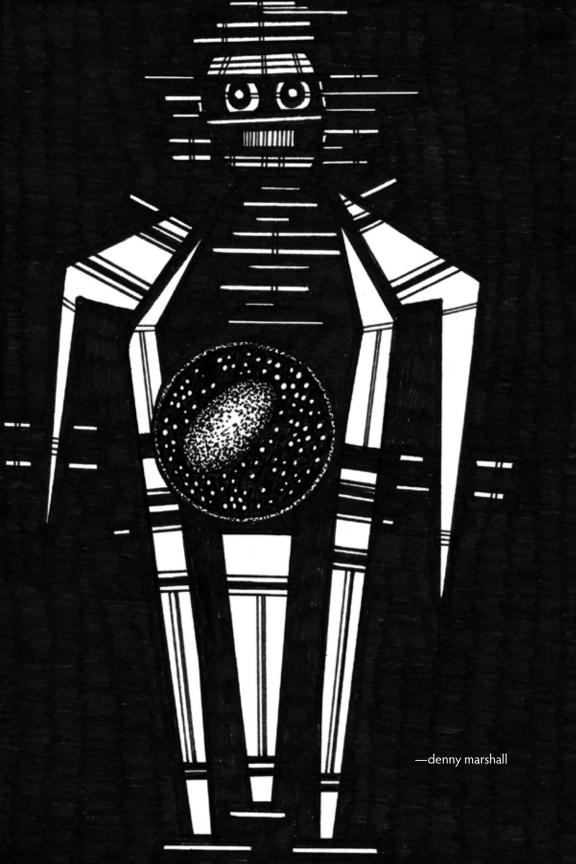
They held hands all night, staring into each other's eyes, and at sunrise she hugged him and kissed him on the cheek and was gone.

After a while, he reached for a book on the shelf. The book fell open to the right page, the spine creased and cracked from all the times he'd opened it to read this particular passage:

"Things which have once been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance after the physical contact has been severed." These words were from Sir James George Frazer in *The Golden Bough*, almost a century old now. He called this the Law of Contact.

Scott placed the leaf on the page and closed it in the book. He slid the old book back on the shelf, between his mother's clock and his grandfather's eyeglasses, as a smile warmed his face, and he realized he didn't have to keep waiting for her anymore.



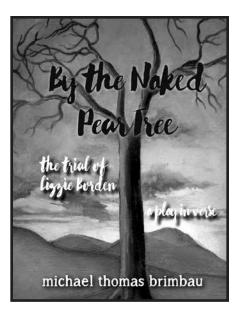


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By the Naked Pear Tree

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.

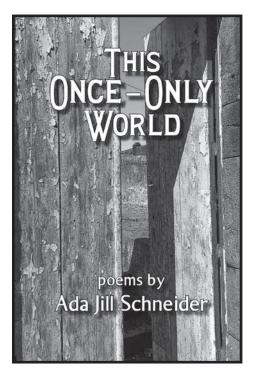
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This Once-Only World

poems by Ada Jill Schneider



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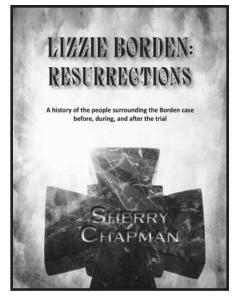
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Lizzie Borden: Resurrections

A history of the people surrounding the Borden case before, during, and after the trial



by Sherry Chapman

\$21.95

Whatever happened to Lizzie Borden after the trial that accused her of bludgeoning her father and stepmother with a hatchet in 1892 Fall River, Massachusetts? It's all in here, and it doesn't stop with Lizzie. A plethora of persons were involved around her in some way. From her friends to her foes, from the doctors to the policemen; from her Manse to The Nance, at last comes the first book of its kind that tells what caused Officer Philip Harrington (who greatly disliked Lizzie) to die suddenly in 1893. What happened to neighbor and friend Dr. Bowen after the crime and trial? Why doesn't Edwin Porter, who covered the trial then wrote the first contemporary book on the murders, *The Fall River Tragedy*, have a gravestone – and who is buried with him? Not by him. Actually with him.

From original source documents, photos of the graves, obituaries and death certificates each on whom records could be found has their story told in details unknown until now. What were they doing before anyone much had heard of Lizzie Borden? What was their role in the case? When did they die and how?

Some of the results may surprise you, whether you read this book for pleasure or research. There are no legends here, but a factual telling of the stories of these persons who are today all gone but need not be forgotten. And with this book they may be hard to forget.

