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ISSUE #16

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We do sell print copies of each issue on Amazon and through our print-on-demand partner, CreateSpace. Each issue is reasonably priced from between \$8 - \$14, depending on their number of pages. Please order your copies *today*!

You are reading issue #16, by the way. So if you haven't caught up on the other fifteen 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: peartreepress.submittable.com/submit.

We really would love to read your work.

Stefani Koorey
Editor and Publisher

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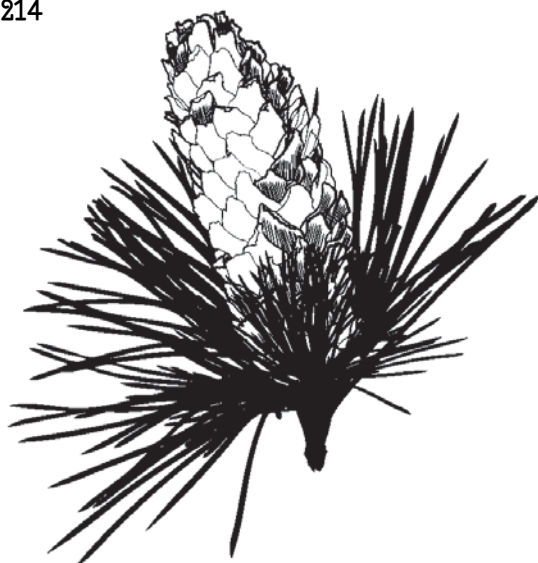
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CREATING A MONSTER



by rick mcquiston

Marty held his flashlight in one hand and his baseball bat in the other. He felt the sting of a splinter in his palm but ignored it. He had more pressing matters to attend to than a tiny piece of wood in his hand.

He stepped through the doorway and out onto the back porch. A cool breeze rolled across his face. A lone owl hooted from some unseen perch.

With bated breath, Marty nudged the door closed and trained his flashlight on it. He closed his eyes, too scared to look, and counted to five.

He opened his eyes.

The door looked as it always had: weathered, but unmarked. No blood, no weird writing, nothing.

"Thank God," he sighed.

It had been three days since the incident on the road. The dog he had accidentally killed still haunted him. The poor thing had shot into the street so fast he didn't

have time to stop, and in an instant all that remained was a lifeless heap with a collar still wrapped around its neck. Its head impacted his front bumper with such force that there was a dent in the chrome.

Marty sighed as the depressing memories squirmed around inside his head. He felt so bad about the whole thing, but what could he have done? It wasn't his fault. But when he tried to explain that to the dog's owner (an unpleasant young boy who could have substituted for the great white shark in *Jaws*) the kid simply scowled at him. He then scooped up what was left of his pet and walked away into the night.

But before he disappeared into the brush on the side of the road he threw back a disturbing glance at his dog's killer. It was a look of undisputed evil, an expression that possessed a degree of cruelty beyond what any civilized human being would have.

Marty saw the boy mouth some words at him. He couldn't hear them but judging by the zeal with which they were said he guessed they weren't pleasant.

Then he was gone. Only a slight depression in the bushes showed that he had been there, and after few seconds that too vanished.

Marty stood next to his dented car, a disbelieving look of regret plastered across his sweaty face. After pondering his next move he drove home and sank into his bed with an empty stomach and the beginnings of a migraine.

The following day nothing out of the ordinary happened. He woke up, dressed for work, and said hello to his neighbors. He felt fine, and despite his somewhat paranoid state of mind, enjoyed his non-eventful day.

However, the next day things were different. His car wouldn't start, at work he got an electric shock from a shorted-out cord in his office, and he lost his wallet, even though he had put it right on his desk. He simply turned in his chair, swiveled back around, and it wasn't there anymore.

And the day after that was worse. A pipe in his basement burst, flooding the room with nearly a foot of water, he received a phone call in the morning that his cousin had been in a terrible car accident, and then he lost his job, his boss citing several expensive mistakes he had made over the course of the last few months.

Marty sulked back home, depressed, frustrated, and above all—worried.

Did the incident with the dog have something to do with it?

He didn't think so, but the notion wouldn't leave his mind. It festered there like an open sore, demanding to be recognized.

Marty reached out and touched the door. It was his way of reassuring himself that it was, in fact, safe. Ever since he came across the markings on the side of his house he knew it had something to do with the accident. The weird symbols and words, some of which looked like nothing more than scribbles, were written just below his bedroom window. He might not have even noticed them if his next-door neighbor hadn't pointed them out to him.

Marty pulled his hand away from the door and looked at the tip of his fingers. They were white.

Realizing that the paint on the door was still wet, Marty immediately began to wipe it away with the back of his hand.

The words and symbols were gradually revealed.

They painted over them. They tried to hide them so I wouldn't wipe them away.

He then noticed something else: tiny drops of white paint that trailed away from the porch and into the brush.

Deciding to face whatever threat was waiting for him, Marty steadied his nerves, took a deep breath, and strutted off his porch. He was angry now. He didn't deserve this. It was an accident. It wasn't his fault. His hands clenched into fists as he made his way into the bushes, baseball bat in hand.

The brush was dense and only marginally lit by moonlight. Marty tread on though. He had no choice. If he didn't face up to his tormentors his problems would only get worse.

He searched but found nothing. Fearing he'd become lost, he turned back, weary and frustrated.

Reaching the clearing of his property, Marty trudged up to his porch. He stared at the symbols and words poking through the paint on the door. They still made no sense to him: a series of wavy lines and unpronounceable words.

But they were there nonetheless.

Marty set his bat down and used his hand to smear as much of the markings as he could.

"Who did this?" he mumbled to himself.

And then, as if answering his question, a figure appeared at the tree line, cloaked in shadow, and standing as if in presentation to him.

Marty whirled around when he heard the bushes rustle. He grabbed his flashlight and pointed it at the figure.

It was the boy who owned the dog. He was standing there, unflinching from the light shining in his face. He wore the same ominous expression as before, but this time it hid an underlying grin that manifested itself in the corners of his mouth.

Marty felt a cold shudder dance up and down his spine. "What do you want from me?" he shouted.

The boy continued to stare.

"Leave me alone or I'll call the police!"

Still no response.

The boy raised one of his hands to reveal a paintbrush. It was still wet with white paint and he pointed it at the door.

Then he turned and disappeared into the brush.

Marty spun around and continued wiping away the markings on the door.

A distant howl arrested his actions. It sounded like a wolf but was far enough away not to alarm him too much.

"It's just some animal," he mumbled and continued working on the door.

For the most part the markings remained, although Marty was able to smear them to an extent. He stepped back to see if it would be enough.

The growl told him it wouldn't be.

He turned and saw the impossible loping toward him.

His breath froze in his throat when he realized it was a dog, the same dog he

had hit with his car. But now it was alive and angry, slowly creeping along like some rabid nightmare.

Although he didn't want to, Marty pointed his flashlight at the beast.

Its fur was caked with blood and dirt. Tufts of mangy hair poked out of the mess in places but were so laden with filth they didn't move. The gaping wound in its head, the result of colliding with Marty's car, leaked brain matter that resembled wet pudding. And the eyes, clouded-over orbs set deep within its scowling visage, burned with hatred for the person who had killed it.

Marty stepped back until he pressed against the door. He gripped the bat so tightly it hurt.

The dog inched closer, never taking its eyes off its prey. It didn't blink. It didn't breathe. It only did what it was instructed to do.

Marty swiveled around, flung the door open, and rolled into the house.

The dog rushed forward. Its mouth hung open in a mockery of excitement. Stale air whistled past its teeth.

Marty kicked the door shut with his foot just as the dog smashed into it. It held firm as it rattled in its frame. Slivers of wood fell to the ground. He stood up and brandished the bat like a gladiator in the ring. It provided little confidence but it was all he had.

He crawled down the hallway, always wary of the abuse the door was taking.

With a sickening thud the last barrier between him and the dog fell in a shower of debris. The door lay on the ground. The dog stepped over it, golden spittle dribbling from its formidable mouth, and with lightning-quick speed, pounced on its cowering victim.

The boy watched the grisly spectacle from his vantage point in the brush. His dog was performing admirably, effectively snuffing out the life of the one who had killed it.

The boy looked at his watch. His time was limited. Soon his pet would turn on him. The spell only lasted so long, and then...

With a sense of urgency he closed his eyes and began to recite a powerful spell. It would no doubt be effective in restraining the dog long enough for him to properly dispose of it, but still he worried. If his pet somehow managed to resist then it would not only kill him but steadily gain immense power and slaughter at whim, not stopping until every living creature it encountered was dead. He had created a monster and now he had to destroy it.

The boy finished the spell and stood up. He was pleased. All he needed to do now was locate the dog and complete the job.

He turned to leave and immediately noticed something: a rancid, coppery odor that struck him in the face as if he had walked into a wall. He covered his nose and mouth with his hand and looked for the source of the smell.

It only took him a few seconds to see his dog, its face matted with blood and pieces of torn flesh, galloping toward him.



Eclipse in Place of Heart

Lo! yon beyond the suff'ring sea and sky,
No sound to sense, nor scene to spread, to see;
Repent! as nightfall nears horizons die,
For sunder'd are the souls not meant to be.

Amid the wanton waves of treachery,
Alas! do end your odyssey through love;
Send not your shine of moonstruck eyes to me -
The light that prowls with not a truth to prove.

With wand'ring words in want of eager ear,
Recall I've none as I'm a renegade
With an eclipse in place of heart I wear,
Do dash the thought we're for each other made.

Pray turn and wade your way back to the shore,
For nothing will await - all's nevermore.

—shawn chang

dying in a bucket

A mere carrying never makes a mother.

A gynecologist
observes soft
feminine rhythms
on a monitor.

Currency conceals compassion.

Hospital sweeper
carries remnants
of a plastic love in
his black bucket.
His squint-eyes
are conditioned.
Pulses pause
unnoticed in the
bucket. Just two
hundred rupees
bury his conscience.
He seeks shelter in
a dark arrack bottle.

It's a cold-blooded
secret that people
seem not to see.

Abortion is an accepted murder.

—fabiyas mv

[short story]



by j. cameron kuban

Not winter. Not spring. Too cold for one, not cold enough for the other. The sun had the orange glow of late afternoon and the streets were starting to exhale curling tongues of fog as the temperature continued to drop.

The bus stopped and five of us filed onto the sidewalk. I saw the kid as soon as I got off the bus. I wanted to avoid him. He was standing next to his car, scanning the people coming his way, sifting them, looking for the right one. I tucked my hands deep into my jacket pockets to keep the wind from seeping up my sleeve, stared at the ground, and started walking.

"Hey," he said to me, "I want to show you something."

I shook my head no.

"Hey," he said again, leaning closer with a smile so charming it was sinister. His tongue darted over his lips; his dirty hand combed black hair away from his eyes. "I want to show you something incredible."

His eyes were penetrating—not as much for their pale blue color as for their determined ability to split me open and read my thoughts. I had never seen him before, but I had the feeling that he had been waiting for me to come along. He was no ordinary street-side beggar.

"I want to show you—"

I told him, "No, thank you very much, but no, I don't want anything incredible today." *I don't want to vote for his man, don't want to sign his petition, don't want to be saved by Jesus. I don't want whatever he's got.*

"No," he said. "It ain't what you think. It won't cost you a thing but two minutes of your time. Come here. Look. Look."

He went to the back of his car, opened the trunk, and motioned for me. He pulled back a blanket to reveal a mirror framed in antique carved wood. Flashes of color streaked through the glass like veins of lightening—blue, red, purple, glittering phosphorescence; fast and changing, like living beings.

"I know what you're thinking," he said. "It's not a mirror. An *Aleph*."

"*Aleph*." I reacted when he said that. He caught it. He was keen to catch those little reactions: the muscle twitches, the number of times an eye blinks, the way the neck stiffens or the head moves. All those tiny details were signs that told whether he was winning or losing his game.

"You know what an *Aleph* is?" he asked.

I nodded. I had heard of it before. Many years ago, while visiting Buenos Aires, an old man bought me a drink and told me a story about a thing he called an *Aleph*. He said that it was older than mankind, as beautiful as Heaven, and as evil as Hell. He said that he saw the future in it, and that it ruined his life because he

saw himself and no man should ever see himself. He said it was destroyed by a madman and the world was better without it. Now, here in the middle of the city, half way between the bus stop and my apartment, was a kid that had another one.

The mirror glowed with shimmers of red and green, aurora borealis, color pulsed like lifeblood, always moving and changing. Therein was ageless beauty, a mirror like a lake, reflection on the surface with fathomless depths beneath. The carved wood that framed it was a bass relief of obscenities and impossibilities—women with animal companions, unknown beasts feeding on human limbs, and in each corner, a likeness of a naked man, one with wings and a bird's head, one with a tail and a lion's head, one squat with four scaly claws and an alligator head, and one with hooves and a bull's head. All the beasts and humans were carved with their heads turned inward to gaze at the shimmering glass.

Of all the things he could have called it, why did he call it an Aleph?

"You know what you can see in there?" he asked.

Was it the same object the old Argentine had told me about? Could it do the same thing?

"You see yourself, me, mankind. You see Time itself. A magic mirror? Ha! There's no such thing as magic. There's the *Aleph*. All it takes is a minute."

I asked him why—why me, here, now. Who was he? What did he really want? But he just smiled and said, "You want to know? Just look."

I wish I had said no, but I caught a quick glimpse of eyes staring out from behind the glass, deep blue eyes gone blind from waiting for something to look at. I had to see more.

"One thing," he said. "Take off your glasses. No, let me hold them for you. You have to see it with nothing between, not even glasses."

He positioned the ancient mirror upright and stood me in front of it to stare, stupid and half-blind. The flashes of light were gone and in the reflection was that young man standing behind me, smiling, with my eyeglasses in his hand.

I told him, "The only thing I see is a fool that can't see."

"Give it a moment," he said, his voice beginning to soften and melt away like an echo from a long tunnel.

The reflection changed. Smoke obscured the reflection, clouding the aged glass, and it happened in an instant.

I had the sensation of being grabbed by the head and stretched up the way a melting rubber doll stretches and turns to ooze, pulled into the mirror, my head squeezed flat, and my mind started to fill. There was time, all time, everywhere. Eternity compressed into a millisecond and poured, boiling, into my brain. There was chaos and order, darkness and light, an infinity of beasts that walked and swam and swarmed, eating each other before the sky came down and buried them in cold. There was a flash of human history holding its torch high before drowning in flames and ashes. There was the sun, larger than the sky. There was heat, then waste and darkness and cold forever.

Amid it all, I found myself. I was a speck on a page in a book with no end. I didn't want to know, but that didn't stop me from knowing. I saw a sparse room

with an old man sitting on the floor. As soon as I saw the scene, I was there, in the room, face to face with the old man, transported.

The room was so cold that I could see my breath. No pictures or decorations hung on the walls, no furniture, but the carpet was plush and rich, and the curtains that parted over the window were stylish and wealthy. The window itself was milky, giving no view but diffusing a beige light through the room. It looked to be a room in an elaborate house, but an empty house—a dead house.

The old man was regarding me the way he might inspect a friend he had not seen in years. He was bald, heavily wrinkled, freckled with liver spots, his clothes old—not dirty, not out of place, just old.

He wore the expression of a man that had given up on life. Each breath was a sigh of the pain that pierced his body at every ruined joint. He had lived once, but that was over. He was done living. His life was composed of memories and regrets. Now he was waiting. He had been waiting for a long time.

For a moment, I experienced the sensation of being two men at once—seeing the old man as he was, and seeing me standing before him, nervous, wary, disbelieving. Quickly the old man's mind closed over my own; his thoughts became my thoughts, his sensations my sensations, his feelings my feelings, me turning into him. I felt the stab of arthritis in my bones—especially my hands and fingers. I felt the floor beneath me and the wall at my back, felt the extra weight on my belly and the fight of my lungs to draw breath, felt the tiredness from eighty years of regrets. I became him.

He stared at me, the room, me, the floor, me, the window, me, like he couldn't believe it all existed. I remembered that feeling of doubt.

I asked if he recognized me.

He examined my face, eyes, clothes, but always came back to my mouth, waiting for it to open. I knew what he wanted to see so I opened my mouth and showed him the gap in my front teeth. I knew what he thought: "A lot of people have that gap. A lot of people." Recognition spread across his face. He knew me. He did not yet believe that our encounter was reality, but he knew me.

Next he had to help me stand up. I should've known better than to sit on the floor.

We left the room and headed down a short hallway toward another room, the chamber of revelations, to my coffin.

I remembered being that young man, looking into a mirror and suddenly meeting an old man here in this same house. I was intimidated, uncertain, confused, frustrated, struggling with facts too incredible to believe. That kind of fear builds slowly as it makes you sick in your stomach, makes you pour sweat while you shiver cold.

His hands were shaking. So were mine. I was afraid too.

He followed me into the room, which was empty except for one thing.

"The *Aleph*," he said.

I nodded.

“How...?”

Part of him wanted to leave, wanted to forget about me and the *Aleph*; but the other part struggled to know the forty years of secrets that turn him into me. He had already looked into the glass. He already knew those secrets whether he wanted to or not.

“No,” he said.

He looked at me with pleading and shook his head, but then looked at the *Aleph*—hypnotized by the archaic shimmers of light that swelled from its depth of millenniums—and he couldn’t look away. He went to stare into the glass.

Very quiet, I reached into my pocket....

The old man left me as soon as I looked into the mirror. Me inside the *Aleph* watching me inside the *Aleph*. I was myself again, whole, as forty years took only one second to flash in my eyes and register in my mind with the clarity of memory. I saw every detail of the next forty years, me slowly becoming that old man who waited and waited.

I turned to the old man. He had taken a gun from his pocket.

“Now you know,” he said, his mouth twisting, his eyes blinking and looking down. “Now you know. I don’t have to say a thing. I don’t have to tell you why. I don’t have to tell...”

He lifted his watery stare back to mine and said, “Destroy it! Smash it as soon as you get back! Do it fast, don’t stop to look, just do it!”

He put the gun to his head. I reached out for him, filled with panic. That was *me*, forty years from now; *me*, with a gun to my head; *me*, squeezing my eyes shut; *me*, squeezing the trigger; *me*, dying—

And then it was over. I was back on the street curb, standing behind a car, staring at a mirror, alone. Car keys were in my pocket, eyeglasses in my hand. The kid had disappeared, but the *Aleph* had shown me who he was and where he had gone. My tongue found the gap between my two front teeth.

Destroy it...Smash it...!

The ancient mirror stared with its timeless glass eye, permanent. One could no more destroy it than destroy Time itself; to smash it would be to smash the future.

The sun had set and the wind was stinging cold as evening grew dark. A loud hiss startled me—the brakes of a bus stopping to let a woman off. She was coming in my direction.

I called to her.

She gave me a skeptical look, wanting to go on by but not knowing how to be rude. She was older, from a different life, with substances in her soul that were invisible to me. I recognized her from the *Aleph*, having seen her entire life in the fraction of a second. She was naïve, and she came to me.

“I just want you to look at something for me and tell me what you think, yeah? Just stand right here and look at that.”

“Look at the mirror?” she asked.

“Just look. What do you see?”

“I see—”

I lay the *Aleph* down, pulled the blanket over it, and closed the trunk of the car when a nearby street light came on to wash the dark with a cone of mechanical blue. Tendrils of mist curled out of the manhole covers in the street and crawled across the pavement to swirl at our feet.

The woman’s hands trembled, wiped her tears, and clutched each other over her chest. She shook her head slowly before letting go a quiet breath. Then she faced me and said, “It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.” She started to cry, turned, hurried, ran away while I listened to her footsteps melt into silence.

I put the keys in the ignition of the car—hoping someone would steal it but knowing that no one would—and started to walk. I had no desire to go home. I had no desire to go anywhere. I had eternity in my head and most of it looked like staring up at the night sky until, one by one, the stars went black.

If what I had seen was truth...

If what I had seen was truth, I had forty years....

The waiting had started.

The bright orange of a neon sign popped on to my left, casting a dirty halo in the cold mist. I stopped to look at it, and walked toward it. I opened the door next to the sign and a wave of stale alcohol and cigarette smoke crashed over me. I went inside, went to the counter, and ordered a drink.

Then I ordered another.

...and another...

...and another...




[poetry]

Dream Fragments

Opening the latch,
my mind flits out
through sleep's
window, roams
in a glimmer.

As the elephants
chase me, I dart
like a Norway rat.
My legs lose quick
pace, when mind
returns my body.

Red tiled roof of
my old school...
a pair of eyelashes
darkened with
mascara...sidelong
glance...
All are broken.



My dad hails, but
his words scatter
far away from my
ears. He flies in the
sky. Mind follows,
but falls upon my
body by dawn.

The moonlet falls,
its stem broken,
and the stars collide
into pieces. Soon
all disappear in
sweat in a flash.
I drink water
from the fear-fall.

A few dreams lie
deep under like
fossils; others
vanish as butterflies.

—fabiyas mv

[poetry]

Dheedhi's Daughter's House warming

Dheedhi counts days with a sparkle in her heart.
She hopes to melt her ice-cold loneliness in the warmth of a party.
She buys a washing machine.
Pickle of mango peel, piquant beef, banana chips...
She packs all with pizzazz.

But her daughter foresees shards of shame protruding from ma's mannerisms.
Outworn ways, the ill-mannered slurps, unrefined words...

"Tomorrow's function's limited, ma.
I'll come to pick you another day."
Deedhi's lips tremble and eyes become moist.
Several desires disappear silently in the Bermuda Triangle of generation gap.

—fabiyas mv

dig a hole

there are those
who will tell you
love is kind
love is forgiving
love is blind
but I tell you
that to live
requires
that you dig
and dig

dig a hole
deep down
into your cold hard heart
bury lost love and hatred there
then cover them over
layer upon layer
because nothing is gained
by holding on
to memories
long dead
let your stillborn
babies go
downstream on the river Lethe
until they fade at last from sight
or nothing new can ever grow

—allan rozinski

A SLAPSTICK SUICIDE

by wayne scheer

Arnold Blaylock decided he didn't want to be remembered for his poor spelling and punctuation, so he decided to leave a message on his answering machine before blowing his brains out.

Almost thirty years had passed since Mrs. Gordon, his fourth grade teacher, pounded into his brain the importance of correct spelling, and now he felt paralyzed by fear. He imagined if his suicide note contained misspellings he'd be doomed to spend eternity rewriting it.

He couldn't remember if alimony was spelled with one "l" or two. Arnold hated using a dictionary—in fact, he didn't own one—nor did he own a computer. He considered going to the library and using a dictionary to check his spelling, but decided it was far too much trouble.

It wasn't just spelling the word "alimony" that bothered him. Shouldn't it be written as "allmymoney," as in Debra, the lying bitch, didn't deserve monthly allmymoney payments? Would she understand if he wrote it like that? Besides, a pun had no place in a suicide note. He didn't need Mrs. Gordon to tell him that.

So he settled for leaving a message on his answering machine. But there was also a problem with this. How could he be sure anyone, especially Debra, would listen to the message? Mrs. Greenwald, next door, would likely hear the gunshot and call the police. They'd get the super to let them in and they'd find most of his head splattered on the living room wall, looking like a Jackson Pollock painting. They'd determine it a suicide easily enough, so why would they bother checking his answering machine? And even if they did, why would they play it for his ex-wife?

They might contact her and she would tell them he had no immediate family. She'd advise the super to give away his belongings. His answering machine, along with his clothing and Goodwill furniture—the only things left after her lawyer picked him dry—would end up in a dump or back at Goodwill, where some

stranger would record his own stupid message right over his. Arnold wasn't sure if that was how answering machines worked or if that was how the police worked, but he wasn't going to call the company that manufactured the device or the police to find out.

Besides, he wasn't sure people even used answering machines anymore.

This suicide business was getting tiresome. Writing a note was too much trouble and leaving a message on his answering machine likely wouldn't work. So he changed plans.

He'd call Debra's home phone, knowing she'd be at work, and leave the message—including the sound of the gun shot. He'd tell her exactly what he thought of her and the lies she had told, lies that cost him his job and the few friends he had, and then he'd say, "This one's for you, Deb." He'd put his recently purchased glock in his mouth, tilt it slightly upward, and pull the trigger.

He took the gun out of the paper bag that rested on the coffee table next to him. He checked to make sure it was loaded and undid the safety, just as the guy in the pawn shop had taught him.

For the first time in his life, Arnold decided not to think about what he would do next. He punched Debra's phone number, expecting to hear three rings and then her voice saying, "Hi, this is Debra. Please leave a message at the sound of the tone."

The loaded gun felt heavier than he remembered at the pawn shop when the owner loaded it for him. His heart pounded at the sound of the first ring.

With the second ring, his hands shook. Still, he held onto both the phone and the weapon.

Arnold took a deep breath and shouted, "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" into the phone during the third ring.

When the ring ended, he heard Debra's chirpy voice. "Hi, this is..."

He could barely wait for the full message to end. This was going to be a memory she'd live with the rest of her life. He felt lightheaded, almost giddy.

The message ended. It seemed like forever before the tone came on. He put the gun in his mouth.

And an out-of-breath male voice said, "Hello. Hello."

"Imph Desh..."

"What?"

He took the gun out of his mouth. "Is Debra there?"

"No. Who's calling, please?"

In a frighteningly calm voice, he said, "This is Arnold, her ex-husband. I have a message for Debra."

With that, he put the gun back in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

It clicked, but nothing happened. He tried again. Nothing.

"What's the message, Arnold? Arnold?"

He had wet his pants.

"I'll have to get back to her."





[poetry]

Deliverance

My wish for the time being
Is to go back and never return.
Go back to my cradle
Where I slept the eternal sleep.
I wish to get dismantled
And melt into the soil
Never to sprout again.
To be shrouded by that darkness
As blank as indifference
Or to get demented, at least.
Let all my senses die
And be eaten up by you, Sleep.

—manjary mk

Fractured Goddess

We have pulled her apart with our clutching hands,
devoured her bit by bit to fill our yawning bellies,
caught her shadow in sealed glass bottles
and her soul in still water, and listened
while she wept. How much can we break
from her divinity, how many icons must weep
or bleed before we see how she fades
with each passing year? If we loved her—
not her beauty, nor her power, but
the lightning flash that she arcs across our skies,
the heartbeat revelation of discovering
where she dwells in us, we would know
our breath is bound to her like incense rising,
and our dreams like ivy, coiled
around the solid tower of her presence.
We would worship the taste of her in our mouths,
and savor the stretch of our sinews
as we knelt before her tattered majesty.

—jennifer crow

[poetry]



Dark Valentine II

O love, one winter passed and now we are still here.
The love we share has blossomed, growing through the year.
I've numbered memories you have bestowed on me;
Without you, I'd have drowned amid a loveless sea.
Together we shall drink again while moonlight shines,
To celebrate the darker side of Valentines.
Our hidden fears were only shone to the Nocturnal,
Yet stronger now, I've made way to love eternal.

—ashley dioses

For K.A.O.

Blind Faith

Trading on ignorance,
multiplying endlessly,

the tenets and fears
of our manufactured

hates inhabit us
like monsters from

some microscopic
world grown large,

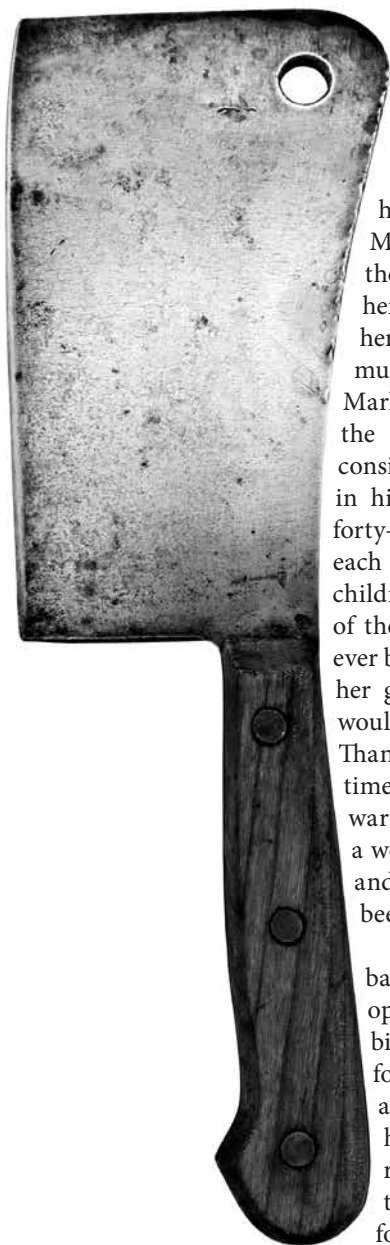
jaws gaping, claws
forever grasping

for the next blind
prejudice to embrace

—bruce boston

Dinner with Sophia

by tonalea l. chapman



Sophia had lived in the same neighborhood all her life. Each day she walked three blocks to Jay's Market; she would get fresh vegetables to cook with the evening meal, then she would turn and make her way back home. Rain, snow, or sunshiny day—her routine rarely varied. There were other markets much closer to home but Jay, the owner of Jay's Market, always had the freshest vegetables, especially the zucchini, tomatoes, and artichoke. Sophia considered herself pretty lucky. She had met Marty in high school, they eventually married, and after forty-plus years were still passionately in love with each other. Together they had raised three wonderful children, who were now working and raising families of their own, and not one person in her family had ever been seriously sick or hurt in any way. Sophia saw her grandchildren every weekend when the family would get together over a hot fresh meal. Holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas were always very special times, when the house would be filled with love and warmth. If asked what the trick was to having such a wonderfully fulfilling life, she would always smile, and answer the same way: "I guess I've just always been lucky that way."

Sophia put on her coat and boots, gathered her bag from the hook in the corner of the closet, and opened the door to head out. The wind was always bitter cold this time of year in Maine, and she found herself sucking in her breath as she stepped across the threshold. She turned to look back into her quiet house, at Marty sleeping quietly in his recliner with the television on mute, and realized that the house was almost too quiet. She thought for the tiniest moment that she could hear the

ghostly laughter of her children and the mummers of adults as they rejoiced the love of family. But then the wind blew strong again, and she saw Marty shiver unconsciously in his chair and nestle deeper into it to escape the cold draft. As Sophia stepped the rest of the way out and closed the door behind her, a small smile came to her face, followed by a big grin. She really did love these walks to the market; they really did cheer her up.

When Sophia was young, she knew her way around the streets; she would sometimes skip to the market with her long blonde hair bouncing behind her. Other times, she would run there and walk back, giving her time to look around the neighborhood and meet people. She probably knew the neighborhood better than anyone else in these parts, because she always took the time to look around and really see. Not just see the apartment buildings made from wood, stucco, mortar and brick, but really see what went on behind the pulled drapes and dirty panes of glass. For instance, Sophia knew that early in the forties, in apartment G in the Conner Apartments, there was a man who drank himself into a stupor every night. He was married to a lovely wife that shopped in the same market as Sophia, and every once in a while, his wife could come in on a dark cloudy day wearing large sunglasses, or a little too much make-up on her cheeks. Sophia also knew that they had a beautiful little girl six years old, and some days, she didn't go to school because she couldn't walk very well, and that sometimes she would sit on her apartment stoop with her bulky clothes pulled tight around her even on sunny days. Sophia also knew that one day the husband, or father, just disappeared; after that, the little girl began to dress in pretty nice clothes, and the beautiful young wife never wore sunglasses again, even in the brightest days.

As Sophia turned the first corner, the wind hit her straight in the face, and she faltered for a moment. She wasn't a young girl anymore, she didn't skip or run to the market anymore, but she was still keenly observant as she had been as a teenager, and her memory never faltered a bit. Ahead of her, Sophia saw old Mr. Murphy. He was using a walker, but she could remember a time when Mr. Murphy, newly married, would come bouncing home, empty lunch-box in one hand and paycheck in the other. His new wife would be waiting for him on the apartment stoop, and she would throw her arms around his neck, as he would pick her up and twirl her around. If you were to look up at their apartment twenty minutes later, the shades would be drawn, and the lights wouldn't come on until late in the evening. She also remembered a few years later when Murphy would come home late looking unshaven and tired, like the world was riding on his shoulders. His bride would be out with "the girls" until late at night, coming home with whiskey on her breath and the smell of men's cologne on her clothes. One day the wife just disappeared and never came home again.

Sophia was stepping into the market just as snow was beginning to fall. Jay Jr., or JJ, as everyone called him, was behind the counter checking out Sonny, one of the parochial kids from St. Mary's High School. Sophia had one foot in the door when Sonny body-slammed her as if she weren't there. If she hadn't grabbed the door jam, Sophia surely would have been sitting on the sidewalk.

JJ ran to her side and helped her get her balance. He just shook his head. “These damn kids today, not like they used to be, eh?”

Sophia replied, “You’ve got that right, JJ, but I don’t let it bother me; I know sooner or later, what goes around comes around.”

Sophia continued into the market, glancing out at Sonny as he ran up the street. Then catching a glint of silver in her bag, she covered it back up with one of her handmade flowered handkerchiefs her daughter had given her for Christmas one year. Sophia quickly went about her shopping, gently squeezing a few tomatoes then putting them in her bag, getting a few green onions, and a couple of nice baking potatoes.

JJ was shuffling around the store with a broom watching Sophia as she picked her vegetables. “You always pick the best ones; I don’t know how you do that; a hundred people could come through those doors and overlook the best vegetables; then you come along and pick them right up. How do ya do it, Mrs Sophia?”

Sophia smiled and gently squeezed another tomato. She said, “I’ve always been lucky that way, JJ, just always been lucky that way.”

JJ was now leaning on his broom more than sweeping with it. He said, “So what’s for dinner tonight, Mrs. Sophia?” His stance was like that of a man who had been in this same pose many times.

Sophia looked at JJ, then past him into the blanket of snow outside, then with a glazed look in her eyes answered, “JJ, I think I will cook liver tonight, nice fresh liver.”

Sophia paid for her items; then stuffed them all in her bag and opened the door to the soft falling snow.

“You be careful out there now, Mrs. Sophia; it’s gonna get slick fast.”

Sophia looked back at JJ and said, “Why thank you, JJ, you’ve always been a sweet boy. Tell your wife and little boy hello from me.”

Sophia let the door close behind her, not hearing JJ’s thank you, and she began a steady pace heading the same direction Sonny had gone. His footprints were still visible in the snow, but she didn’t really need them; she knew where she was going; she always did. The boy’s tracks were like a ghostly guide pointing the way.

By the time Sophia reached the apartment building, Sonny’s footprints were practically gone, but she climbed the steps, not as fast as she would have twenty or so years ago, but fast enough. Sophia went in through the main door that wasn’t closed quite all the way, and as she stepped through she let it go and heard it click behind her. She started for the last apartment on the right. That door was left ajar as well, as if she was expected, and she smiled as she went through, silently closing the door behind her. Sophia set her bag on the floor and took off her shoes so she wouldn’t leave gritty snow all over the beautiful hardwood floor. She reached into the bag; slipping her handkerchief aside, she pulled out the large meat cleaver she carried.

Sonny was standing in the middle of the room when Sophia entered. He looked down at her four-foot-eight-inch tall and one-hundred-ten-pound frame with a smirk.

Sophia said, "You young kids just don't know anything about respect. I know how you treat your mother, yelling at her and pushing her around. I know that you ran your father off with your temper, and that your sister ran away because she was tired of you coming in her room late at night when you mother was asleep and safely locked behind her bedroom door. I also know your mother doesn't date because of your behavioral problems."

Sonny looked at Sophia and said, "What the fuck you doing here, you old hag?"

Sonny stood staring at her with venom in his breath, as his eyes grew dark and his face turned red with anger. "I don't know what the fuck you're talking about, bitch, but if you think you're going to fuck with me, you're so wrong. I'll snap your neck like a freaking chicken bone."

Sophia took a step toward Sonny and smiled. "I don't think so, Sonny."

Sonny puffed up like a cock getting ready for a fight as Sophia took another step toward him, raising the cleaver. Sonny took a step back, reaching for something on the mantel with which to hit her. Spittle flew from his mouth as he yelled at Sophia, "You're going down, you old hag!" As he turned, he slipped on some of the snow he had tracked in and lost his balance, falling on his right side and knocking out his breath.

Sophia seized the opportunity and brought the cleaver down hard, hitting Sonny in the chest. Sonny tried to yell but couldn't. He looked up at Sophia as she stood over him trying to pull the cleaver from his chest.

He tried to speak, but his words came out as a whisper. "You won't get away with this, bitch," he said.

Sophia dislodged the cleaver from a rib, and stood up to strike again. She smiled down at Sonny. Tucking a few loose strands of gray hair back into place, she answered him in the same low whisper he had used and said, "I think I will get away with it, young man; I'm just lucky that way." With those words, she struck the lethal blow.