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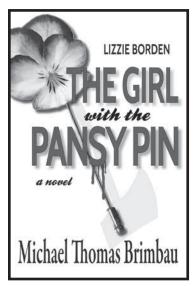
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Lizzie Borden: The Girl with the Pansy Pin

a novel by Michael Thomas Brimbau



Lizzie Borden and her sister Emma lived a life of privilege and entitlement, with wealth and social status far greater than their neighbors. But it was not enough. In time, Lizzie and Emma grew restless, aching for a more opulent life—to reside on the Hill in a big house amongst their peers and Fall River's finest families.

But Father's riches were window dressing, dangling just beyond their reach—quarantined by a frugal patriarch who was unable or unwilling to change his scrimping ways. Andrew Jackson Borden had no intention of moving to the Hill and abandoning the home he had purchased for his second wife, or spending the money he had worked so hard for all his life. Now he

was planning to give it all away—to his wife, their stepmother.

In time, discord in the family began to ferment and fester—and there were signs that things were not as they should be.

On a sultry August morning, in the naked light of day, someone entered 92 Second Street and brutally hacked and murdered Andrew and Abby Borden. Soon the finger of guilt pointed to Lizzie. But she loved her father. He meant everything to her. The gold ring she had lovingly given him and that he always wore said as much. She would never have harmed him. Or would she?

The Girl with the Pansy Pin tells the gripping story of a desirable and vivacious young Victorian woman desperately longing for adventure and a lavish life. Instead, she was condemned to waste away in a stale, modest existence, in a father's foregone reality, with little chance of ever discovering love, happiness, or fulfillment. Now they have charged poor Lizzie with double murder.

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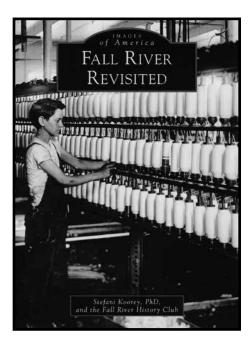
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Fall River Revisited

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 $19\overline{6}$ buildings, and 1,334 people were displaced from their homes.

Once the capital of cotton textile manufacturing in the United States, by 1910, Fall River boasted 43 corporations, 222 mills, and 3.8 million spindles, producing two miles of cloth every minute of every working day in the year. The workforce was comprised of immigrants from Ireland, England, Scotland, Canada, the Azores, and, to a lesser extent, Poland, Italy, Greece, Russia, and Lebanon.

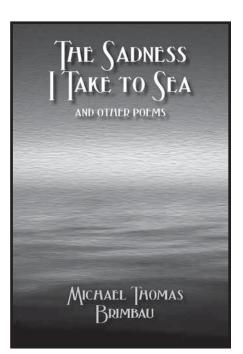
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The Sadness I Take to Sea and Other Poems

by Michael Thomas Brimbau

Putting pen to paper and allowing its ball tip to bleed and spill out is a good thing, and helps with the venting as well as needed healing. After all is said and done, following all the missteps and failings, to move on and search for lost love all over again is not only essential but the absolute specimen of a yearning and healthy soul—and the fundamental spirit conveyed in *The Sadness I Take to Sea.*

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Do Come In and Other Lizzie Borden Poems

by Larry W. Allen

with a new Lizzie Borden sketch cover by Rick Geary, famed author and illustrator of *The Borden Tragedy*.

Lizzie Borden. For some, the name conjures an innocent young woman who bravely faced her trial with strength and fortitude. To others, she has become the icon of all things gruesome because of the



bloody nature of the crimes for which she was charged. And yet others see Lizzie Borden as a woman who got away with murder.

These 50 poems trace the life of this enigmatic woman—from the 19th through the 20th century. We meet her as a young adult and watch her develop into an old woman living alone on "the Hill."

Do Come In is a remarkable collection of poems entirely devoted to the Lizzie Borden story.

So *Do Come In*, and meet Lizzie Borden and other characters as diverse as Jack the Ripper, Bob and Charlie Ford, and Rachael Ray, in poems that range from humorous to horrific.

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Lizzie Borden: Girl Detective

by Richard Behrens

Introducing Miss Lizzie Borden of Fall River, Massachusetts, a most excellent girl detective and the most remarkable young woman ever to take on the criminal underworld in late 19th century New England.

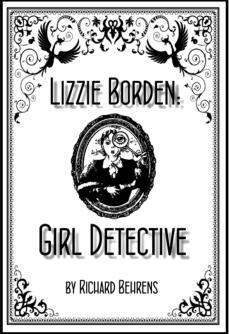
Many years before her infamous arrest and trial for the murders of her father and stepmother, Lizzie Borden pursued a career as a private consulting detective and wrestled unflinchingly with a crooked spiritualist, a corrupt and murderous textile tycoon, a secret society of anarchist assassins, rowdy and deadly sporting boys, a crazed and vengeful mutineer, an industrial saboteur, and a dangerously unhinged math professor—none of whom are exactly what they seem to be.

In these five early tales of mystery and adventure, Lizzie Borden is joined by her stubborn and stingy father Andrew; her jealous and weak-chinned sister Emma; her trusted companion Homer Thesinger the Boy Inventor; and the melancholy French scion Andre De Camp. Together, they explore Fall River's dark side through a landscape that is industrial, Victorian, and distinctly American.

You have met Lizzie Borden before—but never like this!

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Contributors

Turner Dehn is a writer who recently moved to Baltimore from Chicago.

Jeff Haas is a professionally published poet and short story writer who also teaches creative writing at Emory University.

Rick McQuiston is a forty-fiveyear-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.

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.

Charles Albert is a theoretical physicist, owner of a machine shop, and father of three boys, living in San Jose, CA. His poetry has appeared in the *Rockhurst Review*, the *New Verse News*, and *Words on a Wire*.

Mitchell Hartshorn is currently attending Full Sail University and working on obtaining a degree in Creative Writing. **Shawn Chang** is a sixteen-yearold writer whose poems have been published in anthologies (including *The Literary Hatchet* #14), and an online journal. He is presently a columnist for the local news.

Scott Merrow has been writing short fiction as a hobby for about ten years. He's had a few stories published recently with a few more forthcoming. He and his wife Paula also co-write short screenplays. To date, ten of them have been produced. Scott and Paula live in Colorado.

Jennifer Loring's short fiction has appeared in numerous magazines, webzines, and anthologies, including Crystal Lake Publishing's *Tales from the Lake* vol. 1. She has also published a novella, *Conduits* (DarkFuse, 2014), and two novels, *Those of My Kind* (Omnium Gatherum, 2015) and *Firebird* (Limitless Publishing, 2015). *What's Left of Me* (The Firebird Trilogy #2) releases in July 2016.

Cameron Macauley is an instructor at James Madison University and has been writing horror fiction since 2005.

Kristyl Gravina's poetry has been published by *Lost Tower Publications* and *Down in the Dirt* magazine. **George Garnet** writes about the ordinary lives of poor people. His fiction has appeared in *eFiction*, *GKBC*, *Needle in the Hay*, *The Lady in the Loft*.

Ashley Dioses has been published by Hippocampus Press, Centipede Press, Weirdbook, Martian Migraine Press, Burial Day Books, and a few amateur ezines. She will have her debut poetry collection published by Hippocampus Press in 2016. She has also appeared on Ellen Datlow's full recommended list for Year's Best Horror Vol. 7 for her poem "Carathis," published in *Spectral Realms No. 1* by Hippocampus Press.

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. Wesley Gray is a writer, an author of fiction, and a poet. He is the author of the chapbook *Come Fly with Death: Poems Inspired by the Artwork of Zdzislaw Beksinski*, among other things. When he isn't writing, he enjoys a wide variety of geeky activities, but mostly, tabletop gaming with family and friends. He resides in Florida with his wife and two children. Learn more at: WesDGray.com.

KJ Hannah Greenberg is playful, yet quaint, gets high on adverbs, mixes more metaphors than a platypus has pockets, and attempts to matchmake words like "balderdash" and "xylophone." Her newest collection of short fiction is *Friends and Rabid Hedgehogs* (Bards & sages, June 2016).

Charlie Bennett is a fiction writer and attorney living and working in Louisville, Kentucky. His work has previously appeared in *Yellow Mama, Penny Shorts*, and *Fiction on the Web*.

Rory O'Brien lives in Salem. His debut novel is a murder mystery titled *Gallows Hill*. roryobrienbooks. com.

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.