A few hours later, Marty awoke from his nap in the recliner. He could hear Sophia singing to herself in the kitchen and could smell the aroma of something great cooking. He shuffled from his chair and went into the kitchen. Coming up behind Sophia, he gave her a loving peck on the cheek. "Something smells great, Sophia. What's for dinner?"

Sophia leaned lovingly into Marty, and enjoyed feeling him near her. "We are having liver with green onions, asparagus, tomatoes and potatoes for dinner; I got it all fresh just a few hours ago."

Marty began setting the table for them, "I'm a lucky man, Sophia, and I don't know how you do it, but you always manage to find the freshest vegetables and meats." S

ophia turned and put the large bowl of liver and onions on the table, smiling up at Marty. "You know me, Marty; I've just always been lucky that way."



Evening Breeze

It blows softly
through a transient
heaven in my heart.
It brings the smell of
soap-suds. Portrait of a
nude damsel gets visible
on mind's canvas. Soon it
brings the fragrance of incense
smoldering in a prayer room. I
sin and purge myself in the same
breeze. As I lie fatigued, my spirit
revives in the wind. Sweat gets dry.
A secular wind. Holy chants of people
in diverse creeds flow merged in the breeze.
It passes, patting everybody, yet nobody sees.

—fabiyas mv

Forty Years to Life in Supermax

Great expectations, I had none
but irony appealed

so read that book first page to last,
eye toward Pip from boy to man

Gave thought to my own life bereft
of any kindly Haversham,
no fair Estella's touch
to quell the beast

There at least a reason why
so many died all by this hand
now gently turning pages

Bleak House still my reading plan

—alan meyrowitz

the animals in my life

by eugene hosey

I was two years old the first time I petted a dog. I was walking on the grass in the sunshine, and there sitting on his hind legs was a grey bushy-haired dog about my height as it sat. He put his face in mine and sniffed. I looked into those black button eyes and saw pure innocence. I had no fear. I rubbed the back of his neck and his head. I heard someone behind me say, “You better not let him do that. That dog will bite.” I didn’t believe it—even when I heard a low growl deep in the dog’s throat. Suddenly he bit my hand. I made an outcry as I looked at his teeth marks on my skin. He ran off and I said, “Som’bitch dog!”

A chorus of laughter sounded behind me and someone hurried to check my hand and said, “He’s all right.”

The first dog of my own was a solid black mutt that my mother named Snowball. I got the dog when I was six and we moved to a bigger, nicer house. Daddy built Snowball a dog house and put a pen around it. She was pregnant when we got her. Like most good dogs she liked affection. She was not a biter but she barked almost constantly for attention. The night she gave birth to her puppies, I stuck my hand in her house and found her head and petted her. She made whimpers of pain with intervals of silence. I felt the babies as they came; I felt them tumbling about.

Mother said not to pick them up and leave Snowball alone until she was finished and felt better tomorrow. We gave her litter away one by one, and eventually we gave Snowball herself away because she would not stop barking at night, and she kept us and the neighbors awake.

I was about ten when I got the first and only dog I ever loved. We named her Lassie. To this day I regret that stereotypical, eponymous name. I wasn't thinking about the importance of clever names, but we did watch the collie Lassie on television, and so Mother and I both liked it. Lassie's front and hind legs were a salty gray—as was her face; two white splotches were brushed above her eyes; her long snout was tan and white mixed; her neck and belly were white; short wavy hair hung down both sides of her neck. There was something new to me about this particular animal. When I gazed into her eyes, it was not just innocence I saw. When Lassie gazed at me I saw a happy, limitless admiration. She was always waiting at the side door for feeding times. She never got pregnant. She followed me around and slept on the carport. When I wanted to play with Lassie and she was nowhere to be seen, I would call her name as loud as I could and sit on the lawn and wait. I would call repeatedly. If she were far off, it would take a few minutes, but she would always either hear me or know I wanted her through some canine ESP. I would continue waiting, watching across the long row of back yards. Either soon or after a few minutes, she would appear far away running toward me as fast as she could go. Reaching me, she would leap upon me, all four legs standing on either side of me as I fell back, her tongue slobbering all over my face enthusiastically, my head finally turning and my eyes closing as I laughed. She would stay with me like this for a long time. Out of breath, she would then pant with her tongue hanging out, dripping saliva as she stared at me with a big dog-smile that seemed to emanate from her whole face. I would pet her and she would smother me with her tongue kisses again, and I would close my mouth and eyes and finally cover my face with my hands and roll over.

I did not know how much I loved this animal until one Saturday morning during the summer while my mother and I were watching television. My sister suddenly appeared at the screened door to the den and said, "Lassie got hit by a car!" We hurried outside. Lassie was in the grass right off the road in the next-door-neighbor's yard. I ran to her, grieved and crying, for I could see from a distance she was not moving in the slightest. When I reached her only her eyes were moving, roving about with no expression whatever. My mother, my sister, and I all cried. Only dad did not, but he looked at us with pity and took Lassie to the veterinarian. He wasn't gone long; the veterinarian, dad said, told him she was dead when he got there and said that she had been too internally damaged to be saved. Dad put her down on the carport concrete wrapped in a towel. My sister and I paced and cried, trying to get used to the fact that Lassie was dead.

Mother's soulful brown eyes looked at me and said, "Do you want your daddy to take her off to the woods, or do you want him to make a coffin and bury her in the back yard?"

I said, "Please bury her." I did not look at Lassie again. I watched dad hammer

together a box out of scrap wood he took from his shop, but I did not watch him bury her.

Looking back on Lassie after fifty years, I think I understand the depth of my remorse over her death. Her simple, unlimited dog-love attached itself to my heart, and my heart accepted and returned it with no sense of future—as if she would live forever. That dog was the first animal I ever loved—the first creature I loved that died. The loss did not immediately make me want to stop having dogs, but the ones that came afterwards I cared for less and less. I tried to replace Lassie but never could. Her death stabbed a virgin place in my heart that healed but left a scar that prevented me from ever loving a dog again.

I realized that most pets were creatures that—from one cause or another—had short, fragile lifespans, and that it was foolish to invest one's whole heart in the love for a dog. Yet to this day I feel an irresistible sensation about a good animal. I had a few more dogs. Snoopy died of Distemper. Betty Jean was killed by a car. One dog simply disappeared. I never had another one.

As I entered adolescence, I learned that some animals were just seriously, dangerously bad. In fact, we had a vicious canine epidemic in the neighborhood. One of these monsters lived next door. I don't know what kind of dog it was, except that it was big, strong, and evil. Our next door neighbor kept it chained to a tree most of the time, but for a while everyday they would set it loose for some exercise, and it would take off down the road and sniff out one yard after another. I watched it several times from our front porch. The dog liked to growl and snap at children. I never saw it bother a tall adult; it picked on small children. When the dog was immediately recognized on the loose, an outcry would go up and parents would grab their children and hurry them inside—but not before this canine bastard managed to inflict a serious wound on a little boy's leg. People reasoned with the owners to get rid of this dog or keep it in a secure pen, but they refused. So one morning the dog's masters got up and found their dog dead with a bullet in its head. In another family was a big brown bulldog that chased and bared fangs at anyone who strolled by its masters' house. Finally it chased a woman down the road; the woman fell, and the bulldog made a big gash in her arm. Bulldog just disappeared one day after this and was never seen again.

In those days there were no leash laws and every kind of dog could express the instincts of its nature—whether good or evil. Therefore human beings who believed they had the right to enjoy their own neighborhood without having to fear and defend themselves from the dangerous animals of reckless people got rid of these canines whenever it became necessary. I agreed with this. Some people say, “A dog is bad only because a human being made it that way.” I say, “It's not as simple as that. I think a lot of times the bad is in their nature to begin with. Like genetics. But say you're right that at least some dogs are trained to be bad. Do you know how to turn a beast into a good-natured dog?” Eventually the leash laws came about, and the dog pound got more active.

One day in a department store I noticed the fish tanks in the pet section. I was immediately attracted. The fish in the aquariums were passive and beautiful; it was

soothing to watch them swimming about in their isolated water world. My interest started with a hugely pregnant guppy. I put it in a big jar and waited. One morning I got up and the mother guppy had had her babies. Each day I would pour the fish in a bottle of fresh water through a net. They lived through this process for a while, but one day they all died as soon as I poured them in their fresh tap water. I had not known that the water needed to be cleansed with a few drops from a little plastic vial. After this I bought a book about tropical fish and asked dad to please buy me a ten-gallon fish tank with all the accessories. Dad was rather cheap, but he worked with a man who had a fish hobby and just so happened to have what I wanted. He paid the man ten dollars for the works, and I was happy. The man even included several fish in the deal—red ones, black ones, and a bottom feeder. I set it up on a sturdy wooden table near my bed so I could go to sleep as I watched them.

One night when I was sick and feverish I thought the fish were having a feud and wanted my advice. Basically they all felt picked on by the others and wanted privacy; the bottom feeder thought it was all amusing. I laughed at the situation and suggested they divide into two groups and each group occupy two different sections of the tank. One fish wisely pointed out that this plan would ultimately make it worse by starting a war between the two sections. I laughed at the idea of a war inside a fish tank. Then I advised them to all keep to themselves and mind their own business. Gradually I lost interest in tropical fish. I would forget to feed them; I would let the water level get too low. I ignored them. I got tired of them. Keeping an aquarium became an annoyance. One day I chased down each fish with a net and flushed them down the toilet. There wasn't much water in the tank by then, so the aquarium was easy to lift. I carried it through the back yard, into the woods, and threw it in the brush.

I lost all interest in pets until adulthood. I moved into my own house. I let someone talk me into taking a kitten to keep inside. She was a grey tabby. I named her Olivia. At first she was a sweet little thing and liked sitting next to me or in my lap. When she grew up she changed. Perhaps I stopped paying enough attention to her, and she began to demand it to a degree that shocked and repulsed me. She became a clever bully.

One night I woke up and she was sitting on my face. I knew she knew that this repulsed me. If I locked her out of the bedroom she would scratch and heave her body against the door to keep me awake. When I was downstairs she would make mysterious noises directly above me. She yowled and screamed. She would scratch my leg hard enough to draw blood and run off and hide. Finally, I broke and put her outside, but she started tearing the screens off the windows. She pissed on the windshields of the next-door-neighbors' cars every day, and they put a note in my mailbox threatening to call animal control. Olivia knew what she was doing. But I fought her on it and took her a few miles down the road and threw her out. At this point I hated her.

She was gone for two days; on the third, I pulled in the driveway—there she was pacing on the front porch waiting for me. Then I felt guilty and let her in, but she brought in fleas. It took a month of exterminators to get rid of this awful infestation.

After the fleas were gone, she went back to all her torments, adding to them the practice of shitting and pissing in the bathtubs. I couldn't take anymore. This time I took her at least thirty miles away and dumped her out in a neighborhood where I saw several cats. I hoped she would take up with someone and someone would love her. A few days later I regretted it and even went driving around looking for her. But I got over it soon enough and told people I had given Olivia to a friend of mine.

A year passed. One afternoon I heard a knock and a scratch at the front storm door. I went around and looked. It was Olivia. I decided to ignore her. That night I opened the front door, nervous and feeling dread. There Olivia sat. She looked at me with sleepy, fond eyes. I went back inside, finally determined to be rid of her if it took driving two hundred miles. But the next day, she was gone and I never saw her again.

I had moved far away from my birthplace, but my mother got sick and sicker still until she was becoming an invalid. I was the only one left in the family willing to live with her, and I could hear in her voice on the phone the desire that I sell my house, return to my roots, and be with her when she died. I remember her saying, "You've given up on marriage and children, haven't you? Don't you think we could live together?"

I thought about this for less than a day; I was her oldest; there was a connection. *Typical, isn't it? I've heard it, and they're right. You think your life is going in one direction, while in fact it's going in a direction you've never considered even though it's been in the making for practically your whole life. My two marriages failed, and my destiny is to take care of my mother.*

My mother and I would sit on the porch swing after the sun was down and the insects were making a pleasant racket. Sometimes my heart would sink when I would turn my head and look at how much my mother had aged, how her face had shrunken with so many vertical lines, and the feeble gaze in her eyes—green eyes that would catch me looking at her and return my look with a kind of love and peace I could not fathom it was so deep.

A beautiful homeless cat made a habit of visiting us on the porch, and we made a habit of feeding her. She was a friendly cat—not skittish at all. Her personality was feminine and delicate. She was a long-hair black cat with a white triangle on top of her nose; beneath her nose were two circles of white that continued with white around her mouth. White cascading down her neck filled solid her underside. Her legs were black, all four of her paws white.

We decided to take her in. We named her Hattie Belle. She hesitated to enter for only a second. At first she slept for days, and then she ate ravenously. She loved petting; she especially loved to have her face rubbed. Her favorite sleeping position was spread-eagle on her back. She would lay this way all over the house; it was hard to avoid stepping on her. She was grown, and I wondered if she had survived outside for years with so many hostile dogs passing through the area. This was a small country place and packs of wild dogs would sometimes run through

looking for anything they could eat. I had found two dead cats in the yard that had obviously been torn apart by these dogs.

One day I was inside reading, and I heard barking, growling, and whining out back that was getting louder. The sound was not just a typical dog bark. I went out the back door and saw an awful thing. A large brown dog was on his back, perfectly still, pathetic, and whining. A big brown bulldog was chewing on the dog's leg. The bulldog had chewed off pieces and blood was all over the tortured dog's belly. That poor dog did not even try to defend himself, and the bulldog appeared to be leisurely eating a leg. I took a shovel to the monster and yelled at it, but it hardly noticed. This was too disgusting to allow. I could not just go back in the house. I would kill this bulldog one way or another. The victim continued the sounds of suffering but would not even try to get up. I was shaking with anger and pity.

I went inside our tool shed and looked around. The only implement I could find that looked deadly enough was an ax—a long-handled, wide-blade ax. I chose it. The bulldog still did not notice me. I thought against striking the beast in the head for fear of cutting the leg it was chewing. So I raised the ax with a wide grip and brought it down with as much strength as I could muster right down on the bulldog's backbone. I felt the blade enter the spine securely, and the dog stopped his torture without a sound. It was dead with the ax still buried in its back. I grabbed the ax handle and pulled the animal away from the other dog, which continued to lay there whimpering. I nervously walked around the back yard for a while, calming down, until I saw the maimed dog hopping three-legged across the yard. *I am glad I did that.*

I went back inside. I was greeted by Hattie as I entered. I picked her up and took her to my recliner. She sat on my lap and I scratched her head and looked into her eyes. They were green with dark blue pupils. "I'll never put you outside," I said. "You wouldn't believe the bloodthirsty monsters that are out there. I'll take care of you and mother until both of you are dead or I'm dead myself—even if it's a human being I must kill to protect you." Then I held Hattie Belle like a baby, her head nuzzled in my neck, and I rubbed the length of her.



THE DAY OF THE DEAD

—EL DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS

A different mask, I wear upon each day shying
within this shell that I've built with paper-paste;
a wall between my fragile form indemnifying
my soul from all the judgments, I've made in haste.

Over this wrack of bones a mottled flesh is thrown
and remnants light or coarse, shapes and colors too,
I use these to separate self from haunts unknown
in the millions rising for life's too rich to subdue.

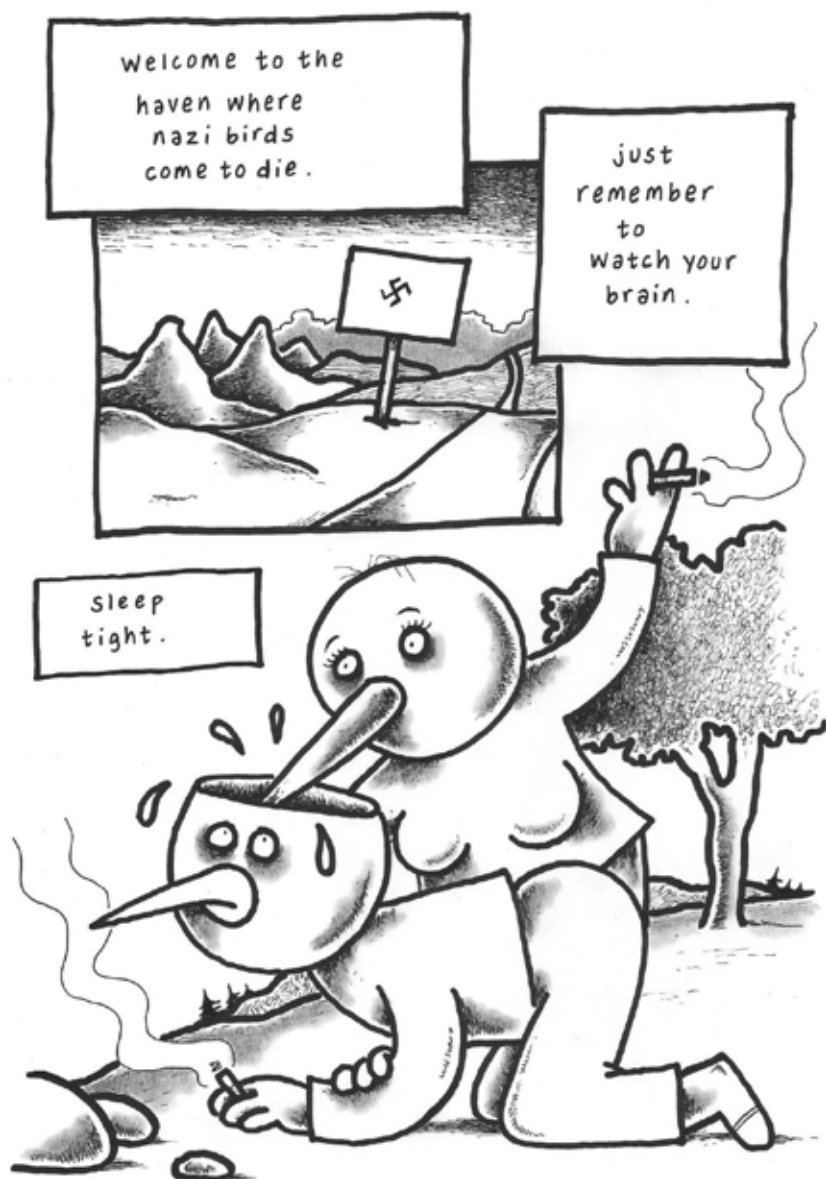
Oh, if we'd but admit from our birth we're dying;
perhaps, man could live each day outside a single shell
for the world is full of skeletons, speechless trying,
to create an earthly garden from a dreamt of hell.

What is real and right, what is born, or borne; you see
is within a skull of bone, what will be will be.

—deborah guzzi



JANNE KARLSSON'S
**THE BIRDS
OF DOOM**









[short story]

ANOTHER FRIDAY NIGHT

by christopher l. malone



Theo Dunby was finishing up the last Friday night shift he'd have for a while at the Chesapeake Café. The football season was slated to begin the following week and he wouldn't be able to work another one until it was done. Dutifully he went about his work, reminding himself to smile at customers as he cleaned off the tables. He had a nice smile and noticed that people responded well to him when he flashed them his teeth. In a few moments he'd have to ask them to leave, and it was easier to get them moving if they liked him, creating the type of genial clientele that didn't want to be an inconvenience, instead of the spiteful kind that opted to chew their food slowly and take their time at closing. You could avoid nasty people just by killing them with kindness.

Once the customers were gone and their tables cleaned, Theo followed up with the large grill-top in the back of the kitchen, cleaning the grease traps before taking out the garbage. Fridays were typically bad, and this was no exception. The trash consisted of two large, thick black-plastic body bags, tied off at the top and stuffed to capacity with half-eaten food, used napkins, plastic utensils, and other bits of refuse that would collect in a regular business day; it was amazing the amount of weight that could accumulate in a single shift. Theo hauled them both, one over each shoulder, toward the giant green dumpster out back, and in spite of his powerful legs, he made his way with slow, labored steps. It was hard work, and he was slightly small in stature—too short to throw the trash over the top. Instead, he dragged the bags over to the side of the dumpster, and slid back the side-hatch that would accommodate a person of his height.

That's where he discovered the body. It was staring at him through this makeshift port-hole. The corpse was in a seated position, atop several bags of garbage and leaning against the rusted and decomposing metal at the back of the dumpster. Its hands looked to be pinned behind it, and Theo noted that the feet and knees were bound together with black duct tape overtop the body's faded denim jeans. He looked at the eyes and noticed they were shut, with white flakes crusting over the eyelashes. Theo stared at the body for a moment and then proceeded to shove his trash bags in the dumpster, over the corpse—first one, then the other—stopping in between to catch his breath, as the sheer weight of lifting one bag was enough to exhaust him for the rest of the night. When both were well inside the dumpster, he reached in and pushed them back as far as his arms could stretch to the other side. His right elbow brushed against the body's cold knee.

He pulled back and looked at the body to make a judgement. He then went back into the restaurant, grabbed a mop handle, and beat the trash bags back until the body was once again satisfactorily in full view. Then he put the mop handle back, set the alarm for the café entrance, locked the doors, and returned to the dumpster. He stared at the body for a while longer, and when he'd had enough, he slid the side-hatch closed, and went home. He never called the cops.

By Saturday afternoon, there were complaints of a smell coming from behind

the Chesapeake Café, as a hot sun had done the job of defrosting the body. The cops arrived, set up a crime scene, and by Sunday morning the dumpster had become a local tourist attraction. On Monday, the school lunch room was abuzz with the news of the body found at their local mall; speculation was rampant, and more than a few brave souls bragged to their friends about how they'd actually gone to the dumpster, and how spooky everything was, even if the body had already been removed. The yellow crime tape was enough to set the scene.

Theo sat quietly at a circular table with two teammates, listening to them argue passionately about the body. Mark sat on Theo's left; he was a bulky, second-string tackle, with more fat than muscle, but nevertheless felt that his size gave him the benefit of being right all the time. He spat when he talked, and he directed his words at Eddie, who sat between him and Theo. Eddie was tall, slender, and the back-up to the back-up quarterback. He wasn't really bad at football, but just a step slower than the other two quarterbacks, who were always neck and neck for the starting job. Coaches would tell Eddie that he had problems reading defenses, and until he could learn how to read a play and see things start to unfold *before* they happened, he'd always be stuck in a constant state of catching up. Eddie could only shrug his shoulders, not feeling any real pressure or shame. People always get hurt playing football, or get suspended for doing things they shouldn't do. If he could keep his nose clean by hanging out with Mark, the bench-warming lineman, and Theo, the team's kicker, he felt like his time would come.

"For the last time," Eddie said in a calm voice, allowing Mark to get wound up and look like the fool, "dumping a body behind a restaurant before jumping back onto the interstate doesn't make this the *perfect murder*. Sure, they might not be able to find the getaway car, but they'll ID the body and investigate leads and everything else they do on those crime shows. Don't you watch television?"

"Television isn't real!" Mark retorted, slightly louder than he meant to be. People turned to look in his direction, and his cheeks reddened with embarrassment. Eddie smiled, feeling some sense of victory.

"Just because it isn't real doesn't mean it's all fake."

"That doesn't even make any sense!"

"It does if you think about it, but that means you'd have to think."

This was what they typically did. They argued for the sake of arguing, with Eddie usually finding some satisfaction in getting under Mark's skin. They would probably bicker about the topic until the lunch bell rang. Theo would just sit there idly, allowing his mind to wander while they kept on.

"What do *you* think, Splitsville?" Mark asked him.

Theo was caught off guard, and hadn't expected Mark to draw him into the conversation. He also didn't like being referred to by the nickname "Splitsville," but understood it to be a sign of camaraderie, and therefore knew it was useful. Although he didn't take any pride in it, Theo was touted as the most potent aspect of the football team's offense. *If we can get it into the redzone, the guys would sometimes say, it's Splitsville from there.* They called him Splitsville because of his tendency to split the uprigths. Always cool and collected, Theo had never

missed a field goal or point after touchdown. He never felt pressured by time or scoreboards or coach-speak; in fact, the coaches largely ignored him, as they were superstitious of the one sure thing they had on their team and in no way wanted to jinx a good streak by giving any advice. He would judge the kick, think in terms of distance, angles, and environmental factors, and then let it rip.

When he had joined the team, it was mainly because he understood that fitting in got you things, and that to better fit in, it was best to join the football team. When he was asked to try kicking during an early practice, the coaches found out what they had on their hands and he immediately started on the varsity squad in his freshman year of school. By junior year, he'd already broken the county record for most field goals.

All of this had guaranteed him friendship, but instinctively he kept to a small circle. Talented people were exhausting and demanded too much attention. His relationship with Mark and Eddie was simple; they were relics from those bygone days in which Theo kept himself near larger people for protection. Since then, he had gone through puberty, and puberty had been *very* good to him. People became much friendlier and he used that when he could, but for the most part, he stuck with two people and maintained a cool, quiet demeanor.

"What was the question?" Theo asked, snapped out of a momentary state of distraction. He had been too busy thinking about the dead body to pay attention, meditating on the way the frost in its eye lashes resembled the frailty of snowflakes, and how there was something familiar in the corpse's slack face, and expressionless mouth. It was somehow relatable. It felt like beauty.

"Dumb-Dumb wants to know if you think he's got the perfect murder figured out," Eddie chimed in. Mark glared at his friend and then looked back at Theo.

"It's not *dumb*," he said. "I've seen it in a movie."

"Seen what in a movie?" Theo asked.

"Last week, I was watching this movie where a guy tries to kill his wife using blood from a Japanese blowfish, right? It would've worked, only he spills some of the blood, and it doesn't all make it into her wine, so she only gets into a bit of a coma, or whatever. So anyway, I figure that's not a bad idea. You make somebody a real fancy meal, and boom, it's an accident." Mark's sincerity was almost too comical for Eddie.

"That was a movie, though!" he cried, "And a *bad* movie at that. Besides, who in the hell would ever want to eat a blow fish and call it dinner?"

"He does have a point, though," Theo replied in his usual reserved way. Eddie and Mark had grown accustomed to the way he spoke, and developed a special ear to catch him when he did. Theo didn't talk very often, but when he did, he always made sure he had something interesting to say.

"What point?" Eddie asked.

"The blow fish dinner idea makes it look like an accident," Theo said thoughtfully. "If you're going to do a thing, it's got to look like an accident if you want it to be perfect."

"Boom!" Mark roared. "In your face, Eddie!"

“Boom nothing,” Eddie replied. “If you’re going to have someone drink poison, it’s not going to look like an accident. *Oh, how did this fish blood end up in her wine glass? Um, gee, I don’t know, officer! It must’ve been an accident!*”

The bell rang, always serving as the decisive force that killed an argument with little regard for resolution, and Mark and Eddie jumped up from their chairs with empty lunch trays in hand, ready to walk back together to their psychology class. Theo, on the other hand, remained seated. He was turning Mark’s words over in his mind, and imagining the way the corpse’s knee felt against his elbow.

“Maybe you don’t have to have them drink poison,” he said to himself. Mark and Eddie had moved far enough away from him that they hadn’t caught his final thoughts on the subject. “Maybe,” Theo continued, “You just have to have them drink...”

It was Friday morning, and Theo lay in bed. He rarely recalled his dreams, but over the course of the week since finding the body, he dreamed vividly, and in shades of blue. He’d had the same recurring dream since the night at the café; the blue-brick wall at the back of the café with the dark blue dumpster pressed against it, and everything covered in a powder-blue crystalline frost that made Theo shiver uncontrollably, clutching his arms against his chest as he took labored steps toward the dumpster’s side-hatch, trudging forward against a fierce oppositional wind that threatened to bowl him over with each harsh, whistling gust. In every dream, he would march forward, pull back the side-hatch, and bear witness to a cavernous room filled with mountains of trash, and always at the center of the largest heap was a throne made of over-stuffed garbage bags, with the corpse sitting atop of it haphazardly, arms still pinned behind it, and legs still bound in duct tape, looking almost the same as when he first saw it. The only difference was that the eyes were no longer frozen shut, but wide-open, and even with its head askew, the corpse’s bright-blue eyes locked onto Theo’s and they held each other in an unblinking gaze, until Theo would awake with the blankets thrown off his bed, and his sheets covered in sweat.

He had never thought of anything as being beautiful before, and now he could not stop dreaming of the dead body. Every day he was becoming more aware of the desire to make his own.

The practice before a game was typically light. The team would gear up in their game pants and pads, do some easy stretching, and watch a little bit of game film before putting on their jerseys to march out onto the field. Theo would run with the rest of the team to keep his legs limber, although he usually ran in the rear. He would finish his lap, take a hit of his inhaler to pre-emptively quell any asthma attacks, and kick a few field goals from various spots before going back into the locker room. On this occasion, he had just placed a ball through the uprights from thirty-three yards, when he overheard two assistant coaches speaking in low voices behind him.

“Sweet Christ, that boy can kick.”

“...yeah, but that’s about all he can do.”

“Oh Hell, Pete. The kid might break a state record tonight. That all you’ve got to say for him?”

“He’s just a kicker, Mike! Besides, it’s like he doesn’t even know he’s getting ready to break a record.”

“And that’s just the way Coach Phil wants it. No press is no pressure. The way he sees it, that kicking streak might just be about all that kid’s got going for him, outside of hanging out with a couple of bench-warmers. You don’t talk about a pitcher’s perfect game, and you don’t screw with Theo Dunby’s field goal record. That’s the rule.”

When Theo turned to look at the two coaches, they immediately cast their eyes downward, as if they had been caught doing something terrible.

“I’m going into the locker room now,” Theo told them, and they looked up and nodded back at him.

“You go on in,” one of them said, smiling artificially. “Coach Mike and I are right behind you.”

Theo walked quickly, mulling over their words. A kicking streak and a couple of bench-warmers were the only thing he had going for him? It was insulting. He felt unreasonably angry. His pace quickened as he made his way into the locker room. The majority of the team had formed their clusters, going about their conversations and pre-game rituals; Theo would never truly understand the significance or usefulness of them, and he ignored his teammates as he always had when he walked by, head down and feet moving fast.

Eddie and Mark sat at the back of the locker room, bickering with each other as per usual. When Theo approached them, they looked up at him and went quiet. They’d never seen him look in such a way.

“Gentlemen,” Theo said, louder than his usual reserve, but still so hushed that only they could hear, “I am going to sabotage the streak tonight. Drinks in my basement after the game. Come over as soon as you can.”

They looked at each other for a moment, and then somewhat bewildered, Mark replied, “Sure thing, Theo.”

“What are we drinking?” Eddie asked, and there was no excitement in his voice. He seemed just as thrown off-guard as Mark.

Theo pondered for a moment and then told them matter-of-factly, “My mother keeps a very large bottle of amaretto in the kitchen with the cooking spices. I assume this will suffice in getting us drunk.”

Mark and Eddie once again looked at each other, and their faces broke with laughter. They laughed so hard that they threw their arms around each other, supporting themselves as though the hilarity of the moment would cause them to fall over. The sight made Theo even angrier, and galvanized his decision. Why dream of one body, when you could have two? He could make them look the way that he felt. He could make them understand.

Mark’s laughter started to subside, and when he looked up at Theo, he was near tears he had been laughing so hard. “Oh, Theo!” he told him. “Where have

you been hiding all this time? I've got just the thing to go with that amaretto. We'll be all set after the game."

Theo simply turned around and walked away, just as quickly as when he approached them. If he'd stood there any longer, he'd have killed them then and there.

The first field goal opportunity came a few minutes into the second quarter. Lined up on the 17-yard line, it was a simple chip shot. Theo lined it up the way he wanted, kicked hard, and watched the ball smack the left upright before bouncing forward onto the turf. The home crowd made an audible sigh of disappointment, knowing the streak to be over. When Theo approached his spot on the bench next to Eddie and Mark, he walked right past them, stripping off his helmet and shoulder pads in stride, and dropping them on the athletic track surrounding the field. He was going home.

When he got to the house, he walked around to the side where the basement entrance to his bedroom was. He removed the rest of his football pads and changed into comfortable clothing—a pair of blue jeans and a plain white t-shirt—and calculated how much time he had. The game had probably reached half-time, which left him roughly an hour to figure things out.

Upstairs his parents were asleep in front of the television, curled up together on the couch. Since he'd started high school, they thought their boy proved pretty good at being able to handle his independence, and they gave themselves nights like tonight to just relax with each other. Theo paused and stared at them. His anger had not waned, and the thought of killing his parents occurred to him, but the other idea was already established. It had to be an accident and it had to be drinking, so he snuck the bottle of amaretto out of the kitchen and down into his bedroom. He then went back to his parents' room and grabbed the gun they kept in the lockbox in the nightstand by the door; he knew the passcode was his birthday. With the gun in hand, he went back down to the basement, into his bathroom, and practiced by pointing the gun at the mirror, working on a menacing look. When he was satisfied, he placed the gun on the bathroom sink, and practiced making crying faces.

"No, officer," he rehearsed, "we were just trying to have a good time." He could make the sounds accurate and the face was convincing. Even though he couldn't produce tears, it would be enough to suggest he was distraught.

When he left the bathroom, he took the gun over to a sitting area with four chairs and a small table, though it was rare for the three of them to hang out in his basement, and the fourth chair was never occupied. He placed the gun underneath the chair where he preferred to sit, and placed the bottle of amaretto on the table. He then sat and waited for Mark and Eddie to arrive.

Forty minutes later there was a soft knock at the basement door.

"Theo, you in there?" It was Mark's voice. Theo got out of his chair and walked over to the door to let Mark and Eddie inside. Mark carried a box of red wine, and Eddie followed behind with his hands in his pockets.

"What's in the box?" Theo asked, when he saw Mark place it next to the bottle of amaretto.

"Some cheap red wine leftover from a dinner party that my mom and dad threw last week," Mark said. "I saw them mixing some of that amaretto stuff, and they were all talking about how good it tasted, so I stole a little bit, and I have to admit, it's some sweet stuff. You go grab the glasses and I'll mix the drinks."

Theo watched Mark take a seat closest to the alcohol. Then he scurried up the stairs to the kitchen. He peeked over into the living room, observed that his parents were still sound asleep, grabbed three glasses from the cupboard, and quietly made his way back to the basement. Eddie still sat looking at his shoes, and Mark examined the bottle of amaretto's label.

"This looks like some powerful shit," Mark told Theo. "You mix this with some wine, I'll bet it'll put you on your ass in a second."

"That's the idea," Theo replied, and he placed the glasses on the table, thinking about the gun under the chair, and trying hard not to daydream about the body in the dumpster.

Mark immediately went to work, first pouring the wine in one glass, then the other, and stopped at the third glass. "Eddie?" he asked him, and his friend shook his head, still looking down at his shoes.

"What's the matter?" Theo asked.

"Aw, old puss boy over here doesn't want to get in any trouble," Mark said, smiling at Eddie. "I told him to come over anyway, though. Maybe he'll change his mind." He looked at Theo. "Don't mind him, man. The coaches basically lit into us for not trying to stop you from leaving."

"They were pretty pissed," Eddie said, and Theo recognized that Eddie was upset with him. He thought of how to handle it, but didn't know what reaction to use. It was exhausting having to pretend to care, and he understood now to a greater degree why he wanted to kill them. He just wanted to stop pretending all of the time. It was getting boring. He wanted to move on to something new.

"I don't know what to say," Theo told them, looking from one to the other, and for a very rare instance of his life, he was being completely honest with them. He followed up with the most appropriate line he could think of to get what he most wanted. "Let's drink."

Mark grinned at Theo and took the cap off of the amaretto, topping each glass of wine until it was near the brim. He handed one glass to Theo and held the other one up.

"To friendship," Mark toasted, and Theo could only stare at him. He couldn't comprehend the concept of *friendship*, and he suddenly felt tired of them both. Maybe he would just hurry up with the drink, grab the gun, and shoot them both. Why wait? He could move on to his parents afterward, and then figure things out from there. Theo raised his glass to Mark's, stared at the drink for a second, then brought it to his lips and poured the whole of it down as quickly as he could.

"Well that's one way to drink it," Eddie said, looking at Theo with a bit of surprise. "I thought people were just supposed to sip wine."

Mark himself was a bit surprised by the way Theo handled the drink, and more so when he watched him slam the glass down and double over, launching into a coughing fit.

"Hell, yes!" Mark exclaimed, grinning wide. "Eddie," he said to his friend, "I think Splitsville just took his first alcoholic drink. Listen to that hack!"

Eddie and Mark watched Theo continue to cough, doubled over, with his hands on his knees, and the sight was enough to break Eddie's sour mood and give him cause to laugh.

"Dang, Theo," he said, "It didn't hit you that hard, did it?"

Theo's coughing fit continued, though, and after a few seconds longer, he stumbled backwards and collapsed in his chair so hard that it flipped over, and Theo wound up on his back, still coughing hard. This made Mark and Eddie laugh even more vigorously, happy to see someone they'd thought of as a friend finally cut loose.