Pete Mesling's debut collection of short fiction. None So Deaf. is currently available from Books of the Dead Press. Other publishing highlights include selling a story to Mort Castle and having it appear alongside a reprint of Clive Barker's "Midnight Meat Train" in *Doorways Magazine*. He has also had the pleasure of working directly with the late Richard Matheson on a retrospective about his career in film and television. His work appears in All-American Horror of the 21st Century, the First Decade: 2000 - 2010; Best New Zombie Tales, Vol. 2; Black Ink Horror, two of the Potters Field anthologies, and, most recently, the Hammer Film tribute anthology Spawn of the Ripper from April Moon Books.

B.C. Nance is a native of Nashville, Tennessee where he works as an archaeologist specializing in historic sites. In his spare time he writes fiction and poetry. His work has been published in *The Writer's Post Journal, Inwood, Indiana*, and the anthology *Filtered Through Time*.

Joshua Viola is a writer from Denver, Colorado, and chief editor at Hex Publishers. He has edited several anthologies, including the Denver Post number one bestseller, *Nightmares Unhinged* (September 2015), and *Cyber World* (November 2016), co-edited by Hugo Award winner Jason Heller.

Aditya Shankar is an Indian English poet and flash fiction writer living in Bangalore. His work has been published or is forthcoming in Dead Snakes, Synchronized Chaos, Chicago Record Magazine, 101 Words, Hour After Happy Hour Review, CC&D, 'Purrfect' Poetry, Beakful, Shot Glass Journal, Earthborne, Terracotta Typewriter, and Eastern Voices anthology, among others. He is the author of a poetry chapbook 'After Seeing' (2006) and a poetry collection 'Party Poopers' (2014).

Richard Stevenson is a

Canadian author whose most recent books are haikai and haikai sequence collections: *Fruit Wedge Moon* (Hidden Brook Press, 2015) and *The Heiligen Effect* (Ekstasis Editions, 2015). A long poem sequence on the Clifford Olson murders, *Rock, Scissors, Paper* is forthcoming.

Tina Stickles is an author and poet living in Texas. She works as a pediatric nurse, and also enjoys photography.

James B. Nicola, a frequent contributor to *The Literary Hatchet*, his second poetry collection, *Stage to Page: Poems from the Theater*, will be out in June of next year. His first, *Manhattan Plaza*, is currently available.

Steven Petersheim is

Assistant Professor of English at Indiana University East, where he teaches American literature and poetry. His creative work has been published in *The Kudzu House Quarterly, The Wilderness House Literary Review*, and elsewhere.

Phoebe Reeves-Murray is a writer, teacher and mother. She has worked with children and teens for the last 30 years. She loves writing about the mysteries of the parent child bond, fairy tales, Jungian archetypes, and strange events that take place in the space right next to our own lives. Her fiction has recently appeared in *Quail Bell, Corvus Review*, and *Empty Oaks*.

Laurence Sullivan is a

Wicked Young Writer Awards 2016 Finalist, whose fiction has been published in *Londonist, The List, Amelia's Magazine, The Legendary* and *Drunk Monkeys.* He became inspired to start writing during his university studies, after being saturated in all forms of literature from across the globe.

Carmen Tudor writes adult and young adult Gothic horror from Melbourne, Australia. Check her out at carmentudor. net and @carmen_tudor. Joe Russo has been published in Linguistic Erosion, Farther Stars than These, Leaves of Ink, Typehouse Magazine, Door is A Jar Magazine, Spillwords, BoySlut Poetry Magazine and Centum Press's upcoming anthology 100 VOICES AT CENTUM. Joe is a traveling gypsy, residing in such places like Orlando, Florida; Katy, Texas and finally New York, New York where he got his computer stolen but this could also be a dream. He isn't quite sure. You can find more of his work over at his website joerusso8writer.wix.com/creativewriter

L.K. Taylor grew up in England with her parents, sister, dogs, cats, birds, fish and house-plants. When she was 16, she read her first Adult Fiction Horror—Richard Laymon's 'Endless Night.' Once the night terrors and obsessive checking-of-locks phase was over, Lorraine knew she wanted to be a writer. She currently lives with her husband, two children, two cats, and a vivid imagination.

John Teel is a union ironworker from Philadelphia. His fiction has appeared in *Pulp Modern, Dark Moon Digest* and *Shotgun Honey*. When he isn't working he's spending time with his wife Rae, their son Charlie and their insane dog Gizmo, who they never feed after midnight.

C.M. Werner is an underemployed writer living in a cramped micro-studio in Denver, Colo. A radical queer raised in a pristine, conservative suburb, writing has long provided her an escape to a world that's equally bleak but far more malleable.

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.

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.