"Come on, Eddie," Mark said, still chuckling, "let's help the poor kid up." They walked over to the chair, and neither of them noticed the gun that was now exposed on the floor. When they went over to Theo, however, they saw his face swelling. His lips were turning blue, and it looked like he wasn't breathing. They grabbed his hands, and they felt cold and clammy. Without another word, Mark rushed up the stairs to get Theo's parents, while Eddie stayed with Theo, panicked and unsure of what to do.

The diagnosis was an anaphylactic reaction brought on by a rare allergy to alcohol. They tried their best to save Theo, but it was too late by the time ambulances arrived. Theo Dunby died of shock. His father saw the gun on the floor and quickly put it away, assuming his son had gotten it out for them to play with at some point during their night of drinking. At the funeral, he made the comment that he never knew his son was interested in guns, and he lamented that he had never taken him out to the range for some bonding time. Theo was an independent spirit and had never seemed interested in bonding.

Although the two friends were present at the scene of the accident, no official charges were pressed. "Just another Friday night," one of the officers would tell the others. "Kid misses out on breaking a state record and just leaves the game? I'd want to have a drink, too."

Having brought the wine, Mark suffered a two-week suspension from school with mandatory counseling; Eddie also had counseling, but he didn't miss any classes, as Mark was forthright about his friend not touching a single drop. As it happened, the team dedicated the rest of the season to their fallen teammate, and Eddie took Theo's place on the field, starting as the team's kicker. Every kick was in his friend's loving memory.



Mired Down

The obsidian swamp reflects a depth of confusion.
Layers fetid, sounds feral, echo a dry-eyed confusion.

Riled, blinking, all that's moist becomes dry-eyed
cracked at the edge of lament; souls cry in confusion.

Night sounds surreal: hoot, croak, and distant howl,
lead this unwary Heathcliff seeker awry, lost in confusion.

The damp of swamp meets death in whey-faced skin.
Moonlit slime mirrors my thoughts, I sigh in confusion.

Quicksand will be my bed, peat my shroud, I crouch
for an eternity, entombed in the moor, I lie in confusion.

—deborah guzzi

My Mom and Her Home

These old stones
have undressed their
plaster-clothes. Her roof
is tattered, yet she declines my call.

Fashion and novelty
never tempt her. Her soles
sometimes soil her floor, but she
doesn't fear a stretched-out index finger.

She refuses a share
of yummy Chinese noodles
or Arabian barbecue chicken
from my kitchen beyond the fence.

She takes steamed rice
and cheap sardine curry
as five-star food to her home.
No one teases her, the ill-mannered slurps.

She hears his footsteps
from the corridor of hallucination.
Nobody chimes in, her secret whisperings.
She likes the fright, the wilderness of dark lonely nights.

Nude red stones in her wall
remain as remnants of old love.
She'll never come to stay in our new home,
she likes to be on her own always.

—fabiyas mv

the
ghosts
of
empty
spaces

in the haunted heart there lurks
in the many hollow spaces
an equal measure
of want and sadness
that prevent the hollow spaces
from becoming filled

the hollow heart
has nothing to give
and what is given to it
wanders through its
empty chambers
like an unwelcome guest

there is no furniture
that might serve as an invitation
to sit and stay awhile
one gets the uncomfortable feeling
that every entrance to that heart
exists only to hasten exit

—allan rozinski



a cat crossing the street

by r. gene turchin

Reggie leaned against the post on the corner of the porch smoking a cigarette because his mom didn't allow him to smoke in the house anymore. She insisted it stunk up the place and besides it was bad for her health. Most of Reggie's friends smoked. *What was the big deal?* All that terrorism about cigarettes causing cancer and heart disease was just that—scare tactics by a bunch of do-gooders who didn't have enough things to worry about in their own lives so they tried to make yours miserable too.

He took one more drag and flipped the butt into the yard. She complained about that too. Said there were too many butts in the yard—like she expected him to crawl around in the grass on his hands and knees and pick up the stubs. Grass would grow and cover them anyway.

He pulled his feet up onto the cap railing. It was just wide enough so he could sit comfortably with his back against the post. His stomach growled. He was hungry but he wasn't eating any of that Polish crap his mother made. *What was wrong with American food?* Every meal she cooked had cabbage and sausage in it. He didn't know anyone else who ate stuff like that. He'd have to buy something himself. Real food. Digging his hand into both pockets of his pants he came up with two fivers, three ones and some change. He could get a pizza or a couple hot dogs and a beer with that. He tried to remember any talk he'd heard of a party

this week. Not too much going on in the middle of the week. It could turn out to be a suck-ass night if he didn't come up with an idea soon.

There was always a party near the University. The thought drifted into his head like a leaf in the breeze. Those rich students always had money and cars. Reggie learned how to infiltrate their parties. His trick was to say he was a friend of Bob. Everybody knew a Bob. It always worked and got him in. Food choices were usually chips and dips, which wasn't great but there was always plenty of beer and if you kept your wits, a guy could pocket one of the bags of weed lying around.

The gas gauge on the car had been tickling empty for two days now and he wondered if there was enough gas to drive to the campus. At a party, there was always a spare dollar or two to pick up when everybody was drunk. Last week he scored a pair of twenties which was a gold mine and he ate well for a few days. The thirteen dollars in his pocket was all that remained. Cash was in short supply.

Nobody would hire him for a decent-paying job. He knew tons of guys who weren't any smarter than him that made damn near 100K a year just driving a truck. Hell—anybody could drive a truck. He tried applying for driver jobs but they wanted you to have a CDL. It was all about connections. If you knew people, they'd just give you a Commercial Driver's License. Didn't have to take no test or anything. Reggie didn't know people and neither did his mom so he was screwed.

There was that issue with the high school diploma thing. He'd dropped out his senior year because he missed too many classes and they tried to force him into remedial courses. He sure didn't belong with those retards. Maybe he'd partied too much but who doesn't in their senior year? Teachers had it in for him anyway because his Mom wasn't part of the town clicks. You had to belong to the country club and the right church. The system was set up against regular people like him.

Out of nowhere a cat jumped on the railing in front of him. Startled him enough that he started coughing. Thing scared the shit out of him. He swatted at it and yelled, "Get the hell out of here."

The cat stared back at him, calm defiance in its yellow eyes, but it refused to move. It only jumped into the grass when he kicked at it. It gave a "fuck you" meow before turning and sauntering across the lawn toward the road. *Where did it come from anyway?* He couldn't remember seeing any cats around the neighborhood in the last month. Didn't appear to have a collar so probably a stray, he thought. Looking for a handout. It was all black except for a white triangle between its eyes. Other people might have thought it was cute.

He watched the cat's head turn left, then right, before walking out onto the asphalt. Damn thing at least knew how to cross the street, he thought. Near the middle of the road, it just fell over, like it had a particular spot in mind. It lifted its head for a second and looked back at Reggie as if to say, "You got a problem with this?"

Reggie shrugged. Friggin' cat would get its due. Car would come along soon enough and splat the stupid thing all over the road. Road-kill cat, he thought and chuckled. This would be worth watching.

He forgot about food and waited for a vehicle to terminate the cat. He heard

the deep rumble of a leaky exhaust and saw a rat-shit truck approaching from the blind corner at the end of the street. He swung his feet over the rail in anticipation. It was almost like opening a package at Christmas or getting to eat all the birthday cake you wanted.

The cat raised its head and casually walked to the opposite side of the street along the curb. The truck passed without incident. Reggie felt cheated. The cat was sitting licking its front paw. It stopped and looked at Reggie. Bitch was taunting him.

“Had enough of this shit,” he said to the air. He looked around for something to throw at the cat. He stooped to grab a soup can lying near the porch. Pulling back his arm he gave it his best baseball pitch. Water and cigarette butts streamed backward over him. He spit, cursing. His mom made him use the can in one of her cleaning rants. Said he could empty it in the trash when it was full. He never did empty it. Her fault for making him use it.

He noticed the cat had moved back to its spot in the center of the road. It rolled to face him, eyes glowing like sinister LEDs.

He thought it had known, somehow, that the truck had been coming. Maybe it could feel vibrations in the road.

“Who gives a flying shit?” Reggie talked out loud to himself. The cat annoyed him but it was time to make plans.

His cell chirped and he struggled to fish it out of his pocket. By the time he wrangled from his shorts, the screen said, Missed Call. He punched buttons trying to get the caller number to show. “Stupid phone!” He tossed it onto the small table his Mom kept on the porch. He hoped it might be Butch, except his ID always came up as “Butch,” except when he changed phones. Butch changed phones a lot which of course made him hard to keep track of.

“Makes it harder for the narcs to find me,” he said. Butch thought of himself as a big time drug dealer but most of the stuff he sold was crap and sometimes not even real drugs. Reggie thought Butch was a dick most of the time but he did know where to party. Not great parties but still, free food, sometimes booze and a few willing girls.

He needed to swipe on some deodorant and aftershave before heading out. As he picked up his phone and tossed his second cigarette, he noticed the rabbit in the yard. It stood as still as a statue almost dead center in the grass like some kind of silly lawn ornament. It was a strange orange-brown color and really big for a rabbit. Its ears stood straight up like a pair on antenna. He stared at it and one brown eye moved and looked back at him. In the blink of a star-flash movement the cat was slunk low on the lawn not five feet from the rabbit. *No wonder the rabbit was doing the statue gig.* Reggie didn’t know what he expected but it wasn’t the sudden deadly slash of the cat’s forepaw. Blood spurted from the rabbit’s neck and then the cat’s jaw was clamped to one side of the neck. The rabbit shuddered but the cat held on pulling it down. The rabbit’s feet paddled uselessly as the cat dragged it across the yard and into the hedge bordering the garden. Reggie felt a strange shiver of coldness in his gut.

“Damn!” he said. The hedge moved softly as if by a breeze as he stared. “Damn,” he said again and went into the house.

When he came out later with a clean shirt and smelling of Aqua Velva, the cat was again lying in the road. Reggie grinned as he walked toward his car on the opposite side of the street. He was going to give the cat a taste of his shoe as he walked by. See how far he could boot it. He visualized it screeching as it flew from the impact of his kick. That would be too funny. The cat raised its head from the pavement as he neared, as if to say, “What do you want?” Then let its head drop back down like Reggie was nothing to worry about. Might be better to throw it rather than kick it. Might miss with a kick but he could sure as hell give it a good toss. Reggie decided to play cool.

“Nice kitty,” he said, leaning over to scoop up the cat from the middle of the street. He didn’t see or hear the car until the bumper connected with his head.

One of his eyes was still open and registering images. He saw the cat come toward his head. It dipped a paw into something wet on the road and touched the paw to its tongue.



[poetry]

A Chinese Fishing Net

Death hangs
on the poles
at our bank.
A Chinese
fishing net
sinks down
with baits
to lure into
the fate.
Doom lurks
between the
darkness and
the blue.
Joys dry in the
breathless net
at dawn. As
care snoozes,
snare catches.

—fabiya mv

Chinese fishing nets hanging on poles can be seen at river banks of Kerala. These nets are lowered and laid at the bottom of the river at night, and lifted up with fish in the morning.

Solace

you could smell nothing but pine and dew
the aroma wafted into your nostrils
it hit your blood and your brain then every cell in your body
and burst you with life, energy
revitalizing the soul within
a natural cocaine
and the fragrance of fireweeds, pond lilies
candysticks and wild ginger
seemed to flourish the tastebuds
a savory cocktail
a sapid gift from the forest surrounding
you could hear all but the euphonic
the grass and the ferns sang together
their green and orange and yellow fibers
meshed with the gentle wind and hit a harmonious high note
while the trickle of a nearby stream struck low
the inventors of song
you could see the purpose of existence
life's endeavors being conquered before your eyes
the ferns painted the forest floor
holding hands and dancing in the breeze
pine needles hitting your bed of hair, spurring your thoughts
spots of shade and sunlight
speckled in the dirt and the mud and the greenery
provided by sun of the day
and moon of the night
wild rabbits afraid of your advance
deer and moose searching the grounds
for berries and water and rest
with epithets only pleasant,
the forest:
harborer of all that is beautiful
consolidator of a divine touch of all senses
breathe it in, let it shower you in it's
high peaks and low meadows,
flushing creeks and wild flowers;
it's bone-dry sun
and wet rain
ah, the forest.

—kyle perdue

[short story]

THE SALVATION LOTTERY



by shannon lawrence

Brand awoke to the sound of running water. Just a faint sound. He tried to roll over, to go back to sleep, but he rolled right off the side of the bed onto a hard, wet floor. Gasping, he opened his eyes, gummy from too much sleep. He rubbed them, pushing at the blurring that wouldn't go away.

Finally, he was able to focus, but he wasn't sure what he was seeing. Gray concrete walls, a film of water on the floor, shelves, and a table covered with various odds and ends. It wasn't his bed he'd rolled out of, but a cot.

His head pounded and he felt sluggish. Had he crashed at a friend's house? No, he hadn't been partying. He'd been at home, in his crummy little apartment, microwave food growing cold on the table as he watched some soulless show on the boob tube and contemplated his own mortality.

He'd been preparing to end it all. So why was he here now?

There, underneath the cot, the gun he'd been holding. The one he'd been about to use. He crawled over to it, picked it up, cradled it against him. Well, wherever he was now, his plans didn't have to change. Same channel, different location.

He held the gun to his temple, the barrel cold against his flesh, smelled the scent of gun oil mingling with the metallic scent of the water. Closing his eyes, he began to squeeze the trigger.

"I wouldn't do that, Mr. McKenzie."

The voice came out of nowhere, deep and masculine, and somehow odd to his ears. Brand jerked, opened his eyes. He didn't see anyone when he looked around.

"Where are you? Who is that?"

"You're going to want to hear what I have to say."

"I sincerely doubt that. Why can't I see you?"

"Because I'm not in the room, Mr. McKenzie."

"No kidding."

"No need to be unpleasant. Let's get down to brass tacks, shall we?"

There was a burst of static and Brand realized what had struck him odd. The voice had an almost robotic mechanical edge to it. He got up and began to search the room, looking for some kind of radio. Instead, what he found was a baby monitor, one that apparently worked both ways. He thought about turning it off, but decided it would be best to hear what this person had to say.

"Go for it."

"All right. It is our understanding that you have chosen the ultimate act of selfishness: suicide. Your family has been quite concerned about you, understandably so. Their desire is for you to survive. Thus, they entered you into the Salvation Lottery, and your name was chosen. In short, we're here to save you, Mr. McKenzie."

"You're wasting your time, Mr. Nameless. I have no interest in being saved."

"Indeed. That is our understanding. However, your family wants you saved, and they're the ones who will have to live with your death."

"They'll be better off without me; it's just hard for them to realize that."

"Ah, in this case you're wrong. Once you've won the Salvation Lottery, the clock starts ticking. You will have 12 hours to prove you want to live by getting yourself out of the current situation. If you do not find your way out, your family pays the ultimate price."

"So I die either way? I'd rather just take care of the problem now." With these words, Brand once again put the gun against his temple, setting the baby monitor down on the table.

"You might want to hear me out before you do that. The ultimate price is not the loss of your life, but of your family's lives. If we cannot rehab you, they have agreed, in writing, to die with you."

Brand let his hand fall to his side, almost dropping the gun. "What? What do you mean?"

"It's how the Salvation Lottery works. For true salvation, you must not only live, but prove your life worthwhile. You have 12 hours, Mr. McKenzie. Everything you need can be found in this room. It's up to you to put it all together. No worries, though, it's easier than you think."

Brand picked up the baby monitor, shouting into it, "This is crazy! You can't do this; it can't be legal. Get me out of here!"

Nothing but silence greeted him. The red light stayed on, but several minutes of ranting got him no response. In a fit of anger, he smashed the baby monitor against the wall, regretting it almost the moment it left his hands. How would he contact them now?

It was only with the absence of the monitor's static that he heard a slight beeping. He threw things out of his way as he searched for the source of the beeping. A bomb? Had they really put a bomb in here with him? He didn't know how to stop a bomb.

What he found was a clock, ticking backwards, but not a bomb, at least as far as he could tell. It was at 11:38. Had he been ranting that long, or had the clock started the moment he'd woken up?

No matter. 12 hours wasn't a long time; he needed to get started.

First things first. He needed to examine this room, see where he was being held. It was small, probably about 13 x 13. He found what appeared to be a vent, possibly where his air was coming from, at about head level on one wall. He also found a spigot, releasing a steady trickle of water into the room. This was where the water on the floor was coming from. Water, he now noticed, that was getting higher. It had risen to the top of the rubber sole on his shoes, the cold beginning to seep in through the canvas there.

There were no visible exits, nothing that breached the walls aside from the water spigot and the air vent. The floor was concrete, like the walls. A basement? Cellar? But there would be a door into either one of those things.

Oh! A trick door. Perhaps it was hidden in the wall. He began feeling with his fingers, trying to find a seam, anything. When that proved futile, he started moving everything on the shelves, hoping for a trigger, like in the movies. Paint cans, computer chips, springs, wood blocks, tools, screws, and countless other objects littered the floor by the time he was done, but not one of them created a doorway in the wall. The shelves stood bare, tables the same. No surface, save the floor, bore anything at all, yet he was still in here, in this impossible room.

Looking up at the ceiling, he thought he saw something there. He dragged over a table, got on top of it, and began prodding the ceiling with his fingers. Something was, in fact, there. It was a tiny piece of metal, curved, like there was a hook stuck in the ceiling, some sort of metal loop. But it was embedded in the cement, just a little bit exposed, as of the bottom edge.

He jumped down and moved the table to one corner, standing on it and feeling around the ceiling the same way he had done with the walls. Each time he cleared a rectangular area of ceiling, he moved to the side, moving forward once he reached the wall. He did this until he reached the opposite corner of the one he'd started in, all to no avail. Nothing.

Upon checking, he found the clock to read 10:20. He'd been at this for over an hour.

The air vent! Running to the air vent, he tried to pull it off, but found it screwed in. There were tools everywhere; there must be a screwdriver. He dove onto the floor, oblivious to the water that soaked into his jeans, throwing things this way and that as he tried to find a Phillips-head screwdriver. It didn't take him long to realize he was creating more chaos and couldn't hope to find anything in this mess. Instead, he started organizing things back on the shelves and tables. Random electronics went on the bookshelf against the back wall; basic materials, like wood and scraps of plastic and metal, went on the wall shelves around the room; tools of all kinds went on the table he'd used to check the ceiling; and cloth and other random scraps that didn't fit the other categories went onto the second, smaller table that stood in one corner.

While he didn't find a Phillips head, he did find a set of small flathead screwdrivers, one of which he could maneuver to undo the screws on the vent. All except one. That one had been filed down to leave a completely flat surface. How was he supposed to get that out? He tried pushing the vent down, hoping it would turn using the last screw as a sort of hinge, but it was too tightly screwed. He'd have to come back to it.

His attention was drawn to the water again as it hit his ankles over the tops of his shoes. Why hadn't he tried to shut that off right away? Stupid oversight. His feet were freezing.

At the spigot, he tried to turn it, but nothing happened. He ran over to the table for the wrench he'd found, racing back to try it on the handle. Lefty-loosy, righty-tighty. At first, the wrench didn't budge the handle, but he put all his weight into it and finally felt it move. Instead of turning off when he turned it to the right, the water flow increased.

“No!” How could this be? He floundered in the rush of frigid water, trying to turn it back to the left, but when he did, nothing happened. The water flow didn’t change, no matter what he did with the wrench. The water seemed to have quadrupled in speed, the best he could tell. At this rate, instead of just being a nuisance, it might just be the thing that would kill him. That, or exposure from the temperature of the water. He wasn’t sure what to fear more.

He hurried over to the odds and ends table, searching for something, anything, that might plug the spigot. A cork sat there, one of those random objects he didn’t think would have a purpose. Grabbing it, he hurried to the spigot. He fought the force of the water, trying to push the cork in. Twice, it slipped out of his hands. Twice, he found it again and tried to get it into place. Finally, it went in, with him rocking it a bit to force it in the smaller spigot. That’s what corks were meant to do, after all.

But how long would it hold?

A glance at the clock revealed his time to be 9:58.

“What else is there? What can I do? Why are you doing this?”

He dragged the cot over to the big table and sat down on it, studying the room. The only thing he could see doing anything about was that vent. What could he do? He shifted around on his seat and stared at the tools in front of him.

Picking up a set of needle nose pliers, he went to the vent, splashing through the water, his feet mercifully numb, though he figured that was probably a bad thing in the long run. He tried to find any sort of edge or surface that would let the pliers catch. He had his left arm placed on the wall for leverage, his right hand digging the pliers against the screw, when his hand slipped, sending the pliers into the fleshy underside of his palm. They dug a deep divot up along the base of his thumb, pain shooting up his arm. His yell reverberated throughout the room as blood began to well up out of the wound and slide down the meaty part of his palm.

He climbed back on top of the cot and stuck his hand into the water in the hopes that it would numb the hand while cleansing the wound. Of course, who knew what was in the water pouring in? It didn’t reek of sewage, though, which was good enough for him at this moment.

He watched as tendrils of blood drifted away from his thumb, staining the water. He saw a flash of white through the dark blood. Bone? Oh god, had it gone that deep? He thought he’d just scratched it really well. He jerked his hand out of the water, brought it close to his face. Sure enough, that was bone.

While he was examining his hand, he heard a groaning, followed by a pop as the cork shot out of the spigot. Water began to pour in again, though it seemed to be somewhat lessened than before. Maybe something in the wall had gone before the cork, like a pipe.

A sigh escaped him, but he wasn’t sure what else he could do.

“What in the hell do you mean it’s easier than I think?” he shouted. Oh yeah, no more baby monitor. The pieces had joined the odds and ends shelf during his cleanup. He slumped over at his own stupidity.

For a moment, he thought about giving up. Maybe just lying there in the water, letting the cold numb his entire body before he drowned to death. Embracing that sweet oblivion he'd been looking forward to for so long now. But he found he wanted to live, at least to save his family, if not to prove these assholes wrong and to beat them at their own game.

This time, it was a sob he let out.

9:00.

While time seemed to be racing, it also felt never-ending. He just wanted out of here. The first thing he'd do would be to call his son and tell him he loved him. The second would be to call his parents and ask them what the hell they'd thought, signing him up for something like this. No matter how worried they were about him, he was sure they wouldn't have signed something saying they'd be willing to be murdered just to keep him alive.

He hadn't thought they were even paying attention, that they had any idea how bad things were for him. He'd tried talking to Dad, hoping his own father would lend him some money—he didn't want to ask for it—but Dad had just shrugged him off. He'd tried asking his big brother for advice on how to handle things, but Jim had blown him off—Wall Street was busy, and working there meant he didn't have time for his little brother. He tried every which way to ask for help without actually asking for it, and no one had noticed, or so it had seemed. His own mother had turned away from him, her eyes so sad, disappointed. He knew how she felt about gambling, yet he'd buried himself under debt to get that fix. Lost his job, his wife. She'd taken his son from him, fled. Had they signed up for this, as well? Was his son at risk, along with his parents? Who did the term “family” encompass?

These thoughts were getting him nowhere. He'd never find out what was really going on if he didn't get out of here. Better to assume it was all concerned and just get the hell out.

He grabbed a piece of cloth from the shelf and wrapped it tightly around his injured hand, using his teeth to tie a knot and cinch it. Hunger gnawed at his stomach, and he realized it had probably been there for a while. He pushed it aside and studied the contents of the shelf, picking up a chisel and a butter knife. When he stepped into the water again, he found it to be three-quarters of the way up his calf. The cot overturned and floated behind him, but he let it go.

With the knife, he started working an edge of the vent, digging and pushing to get underneath. It took a while, his teeth chattering from the cold, but he made some leeway and moved it enough to work the knife deeper. He then shoved the chisel in behind it, ignoring the pain that throbbed in his hand. He worked it back and forth until it was in as deep as he could get it, sticking up at an angle. Using both hands, one on top of the other, he pushed the chisel toward the wall, attempting to lever the vent out of the concrete. It gave enough for him to move the chisel deeper, push again.

He worked at this for several minutes, each time getting a little more give out of the vent. When it was too far out to get any real leverage with the chisel, he

used his hands to work at the vent, pushing it down to try to loosen the remaining screw.

His hands were so cold that numbness set in and he didn't feel the metal cutting through the uncovered portion of his skin. Not at first. Not until blood began to well up through his fingers. Just as he saw the blood, the pain sliced through the cold. Just a little, just enough so he knew it was there. It stung.

When he looked at his hands, he saw the cuts were deep. He stuck his hands in the water again, trying to remember when he last got a tetanus shot. Probably way too long ago. Great, maybe he'd develop a little lockjaw before he died. Wouldn't that just make it all perfect?

The edges of his wounds were jagged and white when he pulled them out of the water, but he couldn't see bone, so they weren't as deep as he'd feared, not like the initial injury. He grabbed a pot holder in lieu of gloves, and went to work on the vent again.

"How did you people choose what to put in here? A pot holder? Really?" He no longer cared if anyone could hear him.

He twisted the vent until the screw wouldn't give anymore, then took the chisel to it again, finally levering the screw right out of the concrete. He was afraid to know how much time had passed. He'd been working at this long enough for the water to have crept up above his knees. His feet and legs were entirely numb at this point, and he was shivering uncontrollably, teeth chattering painfully. He was afraid one of them would shatter any moment.

He dropped the vent onto the nearest shelf, not wanting anything in the water he could injure himself on, and peered into the square hole left behind. It was too dark to see anything other than a tiny slice of black accordion tubing.

A flashlight sat on one of the shelves. He sloshed over to it, no longer able to run through the deepening water. When he took hold of the flashlight, he glimpsed the clock. 7:27.

It had taken way too long to get the vent off. It better lead to something good.

The beam of the flashlight was weak, but it was enough to show him more of the accordion tubing. He'd hoped he would see some sort of opening, something the tube was connected to. Initially, he'd thought there might be light, some sign that the outside world was right there. But only darkness and tubing met his eyes.

The tubing sloped downward, disappearing from sight. The sides were thoroughly sealed. He thought about working at the edges, trying to pry it loose, but he feared he was underground, that he might suffocate if this was the only thing giving him oxygen.

He didn't want to suffocate. What would it feel like? Would he panic? Even when he just held his breath a little too long, it caused him to feel desperate for air. Lungs bursting, cells screaming, mouth gaping. That's what it would be like. Gasping and clawing, but never getting the needed oxygen to make it stop.

No, he definitely didn't want to suffocate. So for now he wouldn't mess with the tubing. There had to be another way.

Brand climbed atop the table and set his head back on the wall. He scanned the room, looking for anything he might have missed. The vent wasn't big enough to have gotten him in here, so there had to be something he wasn't seeing. What was he missing?

He closed his eyes, thinking about what it could be. How did they get him in here? In his mind, he ran over each corner of the room. The only entries he could see were a faucet and a vent, both obviously way too small to have afforded access to this cube. His mind wandered back to his family. To the way each of them had looked at him through everything. Their eyes were all the same, deeply disappointed in him. That same look mirrored in face after face.

Brand jerked awake, his legs shooting out and splashing into the water surrounding the table.

"Shit!"

How long had he been asleep? He slid off the table, plunging into water that was hip-deep now. The icy cold shocked him, and he gasped. The time on the clock was almost enough to make him vomit into the water, but he held it back.

Three hours. He'd slept for three hours up on that table, as the water crept up higher and higher, overtaking him while he was zonked out.

4:11.

What an idiot. He'd stayed awake longer than 48 hours before, and his life hadn't depended upon it then. So why now, when his family's life depended on it, had he fallen asleep? It must be the cold getting to him.

He flexed his fingers, now a frightening blue in color, and withered. No blood was coming from the wounds he'd suffered earlier. This scared him more than anything. It was like looking at a movie corpse, one that had been found floating in water, all shimmery white and absent of signs of life. They felt stiff as he moved them, and they wouldn't bend all the way. And they ached. He could feel that ache up into his wrists, the pain was so deep.

Tucking his hands under his arms, he climbed back up onto the table. After all that time, he'd probably been dry when he first woke up. He should have stayed out of the water. It did him no good to know how much time he had left, yet he'd sacrificed being dry to do so.

"Stop beating yourself up, Brand. You need to straighten yourself out and think. How did you get in here?"

Once again, he stood to look at the ceiling more closely. The seams at the edges were smooth, no sign of a hatch. The rest of the ceiling looked as though it had been carefully rubbed with silk. Seriously, he'd never seen a ceiling so flawless.

The walls were next. Still nothing. Not one thing to indicate something more, a doorway, window, hatch, anything. They obviously hadn't put him in here with magic, which meant there had to be some way in or out.

Wait, the air tubing had gone down, not up. He couldn't be underground if the vent led down instead of up, right? So what did that mean? He was above ground somewhere, or so he figured. No idea what that should tell him. The cold was

making him feel sluggish. His mind struggled to work the problem out. Above ground, yet no windows, no doors.

He had a thought and, taking a deep breath, he sunk into the water, the cold hitting his head like a physical punch. He swam downward, so weak the water was buoying him up. His fingers found the seam along the ground; it felt rough. For some reason, the seam along the ground was rougher than the seam around the ceiling. Did that really mean anything? Possibly.

Diving three more times, he found each wall felt the same. It was as if the ceiling had been poured at the same time as the wall, so as to make them one unit, yet the ground was a separate entity. In fact, he hadn't noticed it before, but the ground had patterns in it which the walls and ceiling lacked. It was textured.

Back above water, he roared his frustration. It was time to wake up, take control of this slow brain and figure a way out of here. But it was getting harder and harder to concentrate. He knew this meant something, but couldn't pinpoint what that might be.

He wanted out of here. No part of him could process why his family would have done this to him. Or to themselves. This was unbelievable. Had he been sealed inside concrete with no actual way out? Maybe that was it. Maybe there was no entry because the cement had been poured around him. But no, that couldn't be. They would have had to have something to hold the structure together, to make this shape, and they couldn't have removed that through the vent any more than they could have squeezed him through it.

He grabbed a crowbar and went to the wall with the faucet, slamming the iron into the concrete over and over and over. His hands began to sting again, but he didn't care. There was no way out of this ridiculous cube. He was going to die in here, no matter what he did, and all he was doing floundering around in here was putting on a show. Yet for who? There were no cameras, no peepholes. He'd checked every inch. They couldn't know what he was doing in here, so that must mean they wouldn't know if he'd done something right. If he screamed out that he wanted to live, they wouldn't hear it. How was he to prove he'd had a real change of heart if they couldn't see him?

The crowbar flew out of his hands, hitting the water with a splash he could barely hear above the blood pounding in his ears. They'd never know how badly he now wanted to live. Not because of his family, though they were the reason he couldn't give up. But because he genuinely wanted to survive. Suddenly, things on the outside didn't seem so bad. At least he'd had a warm, comfortable, DRY bed. He'd had food. He'd had a job. Sure, it made him miserable, and his boss was a phenomenal suckass to the higher ups, but it had been a paycheck, and one that inviolid solid work.

Yet again, he regretted having broken that baby monitor. He hadn't thought it through, and there was a good chance he'd signed his death warrant the second he smashed it.

"I'm sorry," he said, laying his head against the wall near where the air vent had been.

As he stood there, his head against the cold cement of the wall, he heard something. It was a faint noise against the background of the rushing water, but it was there. He had no idea what it was, but it was coming from the vent.

He went to the vent, deciding now was the time. A glance at the clock showed he was down to 3:32. What was the difference between drowning in three-and-a-half hours and suffocating now? Not much, that was for sure. The water was too high for the table to keep him dry, and the shelves were too shaky. There was nowhere else to go except out, and this was the biggest exit he could find.

His hand fit into the tubing with room to spare, and he shoved it in, pushing at the sides of the tube to try and knock it loose. He pushed sideways, down, up, every which way, but the tube wasn't moving. He put his forehead against the wall again, thought about everything that lay on the tables and shelves. There was so much crap, but there had to be something he could use.

Oh yes, a box cutter! He remembered seeing it before. Now just to find it. It had been on the table, but the water had covered the table. He ran his hands over the table, under the water. With his fingers so numb, it was impossible to tell what he was touching. He started using both hands, lifting items up to examine them, then placing them back where he'd picked them up from.

"Where is it? Where is the damn thing? Come on!"

At last, he picked up the box cutter, unsure he'd be able to grip it well enough to cut his way through the tubing. He had to try, though. He was out of ideas.

It took some time, but he was able to grasp the box cutter enough to put the blade through the tubing. He couldn't feel what he was doing so much, and was terrified that if he dropped the box cutter it would slide away into oblivion. So he sawed slowly, despite the overwhelming urge to rush.

Suddenly, he saw light. Just a bit, but it was brighter out there than it was in here. Had he broken through to the outside? He kept cutting, his speed picking up. When that proved too slow for him, he chucked the box cutter toward the table with a kerplunk and used his hand to push, pull, rip, nudge. Everything he could possibly think of to do to the tube, he did, until, at last, light touched his hand, and the tube fell away.

Pressing his face to the hole, he tried to see what was outside, but the light was so bright after the darkness inside that it blinded him. The noise he'd heard earlier was louder now. He still couldn't make out what it was, but it seemed to be an electrical hum. Maybe a generator? Was that how he had light via the one bare bulb in the room?

"Help me! Is there anyone out there? Please, help!"

He jerked back when a face appeared on the other side of the hole. It was a man, pale, with light, well-groomed hair. When he spoke, Brand recognized the voice from the baby monitor.

"And why should we help you, Mr. McKenzie?"

"I want to live!"

"Why?"

"Why? I don't know how to answer that. "

"Hm, well, I imagine it's because you want to save your family."

"Well, yes, but I don't think that's all. Not anymore."

"I see. Would you feel more at peace if I told you I'd lied to you, that they would be perfectly fine if you died right now?"

Relief filled him, flooded his being. He felt it in his chest, his throat, his stomach.

"They're going to be okay?"

"Yes."

"Oh, thank God."

"Yes, well, if that's all, I'll just go back to what I was doing."

"No, wait!" Brand pressed his face to the hole so hard he could feel the edges digging into his face. He didn't care, though. This was life or death. "Please, let me out."

"So you do want to live then?"

"Yes, yes I do. If this is what death feels like, I don't want it. My life isn't so bad. And I can change the parts I don't like. I know this now. Won't you let me out?"

"How do you suppose we do that? I'm sure you've noticed there are no doors."

"Yes, but I...I don't know. All I could find was the seams around the bottom, and I don't unders...wait. Wait! The hook in the ceiling, the seams on the floor. Does it lift up? Can you lift this off me?"

"Very good, Mr. McKenzie. Let me consult my partners."

His face disappeared from the hole, and Brand felt panic welling up in him. "Wait! Don't leave me here. You're coming back, aren't you?" He didn't want to be alone, to die alone in here.

The face reappeared. "I'll be back, Mr. McKenzie, no matter what is decided among the council."

Brand stood there, waiting, shivering. He felt like his body should have given up by now, like this shaking would surely break bones if it went on any longer. He was so ungodly cold and tired.

A loud beeping sounded from outside, and he heard the sound of heavy machinery.

"What's that? Mister, where are you? What's happening?"

Something loud slammed into the top of the cube, vibrating into his aching head. He moved away from the middle of the room, pressing his back against the wall. The sounds of machinery continued, a racket occurring above him. It sounded like the cube would be torn apart any second.

In fact, he could feel it shaking, see it on the surface of the water. Something was happening.

With a loud crack, one wall lifted up, tilting the others, which cracked and split, as well. The fourth wall held a moment longer, but then lifted with the rest of them, the cube swaying as it began to rise into the air above him.

He watched in awe as it went up, up, up. The water flowed out, away from him, washing out in all directions. He stumbled with the force of it, falling to one knee as the water emptied.

When he raised his head to look, the brightness was overwhelming, but he blinked and worked to focus on something, anything, that wasn't cement.

Above him, the cube stopped lifting, instead swaying in place up above him. He stepped out, off the cement floor and onto a grated one. The water had flowed easily down the grate, leaving behind puddles that bespoke of the chilling water he'd been in for so many hours.

A woman ran up to him, her feet clanking across the grated floor. She held a large blanket, which she wrapped around him. As he turned, blinking, he saw the numbers on the clock. He still had 2:45 left.

As he watched, the number changed to 2:44. The countdown continued.



HOLLOWBOUND

Denim rips
Venom drips
Honeyed smiles
On painted lips
Needled eye
Wheedled by
Whispered wiles
In silken sigh
Hack and hew
Crack in two
Heart in shards
And beaten blue
Toss the dice
Cross the ice
Cut the cards
Of lilt and lies
Heave the coal
Cleave the soul
Hear Her wail
From pole to pole
Reined to rock
Chained by lock
Spoil and stale
At Ragnarok
Vivid taunt
Livid, gaunt
Lifeless void
Whose haloes haunt
Neatly played
Featly flayed
Romance toyed
And now decayed

—shawn chang

[technology and industry]

Technology and industry
have squeezed the space between.
The world lies at his fingertips
and he is seventeen.
No obstacle's not razed or drilled.
A life of time's been saved
by artificial passages
blasted, laid and paved.
Beyond the seas and deserts, even
north and south poles, can
be visited as fast as thought
and sleek as superman.
One click and he is anywhere
and anyone they say.
So he's not in the mood for doing
anything today.

—james nicola

carpe diem

by darin z. krogh

At first you don't see the spiders straight on. You catch them out of the corner of your eye. Scurrying.

You quickly turn your head to get a good look. It's gone. Must have slipped into a crack. Maybe jumped off into the carpet.

But a spider vanishing under cover doesn't cause you to guess that you're seeing things. You go from bugs to larger critters. Snakes or rats. Peripheral and then straight on.

They say it's the stage before you see pink elephants. And worse. By then you realize that Mother Booze has come to take you away from all this. And you're crazy about her.

But there's no booze today. And no prospects. No check until the first of the month. And that's four days away.

Being sober hurts. At least it hurts enough so you don't think about sad things like God, children, wives and how it might have been. You think about that stuff when you're drunk.

I had to find Chip. He might have some drink money. But it hurts to go walking outside. Somebody's probably already jumped him. Cleaned the dopey sap out of his money.

But maybe not. That sneaky sonofabitch hides his loot better and better every day. He's getting to be a low production roll.

I walked into the bar and decided to stay. Bobby, the bartender, usually lets me vacuum the place for a drink. One drink might be enough to hold me over until Chip arrives. Come on, Chip, you bastard, hide your stash. Don't get blind-sided. Stay clear of dark alleys.

Bobby says okay to me vacuuming for a drink but he includes smashing the cardboard boxes out back. Then they gotta be put in the dumpster. That ought to be worth more than one drink.

"Is that for two, Bobby?"

"Fuck, no."

"Aw, Bobby. The boxes are gonna take me an hour."

"Then forget it."

"No, no, Bobby. It's just..."

“Forget it.”

“I’m on it, Bobby.”

The grind of the vacuum rips my brain. Stomping on the boxes makes me sick. I puke before I get done. Bobby won’t let me stay if I smell like puke. I flick the bits of vomit off my jacket and chew on a cigarette butt to cover my breath. Then go back into the bar.

Now, the drink. One damn drink. It ain’t no help. Not really.

“Fill it to the top, Bobby.”

I gulped it. It didn’t do anything for me but at least it tasted like booze.

I decided to wait for Chip. He’ll be here before it gets dark. If he can.

The blaring television behind the bar is my only diversion from the shit going on in my head. One show. Then another. It’s killing me.

Maybe I’ll go back to my room. At least I can roll around on the floor and moan. Bobby makes me stay on a stool when I’m here.

Yeah, I’m leaving. As I turn for the door, it opens. Chip squeezes in and shuffles to the end of the bar.

He passes by a light. A big wet cut shows up on his cheek and blood is oozing from a lump on the side of his head.

I grab a handful of napkins and move to clean him up.

“Goddamn, they got you good this time,” I said, dabbing the fluid coming from the lump. “It’s not thick blood. Maybe it’s not that bad.”

“Kenny and that fuckin’ Indian. They nailed me outside Dolly’s.” Chip moaned.

“How much they get?”

He looked at me and then hung his head over the bar.

I thought he was going cry.

But he gagged and spit up a puddle of dirty bile.

Bobby heard him from the other end of the bar.

“WHAT THE FUCK YOU DOIN’?” Bobby shouted.

“He’s beat up, Bobby,” I intervened.

“I DON’T GIVE A SHIT WHAT HE IS. GET HIM OUTTA HERE!”

Chip burped up again. This time something else came up. It was floating in his stomach juice, a soggy twenty dollar bill folded into a square. I snatched the bill from the puddle before Chip could grab it. I curled it up, out of sight in my hand.

Bobby was striding down toward us. He looked pissed.

He grabbed Chip, dragged him across the floor and threw him out the door onto the sidewalk.

You heartless bastard, Bobby.

I quick-stepped to the bathroom and washed the bill in the sink. I was going to dry it off but the towel roll had come loose from the machine and sat on the floor where it was wicking up a puddle of piss. I slapped the twenty dollars on my sleeve. The bill was still wet but didn’t smell like vomit. Bobby hates puke.

I walked out of the bathroom into the ball room and announced, “HEY BOBBY, PUT A DRINK ON THE BAR. I GOT MONEY!”



[poetry]

A Cobra and a Virgin

Weeds grow thick in his mind.
Light can't enter in.
Wild thoughts need pruning.
A cobra creeps.
Drugs disfigure sense.

A virgin walks through the weeds to pick a fallen coconut panting on the canal ripples.
The cobra winds her calf, creeps upward, and wounds.
She shrieks in vain.
Her dad lies in an arrack bottle, and her mother in the corridor of insanity.

She sinks down in the diabolic darkness.
Scratches from the thorns of lust lie scattered on her body.

All men aren't men.
A cobra in human shape is highly hazardous.

—fabiyas mv

EXTRAORDINARY MEASURES

You would not listen to me sing.
I understood the reason
But, seldom quelled by anything,
I tried the following season.

Then when I got you out with me
One evening for a date
I found out that, surprisingly,
I couldn't concentrate.

Nor have I concentrated since
On anything but you
And ways to broach your ignorance
Of what I'd like to do.

And though there come, from embers' ache,
Incendiary pleasures,
I'll burn to death unless I take
Extraordinary measures.

I shall not sing nor can I talk
When you are by, but write
For all to read, that I might spark—
And what might you, tonight?

—james nicola

HYPOCRISY

Your righteous indignation
has become a source of pride
you cling to, like a child
guards his prized possessions.
You rant against injustice while
wallowing in hypocrisy.

Point fingers at this one or that.
But are you any better
with your haughty head held high?
Have you not contributed
to this broken world of hate,
greed, violence, and lies?

What if your hate
made you a murderer?
What if your jealousy
or greed made you a thief?
Though you've committed no crime,
your hidden guilt is your shame.

We all sit in judgment
of each other's lives
while atrocities against
humanity go largely ignored.
We learn only what our mind
is willing to accept.

Sit upon that throne of righteousness.
Post your social media rants,
the extent of your political activism.
By all means, spew more hate and
assumptions through cute little memes -
modern day education.

Misinform the uneducated.
Stir up more strife
in this unstable society
because something is only true
when it is convenient.
And here lies the problem.

The very ones who condemn hate
spread it like a disease.
Everyone blames someone else
for our sickened society
when each of us needs
to look within ourselves.

—tina stickles

I Can't Sleep

A breeze wraps its tendrils around my ears,
My hair is gone, stubble left in its place,
I feel like I'm flying,
The clouds above me are paltry and cartoon-like,
My fingers smooth over the surface I'm laying on, it's rigid and feels like a greased pan,
It's been warmed by the sun,

I'm swaying, I sit up,
Everyone is laying, watching the clouds on giant turtles like mine,
We're in a park, the paths accommodate our size,
Cobblestones,
Their shells all sparkle like the massive beasts have just rose from the ocean,
It starts to rain in sheets and I laugh,

To my right, a mermaid begins to panic in a swimming pool, she doesn't understand rain,
She's screaming but my turtle keeps me swaying,
I open my hand to find a bloody palm and my wisdom teeth are there,
I spit and more blood lands on my pajama pants,
Everyone is in their pajamas,

Someone has a bow and arrow to my head suddenly,
"Don't move," they say,
The voice is familiar, like a lady who once complained to her husband behind me in the grocery store about how her medication only seems to work on Sundays,
I close my eyes and try to wake myself up, I find myself needing to do this more and more lately,

I'm in my upstairs hallway, facing towards my parents room, the door is open and inside it's only black,
The big window that gives a view of the front lawn is across the floor and I run to look outside,
it's dark now,
The stars are brighter, more artificial,
Everything is normal,
Then, the moon begins to land,
It gets closer and closer until I can see its curves and freckles,
I can see its craters and the dust starts to float down onto the grass,
The stars start to fall, like balloons losing air,

I close my eyes harder and try to move my sleeping body,
I wake up in my bed, now confident that I'm really awake this time,
The covers are laid over me, I'm sweating,
My phone is next to me on the side table where I last left it,
The scissors are on my desk along with a couple of pens and a ruler,
The clock across from my bed reads 19:67 am,

Oh no,

I close my eyes.

—kaitlyn dennehy

LIMBO

by jarid goodman

He woke up, suspicious that his arm was no longer his own. He blinked and rubbed away the crumbs from his eyes and squinted at the arm, flexing and extending it repeatedly. It was his right arm, an effeminate appendage, pale as the snow. Scrawny.

He should exercise, he thought, looking at the arm. He should get more sun. But exercise required activity, and sun required going outside. And he didn't like either of those things. When he went outside, people stared at him. They thought he looked sick, and they were right.

He lay on his right side, staring at his arm. He felt pins and needles extending from his triceps to his pinky and ring finger, and this feeling began to disappear as soon as he rolled onto his other side. He continued to move his arm, flexing and extending it, and the pins and needles went away completely. Only that odd feeling, that the arm did not belong to him, remained.

He saw light coming through the curtains and knew the sun was up, that it had probably been up for hours. He reached for his phone on the nightstand, but it wasn't there. He stretched his torso to the edge of the bed and grabbed his phone from the floor where it had fallen mysteriously in the night. He checked the time. It was afternoon.

He got out of bed without wanting to. He staggered to the kitchen as if he were still drunk from the night before; maybe he was, he thought. He put on a pot of coffee, and immediately decided it was a bad idea. He had to get up early the next morning to go to court, and he knew drinking coffee in the afternoon would keep him up all night. But alas, the coffee was already brewing.

Waiting for the pot to fill, he yawned and stretched his arms toward the floor. He looked at his right arm. Something was wrong with it. He didn't know what, just something. It felt alien to him, like it was no longer part of his body, like it had been replaced by another arm in the night. Like it was an imposter.

It was his arm, of course. He knew that. Only it felt like it wasn't. It felt like it was from another planet.

He poured a cup of coffee and began to consume it in slow, careful sips. He brought the coffee to his computer and watched pornography for a few minutes. Pornography was a double-edged sword. He enjoyed it while it lasted, but afterward felt guilty. He felt like he was still married, that he was doing something wrong by seeing other women naked, that any second Susan and his two boys, Benji and Pete, would come storming through the door and find him with his pants around his ankles, a bumbling disgrace. Pitiful.

He opened a folder on the computer labeled *Angels* and looked at pictures of his two boys. He wondered how much they had grown in the past few months, whether Pete, the little one, would be big enough to ride on the rollercoaster at the county fair this summer. But he wouldn't have to wonder for too long. He knew that tomorrow he would see them in court. He only wished it was under better circumstances.

He dropped his coffee.

It was a strange thing. One moment he was looking at pictures of his two boys and holding his coffee, and the next thing he knew, his hand was open, and the coffee was on the floor. He got up from the computer and grabbed a roll of paper towels, and coming back, blotted up what he could of the coffee. He knew later he would have to go to the market and get some carpet cleaner, but for now he didn't feel like going out. He wanted to move as little as possible.

He looked at his right hand, the hand connected to the alien arm, the hand that dropped the coffee. He flexed and extended his fingers, as though grabbing at the air. Then using his other hand, he spent a couple minutes massaging his forearm. Once he was satisfied there was nothing wrong with his arm, he went to the living room and turned on the television. There was a soccer game on, but he didn't pay attention.

He thought about his two boys. He loved them to pieces. Susan, his ex-wife, he wasn't sure about anymore. He used to love her—he used to love her madly. He remembered being deeply enamored with her laugh, her intellect, her sunshine hair. There was also a time when Susan loved him back, but that was a long time ago, before he started putting heroin in his veins. Later, when he lost his job, Susan left, and the boys went with her.

He understood why Susan left. He understood why she took the boys away

too, but things were different now. He was off the junk, and he wanted to see his kids. But when he fought for custody, Susan said he diddled the boys. Susan knew it wasn't true, but that didn't matter. After her husband started taking drugs, she stopped trusting him, and she knew that accusing her ex-husband of molesting the boys would be enough to prevent him from getting joint custody and maybe visitation.

He sighed. It was a bitter, angry, frustrated sigh. He needed to see his kids.

His stomach grumbled. It was time for him to eat. Despite not wanting to move for all eternity, he stumbled to the refrigerator and grabbed a stick of butter and a carton of eggs. He threw a tablespoon of butter into a frying pan and cracked a few eggs and mixed them together with a spatula. He watched the eggs pop and sizzle.

When it came time to flip the eggs, he grabbed the panhandle and flicked his arm, like he used to do when he made breakfast for his two boys, except this time he bungled the toss. The eggs flopped outside the pan, and melted butter flew directly into his eye.

He cowered back, screaming. He rubbed the grease from his eyelids. He was furious. Not at himself. Not at the situation. He was angry at his arm, the arm that botched the toss, that fucking alien arm that put butter in his eye.

He rushed to the sink and splashed cold water on his face. When all the butter was gone, he grabbed a dishtowel, dried his eyes, and tossed the dishtowel by the stove. He glared at the arm and cursed at it. He cursed at it like it was the devil, like it was a disease. He cursed at it like it was Susan that time she flushed his last bit of junk down the toilet and said she was leaving him and taking the kids.

Smoke filled his nostrils. He looked toward the stove and saw part of the dishtowel on the burner. The dishtowel was on fire. He reached around the flame and turned off the stove. Then he crouched beneath the sink and, just as the smoke detector began to shriek, grabbed the fire extinguisher.

When he rose to his feet, he scrambled to remove the pin from the extinguisher. But his right hand was being difficult. His fingers lacked the dexterity to grab the pin and yank it from the hole. And, without removing the pin and breaking the tamper release, he couldn't operate the extinguisher.

"Christ!" he shouted.

He dropped the extinguisher, putting a dent in the linoleum floor. He looked up to see the flames stretching to the cabinets. His heart racing, he grabbed a spatula and scooped up the smoldering rag, carefully bringing it toward the sink. Then his arm twitched violently at the elbow, flinging the rag into the living room.

He ran to the living room to see flames slithering across the carpet.

It looked like a serpent made of hell fire.

He sprinted to the bedroom and snatched up his comforter. Then, running back into the living room, he approached the growing inferno. He was seconds away from throwing the comforter over the blaze and stomping it into submission when his right hand lost grip of the fabric, allowing the comforter to drag on the carpet. His foot treading on the loose comforter, he tripped and made a thud on the floor.

As he pushed himself from the comforter, his right arm popped from its socket, sending a screeching pain through his upper body. He fell back to the floor, yelping. After a few moments, he clenched his jaw and tried to stand again. He clambered to his feet, his dislocated arm dangling painfully at his side.

He squinted through the smoke and saw the fire spreading to the sofa and climbing up the curtains. He knew that there was no stopping the fire. He had to leave.

Coughing and gasping for air, he staggered to the front door. He fought the habit of using his right hand to open the door and, instead, opted to turn the knob with his left hand.

He stumbled onto the lawn, doubled over, as he pushed the smoke out of his lungs with violent coughs. He slipped on the wet grass, losing his balance, plummeted to the ground. He rolled onto his back, coughing still, straining for a smokeless breath.

He looked at the alien appendage. It was fully extended from the shoulder, perpendicular to his body, like Jesus on the cross. The pain at his shoulder, where the arm had dislodged from its socket, was unbearable, and he suddenly noticed that his arm was moving away from his body at a slow, steady pace. He felt muscles tearing, blood vessels breaking, tendons snapping like rubber bands. His skin felt as though it were on fire. The arm moved further away, and stretchmarks jumped across his skin like lightning in a thunderstorm.

He started to cry. He cried like he five years old.

He cried because he was in pain, because he was losing his arm and becoming disfigured. He cried because he was a terrible husband, because one time when he ran out of junk, he struck his wife, and when he apologized, she tried to forgive him, and he didn't deserve it. He cried because he was a bad father, because he yelled at his kids every night and missed their school plays and sold their videogames, always putting heroin before them.

And he cried mostly because he had planned to contact his dealer that afternoon and shoot heroin into his veins one last time before going to court tomorrow. He thought maybe Susan was right to keep the boys away from him, that they weren't his boys anymore because he wasn't cut out to be a father.

When he stopped crying, he looked to his right and saw that the arm was completely severed. Its only identifying features were a few marks where he used to put the needle.



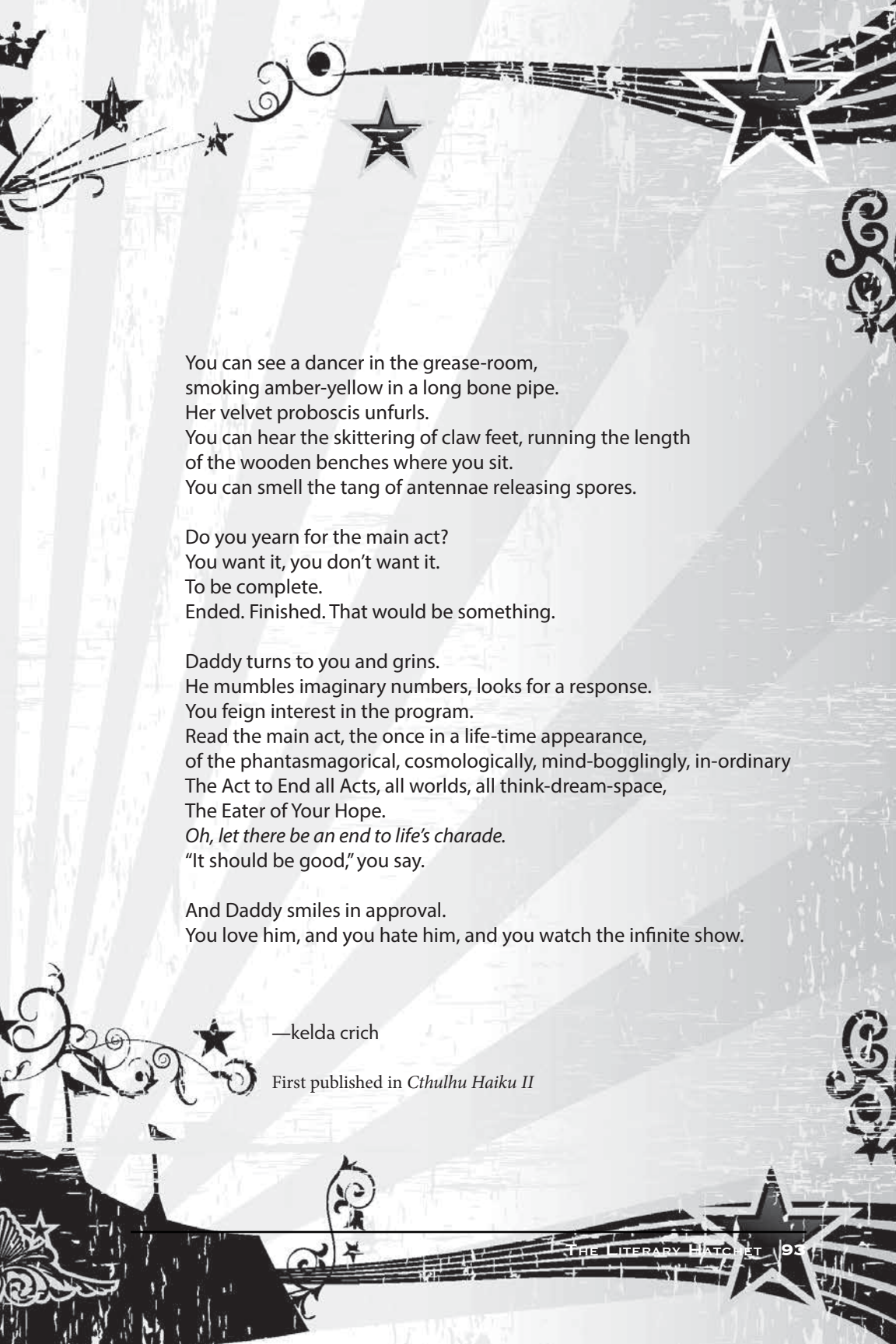
The Last Daddy-Daughter Day

When the bell rings, and the show begins,
first come the jambling clowns.
The prances and pratfalls.
Doppelgangers changing expressions,
shedding white, onion-skin-thin masks
never touching bone.

Next: the non-existent animals, too numerous to note.
Grotesque hybridity being a specialty of this show.
The bird/lion/women, the worm/cat/crows,
the smoke/man/spider/snakes
parade, ooze-crawl, perambulate.
Provoking the whip with knowing eyes.
The taming of the improbable.

Father was always your ringmaster.
Barking his dissonant, insistent opinions.
Commanding your attention.
Your solemn-ludicrous, un-sane, double-think daddy.
He taught you to see what you want to, you don't want to, see.

You can see the myriad in each performer.
On this last day, the acts will be your endless entertainment.
Jugglers eating infernal stars on telesliding sticks.
Magicians slice-ripping space to produce a coin.
Ponies prancing on the backs of corseted women.
And still there are more.



You can see a dancer in the grease-room,
smoking amber-yellow in a long bone pipe.
Her velvet proboscis unfurls.
You can hear the skittering of claw feet, running the length
of the wooden benches where you sit.
You can smell the tang of antennae releasing spores.

Do you yearn for the main act?
You want it, you don't want it.
To be complete.
Ended. Finished. That would be something.

Daddy turns to you and grins.
He mumbles imaginary numbers, looks for a response.
You feign interest in the program.
Read the main act, the once in a life-time appearance,
of the phantasmagorical, cosmologically, mind-bogglingly, in-ordinary
The Act to End all Acts, all worlds, all think-dream-space,
The Eater of Your Hope.
Oh, let there be an end to life's charade.
"It should be good," you say.

And Daddy smiles in approval.
You love him, and you hate him, and you watch the infinite show.

—kelda crich

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LIVES INTERSECT

by wayne scheer

A few days after I moved to Atlanta, about twenty years ago, I came home from my new teaching job at Georgia State to find my grass mowed and a lanky white man in his sixties wearing overalls and a straw hat trimming my hedges.

"What are you doing?" I asked, jumping out of my car. My Chicago cynicism was showing. Why would a white man be mowing the lawn of a single black woman?

He took off his hat, displaying the remnants of white hair combed straight across his pink scalp and offered a theatrical bow from the waist. Holding his hat to his chest while smiling a big, yellow-toothed grin, he said, in an accent as thick as the Atlanta humidity, "Ah'm Mr. Beasley, your neigh-bah." He pointed to the neat little brick cottage next door with a beautiful bed of red and yellow roses still in bloom, although it was early September. "I hope you don't mind me fixing up your place a bit. Just my way of welcoming you to the neighborhood."

I wasn't sure how to react. Was this a subtle Southern way of telling me I need to get my black behind in gear if I was going to live next to white people? I decided to keep my thoughts in check and held out my hand. "I'm Valerie Harris. I was planning on getting to the yard this weekend."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mz. Harris." He showed me his hands were dirty and didn't shake mine.

I told him if he gave me a few minutes to change my clothes I'd help with the hedges, but he said he was about finished. Then he added, "I'd certainly be appreciative of some iced tea, if it's not too much of a bother."

"Of course," I said, not sure what to expect next.

I set up a pitcher of tea and cookies on my front porch and noticed that he washed his hands at the outside spigot. When I suggested he come inside and use my bathroom, he declined. "This'll do right fine, Mz. Harris."

I told him to call me Valerie. He made no mention of his first name.

We sat on the porch for about half an hour, and he talked non-stop, like a man unaccustomed to conversation. He told me he was a bachelor and that he bought his house in 1956 when he was working at the Ford plant in nearby Hapeville. He

had retired a few years back. Soon I had a history of the neighborhood, including how “the colored folk” had started moving in, but he didn’t mind as long as they were neighborly. I smiled to keep from saying something I might have regretted.

He was a good neighbor and, in time, he became a friend. Routinely we’d talk on my front porch over a pitcher of tea. He’d tell fascinating stories of Atlanta in the old days and I’d talk about my own past. In an unguarded moment, I told him about the man I was engaged to in Chicago and how I had found out through friends that he once had a live-in relationship with a man. I had never thought of myself as homophobic, but I couldn’t get over the thought of him with a man. Mr. Beasley seemed shocked, and I could see he was uncomfortable, but he offered no judgment.

Not that Mr. Beasley was a man to hold back his opinions. One sunny Sunday, a group of black teenagers walked past our houses playing their music loud and cursing even louder. Mr. Beasley was in his rose garden while I read on my front porch. He approached them, swinging his shovel, and shouting, “Git away from my property, you niggers!”

The young men stopped dead in their tracks and I ran out between them, telling Mr. Beasley to put down his shovel and saying to the teenagers, “You need to walk away now. Please.”

They did so, much to my relief, but Mr. Beasley, instead of thanking me, kept using the “n” word. “This was a good neighborhood before those niggers moved in with their music and their cussing.”

I could see the teenagers stop once again. Their curses were now directed at Mr. Beasley. I knew I would have to talk with them about how I, too, found their language offensive, but for now I had to confront my neighbor.

“I’m offended by that word, Mr. Beasley, even more than by their cursing. Please don’t use it in my presence.”

He looked at me like I was a simple-minded child. “But you’re not a nigger, Mz. Valerie.” I just stared at him, shaking my head.

I lived in the neighborhood for a long while before I heard anyone call him anything other than Mr. Beasley. I knew his name because I received his mail by mistake one day and saw it was addressed to Woodrow Carson Beasley. But I was shocked when I heard a man his age, who lived down the street, call him Carson.

Although the man visited Mr. Beasley regularly, he had never offered me more than a friendly wave. In an attempt to be neighborly, I brought them iced tea one hot, sticky August afternoon.

Mr. Beasley made a simple introduction. “Mz. Valerie, this is Mr. Waverly.” We engaged in small talk, but when I asked Mr. Waverly how long he and Mr. Beasley had been neighbors, conversation ended abruptly. We finished our tea in awkward silence.

Years passed as naturally as the seasons. Mr. Beasley became my confidant through another bad relationship and cared for my house when I took a leave of absence for a semester to attend to my mother in Chicago. When she passed and I moved back, he and Mr. Waverly met me on my front porch with a coconut

custard pie. I told them how I had tried to get my mother to move in with me before she took ill, but she had refused.

"You did everything you could, Mz. Valerie," Mr. Waverly said. It may have been the first time I ever heard him utter a full sentence. "Your mama knows you love her."

I found the way he spoke of her in the present tense reassuring.

Winter turned to spring and the little crepe myrtle I had planted in front of my house now stood near twenty feet tall with lavender blooms that lasted most of the summer. Mr. Beasley was stooped over now from osteoporosis, but he still cared for his roses and added a beautiful autumn flowerbed of orange and yellow chrysanthemums running along the path to his house. Mr. Waverley used to help him; the two old men would be out there most days raking and weeding in the kind of rhythm that can only come from years of friendship. But the last time I saw Mr. Waverly he looked weak and had lost a good deal of weight.

Yesterday, Mr. Beasley rang my doorbell and asked if he could talk with me. It was a chilly November morning, so I asked him in. He had never visited me inside my house, and now he stood at the door, his hat in his hands.

"I'm moving," he said, before I could coax him inside or offer him a drink. "Mr. Waverley's health isn't good, and we're moving to a nursing home." Then he looked at me, his eyes red and puffy. "We've been together for near fifty years, although we could never live in the same house because of the talk. I want to be with him at the end."

My face registered shock. I wanted to ask if I understood him correctly. My conflicted feelings about homosexuality returned, and I wasn't sure what to say.

He looked away momentarily, but then turned back and spoke almost in a whisper. "I hope you don't think ill of me."

"Oh no, of course not. It's just that..." I stuttered like a fool, realizing how much I cared for this man. I saw his eyes glisten and I thanked him for trusting me with his secret. "You and Mr. Waverly found love. I'm happy for you."

He nodded and tried to speak. We had had many conversations about my own failed attempts at love. "Please take care of yourself," I finally said. "And Mr. Waverly."

He thanked me for being his neighbor and his friend. And for the first time since we met, shook my hand.

I felt tears roll down my cheeks, and I reached out to hug him. He felt so frail, I was afraid he'd break in two. His body shook. I knew he was crying.

But he pulled away quickly. Standing as straight as his twisted back would allow, he said, "Thank you for your kindness, Mz. Valerie."

He turned and walked slowly back to his house.





The Porcelain Doll

She lies in my hope chest
pale skin hidden away
to maintain her perfect memory
Wrapped in her linen shroud
handwritten history pinned to her chest
I long to take her out but
have learned the hard way
The cracks hidden by her flawless face
cut deeper than skin is thick

—symantha reagor

Insomniac's Lament

There weighs at night
truth too bold to bear

hours then surrendered
to replay of regret

Hoping yet for dreamway's
path to dawn—

parading sorrows tempered,
just hint of all that offers
only grieving

—alan meyrowitz

THE ELEPHANT PATH

Black beauties in chains-
Before the ticket counters,
A long queue does creep
To scatter near the black wonders.

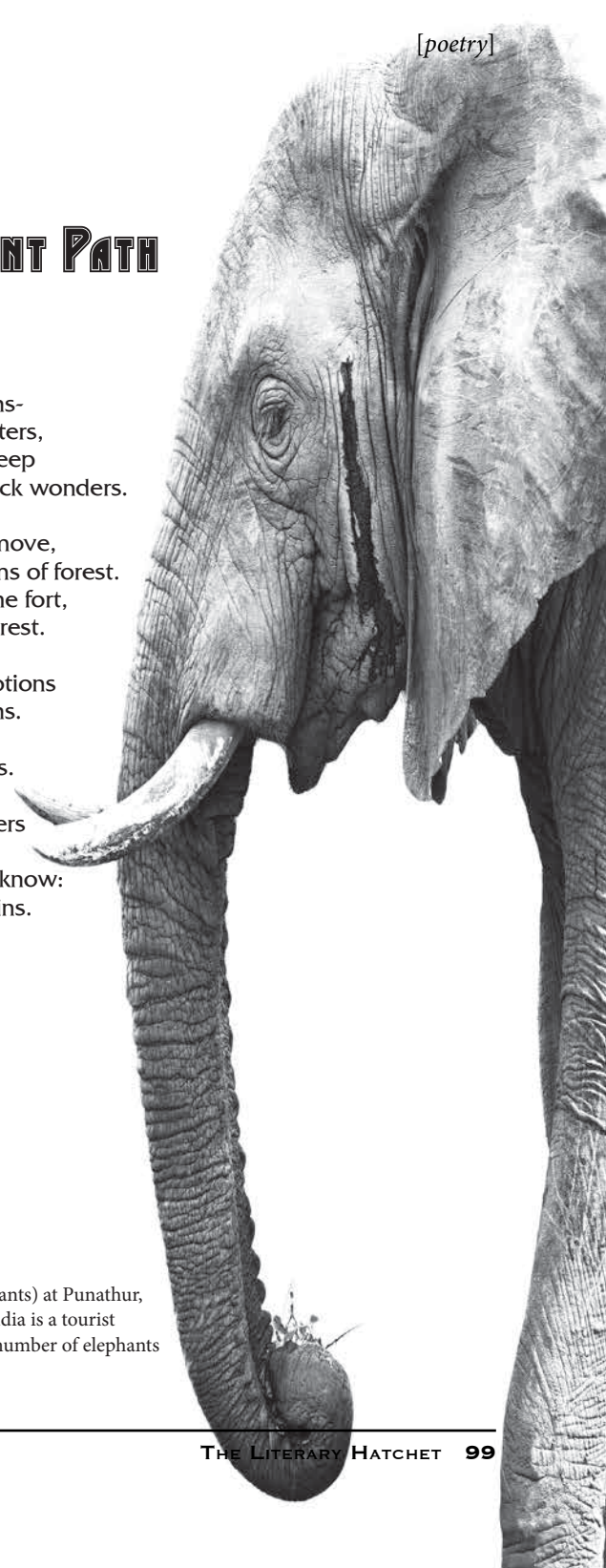
Ears and tails always move,
Ruminating the rhythms of forest.
Elephants are inside the fort,
Exposed to the sky barest.

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

Burning red wild flowers
And tickling streams,
Each elephant longs I know:
But dreams die in chains.

—fabiyas mv

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



Real Doll

by george spisak

Jack needed to try it, at least once. He didn't want a real dead person, not right away. Just someone to pretend. Someone he could control and manipulate completely. He wanted to kiss a woman and find no resistance, no reaction, no hint of another human being present. Just a real, flesh and blood doll that bent to his will.

Once he asked his wife to pretend. But it wasn't good enough. She complained before she gave in. Even then, she whined that he was too rough and she wasn't enjoying herself. Of course she wasn't enjoying herself! This was Jack's fantasy, not hers. She had no right to her demands.

Was it too much to ask for? He just wanted a partner that would play dead. Sex with his wife had become boring, bland and vanilla. It was a downward spiral for the both of them. First came the boring, unsatisfying sex; then her constant nagging. And finally, there was no sex at all. Now he spent hours in his office, fantasizing about what he could have and didn't have. It wasn't his fault. He couldn't control what turned him on.

To feel frozen skin against his own, the chill of death so close to life. There was a poetic justice to it. Something he couldn't get from a breathing woman. Jack wanted to twist long locks of hair in his fists, yank as roughly as he pleased. He wanted to bend stiff but yielding legs around his waist. A woman who didn't breathe—this was all he wanted.

If he bit down on a dead woman, would she bruise? He could try it. He could sink his teeth as deeply as he wanted into a breast. No cries of pain or protest. No smack if he "bit too hard."

Jack licked his lips. Imagined what it would feel like to have his teeth cut into skin. The pop of flesh against his gums as he broke through the first layer.

Would she still be wet? Or would sex require extra lubrication? He laughed to himself. It didn't matter! She wouldn't complain if he was rough or dry or messy. He could spill anywhere or anyplace he wanted without consequence.

His dirty, nasty, thoughts were the only things that turned him on now. If he wanted, he could prop her jaw open and force himself as deep as he could go. The gentle scrape of teeth, a tongue still a little damp. She wouldn't need to stop for oxygen. If he wanted he could tear her earring out with his teeth. Even better—a belly button ring.

Any angle, position, pose he wanted. No matter how uncomfortable for her. He could and would do it. Bondage wouldn't be an issue; he could tie the knots as tightly as he wanted. There wouldn't be a fight about anal. He wouldn't have to be slow or careful. His fingers would become claws, taking strips of flesh with each pull.

He could wrap each strand of her hair around his cock, using it like a sleeve to help himself along. She wouldn't object to the seed in her hair. She'd take it. What he wanted, honestly, and truly, was a girl who would accept and cater to his needs.

His wife didn't understand. She wouldn't even let him bind her wrists with some electrical tape, or put a gag in her mouth. He'd stop trying to convince her to experiment. The marriage was falling apart.

Jack knew she was planning on taking the boys to her mother's and never coming back. He'd known for a while. She was the one that had driven him to his fantasies. She had fueled them.

When he pictured his dead woman, he pictured the exact opposite of his wife. Thin as a rail with small breasts and dark, dark hair. The eyes didn't matter, she was dead after all. But he wanted perfect small feet, the toes mostly even. Except for the smallest toe—it should be at least half the length of the others. Her hands would be slim and fine-boned, each one almost ridiculously long. He wanted to mold those hands around himself, break each knuckle so her fingers would wrap around him at least twice. The snap of each finger as she formed to fit him perfectly was icing on his cake.

He shuddered, panting at the thought of all the things he could do. It wasn't safe to relieve himself of his urges in his office. His wife already suspected him of cheating. And fantasies, no matter how vivid and detailed, were not the same as cheating. The marriage was already crumbling anyhow.

There was a letter opener on his desk. One he never used. It felt strong and its blade was still sharp. He picked it up and balanced it on the palm of his hand. If he used it as a threat, held it against a woman's throat, told her what he needed her to do. He could easily gag her if she couldn't keep quiet. Tie her if she couldn't keep still. If he wanted, he could break her fingers too. He wouldn't get the cold stillness of death, she would breathe and whimper, but it was better than what he had now.

The letter opener slipped into his pocket. He went to the front hall, pulled on his shoes and took a jacket off the coat rack.

"I got called into work, honey! Someone messed up the coding and I need to redo it from scratch. Get some sleep, dear!" He closed the door behind him, got in his car and pulled out of the driveway. There was a strip of bars a twenty-minute drive away from his home. Perfect college girls went there to party all the time. It was the best place in town for drinks and a night of dancing.

All he needed to do was find her.



Kanoli Kaaka

He rolls up and
down on life's
surface as a
droplet on the
*colocasia leaf.
He never walks
with his life
hand in hand.
While heaping
up yellow metal
and rupee on the
side-walk, green
life gets wasted
in his mind's nook.
Time passes with
pastimes, but he
doesn't see.