Rick Blum has been writing humorous essays and poetry for more than 25 years during stints as a nightclub owner, high-tech manager, market research mogul and, most recently, alter kaker. His writings have appeared in *Humor Times, Boston Literary Magazine*, and *Bohemia Journal*, among others. He received first place in the 2014 Carlisle Poetry contest, and honorable mention in the 2015 Boston Globe Magazine Deflategate poetry challenge. Ash Krafton is a Pushcart Prize nominee. Her poetry and short fiction have appeared in various literary and genre publications. She's also the author of novellength fiction, including the *Demimonde* trilogy as well as *The Heartbeat Thief*, an historical fantasy written under the pen name AJ Krafton. She's a member of SFPA and resides in the heart of the Pennsylvania coal region with her family and bossy German Shepherd dog. Visit her at www. ashkrafton.com.

Janne Karlsson is a Swedish artist obsessed with red wine and goats named Ruben. Website: www.svenskapache.se

Emma-Johanna Henriksson is a Swedish blogger/poetess who spends her days reading difficult books or walking in cemeteries. Her blog is here: www.boktrad. blogspot.se

Caroline Couderc is a multilingual writer and translator living in Switzerland and the UK. She has degrees in French Literature, Linguistics and Cultural Anthropology. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in Boston Literary Magazine, The Vignette Review, Shotgun Honey, Daily Science Fiction, Ink in Thirds, War, Literature and the Arts, and others. **Darin Krogh** lives atop the hill overlooking Spokane, Washington. He is forced to write late at night after completing assigned chores assigned by a dominating wife who is a registered nurse and has a fondness for real crime shows in which a wife (who is a nurse) administers a lethal drug to her innocent husband, a lethal drug that cannot be detected in an autopsy. Turn off the television. He is published in the *Spokesman-Review* and several crime anthologies including: *The Dark City: Crime & Mystery Magazine.*

McKinley Henson is a 19-yearold with too many thoughts and inspirations. He admires poetry for its limitless styles and formatting. He is described best as an indecisive paradox. No. Perhaps a "ghost" would be a more fitting term. Just like any amateur poet, he hopes he can create many beautiful works in the future.

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.

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.

Stanford Allen is an author living in Greater London.

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.

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.

Matt Thompson is a Londonbased writer of oddball fantastical fiction and player of experimental music. His stories have been published at *Unsung Stories, The Fable Online* and *Apocrypha & Abstractions*. He can be found online at matt-thompson.com. **Bruce Memblatt** is a native New Yorker and a member of the Horror Writers Association. He is on the staff of *The Horror Zine* as Kindle Coordinator. His story "Destination Unknown," received an honorable mention in the 2012 L. Ron Hubbard Writers of the Future Awards. This month his story, "Wish Upon an Indifferent Clearing" will be featured in *Forgotten Places: Best of the Horror Society 2014*.

Tim Dadswell lives in Norfolk, England, and began writing when he retired from the civil service in 2013. His first short story was published in a British crime fiction magazine in summer 2015. His second was published in Issue 13 of *The Literary Hatchet*. He is working on stories for a range of competitions. John W. Dennehy's work has appeared or is forthcoming from the following: *Clockwork* Universe (Novella/Severed press 2016), Pacific Rising (Novel/Severed Press 2016). Deep-Water Drift (Novella/ Severed Press 2017), SQ Mag, Disturbed Digest, Sanitarium Magazine #10 and #23. Voluted Dreams Magazine, The Stray Branch, Dual Coast Magazine. Calliope. Bevond Science Fiction, The J.J. Outre Review, MicroHorror, and Shotgun Honey. Presently, he is in discussions with a midsized publisher about three horror novels.

Barry Price's publishing credits include a novella, titled "The Journal of the Median Man – A Face on the Wall" for *Sanitarium Magazine*. His flash fiction story – "Keys to the Kingdom" – was published in the premiere issue of *The Literary Hatchet*.

Fabiyas MV is a writer from Orumanayur village in Kerala, India. He is the author of *Moonlight and Solitude*. His fiction and poems have appeared in *Westerly, Forward Poetry, 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.

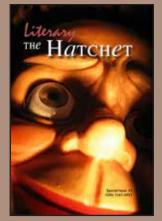


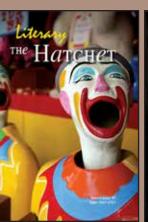


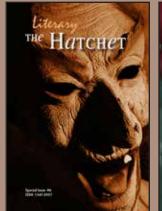
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