Now his body
and arm-chair
are antique alike.
He stays afloat
like a banana
stem. He chews
bits of areca-nut
wrapped in betel,
smeared with a
nip of lime. He
spits red shapeless
fury into a brass
spittoon. His lazy
children grow up
on the mount of
money. Often
Kaaka smokes a
beedi. Curls of
futility rises up.

—fabiyas mv

*Colocasia is a tropical plant with its leaves having a natural ultrahydrophobic surface.



AT THE RISE OF THE HILL

by allen kopp

Freddy Chickwell's mother called him at seven o'clock on Sunday morning before he was even out of bed.

"I need you to come over right away!" she said.

"I can't, Mother!" Freddy said. "It's too early. I don't even have my eyes open yet."

"You're going to want to see this."

"What is it?"

"I can't tell you on the phone. You have to see for yourself."

"I'm going back to bed, Mother. Please don't call me until the sun is all the way up."

"I never ask you for anything," she said pitifully. "I'm asking you this one thing politely."

"I'll come, but only if there's bacon and French toast."

"How can you think of food at a time like this?" she asked.

"A time like what?"

He lay back on the bed and groaned. He had planned on going back to sleep but now that he was wide awake he got up and dressed himself. He hated jumping out of bed and driving someplace first thing in the morning, but it appeared he had no other choice.

As he drove the six miles to his mother's house, he thought of the different things that might have elicited such a call at an early hour: a large rat (spider) in the basement (bathtub); a bill that came in the mail for a large sum that she says she doesn't owe and has no intention of paying; Aunt Jeanette has a tumor on her gallbladder; a large crack has appeared overnight in the foundation.

He pulled into the driveway and his mother came out the front door and down the steps, toward his car in a pink terry cloth bathrobe and fuzzy slippers; her hair was sticking out in spikes.

"Prepare yourself!" she said.

"For what?" he asked.

"He's come back!"

"Who has?"

"Need you ask?"

Freddy walked into the house behind her and there, sitting in the living room in the middle of the couch, was his father, who had been dead for a year. Freddy looked at his father and his father looked at him. There were no words.

His mother motioned Freddy into the kitchen. "What do you suppose is going on?" she asked.

"Who *is* that?" Freddy asked.

"Who do you think it is?"

"Well, I know who it *looks* like!"

"He's been raising all kinds of Cain with me ever since he came back."

"Why?"

"He says I went off and left him."

"Left him where?"

"I told him I would never do that."

"Mother, something's not right here," Freddy said. "People don't just come back from the dead after a year."

"Apparently some of them do!"

"Is he a ghost?"

"I don't think so. He ate a big breakfast and then had to go to the bathroom. I don't think ghosts do that."

"If he's not a ghost," Freddy said, "it must mean he was never dead in the first place. How do you account for it?"

"I don't account for it! I saw him go into his grave."

"The only other explanation I can think of is that he's a zombie come back to eat our flesh."

"Oh, I don't think he would ever do that!"

"I'm calling the police," Freddy said.

"And what could *they* do?" Mother asked. "They'd never believe he was dead in the first place. They'd just think we were a bunch of lunatics."

"Then call his doctor."

"He died, too. Right after your father."

"Maybe he's a hallucination that we're both having," Freddy said. "We were both

so poisoned by the man all the years he was alive that we're being affected by him from beyond the grave."

"I just don't know," Mother said. She sat down at the table with her cup of tea, lit a Pall Mall cigarette, and sniffled back tears. "I cared for your father while he was alive—truly I did—and I missed him after he was gone, but now that I've become used to having my freedom, I just don't think I can go back to the way things were before."

"I'm hungry," Freddy said. "I haven't had any breakfast."

He ate quickly, pushed the plate back when he was finished eating, and fanned away his mother's cigarette smoke. "Now that I've had a little time to think about this dispassionately," he said, "I've decided on a plan of action."

"What is it?" she asked anxiously.

"We'll kill him. It's as simple as that."

"Oh, Freddy! Your own father?"

"Well, he's already dead, isn't he? If you kill somebody who's already dead, it's not really wrong, is it? Not really a crime?"

"I'm not sure how the law would look at it," mother said. "Killing is killing, whether the person you kill is already dead or not."

"I don't expect *you* to do any killing. *I'll* do it."

"But how? I don't want a mess in the house that I'll have trouble explaining later."

"Remember Echo Hill?"

"That old place? I haven't been there for years."

"I haven't, either. If it's like it was when I was in high school, it would be the perfect place to kill a person that's already dead."

"Oh, Freddy, I just don't know about this."

"Remember how they used to tell us kids how dangerous it was to go up there because of the air holes?"

"What are air holes?"

"It's places where you can fall through the earth down into the old mine if you're not careful. There are probably some new ones that have formed since."

"That sounds dangerous!"

"Yes, but it's the perfect place to hide a body. If a body falls down an air hole, it would never be found. The old mine is as big as the whole town and there's deep water in places."

"It sounds very forbidding."

"We can take him for a Sunday drive up to Echo Hill. We'll get him out of the car and walking around, and—boom!—he's gone down an air hole. Just like that."

"And what if somebody sees us?"

"They won't, and if they do they won't know what they're seeing."

"While I'm getting dressed," she said, "you go in and visit with your father."

Freddy went into the living room and sat down in the chair facing the couch. "How have you been doing?" he asked father.

"There's some weeds growing along the back fence," the old man said. "Somebody needs to get out there and pull them up, and I guess that somebody is going to be me."

"I wouldn't worry about any weeds if I were you," Freddy said.

"The whole place is goin' to hell!"

"So, tell me. What have you been doing this past year?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you've been ... away, haven't you? I just wondered what things were like where you were."

The old man looked at Freddy with something like contempt. "What things?" he asked. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Mother came down from upstairs wearing a yellow pantsuit and matching wig that made her look like Doris Day. "Well!" she said brightly. "How are we getting along?"

"About like always," Freddy said. "Not much in the way of communication."

She bent over toward the old man and said very loud, as if being dead for a year might have made him partially deaf, "We thought it would be lovely to go for a little drive! It's such a beautiful day!"

"Huh?" the old man said.

"Remember Echo Hill? We used to go up there for picnics with Betty and Waldo when we were young."

"I don't know what you're talking about," the old man said. "I never did."

"Wouldn't you like to get out of the house? Go for a little drive?"

The two of them together helped the old man off the couch, out the door, and into the car. With him installed in the back seat, mother got into the front seat with Freddy.

"I just don't know about this," she said as Freddy started the car.

"It'll be all right," he said. "I think I know what I'm doing"

He drove out to the edge of town, past the bowling alley, the abandoned funeral home, the roller rink, a used car lot, a couple of taverns, and into farm country, where there were barns, silos, cows, and young horses grazing in fields.

"Not much traffic today," Freddy said.

He looked in the rearview mirror and saw that the old man was asleep in the back seat, his head lolled to the side.

"Isn't this fun?" Mother said. "I just love going for a drive in the country on a pretty day!"

Freddy came to the turnoff to go to Echo Hill, and it was exactly as he remembered it. "Won't be long now!" he said.

He took a couple of turns onto old country roads that became narrower and more tree-encroached. Finally he came to the end of the blacktop and turned onto a dirt road. There was a gate across the road, long-since fallen into disuse.

"Just like pioneering days!" Mother said. "This reminds me of my childhood!"

At the big hill, the road was very rough; Freddy slowed to ten miles an hour to prevent any damage to the tires.

Mother rolled down the window. "Just smell that country air!" she said. A bumble bee flew in and she screamed.

After what seemed a very long, slow climb, Freddy came to the top of the hill

from which one could see into the next state. The dirt road ended there, so he pulled the car onto a little rise off to the right that seemed dry and firm and didn't have a lot of weeds growing on it. It was a place where he could easily turn around when the time came.

"How about if we get out here and scout around a bit?" Freddy said, giving mother a wink.

He started to open the door but was arrested by a sound that he didn't identify, a sound of dirt sifting. Then the front end of the car lurched forward significantly.

"What on earth!" Mother said.

Freddy wanted to see what was happening to the front end but, as he put his hand out to open the door, the ground gave way and the car slid downward, front end first, into a hole just big enough to admit one mid-sized car.

Down, down, down went the car, into darkness complete. Mother gasped and grabbed onto the dashboard as if she could arrest the car in its flight. The old man in the back didn't make a sound. Freddy had a few seconds before the car hit the water in which it all became clear; all the pieces of the puzzle fit into place. Everything that had ever happened—his whole life—had been preparing him for this moment when it would all come to end.



THINGS THAT COULD
SCARE ME
TO DEATH IN A DARK
ALLEY

Christopher Walken

A tribe of cannibalistic winos

The Mormon Tabernacle Choir

A giant baby.

A sasquatch eager to mate and
not particular about with whom.

Mother Teresa's zombie

Flying rats!.

—bruce boston

[poetry]

Daily Paper was Dropped at My Door

Daily paper was
dropped at my door
bringing tired news of
new coming war
approaching times
of anguish and cry
of broken daughters
and sons who will die.

oil scent paper
headed with lines
black faded print
and disastrous signs
why tell your troubles
of days to come
and give no solution
of what must be done.

like guns flaming fire
in some distant land
and people a starving
through all fault of man
of political sons
who keep getting rich
and poor dying fools
in some blood river ditch.

oh! empty pages
with nothing to say
will it could tomorrow
just like today
can you tell of life
and how it will end
will rain fall on me
or some lover's friend.

daily paper was
dropped at my door
bringing tired news
of new coming war
approaching times
of anguish and cry
at my door
you'll no longer lie.

—michael brimbau

written in 1971 upon being drafted.



SEA ATE NINE

For months the nightmares of being lost at sea would find him in the small hours. Fighting wave after wave, he battled to keep afloat, as the undertow pulled him away from land. In the deep ocean he would lose the battle and beneath the water he would go. His lungs would flood. He would not die. Instead, he would drift in currents as tranquil as clouds. A large shape would move in the distance. He could never see it clearly, but on occasion he heard the voice.

It didn't really speak. It was more of a call and was unlike anything Grover Jenkins had heard. It boomed and not even the ocean currents could stifle its magnificent force, which would send Grover reeling backwards. It was so powerful his vision would distort and his brain would rattle so hard within his skull he feared internal hemorrhaging. He was thankful that this behemoth only bellowed three words every time—for another word more, and Grover feared that either his head would explode or that every bone in his body would shatter.

“Sea.”

“Ate.”

“Nine.”

That was what Grover heard. He did not understand what was expected of him from these three random words, but one night at work they revealed themselves.

Grover had entered the building, removing his raincoat, missing the soothing patter of the rain outside. The lonely security guard at the front desk greeted him and told him that only elevator C was operational this evening.

“Oh,” the security guard said. “Also, you must stay away from conference room

by calvin demmer

eight. There is some head office meeting going on there.”

“There many people?” Grover said, straightening the name tag on his green janitor’s top.

The security guard looked at the register. “Nine.”

C, eight, nine, Grover thought, *not sea, ate, nine*.

The feeling of a sheet of ice draping over Grover forced him to clench his thighs and grip the counter to prevent himself from shuddering from the cold. The enigma decoded, the puzzle solved, and the mystery unraveled. Lucid thoughts pumped throughout his mind, making cocaine seem like candy.

“Everything all right?” the security guard said.

Grover nodded.

He knew what needed to be done.

Finding weapons around an office building was not easy. Fortunately, he was able to find a baseball bat in one of the manager’s office and a sharp knife in an office kitchen. After entering the conference room and locking the door behind him, much to the dismay of the nine people seated around the large, oval table, Grover found that the tools he had acquired did the job capably.

After completing what needed to be done, Grover made his way to the nearest bathroom.

He stood in front of one of the large mirrors, but closed his eyes before he could focus on himself. As eyelids shut, the darkness moved down the walls like a thousand spiders, devouring tiles as if they were crisps. It consumed the bathroom.

Grover knew that time was an illusion and felt no urgency to open his eyes. The copper smell of blood tugged on Grover's tether to earth's realm.

Have a look, he thought. Come on, have a look.

Grover opened his eyes and looked at himself in the bathroom mirror. Blood splattered his blue overalls like an abstract painter with an obsession for reds. He dropped his gaze. In his right hand he still clenched the baseball bat and in his left hand he saw the sharp knife glimmer beneath the harsh white bathroom light. Both objects were covered in blood.

It's almost done, he thought.

After placing both the bat and the knife in a gray sports bag at his feet, he made his way to the cream countertop in the bathroom. He switched on one of the taps and splashed water on his face. The relief ephemeral, Grover needed more. He placed a plug in the washbasin and ran the tap.

That's better, he thought, watching the basin fill.

Satisfied, he closed the tap and dropped his head into the washbasin.

With his head submerged in the water, the cacophony of sound waves that traveled through the air ceased. Though he could not see that which had so often spoken to him during nightly hours, he found calm. Here, clarity reigned. Grover knew he had to complete the duty that had been bestowed upon him.

The hard part was done.

He cleaned himself as best as he could. Nodded at his reflection in the mirror and picked up the gray sports bag.

Passing the half-asleep security guard with ease, Grover made his way to the beach.

There, he walked toward the ocean. He noticed how strong the sea was and in his peripheral vision he saw waves crashing against rocks on his left. When he was near enough he opened the gray sports bag. He took out the first of the nine human hearts he had obtained in the conference room and tossed it into the sea.

When he had thrown the ninth and the last of the hearts that were in the bag, he smiled at his accomplishment. He looked to the rocks on his left and saw that no more waves attacked the land.

The sea was well fed for now.

Sea ate nine.



AMPUTEE

The ghost had no mirror
but your eyes,
& your eyes had cracks
that grew roses
reaching to the sky.

It had no limbs
but your phantom ones,
& felt them
running in the forest,
where it hovered
above the fog.

It had no voice
beyond your whispers
in the night
in that big house,
but that was more
than loud enough
to keep coming back
for cocktails.

—darrell lindsey



The Lover's Return

The pining of persistent dreams once tantalized with she
Abigail-named, halo-framed ere being torn from me,
but God! The wanton humour of fate,
the horror it turns of wishes made!
Never had I fathomed from her visage I would flee.

I but exhaled my yearning held in dreams begat of woe
when visiting the sepulchre that sang the reaper's ode.
I wished her back from 'neath the ground,
I wished for life where deaths abound,
but oh, the sick fulfillment fate exhumed from doom below...

'twas as I took my leave from scenes weed-choked and gloom-enwreathed
that at my back a strange susurrus seemed to newly seethe,
and turning to the chilling sound—
Perverse fate! The thing I found—
There stood beloved Abigail, rotting even as she breathed!

What of her once-gold hair remained hung green as sallow hay,
and where her azure eyes once shined writhed tenants of decay.
Vestigial lips forsook black teeth
that, bared, glared foul while underneath
groping, coathy bones did probe grotesqueries my way.



Unholy intervention that so horrified my hope!
Alas, that I should ever dread the form 'pon which I'd dote,
but seized my heart as I, stumbling, flew
from the staggering terror the cemet'ry threw
through cold, funibrial shrouds its hallowed tenements parbroke.

And God! Dear God! The cruelty that inspired her remains!—
which, 'come my ravenous shadow, shambled mad in their campaign.
A mockery of all she was,
blasphemy with Abby's jaws
gnashing and abashing Love, who far-removèd reigns.

And having sought me through the ure oft through we'd watch the moor,
that demon in my lover's corpse now scratches at my door.
Day and night I hear that wail
but no! 'tis not my Abigail!
'tis manifested Hades come to claim me from the floor...

—rodney wilder

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ODELL THE FIRST

by allen kopp

I got a letter from my mother, the first in five years. She told me she was dying and that I'd better come home. More of a command than a request. I was ready to toss the letter aside and ignore it, but I suppose I still had something in me like a conscience. I loaded all my worldly goods in my old station wagon, vacated my apartment, and headed north.

I drove the three hundred and fifty miles over two days, spending the night in a cheap roadside motel where the crickets wouldn't let me sleep. When I got home it was two in the a.m. I knew the doors would be locked so I let myself in by a window in the hallway off the kitchen, a trick I had learned when I was twelve years old. I hoped my mother wouldn't shoot me for a burglar as I made my way through the dark house and up the stairs to my old room. I took off my shoes and lay on the bed in my clothes without getting under the covers and soon I was asleep, more tired than I thought.

When I woke up the next morning and saw it was after ten, I started to get up and realized my mother was standing in the doorway looking at me.

"You're lucky I didn't shoot you," she said.

"If you had a telephone," I said, "I would have called."

"Don't want one," she said.

When I went down to the kitchen, she was cooking eggs and ham. I took my place at the table as if I hadn't been away for decades. She poured me a cup of tea—we were never coffee drinkers—and set a plate of food in front of me.

"You home to stay?" she asked.

"It depends," I said as I started to eat.

"On what? On whether there's anything in it for you?"

"Well, is there?"

"The house is in your name. When I'm gone, it's yours to do with as you please. You can sell it."

"Nobody would ever want it. It's too far from town."

"You can live here, then, as long as you live or as long as you want, and take care of *him*."

I looked at her as if I couldn't believe the words that were coming out of her mouth.

"That's no kind of life," I said. "I think I might get lonely."

"Get yourself a wife and have some children."

"*Phhft!*" I said, almost choking on the tea. "We'll forget you ever said that!"

"You know why I wanted you here," she said.

"Maybe you need to remind me."

"I'll be dead soon."

"I don't believe it. You'll outlive everybody I know."

"When the time comes, I have specific instructions. I've written them down. Call the funeral home in town. I want a simple service and I want to go into the ground beside your father."

"Ugh! That's no kind of talk for the breakfast table."

"I've never asked anything of you in your life," she said.

"I know."

"I wouldn't be asking you now if there was anybody else."

"That's so sweet!" I said.

"The main thing is Odell."

"I know."

"I want you to take care of him after I'm gone."

"Mother, I can't do that!" I said, setting the cup down with a clatter. "I'm not going to devote my whole life to taking care of a person who isn't my responsibility."

"I know it's asking a lot," she said, "but there's nobody else."

"There's *places* for people like him," I said.

"I know there are *places*," she said, "but I've always kept him with me. This is his home."

"I won't promise that I won't put him in a hospital for the criminally insane the minute your back is turned."

"Well, we'll see," she said mildly, and I knew the subject, for the time being at least, was closed.

After breakfast she took me down to the basement where Odell was kept. It was more like a room in the house now than the dungeon it had been before I went away. The chains were gone and had been replaced by bars on the windows. There was a regular bed with sheets and pillows instead of a mat on the floor, and other comforts, such as a table, a lamp and pictures on the wall, one of a horse standing in a field and another of a sunset over the ocean.

When Odell saw me, a spark in his eyes told me he remembered me.

"Brother?" he said.

"He's talking now?" I asked.

"Yes, he's learned a few words," mother said. "I think he seems less like an animal when he speaks."

He was sitting in an old upholstered chair by the bed. She went over to him and pulled him to his feet. He opened his mouth wide as if to receive food and she laughed.

"No, it's not time to eat," she said. "I want you to stand up and greet your brother."

Odell looked at me over mother's shoulder as I stepped closer to him. The sharp, fox-like face was the same, but his look had softened somehow. He was less like an animal now and more human-like. His face was shaved and his hair clipped and combed. The teeth had been filed down.

"You've done wonders with him!" I said, genuinely surprised.

"You don't think they could have done anything for him in one of those *places*, do you?" she said.

At mealtime she showed me how to prepare his food: one slice of bread and a piece of meat cut up into tiny pieces, served on a large tin plate. That's all he wanted, she said, three times a day.

When it was time to change the sheets on his bed or straighten up the room or groom Odell, she made me go down to the basement with her and watch how it was done. I knew she was preparing me to take over for her after she was gone, but I still wasn't ready to assume that responsibility.

"He likes to look at pictures in magazines," she said. "When you go to town, buy him a couple of new ones with lots of pictures. Or comic books. He loves comic books."

"Does he read them?"

"No, but he looks at the words and pretends he's reading."

"Teach him to read and maybe he can get a job teaching in a university."

"Read to him when you get the chance. He loves Dickens."

"*Dickens?*"

"Yes, we're about halfway through *The Old Curiosity Shop*."

"He's more human now than he was before, isn't he?"

"Yes, but he's still a wild animal. Be gentle with him or he'll rip your arm out of its socket."

"I'll certainly remember that!" I said.

A week later she died, simply and without fanfare, in her sleep. I think she knew exactly when it was going to happen, down to the minute. I hoped that when my time came, I could go with such grace and ease.

I called the funeral home and they took care of everything, including registering the death certificate. The graveside service was sparsely attended. Besides me, there was the minister to intone a couple of Bible verses, two funeral home men and two old ladies from town who probably never met my mother but who had certainly heard her name. As I left the cemetery, I felt relieved of a terrible burden and I planned, over the next week or so, to find a good place to put Odell, where he would be safe and comfortable and as happy as it was possible for him to be. Then I would move on.

I put the house on the market but I was sure nobody would want to buy it. There were too many rooms and it was too hard to heat in the winter. If nobody wanted to live there, somebody might open a haunted house and charge admission. I was sure I had seen a ghost or two walking the halls.

The day after mother's funeral I saw that Odell knew something was wrong. I took him his food and he ate it but finally he looked at me with his sad eyes and said, "Mother?"

I knew the moment would come when I would have to tell him. I sat down in the chair beside the bed and put my hands on my thighs—a gesture of trust, I hoped.

"Mother gone away," I said.

"Where?"

"Remember father?" I asked.

"Father?"

"Yes. Remember when he went away?"

"Father?"

"Well, mother has gone to be with father. One day we'll see her again."

"Not come back?"

"No, but you don't need to worry. I'm here and I'm going to take care of you."

"Mother!" he said, beginning to cry.

"I know," I said, "but I'm afraid you're just going to have to get used to the idea."

He began scowling at me whenever I went down to the basement, disappointed that I wasn't mother. He still remained manageable and docile, though. I took him some new magazines with pictures of animals and airplanes and he seemed happy with them. He ate all his food and when I told him he had to take a bath I filled the tub with hot water and he got in and washed himself all over.

Every evening when I took him his supper, he would gesture toward the barred window.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Me," he said. "Outside."

"I'm afraid you can't go outside. It's dangerous for you out there."

"No! I walk."

"You want me to take you for a walk?"

"No! Alone."

"How do I know you'd come back?" I ask.

"Come back!"

"What if you get into trouble?"

"No!"

His pleas to go outside at night became more emphatic and more-oft repeated. He had been locked up in the basement for I don't know how many years without respite. He wanted desperately to get out on his own, out of the basement, for just a little while, and who could blame him? It might make him more manageable when the time came for me to uproot him and place him in an institution. I decided we would try it one night and see how it went.

On a Friday evening in October I stayed with him while he ate his supper and when he was finished and pushed the plate aside I pulled him to his feet. When he looked at me questioningly, I put father's old jacket on him, an old fedora hat and some battle-scarred boots and then I pointed toward the door.

"Where?" he asked.

"You wanted to go for a walk," I said. "Then go for a walk."

"Alone?"

"Yes, but I have to tell you if you don't come back before morning you won't go out again."

"Morning," he said.

"And if you get into any trouble or cause any mischief, I'll say you got out on your own and I didn't know about it."

"My own."

I took him by the arm and propelled him toward the door. "Remember," I said. "Come back before daylight. And don't wake me up. I'll leave the door unlocked for you."

That night was the first cold night of autumn and I slept soundly. When I got up the next morning, the first thing I did was to go down to the basement to make sure Odell made it back. He was asleep. The jacket was draped neatly over the chair and the boots were side by side on the floor beside the bed.

He wanted to go out the next night and the night after that and I didn't object. I wondered where he was going but I knew if I asked him he wouldn't be able to tell me. I pictured him wandering around in the woods and fields, marveling at the wonders of nature, and running like a scared rabbit if he saw anybody.

On the fourth night, Monday, it was raining and I thought to keep him at home, but after he ate his dinner I knew he was planning on going out again and I hated to disappoint him. As he went out the door, I said, "Remember. You have to be back before the sun comes up." He nodded his head and I knew he understood what I was saying.

The next morning I woke up early, barely daylight, with a bad headache. I went downstairs to the kitchen to find some aspirin and when I looked out the window I saw Odell coming into the yard from the back pasture. He was carrying something in his arms. I ran out the door in my bathrobe.

"What is that?" I said, but by then it was apparent it was a limp body.

He laid his burden down on the flagstone walk and smiled at me. "Mother," he said.

"Oh, my god!" I said. "What have you done?"

"Mother!" he said again.

"That's not mother! You've killed somebody!"

It was a stout middle-aged woman with gray hair, bearing little or no resemblance to mother. She was considerably mauled and obviously dead. Her eyes were open and also her mouth, as if she had screamed in the middle of dying.

"Where did you find this woman?" I said.

He pointed vaguely over his shoulder and laughed.

"It's not funny!" I said. "Do you know what they'll do you when they find out you did this?"

"Hurt," he said.

"Yes, they'll hurt you. They'll do worse than that. They'll lock you up forever and ever and they won't let you come home again."

"No!" he said, his eyes filling with fear.

"Yes! That was a very naughty thing for you to do! People don't look kindly on that sort of thing!"

"Nobody see!"

"You'd better hope nobody saw or your goose is cooked!"

"Goose?"

"Never mind! Go into the shed and get a shovel and take this deep into the woods and bury it. Bury it deep. If they ever find out what you've done, they'll be very angry with you. Do you understand? Go get the shovel and take it into the woods and bury it where nobody will find it!"

While he ran off to the shed to get the shovel, I took an old horse blanket from the back porch and covered the woman's face and upper body with it so I wouldn't have to look at her eyes.

It rained all morning. Odell came home about eleven o'clock, covered with mud. He went to put the shovel away and when he came into the house I was waiting for him.

"Did you do what I said?" I asked.

"Bury deep," he said.

"Where?"

"Deep in woods. Nobody go there."

"Go to your room and get yourself cleaned up," I said.

For the rest of the day I expected a squad of police officers to show up at the door, but I saw no one. The next day I went into town to buy a newspaper, a carton of milk, and a loaf of bread.

"Did you hear about the mayor's wife?" the cashier asked as I paid for my purchases.

"No, I didn't," I said. "What about her?"

"She disappeared."

"Where?"

"She went out for a walk after supper and when she didn't come home the mayor called the po-lice."

"As he should have," I said.

"There's all kinds of rumors about what happened to her, but I'm not sure I believe any of them. What I do believe is that she had a lover."

"A lover?"

"Yeah. You know. A man from the city. Everybody knew she had been cheatin' on the mayor ever since they was married."

"No!" I said.

"Everybody's out looking for her now. When they find her, they'll bring her back

and it won't be pretty. The mayor will probably want a divorce now."

"I can't say I blame him."

I went out to my car and unfolded the newspaper. In a sleepy town where not much ever happens, the disappearance of the wife of an important man is big news. I could tell from the pictures that it was the same woman that Odell had brought home. All I could do now was pretend I knew nothing about it and hope that Odell had done a thorough and complete job of burying the body.

That evening after Odell ate his supper, I knew he was expecting to go out again, but I told him very emphatically that he could not. He became enraged and I knew he could easily break me in half if he wanted to. I didn't know how to control him when he was that way, so I locked him in for the night and went back upstairs. I hoped he would be better by the next day.

When I took him his breakfast in the morning, he glared at me with something like hatred because I wasn't mother.

"Mother?" he said.

"She's gone," I said with impatience, "and she's not coming back."

"Where?"

"She's dead, Odell. She's in heaven with the angels."

"I find," he said.

"No, you won't find her unless you go to Windy Hill Cemetery and dig up her grave."

"I dig," he said, reaching for the jacket and boots he had worn when he went out before.

"No, no, no!" I said. "You are in serious trouble! You murdered a woman that you thought was mother and now you have to keep yourself hidden away!"

"Go out!" he said, pointing to the door.

"You can't go out! All I can do for you now is to keep you hidden away. If they come for you, I'll have to give you up."

"Give me up?"

He came at me with his glaring hatred and I got out as fast as I could. Now I was afraid of him. I wanted to keep both my arms in their sockets, as well as my legs and other body parts.

I expected every day for *somebody* to come and take Odell away, but nobody ever came. At night I could hear him wailing with grief for mother and I covered my head with my pillow. I was glad that nobody else was close enough to hear.

I didn't know what I was going to do with him, but I believed I owed it to him to protect him as long as I could. I didn't want to see him face punishment in prison for something he didn't understand. I also didn't want to see the ignorant hillbillies in and around town try to take justice into their own hands and lynch him. I had heard of such things happening before.

After two weeks, I figured we were safe. The prevailing belief was that the mayor's wife had run off with her lover and might never be found. Because I was afraid of Odell, I no longer groomed him properly, bathed him or straightened up his room. I only opened his door wide enough to put his food inside.

One night my mother came to me in a dream. She stood beside my bed and told me to do what needed to be done. I didn't know what she meant at first and then I remembered she always kept a loaded pistol in the drawer of the table next to her bed. She was telling me to get the pistol and pop a cap into Odell's head from behind when he wasn't looking.

The gun was where I thought it would be, and fully loaded. I would only need one bullet, unless, of course, I decided to do away with myself after I did away with Odell. I took *The Old Curiosity Shop* with me when I took him his supper and had the gun in my pocket where he couldn't see it.

He seemed calm now and almost happy to see me. I read a few pages out loud while he ate his food and then I stopped reading and moved around behind him. I took the gun out and pointed it at the back of his head as he chewed. When he turned around and looked at me, I slid the gun back into my pocket. I knew I would never have the courage to shoot him. I would sooner be able to shoot myself.

"Mother," he said.

"You need a haircut," I said.

"Mother. Bring here."

"I'm going to teach you to string words together into sentences so we can have a real conversation," I said.

"Mother."

I went to bed early and about one o'clock I got out of bed and looked out the window. The yard and trees were beautiful in the moonlight. I got dressed without turning on a light, put on my boots and hat and went down to the basement and woke Odell. I helped him into his clothes and boots and then led him out to my car. We drove out to lonely Windy Hill Cemetery and dug up my mother's grave. He was much stronger than I was and, after we had dug down so far, he was able to break open the concrete vault with a sledgehammer and lift the coffin out of the ground. Together we carried it to the car. Then we smoothed out what had been her grave to make it seem undisturbed, except by maybe a groundhog or two.

I drove slowly with the headlights off and the back door partly open. Odell rode in the back to make sure the thing stayed steady. When we got home, we carried it in and set it on sawhorses in the basement where he would be able to look at it whenever he wanted. I opened the lid and he gasped with astonishment, his eyes filling with tears. She looked as if she would wake up any second and speak to us.



A Granite Sculptor

Midday sun burns.
An iron chisel plays
sad tones on a stone.
He enjoys prolonged
chiseling.
The granite conceives
from his tool-point,
giving birth to a god,
who will be plagued
in a prayer hall, with
endless demands, by
someone as his spouse.
Though no narcissistic
admiration, his
sculptures are marvelous.
Creativity is the sperm
of beauty, growing in
mind's womb.

He lights a candle at night.
While warming his palms
over the flame, red hue
reminds him of an old
bloodshed over his god.
A sculptor is never a culprit
behind a communal clash, yet
musing moths swarm his mind.

—fabiyas mv

Lovers in a Fresco

We're glorified in his fame's afterglow.
As his mind's depths and shades of indigo,
We're one, talking of Michelangelo.

Beneath Bartholomew's flayed skin is blue,
The artist's deep yearns fleshed with nude yellow.
Angels glory in his light's afterglow.

The snake coiled round Minos, as prayers flow,
Silence solemn as candles in their glow:
We breathe, dreaming of Michelangelo.

In our congregation blends the rainbow –
Oranges, hues of the virtuoso,
How he colored our delight's afterglow

And the grays, the whites, the body's shadow.
Peter, Paul, John, Lawrence and the widow
Of Joseph, Christ of Michelangelo –

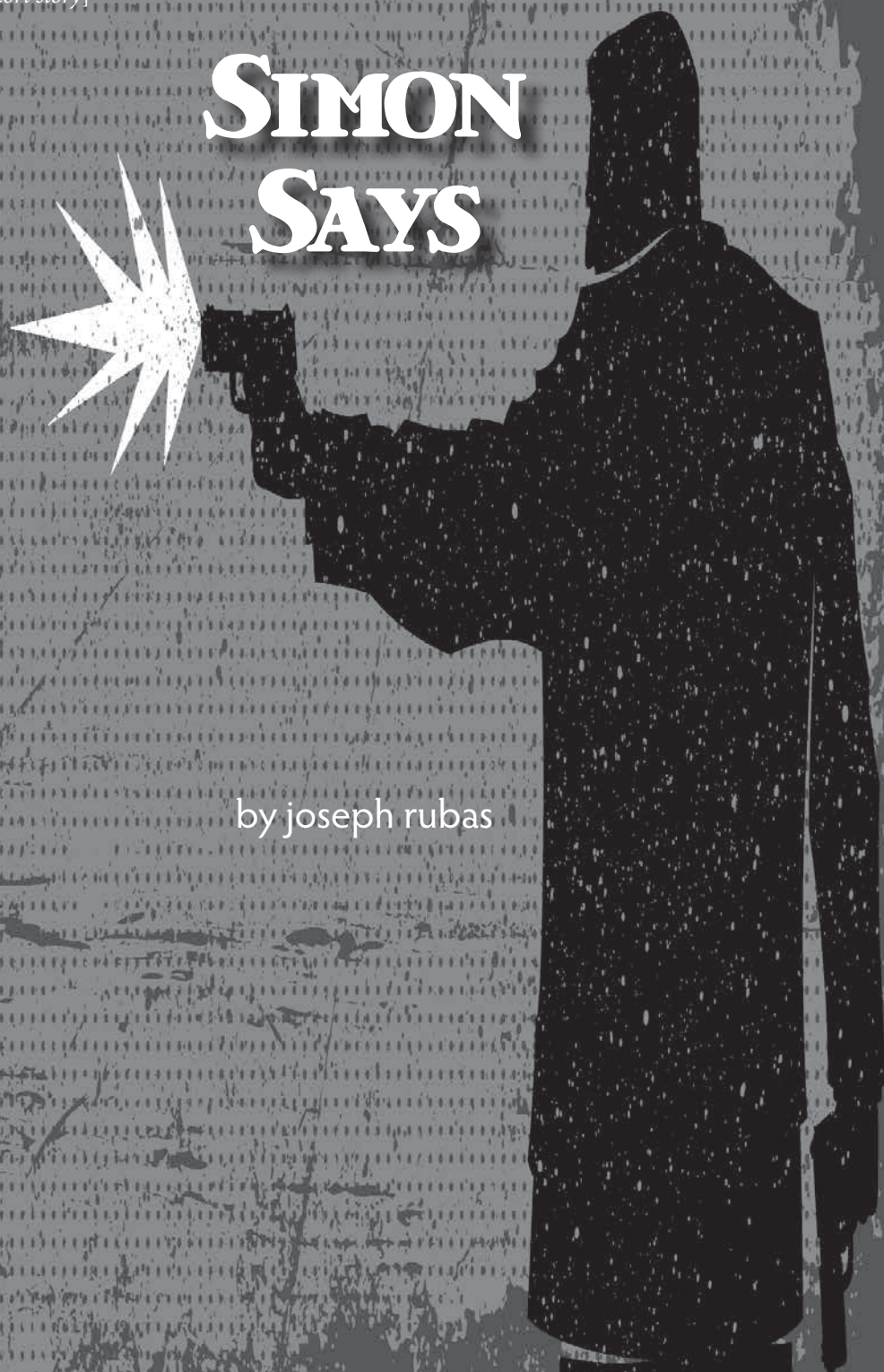
We sing the artist's desires, and we bow.
The rich, the poor, the colored come and go,
Gloried in the faith and its afterglow,
In God's house – dome of Michelangelo.

—jonel abellanos

[short story]

SIMON SAYS

by joseph rubas



The killer crossed into Montgomery County, Maryland, at midnight, fording the Potomac River on I-495 east of Bear Island. Typically one of the busiest highways in the D.C. area, it was nearly deserted now, the headlights few and far between, belonging mainly to truckers and nightshifters on their way to work. Several miles north, the previously wooded landscape flanking the road gave way to the first of many strip malls. Restaurants, gas stations, and cheap motels followed, their presence denoted by tall neon signs glowing meekly in the night.

At 12:12 a.m., he pulled the car off the highway and onto one of the surface streets marking the western edge of Bethesda. He turned left and found himself on a wide lane boasting a thousand bars and late night eateries. He parked at the curb across from Club 22, a place popular with college students, and killed the headlights.

For nearly an hour he watched the front door. A bouncer stood guard, his arms crossed over his burly chest. The line was thick when he pulled up, but after a half hour it began to shrink as people gave up hope of getting in and left. The killer lit a cigarette and listened to the radio. He was invisible to them.

The way he was invisible to everyone.

It had always been that way, he reflected: He was always invisible, always forgotten. When he spoke, no one listened; when he cried, no one heard. His parents made his choices for him until he was married, and then his wife took over. His life was not his own; he had no say. Someone else told him when to eat; when he could shower; what he could do; what he could watch on TV. He was completely and utterly powerless.

Until now.

He grinned as he imagined the days ahead. They would listen *all* right; they would all listen. He would hold power over everyone in the Beltway.

1:00 a.m. The killer climbed into the back seat and crouched down. Holding the rifle in his hands, he watched as the last few people drifted from the entrance, their hopes and dreams of getting into Club 22 shot down in flames. Ain't it a shame?

Still the bouncer remained. The killer eyed him closely. Black and bald, a black T-shirt stretched tightly over his barrel chest, he reminded him of that actor, the one from *The Green Mile*. Clarke something. He was also in *The Whole Nine Yards* with Matthew Perry, who was in *Friends*. The killer never liked *Friends*, but he *did* like *Almost Heroes*, which had Perry and Chris Farley.

The bouncer stood impassively in front of the door, gazing into nothingness. How was that for a job? Standing there all night like a guard at Buckingham Palace. At least the bouncer could move; the palace guards couldn't. They could only stand there like furniture, seen but not heard. Just like him.

The killer rolled down the window and rested the rifle on the door. He closed one eye and peered through the scope: A cross appeared over the bouncer's wide chest. The bullet would enter, tear through the bouncer's insides, and mushroom out the back, leaving a giant crater. There was little chance he would survive.

Sucking in a deep breath, the killer exhaled slowly and lined up his shot.

Unmoving, the bouncer.
Finger on the trigger.
Now or never.
Make them listen.
Tell them what to do.
And when to do it.
The killer fired.

Andy Levin parked the Crown Vic at the curb behind a Montgomery County squad car and cut the engine. A uniform talked to a crowd of people gathered around the entrance of Club 22 while another strung yellow police tape.

In the passenger seat, Thomas Stone unbuckled his safety belt with a sigh. "Why does it always have to be *our* shift?"

The majority of murders in the area occurred late at night or early in the morning. Andy didn't know how it was in other cities, but he suspected D.C. was no different.

"They come out at night," Andy said, opening his door.

"Who?"

"The freaks."

It was early October, and the night was cool. Andy pulled his coat closed at the throat and started toward the crowd.

"Detective!"

Andy looked toward the street; Sargent Bob Mathews was walking toward him, one hand raised in the air. A tall, rail-thin man, Mathews had always reminded Andy of Alan Rickman. They had the same sort of face: Ugly.

"What'cha got?"

By the time he reached Andy, Tom had come over as well.

"Found it lying in the street," Mathews said, handing it to Andy.

It was a brick.

Tied to it with string was a neatly folded piece of paper with the word: POLICE written on the front.

"Looks like our guy left us a note," Mathews said.

Heart beginning to inexplicably pound, Andy ripped off the string, letting the brick fall to the pavement:

DEAR POLICE:

I WANT TO PLAY A GAME. HAVE YOU EVER HEARD OF SIMON SAYS? I TELL YOU WHAT TO DO AND YOU DO IT OR YOU'RE OUT. RELEASE TO THE PRESS. SIMON SAYS WEAR A RED SHIRT.

Andy looked over the paper at Mathews and Tom. Cast in the murky light of a nearby streetlamp, their faces were dark and craggy.

"What does it say?" Tom asked.

Andy handed him the paper.

Tom read it and looked up. "Jesus Christ," he whispered.

"Something tells me we aren't dealing with a run-of-the-mill gang shooting," Mathews said.

Andy sighed. "No. We aren't." He glanced at the crowd talking to the cop. "Anyone see anything?"

Mathews shook his head. "They were all inside when it happened. The guy in the tank top just happened to walk outside and found the vic."

The guy Mathews was referring to stood with his scrawny arms folded. He was tall, thin, and young, maybe twenty-two, with dirty blonde hair. His tank top was bright pink with U MAD BRO? written across the chest in white. College kid.

"Go grab him," Andy said, and Tom nodded. Five minutes later, they were standing by the ass end of the Crown Vic, the kid fidgeting and looking nervous.

"I went outside to smoke, and I saw him laying there."

"You place the call?" Andy asked.

"Yeah," he said with a nod. "He was dead by the time I found him. Am I in trouble?"

"Should you be?" Tom asked.

The kid shook his head. His name was Blake and he was in college. When he was sure they'd gotten everything they could from him, Andy let him go.

An hour later, Captain Bernard Croner let them into his office off the bullpen. It was a wide room decorated with filing cabinets, potted plants, and bookshelves crammed with reference works. Framed awards and commendations dotted the beige walls.

Croner was a short man with graying hair and a weasel face. His beady little eyes were heavy with sleep.

"This better be good," he said tightly.

Croner had been Captain for less than a year, having taken over for Eugene Chizmar, the universally beloved former accountant who retired after a nasty fall on ice. Unlike Chizmar, Croner was generally hated.

"We got something big," Andy said.

He told him about the letter; before leaving they turned it over to the CSI team in the hopes that they could get usable prints from it.

When he was done, Croner leaned back in his chair, his hard face contorted with something like concern. "You think this guy's a serial killer?"

Andy shrugged. "Who else leaves notes like that at the scene of a crime?"

"Something trying to throw us off their trail," Croner pointed out.

Andy nodded. He had a point. "Maybe. But if this guy's serious, he's threatening to kill anyone who doesn't play along with him. If we don't release it..."

"He's going to kill anyway," Croner said. "If he's serious."

"So what do we do?"

"Nothing," Croner said as though it were painfully obvious. "If this guy's for real, he's looking for glory. *I'm* not gonna give it to him."

Andy opened his mouth to argue, but closed it again. Croner was right, at least

part of the way. If the guy was a serial killer, he was obviously the kind who got something from taunting the cops. Whether they released the letter to the press, someone else was going to die. On the other hand, the people had a right to know.

"...if again, we'll go ahead and tell the press," Croner was saying.

"All right," Andy said, getting up. Outside, in the bullpen, Tom shook his head.

"I don't like this," he said.

"Yeah?" Andy asked. "Neither do I."

The killer waited for nightfall with the impatience of a child waiting for Santa Claus. For a good part of the day, he sat by the window overlooking the sun-dappled Potomac: On its distant bank, buildings nestled along sandy shores.

Rising promptly at 5:30, the killer went into the living room so as not to wake his wife and turned on the morning news. The anchors, a blonde woman and an older man, reported the murder of the bouncer, but said nothing about his letter, which distressed him. It was early, however. There was time.

When his wife left for work at 7:00, the killer made breakfast and ate it by the window. She was mad at him for leaving the house last night, but he didn't care. He stopped caring a long time ago.

At noon, the killer got in the car and drove into town. He checked the P.O. Box they kept at the post office: The October issue of *Time* was in. Donald Trump's face filled the cover. *THE NEXT PRESIDENT?* the legend below wondered. The killer took it out to the car and read most of it right there in the parking lot. When he was done, he started back home, taking a roundabout route that killed thirty minutes. At home, he turned on The Weather Channel and absently watched forecasts for distant cities. When he could stand it no longer, he switched over to NBC. Dr. Phil was interviewing a woman whose twelve-year-old daughter was sexually active. The killer lay on the couch and dozed during most of it.

He woke to the sound of the front door opening. The bitch was home.

She didn't speak to him until an hour later. "You didn't do the dishes?" she asked.

He knew he was forgetting something.

Here it comes.

"You're home all day while *I* work, and every day I come home and nothing's done. You just sit here on your ass..."

The killer snapped.

Screaming, he grabbed the bitch by her throat and shoved her against the wall. Her eyes went wide with surprise. She thrashed, but he was stronger. He let go when she was limp and dead.

On the news, nothing about his note.

They weren't listening.

Rage filled him.

At dusk, he got into the car and drove back into Montgomery County.

For several hours he drove the streets of various towns and cities, his rage building. He kept changing stations on the radio but could find nothing about him

or his note. It was Kayne, Taylor Swift, Selena Gomez, Ariana Grande, Nicki Minaj. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

At the corner of Bethesda's Eighth and Porter Streets, the killer spotted a large group of people waiting for the light to change. Black, white, men, women. The killer leaned over, got his pistol from the glovebox, and pulled to a stop. They would see. They would all see.

Rolling down the window, the killer fired without aiming. A woman fell, and another screamed.

Five, six, *click-click*. Three people on the ground, four more scattering into the night. Cars whizzed by.

Shaking, the killer dropped the gun on the passenger seat and drove off. Fifteen minutes later, he found a payphone in front of an auto shop. He deposited his money and dialed a number he had memorized.

"ABC news? My name is Simon..."

Andy Levin stood on the corner of Eighth and Porter, his hands on his hips. Two sheet-covered figures lie sprawled on the sidewalk, while another vic, this one alive, was being loaded into an ambulance.

Three people sat against a wrought iron fence bordering a cemetery. They were uninjured.

"Tell me what happened," Andy asked.

One, a black man in a white T-shirt, spoke, while the others, a white woman and a white man, nodded. "We was tryin to cross the street when this guy pulled up and started blastin."

"Did you see his face?" Tom asked.

Looking up, the black man shrugged. "Kinda. He was a white guy. That's all I saw"

"What was he driving?"

"Black Lincoln," the white woman said.

Tom jotted all of this down in a notepad. Shaking his head, Andy went off to find Sargent Mathews. Before he could, however, his cellphone buzzed.

"Yeah?"

"It's Croner. He went to the press."

Andy didn't understand. "Who?"

"Simon," Croner said, his voice dripping with contempt. "It's all over the 11 o'clock news. ABC."

When Croner hung up, Andy used his phone to access the Internet. Sure enough, on the ABC affiliate site, the top story was: *SIMON SAYS WEAR A SILLY HAT.*

Below that: *Serial Killer At Large in Montgomery County, Makes Demands.*

Back at the station, Croner was waiting by their desk. He looked angry.

"Great," Tom whispered. "Someone pissed in his dinner."

"He called," Croner said.

Andy knew instantly whom he was talking about. "What did he say?"

Croner chuckled sourly. "Simon says hold a press conference."

Andy sighed. "Are you?"

"Do I have a choice?"

No, Andy thought, *he didn't. The ball was in Simon's park now.*

"I can't do it now," Croner said, raising his arms to indicate the nearly deserted bullpen. "Tomorrow, first thing."

"For what it's worth we know what he's driving."

Andy told Croner about the Lincoln.

"Search the DMV database; I want the license plate number of every black Lincoln in three counties. Hell, three *states*."

Andy nodded.

The killer watched the morning news with a sense of breathless wonder. The Captain of the Bethesda PD stood behind a podium and read what he had told him to read exactly:

"My name is Simon. If you know what's good for you, you will listen to me. I have already killed several people. I will kill more. But I will kill only those who don't listen to me. Simon says wear a silly hat. If you do this, you will be safe."

At noon, the news showed video of people wearing silly hats. A city bus driver in a sombrero; a waitress on her way to work in a fuzzy pink top hat; a jogger with a visor turned upside down like Jamie Kennedy's in *Malibu's Most Wanted*.

The killer was giddy with excitement. They were listening.

But there were others. In each shot he saw people in the background, their heads bare. The reporter talked to one, an older man in sunglasses, who said that he wasn't afraid. "The day we start listening to people like that is the day we stop being America," he said, impassioned. "ISIS says infidels should die; you see anyone hanging themselves because of that?"

Bastard!

They would see.

In fact, he wouldn't wait until night. He would do it now.

An hour later, on I-495 outside Montgomery County, the killer caught a man walking along the shoulder of the road with nothing on his head. There was a car two miles back with its hazard lights on. He wondered if he came from there.

Not that it mattered.

Slowing, the killer pulled onto the shoulder. "Need a ride?" he asked through the open passenger window.

The man was there, bending down. "Yeah, I just need to get to..."

It happened quickly. The gun was in his hand, rising, firing. The man fell back, and the killer hit the gas. Cars were streaming by. They saw. They all saw. Hahahahaha!

He took the first exit he came to, and then a right, crossing over the interstate on a bridge. Looking out over the highway, he could see cars pulling to the shoulder, probably to help that hatless fuck. Try as you may, try as you might!

At a payphone, he called ABC. "I just killed a man for not wearing a hat. Tell people to listen to me. I'm not joking."

He hung the phone up and got back in the car. For a while, he drove aimlessly through one town after another, the scenery varying little. Shopping centers, McDonald's, Best Westerns: The American Dream gone bleak. Parking lots as far as the eye could see.

At 3:00 p.m., the killer found himself on a shaded suburban street flanked by big white houses and picket fences. The radio was playing Adele.

He was about to get off in search of the interstate when a light-skinned black boy, roughly fifteen or so, appeared from behind a bus, coming toward him. He was wearing a gray hoodie and a backpack.

No hat, the killer saw.

Kids.

They never think of their mortality.

The killer parked at the curb. When the boy was close, the killer called out to him. "Excuse me! I need some help!"

The kid came toward the window. The killer raised his gun and fired.

The shot took the kid in the chest, lifting him off his feet and flinging him back. "No hat!" the killer screamed. He slammed on the gas and the car rocketed down the street. "No hat! No hat! Simon says!"

A group of kids were walking down the opposite side of the road. They, too, were wearing backpacks. The killer stuck his head out the window. "Listen to Simon!" he screamed. He pointed the gun but didn't fire. The kids screamed and scattered.

At another payphone two towns over, Simon called ABC again. Thinking of the waitress's hat, he said, "Simon says, for tomorrow, wear pink or die."

Andy Levin sat numbly at the desk. Next to him, Tom read the latest news bulletin from his phone. "Two shot, one dead. The first vic was walking along the side of the interstate when Simon pulled up and shot him. The second was walking home from school. ABC says he's sixteen."

"Dead?" Andy asked, and realized that he was trembling.

"Critical condition," Tom said. "Neither was wearing a hat."

Neither crime had occurred inside Montgomery County, so it all was outside of their jurisdiction. Andy didn't know whether that was a good thing or not. Sure, they didn't have to deal with it, but Andy *wanted* to be on the case, wanted to be the one to slap the cuffs on the son of a bitch, or, better yet (though he would never say so) put a bullet in his brain.

"No one's safe," Andy said presently, leaning back in his chair.

"Everyone wearing hats today was safe," Tom pointed out.

Andy sighed.

On the computer screen, an endless list of black Lincolns stared back at him. There were sixteen thousand in the beltway area, from Baltimore to Annapolis, D.C. to Waldorf. So many. More, in fact, than he thought possible.

"There's gonna be a taskforce," Tom said. "No doubt about that."

Tom was a detective during the Beltway Sniper shootings of 2002. The snipers, Lee Boyd Malvo and John Allen Muhammad, killed nearly a dozen people across the area, going as far south as Fredericksburg, Virginia. Tom said that the interagency taskforce that popped up included detectives from every area hit. It looked like the same sort of thing would happen now. The highway murder occurred in Frederick County, while the boy was shot in Loudon County, Virginia. Three counties.

"Wonder if we'll be on it," Andy said.

Tom shrugged. "We dealt with the first two killings, so I don't see why not."

From what the news was saying, the killer was operating in broad daylight in front of countless witnesses. That suggested to Andy a disordered mind. A cold, calculating person would actively work to strike when there were the fewest number of witnesses around as possible. The Beltway Snipers struck during the day as well, but their M.O. was different. They sniped from the trunk of their car. Simon was just pulling up to people on the fucking interstate and opening fire. The snipers came, struck, and went without anyone knowing what the hell was going on. Simon was boldly strutting his stuff for all to see.

Of course, Simon *wanted* to be seen, which made him easier to catch.

It also made him dangerous.

Andy said as much to Tom.

"The first two happened at night, though," he pointed out.

"Maybe he's losing his grip."

"That quick?"

Andy shrugged. "All it takes sometimes is one little taste."

"Levin, Stone," Croner called from his office. "In here. Now."

Sighing, Tom got to his feet. "Let's see what his highness wants."

In Croner's office, his highness looked tired and worn out. Dark bags hung under his eyes and his face was the color of pizza dough. "I just got off the phone with the boys in Frederick. Someone got the Lincoln's license plate. It's registered to a Toyota Camry owned by a guy named David Garry."

"Toyota?" Andy asked. "Then it's not a Lincoln."

"No, it's definitely a Lincoln. Fifty people say it was. We're thinking our guy switched the plates."

"We gotta find this Garry guy, then."

"Bingo. He lives in a place called Dahlgren. It's in Virginia. The local cops are going out to his house as we speak."

Since the first letter came back clean of prints, this was all they had.

"They guy in Frederick said that after the Loudon shooting, Simon yelled out the window at some passing kids and they saw his face. There's a sketch. They should be faxing it over soon."

"Good," Andy said.

"I also got word he called ABC a second time."

Andy cocked his head. He knew he called after the highway murder, but again?

"He wants everyone to wear pink tomorrow."

"Pink?" Tom asked.

Croner nodded. "He says wear pink or die."

In the bullpen, Andy said, "I wonder how many people will actually do it."
"I don't know," Tom replied. "Hopefully everyone."

The killer spent the night chopping his wife's body into a hundred little pieces. He worked in the garage, using first a handsaw and then, when that broke, a chainsaw. He quickly discovered that while chainsaws are wicked killing machines in the movies, they suck in real life: The blood and bits of skin eventually clogged it up, and he was forced to use yet another handsaw. Luckily he had several.

When he was done, he packed her remains in a suitcase and buried it in the backyard: Woods flanked the house on either side, so no one could see him.

The moon was full and the night crisp, but by the time he was done, he was covered in sweat. He showered, shaved, and made himself a Hungry Man dinner. Boneless chicken, corn, and mashed potatoes with a brownie on the side for later. As he ate the chocolate square, he thought of his wife. She *loved* brownies. He didn't hate her. In fact, he hoped there were brownies in hell.

After dinner, he went into the living room and stretched out on the couch. An old episode of *Breaking Bad* was on AMC, and he fell asleep to it, waking only once, his neck stiff.

In the morning, he turned on the news and waited through a segment where a reporter talked to the owners of a no kill animal shelter. When the scene finally cut back to the studio, the blonde started talking about him. The video showed pink *everywhere*. Pink hats, pink shirts, pink armbands, pink bandanas.

This was amazing. The entire Beltway area was doing what he said. He finally had power; he finally had a voice; he was no longer the one taking orders, he was the one *giving* them. It was overwhelming.

Where do I go from here?

The sky's the limit.

At noon, the killer left the house and drove north. An hour and a half later, he was in Baltimore. Tall, gray buildings loomed over the narrow, dusky streets. Even here, the very edge of the Beltway, people wore pink.

Everyone except for the meter maid ticketing a brown truck at a curb. She was wearing an orange and yellow vest over a black uniform. Slowing, the killer rolled down the passenger window and opened fire.

The plates on David Garry's Toyota wound up being registered to a woman named Sherry Goldsmith. The car they belonged to was a black Lincoln.

As luck would have it, Goldsmith lived on the very eastern fringe of Montgomery County near Silver Springs. Andy drove out there past noon with Tom in the passenger seat.

The house, which overlooked the Potomac River, was surrounded by forest on all sides. Approaching on the long driveway, Andy felt a sense of dread.

He was certain that this was Simon's house.

When they knocked, no one answered.

“What do we do?” Tom asked.

Without speaking, Andy went down the stairs and rounded the western wall of the house.

“What are you doing?”

Andy peeked in one of the windows along the wall, but it was curtained.

Back in front, Andy said, “We’ll wait.”

But they didn’t have to.

Serendipitously, a black Lincoln appeared at the bottom of the driveway. Tom turned as it started up.

“That him?”

“Must be.”

The killer saw the two men standing by the porch and knew in an instant that they were cops.

He knew even before he started that he would eventually be captured. They all were. He didn’t care. He would enjoy being the center of attention.

But not now. He wasn’t ready.

What do I do?

Kill them.

He was almost to the house by then. The men were standing at the bottom of the stairs leading to the porch, watching him. Gritting his teeth, he stamped on the gas, and the car took off with a jolt. The men, screaming, jumped out of the way, and the Lincoln slammed into the stairs, the front tires jumping off the ground.

Fuck!

The gun was in the center console. He grabbed it, opened the door, and tumbled out.

“Freeze!”

One of the men was standing to his right, his gun pointed at him.

The killer raised his own gun and fired.

The cop jerked and went down.

Just then, something punched him in the left arm. He turned to find the second cop circling around the back of the Lincoln.

“Drop the weapon!”

The killer looked at his arm. Blood gushed forth.

The killer raised his gun.

The cop fired.

The bullet took him in the throat. He fell back against the Lincoln, his chest and neck on fire, and slid to the ground, the gun dropping from his hand.

Right before the world went black, he spoke one last time, gurgling through his ruined throat. “Simon says see you in hell.”

It was witty. It was quote-worthy.

He died with a smile on his lips.

Tom Stone's vest absorbed the round. His breath was knocked out of him, but that was all.

"William J. Goldsmith," Croner told them later in his office. "Forty-two. Mentally ill. His mother lives in West Virginia."

Goldsmith had lived with his mother until he was thirty, when he married Sherry Carswell. From what they heard later, Goldsmith's mother was a controlling woman who domineered her son. Sherry Carswell wasn't much better.

Goldsmith was diagnosed with schizophrenia when he was fifteen. He took medication for it until he met Sherry. "She said her love could cure him," Mrs. Goldsmith said later. "Lot of good that did."

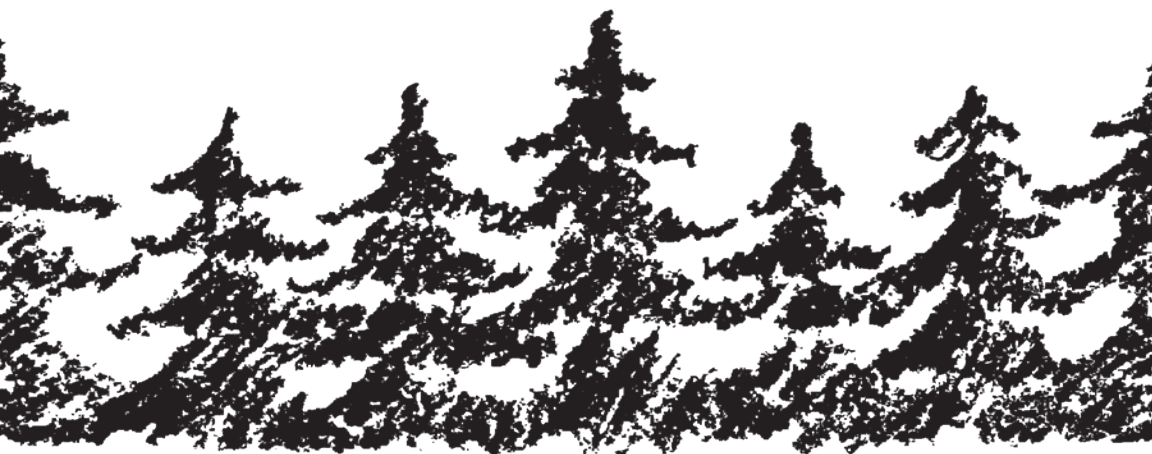
"He wanted to be in charge for once," a famous psychiatrist said on CNN.

That made sense.

Andy was placed on administrative leave, as was the custom for an officer who kills a suspect in the line of duty.

He used that time to read, watch TV, and play games.

But *not* Simon Says.



[poetry]



UNDER HUNTER'S MOON

Dye the dark sky in colours.
They are storm, coming.
Ravens churning.
Tempest building.
In a strange and distracted light.
Clouds unfurling into an immense volcanic sky.

When the cry comes, shrill, elsewhere and insistent.
When the unchained dogs howl, biting into the drive of
the otherworld's breathe.

When Woden rides the horde.
Women, bare chested, hair streaming in the
screaming breath of their horses.
And the multitude of the dead
follows behind.

The Hunter's Moon lights the silence.
I think that I see you in the sky.
Riding wild, on nightness mount.
Cold clatter of horse beats against nothing.
In a Sanguine sky.
This consecrated pursuit.
This illuminating madness
The roar of the God goes by
As in death you hunt for something you never found
in your life.

—kelda crich

First published in *Eternal Haunted Summer*

Witch's Brew

Horn of goat, and heart of rat,
tooth of hound, and ear of bat,
mandible of spider, and head of snake,
wing of hawk, and entrails of drake,
blood of lamb, and talon of crow
. . . with a score of writhing maggots sitting pretty in a row . . .
Gather all together and then next place
into a dark cauldron filled with the alchemist's secret base
before incanting the grimoire's spells anew
while stirring the bubbling contents of the witch's brew.

—allan rozinski



The Diary Entry

It's written in a hand very familiar to me. I read the first line:

My life changed forever seven months ago. The trigger event occurred at the Stardust Night Club, when she slowly walked to the table of a stranger, turning so that he had the best of all possible views, while she smiled at me.

It's a diary entry written by my grandfather. He has just passed away and as the executor of his will, I am tasked with going through his private papers. He has shown me previously where to find the worn wooden box now sitting in front of me, on the office desk I have here in my home study. These yellow sheets of paper are from 47 years ago, and are among the more standard financial and personal papers I expected to find inside the box.

My grandfather's words continue:

I am still trying to unravel what went wrong. Everything had gone better than I could have hoped for up until.... I'd been nice to her, polite and considerate, and she told me that first night we met that I was a nice man, compared to the others....ah, the others.

But that first night...that first night, she came to my table and asked me to dance. She grabbed my hand and pulled me to the dance floor. The band played Beatles and Rolling Stones. Oh, how she could dance—a real fire. Further along in the evening, she introduced me to her friends—new people in my life who really liked me. Then, just like that, she asked me to take her home—to my place. It was so simple and natural. The lovemaking was...I can't describe it. She touched me in places I'd never

by george garnet

been touched. When we finished, she gave me a gentle massage while sitting on top of me naked. She was exquisite—a gem. I thought I had found an angel.

As we lay there afterward we just talked—about anything and everything! She was not only beautiful, she was intelligent. For a few moments I thought I must be dreaming. Here was this incredible girl in my stuffy, tiny studio—naked, her golden skin smooth like velvet, her sexy little body ... Mmmm.

Then just before she left the next morning she broke the news to me. She was married. She didn't want to fall in love with anyone. She wanted to stay married. I was a one-night stand and nothing else. That's fine, I tried to fool myself into thinking at the time.

By the following week, however, I was searching for her in nightclubs. For three nights I looked. I didn't find her until that fatal night of the 26th in the same place I had first met her, the Stardust. She saw me but didn't acknowledge my presence. Even worse was the cruelty I've already spoken of...shaking her ass at that stranger while looking at me. Obviously, the man was only a stranger to me, because he groped her and she started laughing. I tried to talk to her when I managed to get close to her near the bar. I touched her shoulder to draw her attention, but she pulled away. Something was very wrong. She was completely different from the way she had been on that first night together.

Bitter, I tried to talk to some other women there, even asked a few for a dance. I was met by unfriendly, ill-mannered responses, making me feel worse.

I decided to go home. There was no point of hanging around, and the place was suffocating me. I made my way out to the car. I had parked close to the path leading to the Pokies area. I leaned against the door and took a deep breath of fresh air outside.

I looked up at the stars. It relaxed me. A dark moonless night. It was 2.00 a.m.; the music from the club made a low rumble.

Suddenly I heard footsteps on the path and a woman's voice.

"Keep your hands off of me." I looked at the path. Meters away I saw her with the stranger, who was now holding her forearm and leading her along.

He told her that she was behaving like a slut. "Did you have to grab his ass on the dance floor?" the man growled, "Too liberated, huh," he continued and pulled her back. I could see her little petite body swirling around him like a toy. She fought back and tried to break free.

They were fairly close to me but couldn't see me. The path that they were fighting on was deserted.

She yanked off, freeing her hand.

"Go away, or I'll yell for help," she threatened.

The man turned, squeezed one 'Bitch' between his teeth and started wobbling toward the other end of the building, where the entrance was still brightly lit. Arriving at the door, he kicked it open and disappeared inside.

I watched her closely, just meters away. She was staring at her bruised forearm that had been squeezed by the man and mumbled: "Animal..." as she walked slowly away.

I don't know why, but I followed. I only wanted to help. Trying not to startle her, I asked if she were hurt, but she swung around and yelled at me. She told me to get away, leave her alone, to never come near her again.

She pulled farther away, turning and taking a step toward the club entrance. I saw her half-naked back, her hairline, and the thin delicate neck that I once gently caressed.

And suddenly it went terribly wrong. Something exploded inside me. I couldn't see anything. A white light of rage blinded my eyes, and explosions of rejection filled my ears. My hands jumped forward, grabbed flesh with a tight hatred I had never before experienced, as if to forever erase the feeling of mistreatment. They squeezed until what I held began slipping down onto the path, out of my grasp.

I felt empty. Tired, My hands were shaking. The explosions that had consumed my eyes and ears faded. My eyes began to refocus and in the darkness recognized the brightly lit entrance of the club, the path curling toward me. Looking down I saw her body at my feet. She was no longer a woman, but an unmoving broken doll, her eyes open and frozen in horror.

The sight shocked me. I was paralysed as I fought acceptance of the reality. A dreadful reality. My reality.

A loud bang from inside the night club shook me out of that mental and physical paralysis and forced me to act. Before panic overtook me I quickly looked around. The path was deserted. There was no one in front of the main entrance, and no one in front of the Pokies. I quickly kneeled, scooped up the little body in my arms, and walked briskly to my car. I opened the back door and carefully put her body on the back seat. I looked around and quietly closed the door, slid behind the wheel and

turned the engine on. My foot rebelled against my brain, and unable to resist the panic any longer, I slammed on the gas pedal. The car jumped forward away from the curb, and I didn't look back. I drove as fast as I dared until I reached the freeway, and ten minutes later I turned off at Hall Road. I reduced speed and tried to relax.

I parked in front of my unit. I turned around in my seat and reached for the little body. Stupidly and in vain, I searched for a pulse. I tried to gather my thoughts. I was too scared to call the police.

I quietly got out of the car, surveying the neighbourhood as I did so. Five minutes later, the little body lay on my sofa once again, but not as I remembered. I stared at her for a long time, then brought a blanket out of the linen closet and covered her. With this action came a decision. It was going to be a long night. The only thing that helped was the deep ditch that I had dug the day before, as I was working on moving three big Yuccas to the right side of my veranda. The little body wrapped in the blanket fit perfectly in the cold earthen hole. I covered her first with a thick layer of soil, and then moved the three Yucca plants on top, covering the makeshift grave. A short time later I was back on my couch, wishing I was in the grave beside her. That thought put me to sleep.

The next morning I woke and hoped everything had been a bad dream. I wanted to talk to someone. I wanted to tell them what I'd done. But I was afraid. So I decided to write my thoughts down.

My eyes read the last line on the yellow sheets just as my wife enters the room, and I jump.

"Are you okay; everything all right?" she asks.

"I was just sorting through grandpa's papers," I say and noiselessly slide the sheets into the desk drawer.

My wife walks over and puts her arm around me. Then she continues with the story I've heard of how she never knew her grandma, who disappeared when she was young. A petite woman whose body was never found. She disappeared one night while out with friends at some kind of a dance or night club. She had gone out and never returned. They had suspected kidnapping, but couldn't prove anything. After a pause my wife continues: "The other day Mum told me something I didn't know. All that happened 47 years ago."



[poetry]

Vincent's Ear

Miraculously preserved like a saint's body,
silvering since I touched it for the first time.
No longer flesh, no doubt, its luster
the sheen of transformations –
musings of lights and its surfaces.
The letter says it was taken from Theo's possession.
The voice that wakes is like a curse,
whispers of tales I don't want to know
as though it hears, and it reveals

—jonel abellanos



PHANTOMS + GYPSIES

Phantoms try to pass through a wormhole
(the size of a needle's eye)
where gypsies with golden hair
play burning lyres
& sing themselves beautifully throatless.
They wonder if there's a scant chance
they can become more
than a wisp of music
in the throb of time
bobbing before them
like rotten apples
in a cosmic circus.
I did not tell them that the ringmaster
rode the last camel out, backward,
scores of suns ago.

—darrell lindsey

[short story]

I KNOW YOU

by cindy knoebel

James fights his way out of the dream. His arms are thrashing as if in the throes of drowning, feet racing on a treadmill of air, eyes straining to open against the glue of deepest sleep. Sitting up, gasping, he fumbles for the lamp beside the bed and flicks it on, revealing the white tangle of sheets around him. The rest of the room falls away into gray and black, and James can just make out the dim contours of furniture huddled against walls and in corners like robbers, the faint outline of the door across the room a distant escape hatch.

James takes a deep ragged breath, then another. He can smell himself, the acrid smell of fear. He puts both palms on his sweat-slicked chest and feels his heart hammering like it's trying to break through. He envisions the bloody knot bursting through bone and skin into his hands. He gags, tasting vomit at the back of his throat. He lurches to the bathroom.

At the sink, he turns the cold water on full force, splashes his face and neck, the water streaming down his bare arms and pooling on the tiled floor around his feet. He squirts toothpaste directly from the tube into his mouth, using his tongue to smear the gel around teeth and gums, trying to dispel the rancid film that coats them. Cupping water into his hands, he laps it greedily.

Slowly the fragments of the nightmare begin to reassemble themselves, jumbled and out of sequence at first, then clicking into place.

He's in a bar, one he doesn't recognize. The place is packed full of boisterous patrons toasting each other with glasses filled with a rich, crimson-colored fluid. He has the sense of being surrounded by people he knows or perhaps did know at some point in his life, and while they seem to be ignoring him, he can't help but feel he is for some reason the center of attention.

Every now and then a head turns in his direction, and he sees someone's lips moving, but whether they are talking to him or someone else he can't tell. There is a mirror behind the bar, and he cranes his neck trying to see himself. He is just beginning to make out his features when, like an etch-a-sketch gone haywire, the parts of his face begin to dissolve until all that's left is a blank, doughy mass. He tries to call out, to scream, but nothing comes out; his mouth is gone, and because his mouth is gone, he can't breathe.

James switches on the bathroom light and stares at himself in the mirror. A completely ordinary face, its parts intact, stares back. Dark, heavy eyebrows hang over exhausted, red-rimmed eyes the color of teak. A rash of gray-flecked stubble shadows his lower face, the lips twitching and still foaming with toothpaste. Black, tousled hair, also peppered with gray. The pounding in his chest has slowed, but the hangover of the dream still clings to him like a clammy blanket. He checks his watch—he never takes it off—sees it's 5:30 in the morning. There will be no going back to sleep now. Not today. Of all days, certainly not today.

Happy birthday to me, James thinks, then: *Happy birthday to us*, and another wave of nausea washes over him. Thirty years since the day he and Matthew were born, identical twins down to the unruly cowlicks that burst from the crowns

of their heads like rooster combs. And twenty years to the day when, two small boys doing what small boys do and getting into things they shouldn't, they egged each other on with their *I-dare-yous* and *you-firsts*, their curiosity and bravado leading them to an act of God or the devil. And what does it matter now because he, James, is here, in a listing, one-story aluminum-sided rental house crouched at the top of Notch Hill in Ledgesmont, Maine. And Matthew is not. Matthew never will be.

After pulling on a long-sleeved T-shirt and jeans, James does a quick circuit of the house, checking that its doors and windows are closed and locked. He makes his way into the kitchen with its speckled linoleum floor and cheap plywood cabinets and flicks on the overhead light. Packing boxes are scattered about, some open, their contents a jumble, others still taped shut. He concentrates on unpacking a box of kitchen utensils, sorting them into various drawers and cupboards, the simple task calming his mind. Every now and then he glances out the window above the kitchen sink, the gray predawn light revealing fog-draped and pine-studded hillsides to the east. From where he stands, James has an open view of the valley below and the two-lane road that winds like a twisted rope past shorn cornfields and tired farms. No traffic apparent yet on this chill, early November morning.

Ledgesmont, in the southwest corner of Maine, is a community of small farms and family-run businesses, and locals tend to be early risers, but the only sign of life on this particular morning is a vector of flying geese making their way south. James watches as they pass over the horizon; they, too, are fleeing something. Watching them disappear in the distance, he feels a pang of jealousy. They live under no particular threat and are prey to no one. Remembering again what day it is he shivers and turns his attention to another packing box.

James' cellphone rings, the trill startling him, the glass he'd been about to place on a shelf crashing into the sink. *Fuck*, he mouths silently, glancing at the time—6:20—then at the phone; the lit screen indicates “unknown number.” The ringing continues for a while. He waits a minute for the ping indicating a voicemail, but none comes.

James' head is throbbing, and he sits down at the kitchen table, which wobbles unsteadily, reminding him that he needs to check the legs, maybe prop one up a little. Powering up his laptop, he pulls up Google news, checks the national headlines and then, as he's done every morning in every small kitchen in every dumpy rental in every God-forsaken town he's lived in, he takes a deep breath and commences a careful scan of the local news.

Let's see, let's see now, nothing too bad here ... There was a fertilizer spill in middle of Route 23 late yesterday afternoon, could take another day or so to clean up completely, a couple of DUI's, a 911 call for a domestic disturbance at 12 Plum Court—*yikes, that's less than a mile away*—and—

James frowns, pulls up a short article posted just an hour earlier.

“GRANDMA'S BODY FOUND NEAR LAKE,” reads the headline. The article continues:

“The body of Mary Yerkes, 88, longtime resident of Ledgesmont, was found yesterday in a lightly wooded area in the vicinity of Big Spoon Lake, just off State Road 7. Two boy scouts from Fayette, Vermont, who were on an overnight camping trip with their troop at the lake, discovered the body. According to her daughter, Pamela Quinn, also of Ledgesmont, Mrs. Yerkes, a widow who lived alone at 5 Puddleston Lane, was last heard from on the evening of November 4 when the two women spoke on the phone. Reached for comment, Chief of Police Sam Cotter would say only that the body had been taken to the County Hospital, where an autopsy would be performed to determine the cause of death.”

James slams the lid of his laptop closed and stands up. At the window again, he scans the road. A pickup truck—black or dark blue, he can’t quite tell—is threading its way toward the village. James watches it, both hands gripping the kitchen counter. Is it his imagination, or is the truck slowing down? And why, given the early hour and the gray, frosted light, doesn’t the driver have his headlights on?

James flips off the light switch by the door. Sidling back to the window, he notes that the truck has slowed and is only about fifty yards from the entrance to his driveway, and he can see now that it is neither black nor blue, but dark green, and that two people—a driver and passenger, he can just make out two heads behind the windshield—are in it.

The truck slows to a crawl as it approaches his driveway and its occupants are now craning their necks, looking up toward the house and the window where James stands. He suddenly feels vulnerable despite the darkness around him, his head a bull’s-eye for a canny hunter looking for—what? *A monster*, James thinks bitterly, *something to be hunted down and slaughtered*.

He squats down behind the sink, invisible now to anyone outside. He tells himself to calm down and relax. *No one knows you here; it’s only been two days*. And just then he hears the truck accelerate and take off down the road.

James stands up cautiously and peeks outside. The truck is out of sight, the road empty again. He thinks about the phone hang-up and the two people in the truck. Usually in new places, it takes months—or, in a few instances, years—before the pattern begins to repeat itself. The signs come from those closest to him—a friend he makes at the gym, or his boss. The friend stops returning his calls, avoids him at the gym, or simply changes his schedule so they won’t meet. The boss starts cutting back his assignments, blaming the local economy or, on a couple of occasions, complaints about his reporting. Then the accusations start. The bulldog in the apartment next door has disappeared and he has been spied with a dog just like it heading toward the park. A colleague’s sister has been found dead; on the surface, it looks like a suicide, given the rope and broken neck and all. But a guy that looked suspiciously like James was seen slipping out of her house just hours before she was found.

It all started in Atlanta, where he’d moved after dropping out of college. He managed to snag a job as a copywriter for an employee newsletter at a small

insurance company, the pay barely covering his food and rent on a shared apartment. He'd been there three years, slowly moving his way up, the pay getting better along the way, when he came home one night to find a message on his answering machine telling him not to come in for work the next day, and that his final paycheck would be mailed to him. His roommates moved out a couple of days later, muttering vague explanations under their breath, keeping their distance. And one night, without warning, the girl he'd been casually dating had swung to face him while she was making dinner, a knife in her hand, a sudden look of terror on her face. "Stay away from me!" she'd spat at him. "You can't fool me—I know what you're capable of!" He'd backed out of her apartment, pleading with her, only to find himself in the hallway, the door slammed in his face.

Confused and scared at how quickly his life had unraveled, he'd moved on to Indianapolis, then Raleigh, then to a succession of smaller and smaller towns, for a total of six moves in the past ten years.

After the second move, he figured he was the victim of successive breakdowns, a result of what had happened to Matthew all those years ago, the reality of it finally breaking through the sea of his emotions like a leviathan, colossal and terrifying and potentially lethal. He'd tried therapy once in Raleigh, picking a doctor off the Internet with the sympathetic-sounding name of Samantha Gladwell. The session lasted less than thirty minutes and ended with him fleeing the windowless room with its low, neutral-colored couch, jumbo box of tissues, and white-noise machine.

JAMES: I know it's not something I'll ever get over, but sometimes I feel like I'm going insane, like people are blaming me for stuff, acting like they're scared of me and—

THERAPIST: You did do it, you know.

JAMES: Wait, I'm not trying to hide it or bury it or anything, if that's what you think. No, it's more like—

THERAPIST: Perhaps you feel you haven't been sufficiently punished for what you did.

JAMES: Sufficiently punished? My brother's dead, my mom's in a psychiatric hospital, and my dad is living somewhere in Bali. And there's not a day that goes by when I don't remember, when I don't think about killing myself—

THERAPIST: And why haven't you?

And the way the therapist looked at that moment—the muscle twitching at the left side of her jaw, her eyes narrowed and glittering, a scarlet flush beginning to spread from her throat to her face—told him everything he needed to know about her, about himself, and about any ideas he'd had about staying in Raleigh.

Still standing at the kitchen window, James is gazing outside, the fog almost completely gone now, the morning sky blooming a pale winter yellow. He is remembering not just Raleigh, but the towns that came after, nothing to recommend them save various copywriting or editing jobs that could be done largely at home, together with a decent bar and diner where he could drink or read in peace. The last place, smack dab in the center of Florida, rife with gators

and every flying insect known to man, hadn't been too bad—until the day the police stopped him getting off a bus. Two of them, guns drawn, had motioned him away from the street and backed him up against the side of a building. James protested but was ignored; one of them, built like a wrestler, neck like a rib roast, frisked him, pulling out his wallet and examining it closely before passing it to his partner. They'd called it in, radio crackling and him still standing there, the panic rising like a black curtain behind his eyes. After a lengthy back-and-forth with headquarters, they'd let him go, obviously reluctant, no explanation. Later that evening James heard on the news that a gunman had opened fire in a medical office, two people killed, the shooter still at large, and that night he'd had his worst-ever nightmare, and so he packed up again, trading the swamplands of Florida for the rolling farmlands of New England.

Thirty years old today, twenty years to the day it happened, ten years old at the time. Thirty, twenty, ten. James believes there's a kind of symmetry to the numbers, an anniversary of anniversaries. He forces himself to stretch, arms reaching high, his fingertips nearly grazing the low ceiling and gives a jaw-cracking yawn. Enough already, he thinks. *Time for a cup of coffee, then a run and—*

Jerking suddenly, James spins around. *Jesus Christ, what the hell ...* For he could have sworn that he'd been touched on the shoulder by a hand, as light as a feather, as slight as a child's, fingers resting for just an instant on a bare patch of skin at the curve of his neck.

He stands still for a moment, eyes darting around the kitchen, rubbing the spot where'd felt the fingers, which is still tingling slightly. *Stop it*, he admonishes himself. *Must be that damned pinched nerve acting up again.* But still.

James takes three steps across the kitchen and pauses, a quick look to either side of the hallway. To the right is the front door, and he catches the gleam of the new brass deadlock he'd installed the prior day. To his left are two small bedrooms, one used as an office, separated by a bathroom. Home sweet home, he thinks bitterly. *Another shithole in a shit town where no one knows me and most likely never will.*

James goes back into his bedroom and switches his jeans for a pair of sweatpants. Pulling on his running shoes and a light shell, he tucks his cellphone into a pocket, grabs his key, and heads to the door. His hand on the deadlock, he stops, fighting the urge to check again the windows and doors, the panic right there beneath the surface.

OK, let's just work it out, he tells himself, *get those juices flowing so you can meet tomorrow's manuscript deadline.*

Ten minutes and over a mile later, he's running steadily along Undermountain Road, feeling better, thinking about the manuscript he is editing, an article sent to him by a history professor based in Atlanta. It wouldn't pay much—none of them did—and while he has several clients who regularly send work his way, he doesn't kid himself. He is barely scraping by, the frequent moves taking a toll on his finances. After a week or so, after he felt more settled, he'd check out local

opportunities. Maybe, just maybe, this house, this town, will prove different. He'll slip into local life gradually, like a virus, without anybody really even noticing. He knows there are a couple of local newspapers in the area, and he's hoping he can pick up some freelance work. His mind is working, turning over the possibilities, when he reaches the intersection with State Road 7. There's a stop sign here, and a school bus sign too, next to which three children wait, all bundled in puffy jackets, backpacks at their feet.

James figures they are about ten years old, maybe twelve. Turning onto the state road, he gives a wave to the kids as he approaches. The tallest of the three, a solid-looking boy in a gray knit cap pulled down low on his forehead, gives a start and nudges the girl standing next to him. Turning around, she gives James an intent look. Stumbling over her backpack, she suddenly takes off, running across the road after him. "Yerkes, Yerkes, Yerkes," she screams at him. "Yerkes..."

She is midway across when a car comes barreling around the corner. *Jesus Christ Jesus Christ NO*, and James stops, waving his arms frantically at the oncoming vehicle. Brakes screaming, the car swerves onto the shoulder just seconds before the girl crosses the street to where James now stands.

"I know you," she hisses at him. "I know you and what you done, what you done to that Yerkes woman." James looks at her, panting and speechless.

Across the road, a car door slams and a full-gutted man with a mottled red face wearing a plaid work coat and unlaced boots gets out. Hitching up his jeans, he heads toward James.

"You fucking bastard, what the hell are you doing?" he yells at James, who stands helplessly next to the little girl gone silent and still staring at him.

"Nothing," James stammers. "I was just running by and she—" gesturing to the girl—"came running after me, right across the road."

The man brushes past James and squats down next to the girl. "You okay, honey?" he asks, his voice gentle. "Did this man do anything to you?"

She doesn't reply, just keeps looking at James, her expression a mix of fear and hatred.

The man rises. Thumbs hooked on his belt, he gives James a long, appraising look. "You look kinda familiar. Don't I know you from somewhere?"

James tries to smile—*easy now, just take it easy*—and replies, "I wouldn't think so. You see, I just moved here a couple of days ago, still getting settled and finding my way around and—"

"I remember now," the man says flatly, interrupting him. "You used to live down the street from the Henson place. That fire ... the one that burned the house down, killed two kids. Must be five years now. You're the guy, the one the cops were looking for but never found. I seen your picture in the newspapers."

James raises his hands defensively, starts to back up. "No, no—you're mistaken. I told you, I just moved here. I'm real sorry, but I don't know anything about a fire or these people you mentioned, and"—James looks at his watch—"I have to be getting back home now." He glances down at the little girl, starts to say something, thinks better of it, and begins jogging back the way he came.

“Hey!” the man shouts after him. “Don’t think I won’t call this in, because I will! I know who you are! And you haven’t heard the last of this!”

Quickening his pace, James speeds past the bus stop and the two children still standing there, whispering to each other and shuffling their feet restlessly.

Oh Jesus, sweet Jesus, he thinks. And it all comes back to him in a rush of sounds and images, that day exactly twenty years ago, their tenth birthday, his and Matthew’s, a day filled with the promise of birthday cake and presents and friends, a day when they felt excited and reckless and invincible, and so why not creep into their parents’ bedroom, across the pale green carpet, shushing each other as they go, and, pulling a chair inside the closet, climb up and reach for the box on the top shelf? And why not open it? For they know there’s treasure inside, something forbidden and scary, because usually this particular closet is always, always locked *but today it’s not* . . .

James is about thirty yards from his driveway, can see it curving up Notch Hill from Undermountain Road, and he’s pushing now, hard, because it seems essential to get home, to get inside, to check the windows and doors, to stem the panic, the sense that something or someone is right on his heels, hot breath licking his neck, about to catch him and—

You’re a fool, he tells himself. *A fool who thinks he can outrun his past, his guilt.* And knows full well it’s just a matter of time before justice prevails, the kind of justice he, James, the murderer of his brother, deserves. For after the murder—and to this day, despite what the papers called it and his parents called it and the child psychiatrists called it, to him it will forever be just that: murder, not an accident, not a terrible incident, not a tragic mistake. Because even at ten years old, James knew about guns, that they held bullets and could kill people—mostly bad guys, but sometimes good guys too—but had pushed the thought that the gun might be loaded out of his mind when he had pointed it at Matthew, because it was their birthday, and there was a birthday cake and presents and friends, and so surely on such a day, nothing could, nothing would, go wrong.

Turning up his driveway James glances down the road, away from the direction he’s come. Three cars are pulling over onto the side of the road. Doors slam, five men and two women spilling out. One of the men has a baseball bat, another shoulders a shotgun. They begin to argue, and one of the men, gesticulating to the others, points in James’ direction and they all turn toward him. And as if on cue, they begin to walk up the road toward his driveway.

A few moments later James has unlocked his front door and slipped inside, relocking it behind him. He walks over to the kitchen window, can see the small group advancing. And now, from the other direction, he spies a line of cars and trucks, maybe five or six in total, but he doesn’t take time to count. Instead he pulls out his mobile and dials 911.

“Emergency services, how can I help you?” a woman’s voice answers.

“Listen, I don’t know what’s happening, what’s going on here, but there are all these people and cars outside and—”

"Sir, may I please have your name and location?" Was it his imagination, or did he detect a trace of suspicion in her voice?

"My name is James McCandless, and I'm home, on Notch Hill—" but he didn't get to finish, because the voice on the other side starts screaming at him.

"Larry? This is Larry, isn't it! You son of a bitch! You can't fool me—I thought I recognized your voice. How could you think I wouldn't, even after all these years?"

"What ... who is this? I'm telling you, I need help, there are people out there—"

The woman is shouting now. "YOU need help? You, the man who beat me and raped me and left me for dead, and me barely older than a child, only fifteen..." And the line goes dead.

James is back where he was just earlier that morning, hands gripping the kitchen counter. The people—Christ, there must be fifteen of them by now—are gathering, and he can see still more coming up the road and now his driveway, on foot, men and women and yes, children too, not rushing, but moving slowly, with purpose and certainty.

James is cold now, so very cold, and he wants to turn around, to look for some means of escape, but he's frightened at the thought of what might be waiting behind him. Instead, he closes his eyes, searching for the words to a prayer to someone, to something, but all he sees is ten year-old Matthew, his mouth suddenly gaping in a wide O of surprise, his teak eyes gone vast and suddenly flat as he flies backwards and down onto the pale green carpet of their parents' bedroom, one hand groping for the singed and shockingly red hole in his chest, the other reaching for him, James, and the gun that's still in his hand.

James opens his eyes and sees the angry, jeering faces beginning to crowd his kitchen window, hears the steady pounding at his front door and a sudden *crash* of glass breaking—*my bedroom, that's coming from my bedroom*—and he realizes that it's today—*thirty, twenty, ten*—that he and Matthew will finally come full circle.

The voices of those outside are becoming louder and clearer now.

"You bastard! You thought you could run away, thought you could hide, but I've found you!" A woman sobs, claws at the window. "I know you—I saw you in his bedroom—you killed him, didn't you, strangled him while he slept, my baby, my baby..."

"Murderer!" shouts an elderly man dressed in overalls and baseball cap, the spittle from his mouth spattering the window.

"I'll make you pay for what you did to my wife!" A beefy guy wearing a black hoody and paint-spattered jeans draws back his hand, and James sees he's holding a rock, and so it's just a matter of time now, minutes at best, and still James stands there, gripping the kitchen counter.

It was an accident, James. He hears the words clearly, as though from someone standing directly behind him, the voice aching familiar, and he spins around expecting to see—

But there's no one there, he's alone, inside, in the kitchen, and the mob outside is crying for him, his blood. But just then he hears from the front door the sound

of the deadbolt unlocking and the door being pulled open. Pulled open from the inside.

Something has caught the crowd's attention, something or someone on the concrete step just outside his front door.

"I know you're all looking for me," he hears that same voice call out, and he knows that voice, of course he does, because it's *his* voice addressing the people massed around his house. "I know you think you know me, and that you believe I've done things—terrible things—to you or to someone you've loved."

James stumbles out of the kitchen into the hallway. From there he can see directly toward the front door, which is open, and standing just outside he sees a man, a guy exactly his height and build, with dark, gray-flecked hair and a crowfoot that bursts exuberantly from the crown of his head like the comb of a rooster ...

James sags against the wall. His knees are buckling and he's dizzy now, so dizzy that it's a struggle to remain upright. Giving up, he slides down to the floor and buries his head in his arms.

"All right now: here I am," continues the voice of the man on the concrete step, speaking calmly and confidently. *My voice, that's my voice*, thinks James, and knows it isn't and can't be, and so perhaps he is dying, or is dead already, and still the voice continues.

"I want you to take a good long look at me," the figure is saying now. "And if you have something to say to me, or ask me—well, now's your chance. I'll stay right here until you're finished. I've got nothing to hide from any of you."

James can hear an uneasy muttering coming from the crowd, then snatches of conversation.

"I thought you said that was him," a woman's voice whines. "You said you were certain—one hundred percent certain, that's what you told me."

"I did, I did think so, but now ... well, I'm sorry, I guess I was wrong, I've never seen this man before, I don't know why I thought it was him," a man's voice, sounding confused, replies in response.

"Damnedest thing, I coulda sworn it were him..."

"Crazy, I know, makes no sense ..."

"Well, I heard he was here, so of course we came, but ..."

Gradually, the voices begin to fade. There is the sound of car and truck doors being slammed, of engines starting.

James lifts his head, cracks open an eye. The door is still open, but there's no one there—just a rectangle of pure light spilling onto the hall floor. A cool breeze blows through, ruffling his hair. A stray leaf floats through the door and settles onto the floor next to James' sneaker. It's beautiful: a maple leaf, its heart a bright patch of gold, its edges tipped with crimson.





[poetry]

doorway

The impulse under the waves washed me,
fated to survive alone, to these shores, this islet
long rumored, in arcane circles, to exist:
tribulation to cartographers and cartomancers,
turning landmarker men, mythmakers
and the fortuné into seafarers, mystery
whose fabled ruins regained shape and glory
in ages of heroic poetry. I humbly tread
between the columns, smell the moss alive
in the air. Ahead, a white rectangle like a
mystical doorway, no visible horizon but
that I have nowhere else to go but forward

—jonel abellanos

Long Confinement

They never came back—her angels. They flew
and green glass didn't shatter. Those thin wires
sliced them but divine blood stayed in place
and wings ferried them off. Days are silent.
Her window's haunted by old wooden spoons.
Her mother's ghost waits, humming an old tune.
She remembers all the words she once spent
on felonies. Her alibi's erased
by green light. She's misplaced whispered desire.
Nothing in this room is shiny or new.

Ancient clocks are fixed at an evil noon.
There are no sounds. The season's always Lent.
She feels falling shards where she wore her face.
Even the mirror calls her a liar.
Past care, she rocks, missing the color blue,
black shoes, dresses with wings, but her clues
are lined up neatly as forgotten choirs.
She knows how to wait, how to sit, to pace,
to pray. One miracle they can't prevent:
Her angels will come back—soon, soon, too soon.

—mark j. mitchell

[poetry]



Gates of Hell

Ocean deep as my love was,
your lies were bottomless.
The sinkhole where you left me
when you got up for air,
you lit on fire.
Step quickly now,
your floorboards burning.

—emma-johanna henriksson

HER TEN MINUTES

Her ten minutes sneak
through the hole of an
iron needle in the hand
of a cobbler, who sits like
a spider at a nook of the city.

She's broken on her shoes.
'Wait', his word stumbles
over rum stink. Passersby
give her 'tribute' with their
glances, and the beauty
blushes under the hot sun.

She stoops her proud head,
which sways intermittently
towards the east and the west
to check if some acquaintance
is dropping a belittling eye.

Miss Seena's rich and noble,
but with a little money.

—fabiyas mv

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HOW TO SHOOT THE PRESIDENT

by stephen marino

As he spooned his soggy Wheaties, Sam wondered what John Wilkes Booth had eaten for breakfast the day he shot Lincoln. But then Sam remembered that Abe's assassination happened at a late evening performance at Ford's Theatre. Did Booth enjoy a special dinner that night? Have a drink in a tavern? Sam rewound back to 1963: Had Lee Harvey Oswald slopped down some grits that November morning in Dallas? Were grits even served in that part of the Texas? Perhaps his Russian wife had prepared him some repast that reminded Oswald of his recent sojourn in the Soviet Union. *Or did he just drink a cup of cold coffee?* whispered the voice inside Sam's head. He whirled to 1981 and laughed at the image he projected of John Hinkley eating toasted Pop Tarts while staring at a black and white news photo of a nubile Jodie Foster.

Sam was eating the Breakfast of Champions not because today was the day he would shoot the president, but out of habit. He ate that cereal every day. Since he was a boy, he had stared at the faces of the athletes on the orange box. Sam remembered the year Tom Tresh, the Yankee shortstop, smiled at him from the front of the box. Sam had made his mother buy Wheaties because he and his brother had seen Tresh play the first time their father took them to Yankee Stadium. And in the years since, Sam had stared at the faces of athletes, sportsmen, and Olympians on the box: Bruce Jenner, Mary Lou Retton, Carl Lewis, Chris Evert, Dan Marino, and Joe Torre all had eaten with him at his kitchen table. But today was a special day. Sam knew he probably should have a larger, more celebratory meal, but custom had defeated the budding euphoria. He liked his cereal crispy, so he tended to eat it quickly before the flakes became milk-laden and sponge-like. However, today he lingered and stared into the bowl.

He had no political motive for shooting at the president. This president, like

most recent executives, was not worth being elevated to martyrdom. America has the tendency to canonize its fallen presidents. Sam acknowledged that historians could make the claim that most U.S. presidents who were shot at, nearly killed, or slain at least had some form of gravitas that were grounds for elevation to sainthood. About Lincoln there was little argument. The Civil War and the slave thing were sacrosanct: proof enough of the two miracles needed for sainthood. Kennedy's aura came from his youth, his WW II military heroics, and his elegantly hot wife, Jacqueline Bouvier (the bullets would make her Jackie O). Sam had liked that *PT 109* movie that he had seen at the RKO Madison Theatre when he was a boy. His mother had idolized the president for his matinee-idol looks and actually kept a picture of JFK on the console stereo alongside a photo of Frank Sinatra. Of course, Kennedy was canonized long before the revelations about his mortal sins had been uncovered. However, history still forgave his debauchery with Marilyn Monroe, his ineptness at the Bay of Pigs, and his consorting with the Rat Pack. Ronald Reagan remained a larger-than-life screen star when he was commander-in-chief. Taking two bullets to the chest made him a presidential superman able to leap over the Washington Monument in a single bound.

The recent crop of presidents had not been worthy of attempts on their lives—at least publicized attempts. His 90-year-old uncle liked to remark: “White trash in the White House!” Sam thought that their lack of gravitas complemented their decidedly unpresidential acts. Who would bother to kill a president who has the balls to get a bj in the White House from a woman other than the First Lady? A president declares that he wants Saddam Hussein “Dead or Alive.” That is Texas talk and you secretly admired that kind of cowboy bravado in a president; you want to keep that kind of bluff coming for its entertainment value alone. And the current chief executive headlined a miscast vaudeville show. He was a teleprompter, short of real speech, so why kill a performance worthy of mockery? Nowadays presidents did not need assassins: they mostly shot themselves in the foot.

Moreover, Sam certainly did not want to turn his act into tragedy. This president could not be tragic hero, nor did Sam himself want to be one. The philosopher in Sam ruminated that some Aristotle could argue that the *Poetics* were there for both of them: Misdeed! Downfall! Realization! Death! Yes, he admitted that tragedy is something he may have in common with the president, but Sam would not be the playwright of that tale. The era of the hero in America was over.

Sam had no politics. He could not imagine himself screaming: “Sic Semper Tyrannus” when he pulled the trigger on noble Caesar. He did not have cause for his action—like seeking freedom for the homeland that those Puerto Rican fighters claimed when they cornered Truman at Blair House. Nor was he a Manson devotee like Squeaky Fromme squealing in maniacal delight as she pumped her pistol at Gerald Ford. Sam certainly did not think that he was as delusional as John Hinckley. He knew that the media coverage of his imagined attempt could portray him as a rogue gunman, a lone wolf, a home-grown terrorist, or a mentally

deranged lunatic. They could do that to anyone. But he knew he was none of these. In his mind, he simply wanted to prove a point.

Technically, he was not going to shoot the president, but rather shoot “at” the president, which he was sure could set some kind of legal precedent or, at the very least, be legally ambiguous enough for some brash attorney to argue on his behalf all the way to the Supreme Court. The parsing of words was important to Sam, and especially to all Americans accused and on trial. Even Clinton had argued the fine grammatical point of what the meaning of is is. The voice began its questions:

Would shooting ‘at’ even be admissible at trial? Would this even count as an assassination attempt if all you want to do is show the weakness of their defense? Suppose I use blanks?

He found the tenor calming because he knew that no one else could hear inside his head.

Sam simply wanted to send the message that a determined person could actually shoot at the president in the post 9/11 world, in this day and age of security. The point is that the president is indeed vulnerable, despite all the protection he allegedly had—especially in the years since heightened terror alerts. Sam knew for sure (everyone did) that there would always be a way for someone with enough determination to launch some feeble attack on the nation’s leader. But a person with real determination would have to use all kinds of wiles to investigate, calculate, ruminate on a successful plan. Killing Lincoln had taken some planning by the conspirators. If Killing Kennedy was the result of a lone wolf operation by Oswald, he had a good plan. If killing Kennedy was the result of a conspiracy of communists, Lyndon Johnson, Castro, the CIA, and Mafia, and maybe Richard Nixon in Tricky Dick mode, it was a great plan. But John Hinckley and Squeaky Fromme did not have thorough plans; each simply waited outside hotels where the president was scheduled to enter or exit and simply aimed at their targets. The same act was certainly possible today, especially because the White House and media always broadcast the president’s whereabouts from his first piss in the morning to his last fart as he settles in bed at night. Why not send an engraved invitation?

Yes, the difference between then and now was that Abe and Jack’s security details did not broadcast their vulnerability. Today’s multi-layered protection merely gave the aura of invincibility. Like most fortresses when the right besieging tools are used, Sam suspected that he could penetrate the concrete walls of protection around the president, for in his observation they were quite porous. Sam even imagined that in some quarters he would be hailed as a hero for alerting the authorities to the potential threat. After all, if Sam noticed the holes in the wall, weren’t there others like him out there, in other cities, who just as easily are plotting similar attacks?

“They think we are stupid and gullible and that we fall for their lies,” his voice muttered. He remembered what his father-in-law had told him about what his grandfather—a man who had fought in the Civil War—declared: “If Washington

says it's white, then it's really black." Sam abhorred people in the government who condescended to think that citizens were ignorant. The Constitution begins, "We, the people," not "We the stupid people." FDR had withheld the truth about Pearl Harbor, Nixon lied about Watergate, Hoover hid much in the closet. What about the NSA, CIA, FBI, IRS, USPS hacking into our snail mail, our email, or collecting our cell phone metadata or our tax files? Why should we accept as fact that the president was safe behind his wall of agents who were distracted by booze and South American whores?

Sam was not interested in the traditional American assassination attempt with a small firearm up close and personal, so to speak. Shooting with bullets was rather ordinary, *de rigueur* for US assassination attempts. Since Reagan, there had not really been a good assassination attempt on a sitting president or at least one that had been acknowledged properly by the CIA, FBI, or Secret Service. Sam just did not want to stalk the president in the kitchen, backstage, or hallway of a hotel and then pop him as he walked off the podium. He wanted to do something dramatic (something theatre students would appreciate), but also something fitting for our time. Yes, this would certainly fulfill his requirements. And he had to know he could be a successful assassin. After all, "would-be assassin" connotes all sorts of clichés associated with an unexecuted plan: a failure to launch, an inability to rise to the occasion.

Sam had read in the *Times* how the president's security detail knew that the most vulnerable part of travel for the president was when he landed at an airport and then helicoptered into a big city. If the size and geography of the city dictated such travel, the whirlybirds were preferable to a motorcade. Before the 80s, Sam had little memory of there being such a big deal about presidential visits to New York. When he was a boy, the president simply landed and motorcaded into the city with perhaps an entourage of a few police cars with their sirens on. People often think that the Kennedy assassination changed all that, but Sam remembered that his Aunt Rosie had gone to see LBJ at some International Ladies Garment Workers Union rally in 1964 right in the middle of New York. The president was surrounded by screaming seamstresses, tailors, and steam pressers who, released from their sweatshops for a few hours, reveled in the president who promised them union wages worthy of their trade.

When Pope Paul VI visited New York in 1965 to address the UN and tour the World's Fair, he had ridden in an open car from Idlewild Airport through Queens into Manhattan. In those days Catholics schools educated thousands more students in New York City, and the combined dioceses of Brooklyn and New York assigned parishes, elementary schools, high schools, colleges, and universities to line the route along the Van Wyck Expressway and Queens Boulevard and welcome the waving Pontiff. Sam's school had been designated a position outside the Queens County Courthouse and he remembered reporting to school early on the morning of the Pope's visit so that the classes could travel by subway to their assigned spot. The control of the nuns and brothers was so inviolable that each class actually walked double file—boys to the left, girls on the right—

to the subway, boarded the subway LL train, switched at Broadway Junction to take the Jamaica line, got off at Queens Blvd, and walked the many blocks to their position on the curb. Sam remembered that it was an unusually cold early October day—40 degrees—and the students were not permitted to wear coats over their regulation uniforms so that the logos of each school—SBS, SFP, SHS, IHJ, MM—emblazoned on jackets and ties and jumpers would be visible. Sam got a glimpse of the Holy Father traveling faster than a speeding bullet, a white streak whizzing in the wind as the school kids squealed “Viva Il Papa!”

And it was not that long ago that Nelson Mandela, on his first visit to New York after his gazillion years in a South African prison, led an entourage from JFK through Queens and, heaven forbid, through the heart of Brooklyn. Nobody seemed too worried about him getting shot in a drive-by on Atlantic Avenue in the heart of Bed-Stuy. Sam often thought that on his visits to New York that the president should travel like most people do. If the president took the subway, most New Yorkers wouldn't really give a shit. The panhandler on the #4 train would ask him for money. If he were riding the A in from JFK, he, like every nodding passenger, would be offered to buy a DVD, Skittles, or water. If he changed for the J at Broadway Junction, no one would give him a second look.

Sam first conceived the idea of shooting at the president's airborne entourage almost thirty years ago when he moved into his home in the runway community not far from New York's largest airport. He first noticed the flight of the presidential helicopters during Reagan's first term when the president landed at JFK and took a helicopter into Manhattan. Since then, presidential visits to the city varied in frequency depending upon the political, social, global, or sexual motives of the occupant of the White House. The general pattern Sam observed was that a Democratic presidential visit to the Big Apple occurred much more frequently than a Republican visit. Oh, they all had their perfunctory fall visits to the opening session of the UN when most heads of state would converge on Manhattan, snarling air, train, car, and foot traffic for an entire week to the annoyance of most New Yorkers. Of course, the NYPD prided itself on the layers and layers of security it provided the foreign dignitaries. But the police brass became highly stressed when particularly esteemed or notorious world leaders came to give a speech. Sam seemed to recall one day in the 80s when the Pope, Reagan, Fidel Castro, Gorbachev, Margaret Thatcher, Idi-Amin, Hitler, Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed, and Allah all showed-up on the red carpet of the General Assembly. Other presidential visits to New York were dictated by events of national importance—the 100th anniversary of the Statue of Liberty, the Bi-Centennial, the somber events of 9/11—when the president seemingly embodied America, Columbia, Liberty, Freedom—much the same way Queen Elizabeth personified Britannia, Gloriana!

In reality, most visits to New York, as the financial and cultural capital of the United States, were political or personal and thus the logical explanation for the frequency of visits by Democratic chief executives. By tradition, New York

is Sodom—a fact that contradictorily repulses a Republican, but attracts the Democratic head of state. New York and its socially liberal elite is anathema to the GOP but is catnip to the Democrats—although Sam could not reconcile the contradiction of how the Wall Street fat cats swung both ways. The current occupant came frequently to mine the gold, Goldmen, and glitterati of Manhattan, take his wife on a date to Broadway play, or appear on a late night talk show.

These frequent forays into New York had given Sam ample opportunities to observe the helicopters as they flew in and out of the airport. Very often, they tipped him off—especially during election season—by flying the copters in a few days before. Many days, as he sat at his kitchen table with a cup of coffee and *The New York Times*, he could hear a *thump, thump thump, whish whish whish, whirr whirr, whirr* in the distance. Then—as sure as his heart was beating the pulse he felt in his temple—three olive green copters would appear in low formation in the southern sky and slowly plod toward runway R 13, seemingly hover a nanosecond, and lower like three coffins below Sam’s vision. Another three would follow the next day or so, the pattern repeating itself. Then Sam would know a presidential visit was imminent. Sam had watched the same routine for years. The voice screamed, “Why don’t they just paint a target on him?”

Thus, he imagined it would be fun to show the ease of shooting at the president. How—despite the FBI and the CIA and the Men in Black, and the Air Force Reconnaissance, and the multi-layered security detail—how easy it is to launch an unexpected assault on their lax habits. And it was no secret that Sam knew this. Very often in the warm weather, Sam and his wife would entertain in their backyard at a 4th of July bar-b-que or at a birthday party on a hazy, hot and humid summer day when eighteen neighborhood kids were crammed into their 12ft. diameter above ground pool. As a plane took off runway R-13, Sam would joke about how easy it would be to take one down. He would pick the nearest water gun soaker on the lawn and aim it the rising 747: “Rat-a-tat-tat.”

Everyone would laugh at his ridiculous stance. This, indeed, apparently became a real possibility in the eyes of Homeland Security and the Transportation Safety Administration after 9/11 when fewer flights landed low over the boundary roads surrounding JFK for fear of someone shooting at a jumbo jet. Flights instead were diverted more frequently over Jamaica Bay much to the displeasure of the residents of the Rockaways whose beachside community bungalows reverberated with the sonic booms of take-offs and landings.

Sam conjectured that his plan would work in most American cities or nations. This was solidified by media coverage of the Afghan war when the Russians invaded and rogue bands of Taliban would use surface to air missiles—aptly called SAMs—and take pot shots at commercial airliners, low flying surveillance craft, and helicopters. They had mostly eluded capture by moving around the countryside on their donkeys that Sam imagined they probably fucked in the dark of night. The donkeys being much more pleasurable than most of the compliant Afghan women—which undoubtedly was a comfort to all of them. After all, in the past years Americans had to sit through coverage of wars in Bosnia, Herzegovina,

Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria and worry how Mujahedeen riding on donkeys or camels could aim a surface to air missile at aircraft landing at military bases. It seemed to Sam that despite the much-vaunted protection that the Secret Service provided to presidents, he (or she) was not immune to a similar attempt by a SAM right here in the United States.

The vulnerability of the president to such an attack became obvious to Sam on a summer vacation he and wife had taken with their kids to Washington, D.C., back when Clinton was president. They had checked into the Holiday Inn near DuPont Circle sometime in the afternoon after the ride from Virginia Beach. The kids were tired from the previous day at the Great American Waterpark, and had slept most of the way—the three of them slumped across the seats of the Caravan. Therefore, Sam decided that he would take advantage of their reserve energy and make them walk down to the Mall before dinner. They objected very little after Sam promised they would eat at the DC Hard Rock Cafe.

They arrived at the north view of the White House around 6 p.m. and the kids were unimpressed, his older daughter remarking: “It doesn’t look like the pictures I’ve seen.”

So Sam decided to take them around to the view from the expansive south lawn, the one whose view is more popular in the social studies textbooks generously provided to students by the largesse of the taxpayers via the New York State Textbook Law. Just as the family approached the fence to look at the Executive Mansion in the late summer sun, the sudden sound of *whoosh, whoosh, whoosh* filled the humid air. Seemingly out of nowhere, the camouflage green helicopter of Marine One lifted from near a grove of trees on the lawn and roared over their heads.

Sam’s son screamed “Whoa, baby, what’s that?”

Sam’s wife explained, “It must be the president.”

Sam was struck by how close the copter was to the cars on either side of Pennsylvania Avenue and how most ordinary citizens of DC playing frisbee on the mall or jogging on the pathways simply ignored the most powerful man on earth leaving for a weekend at Camp David. That was the first time Sam noted how casual the security surrounding the president seemed.

Sam knew that his plan was viable, but his voice was troubled by the fact that he had not really seriously shot a gun before. As a New Yorker, he had limited experience using firearms. He did not think that the BB gun he used when he was ten years old to shoot at beer cans lined up on his cousin Bennett’s backyard fence on Long Island constituted some serious street cred. But Sam had actually used a double-barreled shot gun on a camping trip in the Adirondacks with his eighth grade history teacher to shoot at a target on a thick oak tree. Once, his brother-in-law had taken him to the indoor Queens range of the New York City Police department. He used a six-shooter to poke holes in the popular poster of the bearded bad guy with the Nixon five o’clock shadow. The water guns at the water park definitely did not count; neither did the rifle he used to aim at paper red stars

at the Rockaway Playland shooting arcade. This lack of experience concerned Sam a bit. Shooting at a helicopter could be like shooting at the moon

Once Sam decided to actually shoot at the president, he knew the difficult part would be obtaining the right kind of weapon to execute (so to speak) his plan. It was certainly easy enough to get many kinds of guns. Despite the relatively strong gun control laws of the Empire State, firearms were easy enough to possess. There are many avenues to stroking a piece of metal in your hand. A close friend or family member—a hunter or retired cop—could find his weapon, his rifle or semi, missing after a backyard communion party or graduation. How often did they really check the back of their bedroom closets or basement cedar chests? Any respectable New Yorker traveling two hours outside the city, North on Route 380 between Scranton and Binghamton, could take an exit for establishments whose bold-lettered advertisements read, GUNS and FIREWORKS, and after a quick ID check, leave with a weapon, have a Big Mac, fries, and a vanilla shake sans whip cream to go, and head back south towards the Big Apple. But Sam knew a handgun or hunting rifle would not suffice for shooting at the president's hard-plated helicopter. He really needed one of those surface to air missiles to send a proper message and he knew that obtaining one of these was easier in Kabul than Queens, New York.

Sam briefly considered the notion of not using a gun at all to shoot at the president. He imagined a laser attack could successfully interfere with the vision of the pilot. In fact, this had become quite popular in the United States. In the past few years, a number of U.S. commercial pilots reported lasers guns being pointed at them as they attempted landings. One famous incident involved a teenager out there for some fun pointing his laser pen at a Jet Blue plane landing at JFK. Sam figured that the pilots of those presidential copters likely wore goggles as protection against such idiotic attacks. But this kind of attack was not dramatic enough according to the shooting code of U.S. presidential assassinations. Using a firearm is in the proud tradition of the American assassin; in fact, he could not recall an actual United States assassination plan that did not involve firearms. Poisoning a leader was so European, so Shakespearean. Thus, he abandoned the idea of the laser.

So Sam turned to the most reliable underground supplier of goods in the modern world: the Internet. He knew they could trace his online searches back to the discovery of cyberspace by Al Gore, so he didn't even attempt to disguise his research or his purchases by creating or using different email addresses, or user names or log-in locations. He never even bothered to clear his search history. To Sam, all life was now in the public domain. Besides, what he was doing was not illegal in any way. He was making no real plans, hatching no plot. He was not executing the popularly used phrase "terroristic threats" which the Bozos in law enforcement overused on eight year olds who point their fingers like a gun at a playmate in the schoolyard or on eighty year old men in supermarkets, who frustrated at the long line at the checkout, says, "They should blow up this place." Sam was merely imagining a scenario, writing a story, acting out his narrative

to prove his point. Was it now a crime in the United States to have a creative thought?

Sam's internet search for SAMs (HA! HA!) resulted in a cache of knowledge about the best weapon he would need. In a few Google strokes, he discovered the existence of so-called MANPADs. The voice mocked: *Manpads? Is that like shoulder pads or maxi pads for men?* But Sam's determination silenced the ridicule. This weapon of choice would more than suffice for his operation. These mobile weapons had been quite handy in all sorts of conflict from Eastern Europe to Asia Minor, from Grosny to Katmandu. Thousands of them had disappeared in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. They could easily be concealed in a donkey side-saddle, in a spare tire in a car trunk, or in a large suitcase. Sam had no need for such ambulatory concealment, for his weapon would be assembled in his home and hidden in his front cellar among his hammers, copper pipes, large wrenches, and fence posts. His family would never know the difference even if they went down in the basement refrigerator for the extra items from Costco. He imagined his wife saying, "Sam could you go down in the basement and bring some cans of...." Or if he sent his son down to get him a wrench to tighten the kitchen faucet and the kid couldn't find it.

"Dad, what tool box is the wrench in?" or "Dad, where's the wrench?"

"In the toolbox."

"Which one?"

"The red one ... the red one on the shelf below the nuclear weapon."

Sam learned that MANPADS were cheap and easily available in the black market overseas but he would have to overcome the obstacle of purchasing a US domestically bought weapon. Sam also researched how to buy the parts separately and assemble his device like the scores of toys he put together for his kids every Christmas Eve so that they would be under the tree when the kids awoke in morning.

Thus, it was possessed. The details of his weapon's acquisition would remain buried in his mind: as secret as a Fatima letter, as sealed as Obama's college transcripts, as repressed as memory. The weapon—and the idea of its use—was well-hidden in a place that he knew was safe.

Sam then had considerable anxiety over whether the weapon would work on the appointed day. He knew a test fire was not possible. After all, it did not come bubble-wrapped or in a box protected with white foam peanut shells. Thus, he did not have a direction sheet or assembly instructions written in English French, Spanish, or Chinese with the accompanying figure 1, figure 2, figure 3a, figure 3 b; figure 4, or see reverse page for specifications. He watched a few news videos he found on you tube of Mujahedeen using them against the Soviets in Afghanistan in 1980. It looked as easy as "point and shoot" for the gray-bearded Muslim as he aimed at a MIG streaking over the mountains. Sam had no place—upstate, out on Long Island, in Pennsylvania—rural enough to test the range of his weapon. He would have to be (less than) satisfied as the first A bomb testers at Los Alamos—one test firing and then on to Hiroshima.

Sam knew he had to find the right opportunity, the exact moment to make his point. Months would or could elapse between acquisition and execution. Conspiracy requires cooperation among men and women: witness Caesar, Lincoln, Archduke Ferdinand. But as for a person acting alone, a collusion of the mind must suffice.

Ironically, Sam needed the cooperation of the president in his own assassination. More frequent visits to New York would provide more frequent opportunities. Sam, of course, always monitored reports of his visits to the tri-state area. This president particularly liked dipping into the well of well-off New Yorkers, so his visits were frequent during election season or when political expediency demanded. He often took advantage of tragedies—storms, shootings—offer some comfort to the victims. And Sam could not plan around these unexpected forays to the metropolis.

Sam discovered that this president was most ripe for the picking (the voice laughed at the cliché) during election season. The president loved the swanky evening events hosted in Manhattan at some small hotel venue or private club where 100 or so “intimates” would pony up some exorbitant sum to be in the same room as the Messiah. These affairs tended to be scheduled for early evening that demanded a 4:30 landing at JFK, a helicoptering to Manhattan and motorcade to the venue, just in time to fuck up the evening rush hour. The 4:30 landing was perfect for Sam’s plan in the spring, summer, and fall when there was just enough light for him to aim.

Thus, this beautiful October day, the stars had aligned for Sam and this president. It was Columbus Day—a day-off for Sam—and the President, conveniently, coincidentally, fatefully—had a number of New York items on his holiday agenda: a march in the annual Columbus Day parade—the first by a sitting president—followed by an obligatory afternoon visit to ground zero, and ending in early evening fund-raiser at the duplex apartment of the dowager heiress to the Rheingold fortune. He had departed from his usual routine. It would be a mid-morning landing.

A few days before, the helicopters had found their usual landing spot on the western tarmac at JFK: “In birds they call it “Dead Reckoning,”” Sam heard himself say aloud. The visit was much covered in the media: the president’s security detail was quite worried about the president actually marching in the streets of New York. This president had many enemies on the right, on the left, abroad, in the North, in the South. Fears of a shooting! A possible bombing! were well-publicized. Mailboxes were removed, manhole covers soldered shut, sharpshooters positioned along the entire route on Fifth Avenue, Central Park South. Senior Citizens’ canes taken away. Columbus Circle at the end of the parade route was as fortified as Masada.

On the weekend before the president’s visit, Sam imagined what the media coverage of his act could be. Of course, the political predilections of each TV, Cable, broadcast, or print medium would be obvious:

Shooting Punctures Holes in President's Protection

President a Shooting Duck!

Assaults Weapons Ban Fails the President

President's Copter Shot At!

Reports a thrill up his leg.

On the O'Reilly Factor Tonight:

Presidential Assassin: Pinhead or Patriot?

Unidentified Spacecraft Targets Prez Helicopter

Sam even fantasized about the film possibilities: an HBO made film, a Lifetime movie. Sam could even imagine a play about his exploits, a musical perhaps, entitled, *How to Shoot the President*. The first act would end in the fiery crash of Marine One on the stage.

Sam snapped out of his reverie by the faint *thump, thump, thump, swish, swish, swish* in the distance. The helicopters were warming up for the arrival of the president. In all these years, Sam had never seen Air Force One fly over his neighborhood; the jumbo jet always took the direct Atlantic route to Kennedy. But Sam learned that all airport departures and arrivals were suspended during the few minutes of a presidential landing, so he knew that when the constant rumble suddenly stopped, that it was only a short time before the eagle landed. Silence: Sam looked down at the cereal bowl. His Wheaties were soggy.

Sam knew that if were to do this, he would only have a few minutes from landing to taxiing to tarmac. Presidential visits to New York required no official welcome by the Mayor or Governor as in a lesser metropolis. There was no ceremony, only a quick walk down the huge stairs from the aircraft and a sprint behind blue curtained screens concealing the actual helicopter he would board. Sometimes, it was the first set of three, sometime the second. Sam had no idea who decided this. But this is the moment Sam knew would be a shell game: he figured he had 1 in 3 odds of actually hitting the copter in which the president flew. Were the odds with him or the president? This was no more than a three card monte. If he shot at any of the first three copters and the president was not in one, then Sam would give himself away; if he waited for the second set and the president were in the first three, then this was for naught. But then he remembered the point of this exercise was mental: to prove that someone could do it. The act would not be his redemption.

With new verve, Sam dropped his spoon into the bowl, the soggy Wheaties sloshing in the milk like punctured life rafts. In his mind, he could see it happening as if it were happening. He ran down into his basement where the MANPAD lay on his workbench among his rusting tools. Sam unzipped the oversized gym bag where he had concealed the weapon. He quickly assembled the four tubular pieces. As he ran up the wooden basement steps, he could hear the *thump, thump, thump, whirr, whirr, whirr* reverberating over the marshes behind his house. The copters were lifting off, taking flight, screwing through the crisp October air.

Sam ran through the first floor, slid open the back door facing the airport, and stepped onto the deck. He would see the three copters rising over the tree line any second. Would he take a shot at the first flock? The thumping and whirring were louder, but the copters did not appear. Where were they? Sam positioned the weapon on his shoulder. Where should he aim? He had not been able to take any target practice. There was no real telescope to look through in this weapon. He might as well have a sling shot and shoot down the Goliath of a copter. But these doubts left him and he aimed at spot just above the roof of the concrete white hanger that he could see from his deck. That was the spot the copters usually rose from. He pinched his right eye shut and aimed. Out of his left eye, he could see clearly. The distant tree-line was in focus. So this is how the mujahedeen do it!

And suddenly Sam knew that he could do this thing. If he picked the correct card, pointed out the right shell, aimed at the copter where the unsuspecting president sat, he would show them all the weakness of their defense and make his point. He saw the blades of the copters slicing over the horizon. He was surprised to find that he had a good aim at any one of them. He gripped his hand on the release and aimed: Yes, he could do this!

And suddenly a rush of wind entered his skull as swift a copter's down draft. And because he knew he could do it, he wouldn't have to. He relaxed his grip. Sam watched the three copters rising, the *thump thump thump* pumping through his heart.

Sam felt like a champion. He turned around and walked into the kitchen. He looked over at the Wheaties box on the table and saw an image of himself on the orange cover, smiling and posing with his surface to air missile on his shoulder.

No, Sam would leave him alone. He knew he could do it and that was satisfaction enough. Let someone else, an enemy, in some other city or country, make his own attempt. Let them think he is safe. Leave this president alone: he would shoot himself in the foot sooner or later. After all, self-destruction makes for better tragedy.



Broken

Don't break me
I'm as fragile as beer-bottle glass
Smashed on the counter in drunken danger
Wrecked by bellicose rage, shattered for sharpness
Drowned in whiskey tears, bleeding booze
Please, I beg, don't break me
Don't leave me
Don't canoe don't streams of saliva
Down into dipping dells and around twin peaked hills
I'm alone on a twitching mountain
Forced to climb up and down, up and down
Slammed by the moans of panting winds, breathing
Hot springs down my spine, I shiver
Don't sell me
I'm biting, nipping, barbed and bruised
Rocky revulsion, ramming right into wrongness
I'm as scattered as whiteness on the bed
Cream in my mouth
Money in my mouth
Roses bloom between my legs
I wish those scarlet petals would flutter like cherry blossoms
But I swallowed
A poison that has murdered my gardeners
Now I wipe away and weep
Don't come
Closer to me

—hannah marier

cholesterol

a lab produces
anxieties on
large scale. a
doctor's eyes
strand on the
cholesterol
while sailing
down the lab
report. but his
words remain
unabsorbed
on her brain's
surface. her
mind is a dead
zone of little
learning, where
cholesterol
doesn't grow.
the doctor
forbids *biriani,
ghee-rice, fried
beef, mutton
chops...a
deadpan smile
spreads on her
wizened lips.
each forbidden
food has been
beyond her
penury since
times immemorial.

—fabiyas mv

*biriani – a South Asian dish.

SETTING THE WORLD TO RIGHTS

by jeff haas

I never wanted to hire a security guard to patrol the subdivision, but when the other members of the Homeowner's Association insisted that our resident Peeping Tom might escalate to a full-blown home-invading rapist, I was required, as President, to pursue the matter. Everyone knew that the culprit was probably Nate Fillmore, a Sugarville High senior destined for the University of Georgia the next year, but no one had been able to catch him in the act. So the board chose to treat the entire neighborhood like an unruly group of high school students being held after class, and they appointed me head of detention.

Finding a security guard was easy enough, but finding one who would work nights for low pay proved more difficult. I finally settled on a local agency that assigned an elderly gentleman named Peter Genworth, a retired English professor who said that he needed the money to supplement his Social Security income. He seemed like an affable enough fellow, and considering that his primary duties would consist of driving around the neighborhood to make his presence known and sitting at the pool parking lot waving to residents, I hired him on the spot. He was happy to have the work, and I was happy to check that task off my to-do list and report my success back to the Homeowner's Association.

One night on my way home from the hospital I saw Peter sitting alone in his car reading a book, and I suddenly felt sorry for him. I've read several medical studies that suggest men who retire early also die early because they lose their purpose in life, and here was a man who had been a tenured professor at Emory University now suffering the indignity of working as a security guard just to make ends meet. He looked lonely and bored beneath the dim parking lot light, so I decided to pay him a visit.

I parked my Porsche at the house and walked to the pool, still wearing my black racing jacket and leather gloves to fend off a sudden April drizzle. Peter's car was a white SUV with a makeshift "Security" decal affixed to the door and a removable amber warning light positioned on top. He was reading a well-thumbed paperback and seemed surprised to see me, but rolled down his window as I approached.

"Is everything all right?" he asked.

"Everything's fine. I just thought you could use a little company."

"Oh, sure. Why don't you come in out of the rain?"

He started to move his holstered revolver from the passenger side seat to the front floorboard, but I stopped him. "That's all right. I'll just sit in the back." I got in behind him and closed the door. "What're you reading?"

"Some whodunit. I just read for fun now that I'm retired and don't have to prove anything to anyone anymore." He raised the driver side window to keep out the rain, which had turned into a steady downpour and was fogging up the windows.

"Can I take a look?"

"Sure." He handed me the book. It was one of those series mystery novels with the author's name at the top in a bigger font than the title.

"It's the thirteenth book in the series, and I've read every last one of them. The detective is going to catch the bad guy again, no doubt."

"If you know the ending, why bother reading it?"

"That's the nature of genre fiction. The ending is never in doubt, especially if the author wants to sell his book to Hollywood. In a mystery novel, the detective always catches the bad guy; in a romance novel, the heroine always marries Mr. Right; and in a science-fiction novel, humanity always comes one step closer to understanding the universe."

"I never thought about it that way," I said, unzipping my racing jacket.

"It's all predicated on false hope—the false hope that order can be restored to society, the false hope that true love can be found, and the false hope that man can understand the universe. People need those beliefs to have the strength to go on living. If we stopped believing in those fictions, we'd all become nihilists and civilization would collapse. Genre fiction is all about setting the world to rights."

"Setting the world to rights. I like that." I handed the book back to him but 'accidentally' dropped it on the console between the seats, and when he reached down to pick it up I pulled a nylon rope out of my jacket, looped it over his head, and pulled it tight. He lost consciousness in ten seconds and died in three minutes.

I stuffed the rope, the novel, and the revolver inside my racing jacket, zipped it up, and walked back to my house in the rain.

A detective showed up on my doorstep the next day after I returned home from performing a heart-transplant operation. He was trying his best not to look like a cliché, but with his tan raincoat and flip-top notepad, it was obvious that he had read his fair share of whodunits.

"Are you Dr. Everett Franklin?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I'm Detective Marshall with the Sugarville Police Department." He flashed his badge. "I understand that you're the President of the Homeowner's Association."

"Yes, I am. Would you like to come in?"

"That won't be necessary. Do you live here alone?"

"Yes. My wife died three years ago."

"I'm sorry to hear that." He looked at his notepad. "Dr. Franklin, were you responsible for hiring a Peter ... Genworth ... as a security guard?"

"Yes, I was. Is something wrong?"

"I'm sorry to say that Mr. Genworth is dead."

"Dead? Oh, my God! What happened?"

"We're still trying to determine that. When was the last time you saw him?"

"Um ... I just saw him last night ... when I got back from the hospital. I guess it was around 9 o'clock. He waved to me from his car when I entered the subdivision. Did he have a heart attack or something?"

"No. Frankly, we believe he was murdered."

"Murdered? Here in the subdivision?"

"Yes."

"Jesus Christ."

"I understand that you hired him fairly recently?"

"Just last week. We were having problems with a Peeping Tom."

"A Peeping Tom?" He made another note. "Did you inform the police?"

"Well, I didn't personally, but I imagine one of my neighbors did. Anyway, I persuaded the board to hire a security guard as a stop-gap measure."

"Why stop-gap?"

"Well, we have several teenage boys who will be going off to college in the fall, and I figure the Peeping Tom issue will resolve itself, if you know what I mean."

"So you suspect one of them of being the Peeping Tom?"

"Boys will be boys."

"Anyone in particular?"

"Oh, no, no, no. I have absolutely no evidence ... just a hunch."

"Dr. Franklin, this is now a murder investigation, and I have to pursue every lead."

"But I don't want to get the boy in trouble."

"He may be in more trouble than you know."

"All right, all right. Nate Fillmore."

He made another note. "And where does this Nate Fillmore live?"

I pointed to the house across the street.

After he left, I watched Detective Marshall through my plantation blinds as he interviewed Nate for a solid fifteen minutes before getting back in his car and driving off.

That night I put on my racing jacket and gloves and walked across the street to the Fillmore house, the revolver and rope hidden under my jacket but the novel held openly in my gloved right hand. Nate answered the door. He was a good-looking young man with short brown hair and blue eyes who wore an untucked pullover shirt, a pair of jean shorts, and no shoes.

"Hey, Nate."

"Hey, Dr. Franklin."

"Is your dad around?"

"No, he's over in London with mom and Amy for a couple of weeks."

"Oh, damn, I forgot! Could you give this book back to him? I borrowed it a few months ago and I've been meaning to return it." I handed him the novel.

"Sure," he said, placing the book on a small table in the foyer.

"Thanks," I said, pretending to leave but turning back around. "By the way, did your dad ever fix that cooling unit in the basement?"

"I don't think so. He said he was going to hire an HVAC guy."

"HVAC? They don't know the first thing about wine cellars. Let me take a look. Maybe I can fix it before he gets back."

"Okay."

I closed the front door and headed for the interior basement door.

"Can I ask you a question, Dr. Franklin?"

"Sure, Nate."

"Have you heard anything about there being a Peeping Tom in the neighborhood?"

"A Peeping Tom? No. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, nothing. Just a rumor."

"That's a strange rumor. Why bother being a Peeping Tom in this day and age when you can find plenty of naked girls on the Internet?" He laughed, and I opened the basement door and started to descend. "Back in a second," I said, leaving the door ajar.

When I reached the basement I walked past the mahogany bar and the home theater to the wine cellar, a sound-proof room that I had helped Nate's dad build five years earlier. Keeping the lights as dim as possible, I removed the revolver from my racing jacket, unholstered it, released the safety catch, and set it down on the cooling unit. Then I walked back to the bottom of the stairs.

"Hey, Nate. Could you bring me a screwdriver?"

"Flat head or Phillips?"

"Phillips."

I walked back to the wine cellar and hid behind the thick wooden door with the revolver. When Nate appeared in the dim light I put the revolver up to his temple and pulled the trigger. He was dead immediately. I placed the revolver in his right hand with his index finger on the trigger, picked up the screwdriver, and selected a bottle of Cabernet that wouldn't be missed.

Climbing the basement stairs to the foyer, I picked up the novel with my left gloved hand, ascended to the second floor, and hid the novel and rope under Nate's bed. I took the Phillips head screwdriver into Amy's bedroom and removed the video camera I had hidden in her bathroom six months earlier. Zipping up the camera and wine bottle in my jacket, I walked back downstairs and replaced the screwdriver in the kitchen drawer. I locked the front door with the extra key I had made when the Fillmores weren't looking, and returned to my house unnoticed.

Later that night I treated myself to several glasses of Cabernet and a video of Amy undressing.

Two days later Detective Marshall showed up on my doorstep again, still wearing the raincoat and holding the notepad.

"Dr. Franklin, we've had a significant development in the case."

"Really? That's great!"

"I can't go into detail, but I wanted to let you know that we identified the murderer."

"You did?"

"It was Nate Fillmore."

"Nate Fillmore? But why?"

"As best we can determine, Peter Genworth figured out that Nate was the Peeping Tom, and Nate murdered him to keep him quiet."

"Oh, my God! Did you take Nate into custody?"

"No, he killed himself before we could arrest him."

"He what?"

"We found his body in his parents' basement." He pointed to the house across the street. "It's a real tragedy. I guess I must've spooked him when I talked to him a few days ago. We've already contacted his parents. They're on their way back from London now. I wanted to thank you for your help. I couldn't have broken the case without you."

"His parents are going to be devastated."

"Well, it's one thing to be a Peeping Tom, but quite another to be a murderer. Just between you and me, he's probably better off this way. He would've spent the rest of his life in jail, and I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy, let alone a good-looking young man like that, if you know what I mean."

"Well, I'm glad that I could help you out, but this is terrible news. The community is going to be extremely upset about this. I'll have to call a Homeowner's Association meeting right away. Anyway, thank you for telling me first. You've done a terrific job in solving this case. It must be very satisfying for you to be able to set the world to rights."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You know, restore order to society and all that."

"Huh?"

"You caught the bad guy."

"Oh, yeah. Actually, it's more like he caught himself. He couldn't live with the thought of being a murderer, or at least he couldn't live with the thought of getting caught for being a murderer. We'll never know for sure. Either way, this case is closed."

He thanked me again and departed.

Now that the Peeping Tom issue has been resolved, I should have no difficulty convincing the board to avoid hiring any more security guards. I'm looking forward to consoling the Fillmores when they return from London, especially Amy. I'm starting to think of that girl like the daughter I never had.



cups and saucers

Fitting its geometric bottom into a saucer,
a cup may wiggle a bit before settling in
but without its saucer a cup feels awkward.
I've seen people place a cup on a paper
napkin not realizing how exposed
the cup feels—like a patient sitting on
butcher wrap paper, waiting for a physical
on an exam table. Don't do that to a cup.

The congenial cup extends its handle to you.
I know some guys who are intimidated
by a six-ounce Limoges china teacup—
as if they were approaching a madonna
whose virtue and beauty are beyond
their reach. They are tongue-tied.
The same guys can handle Corningware
or Pfaltzgraff cups and saucers because
these are the types with whom they went
to school.

Though opposite in nature, cups and saucers
make great partners as each is ordained
to meet the other's needs. Saucer is always
there in overflowing crises. Cup fulfills
the shallow center of Saucer. A symbiotic
paradigm that can serve for generations.

—ada jill schneider

[short story]



THE IMANIS

by z.z. boone

Before you say how crazy I am—a grown man parked on the shoulder of Texas Highway 114, staring at the sky for the past four nights—let me tell you the story from the beginning.

It started some days ago. A Saturday. I was in the habit of going to bed promptly at eleven, and I'd just turned in when I felt the house move and heard the crash of metal and shattering wood. A neighbor's dog began to bark as I turned on my bedside lamp and hurried to the closet for my robe. Outside two car doors slammed, one after the other, and a panicked female voice said, "Shit!"

Slipper-clad, I rushed into my living room, flipped on the porch light, and stepped out into the sticky July night where two kids—a boy and a girl—stood behind the Volvo that had just plowed across my lawn and smashed into the left side of my porch. The car's engine continued to run as the girl spoke frantically into her cell phone.

"Is everyone all right?" I called, but the girl turned her back to me and the boy simply stood—both hands on the trunk—his head bent as if he were going to be sick. Lights had gone on in a few of the neighboring houses and I could imagine the people inside as they peered through curtains and blinds, waiting for the real show to begin.

I quickly surveyed my property damage and saw that the car—its front wheels against the porch floor boards—had split the top and bottom railings and shattered the balustrades. One of the four-by-four supporting posts had been knocked crooked, and my padded wicker rocker had been totally upended.

"I'd better call the police," I said, which immediately caused the girl to turn and lower her phone.

"No!" she shouted. "Chillax! I just called my dad and he's taking care of everything!"

I ignored this and turned toward the house, but something had energized the boy and he was quick to move away from the car and block my path. I'm not in the best of shape. Five-foot-six, two-hundred and twelve pounds. I'm thirty-four years old and have to pause for breath halfway up a flight of stairs. The boy,

in contrast, was tall and solid as a steel door. I recognized him. Tony McCann, “T-Mac” to his devoted, slaving buddies.

“I wouldn’t if I was you,” he said, his breath smelling combustible. He held his position, then moved away, but when I took a step toward the house, he said, “I’m not playing, dude!” I knew he meant it.

It was maybe five minutes later that I noticed flashing lights approaching and figured one of the neighbors had had the good sense to call for help. But it wasn’t the police; it was a tow truck that backed onto my lawn, adding fresher, deeper ruts on top of the ones already cut by the Volvo. The operator, an apathetic young woman dressed in a soiled mechanic’s coverall, climbed from the cab of the truck, turned off the car’s ignition, and wordlessly began to hook up.

A few feet away, the two kids were kissing passionately, as if they were on a honeymoon in the Poconos. I thought this might be a chance to slip into the house undetected, but before I had that opportunity, a van pulled into my driveway. Fandango Home Improvement it read on the side, and the driver quickly stepped out and yelled something in Spanish. The girl alerted and obediently slunk away from T-Mac and toward her father. Once she was enclosed in the van, the man walked over and offered his hand.

“Alex Rivera,” he said. “Sorry about this.”

I couldn’t help but note the roughness of his skin, the strength of his grip. “Did you see my porch?” I said.

“Let’s do the right thing,” Rivera said. “Fabiana don’t have her license yet. This could mess things up for her.”

“Well, what am I supposed to do?”

“Let’s avoid the hassles,” Rivera said. “Tomorrow morning I’ll get a crew out here, make this look like new.”

The tow truck operator came over, asked Rivera how he was doing, handed him a clipboard. They seemed to have been through this before. He signed off, and then gave her a credit card which she swiped through some triangular piece of plastic on top of her phone.

“What about my lawn?”

“I got a nephew with TruGreen,” Rivera said. “Fix you right up.”

T-Mac sauntered over, said he was living in Glenbrook, and asked how the hell he was supposed to get home.

“I don’t know, guy,” Rivera told him. “Maybe if you reach inside the front of your pants you got a pogo stick in there.”

I admit I was somewhat excited by the prospect of a fight. Angry words, a push, maybe a punch thrown. Rivera going back to his van and returning with a pipe wrench. But T-Mac, as dumb as he may have been, was wiser than that. He turned, embarrassed but with dignity somewhat intact, and started off toward midnight.

Rivera reached into his shirt pocket and handed me a business card. “If you need anything,” he said.

The tow truck pulled out followed by Rivera’s van. I slipped the card into my robe pocket and was on the way in when two things caught my attention. The

first was a new neighbor, Jasmine Fitch, who had moved across the street in May. She was a small woman, not particularly attractive but nicely built. One morning, while retrieving my newspaper from the bushes, I had noticed her struggling with one of those old galvanized trash cans and walked over to give her a hand. Introductions were made, and when I mentioned (like an idiot) that this was “man’s work,” she agreed and told me, “My late husband would have had this on his to-do list.”

The night of the incident, she was standing in her open doorway, her silhouette backlit, and dressed in a pastel-colored nightgown. I raised my hand to wave—I almost called out, Everything’s okay!—but she turned, went inside, and closed the door.

The second thing I noticed was a small sign that I’d pushed into my lawn a week ago. The one that read “Room for Rent.” It’d been flattened to the ground, but before I went back inside, I picked it up, straightened the two metal prongs, and shoved it back into the ground.

I didn’t sleep well that night, and around 6:30, when I heard a knock on my door, I figured it was Rivera’s crew getting an early start. I was ready for them, dressed and coffee already brewed, but it turned out to be a man and a woman who identified themselves as K.G. and Neil Imani. He was my height and totally bald and she was an inch or two shorter, wire-haired and prematurely gray. They both wore running shorts—his red and hers black—along with plain white t-shirt and almost identical Nikes. I estimated them to be around my age.

“We were just passing by and saw the sign,” Neil Imani said. He was built like a powerlifter, while the woman carried less fat than a filet mignon.

My first reaction was to lie, to tell them that the upstairs was already rented, but the truth was I needed money. I’d divorced my wife of nine years—actually, she’d divorced me—and although she agreed to let me keep the house, she took the rest. (“The rest” wasn’t much, but it included a sizable alimony payment.) Add to that the fact that the few people who had inquired about the rental had become immediately disinterested when they learned there were no separate cooking facilities, no private entrance, and no designated parking slots.

I apologized for the outer appearance of the house which the Imanis seemed neither interested nor bothered by. I invited them in. I showed them the upstairs—a master bedroom and bath along with a small, furnished living area that was once my office—then took them downstairs and told them they had full kitchen privileges as long as they cleaned up.

“We cook nothing elaborate,” K.G. said as she ran her hand lightly across the stove. “Our needs are simple.”

I explained that my bedroom was the tiny one just off the living room, and that I worked as a high school civics teacher during the academic year. I added that I was presently employed three days a week, noon-to-four, selling pottery at Glazed Over in the mall.

Neil said they were up from Texas and that he was a freelance writer of

advertising jingles. That they'd come to Connecticut to be closer to New York City. K.G. told me she was a personal trainer. They had no work-related references; actually they had very little of anything. When I told them the monthly rental, Neil nodded and started to reach into his pocket before K.G. stopped him. "Remember?" she said. "Bargaining?"

Neil nodded self-consciously.

"Perhaps," K.G. said, "you might consider a slight price reduction in exchange for personal training services."

It was a strange offer not only by the way it was presented, but because I had vowed to lose twenty-five pounds before school resumed in September. Halfway through summer, I had yet to shed a single ounce.

"Maybe we should all think about it," I said, but no sooner had the words crossed my lips than Neil was burrowing into his pocket and producing a wad of cash secured with a rubber band.

"What's to think about?" he smiled, and although I wondered what kind of person walks around carrying that much money, my hand went up as quickly as Lazarus rising from the dead.

They moved in later that day, driving a brand new Honda Civic with the price sticker still on the window, and carrying identical black canvas duffle bags.

No one from Fandango Home Improvement arrived, but since it was Sunday I reasoned that Rivera evidently meant tomorrow.

It was K.G. who showed up in my kitchen the next morning. She was there around eight—same running shorts and T—when I came in with half-a-dozen crullers from Donut Delight. Despite her lack of curves and a pair of muscular calves that bulged like overstuffed Christmas stockings, she was what my father would have described as "eye-catching." On the stove something was cooking in a pot I'd never seen.

"What's that?" she said, pointing.

I shrugged. "I thought we might need breakfast."

"May I?" she said, holding out her hand.

I passed K.G. the paper bag and she looked inside. "This," she said, "is why the slender, attractive you living inside can't emerge." She signaled me to sit at the table, and like some chastised fourth-grader, I did. She took two mugs from the cabinet, ladled them full with whatever she'd been boiling, placed one in front of me and took the other for herself.

"What is this?" I asked as I stared down into a steaming concoction the color of a peeled tangerine.

"It's healthy," she said. And then—seemingly oblivious to temperature—she took a good-sized swig. I sniffed at mine (it was odorless,) blew on it, took a sip as she watched. It was the consistency of pea soup and tasted neither good nor bad. "After you've finished," she said, "put on some loose-fitting clothing and we'll run."

"Right now?" I asked.

"Don't you want that woman across the street to notice you?"

Strange, I thought, because I hadn't mentioned Jasmine Fitch, not once.

"I'm afraid I can't right now," I said. "I have work this afternoon and my clothes aren't pressed."

"When you return then."

K.G. turned, mug in hand, and left the kitchen. Seconds later I heard her climbing the stair. She'd left the Donut Delight bag on the counter, but something told me it was a mistake to approach it. I took a slightly bigger sip of whatever-it-was, and this time I thought I tasted pumpkin. Maybe sweet potato. I couldn't tell.

At 10:40, Rivera's workers still hadn't appeared. I called upstairs to the Imanis, got no response, figured they were either napping or engaged in something that was none of my business. I left two notes, the first on the kitchen table telling my tenants that workers would likely be showing up, the second taped outside my front door informing the laborers that there was a 12-pack of Diet Coke in the cooler I'd set out.

I hadn't really eaten anything yet, so once I got to the mall I headed over to ShowDowners and ordered the breakfast special: a fried egg with sausage and cheese between two slices of French toast. I'd taken a bite or two when a wave of nausea struck me with an intensity of an unleashed Rottweiler. Luck was with me as far as close proximity to a men's room, and once inside a stall my gut spilled open like a liquid piñata. The queasiness passed almost immediately, and I was able to clean up at one of the sinks as if nothing had happened.

Understandably, I blamed that orange-colored swill.

Business was slow, but halfway through my shift I heard a voice say, "Well, well. If it ain't the teacher." It was T-Mac, along with some dapple-skinned sycophant, standing in the shop's open archway. "Not so tough without Willie Wetback, are you?" he said.

His toady remained in the archway as T-Mac walked around handling the displayed wares. I was hoping for a miracle—someone from mall security would have qualified—when a \$65 Japanese wabi-sabi bowl fell to the tile floor and shattered at T-Mac's feet.

"Lookit me. I'm all butterfingers."

"Okay, Tony. You've made your point."

"Have I?" T-Mac said. He crossed to a pair of majolica candlesticks, picked one up as if it were a juggling club, and lobbed it end-over-end to his buddy. "Think fast, Kev!" he called.

To Kev's credit, he did seem to make an effort. But his coordination was that of a bear on its hind legs, and the candlestick—like the ceramic bowl before it—smashed on the floor below.

"Everything okay?" a voice asked.

It was enough to freeze the action, and when I looked over, a smiling Neil Imani was moving past Kev and into the shop. His attire was the same as the day before, and now he carried a plaid thermos. The boys, presuming little threat, uncoiled.

"Take off, Tinkerbell," T-Mac said.

Neil looked inquisitively over at me.

"It's okay," I said.

Neil walked up to the boys who now stood side-by-side and said, "And I'm sure it'll be even more okay once these young men pay the damage and clean up the mess."

"And what if we don't?" T-Mac said.

"Then I guess I'll have to turn this into one of those old westerns and take you out behind the barn."

A small crossed T-Mac's broad face and he looked over toward his friend who caught on immediately.

"That just might be amusing," T-Mac said.

The smile never left Neil Imani's face. "One second," he said, then he handed me the thermos. "K.G. was concerned you might need lunch." He turned back to the boys as cheerful as if they were all going for a Sunday drive. "Ready?" he asked.

T-Mac and Kev gladly led the way, and just before Neil departed the shop he turned and said, "The clothes they have in some of these store windows? Impressive."

I called the police as soon as the trio was out of sight, and waited ten endless minutes until an officer arrived. I tried to get her to hurry outside or call in backup, but she seemed unconcerned. "These kinds of fights never amount to much," she said. "People generally hit the fresh air, come to their senses, high-five and go home."

I cleaned up the mess and phoned the shop owner who got there just as the police officer was leaving. He was a colleague who taught art at the high school. He was sympathetic to my traumatic episode, but fearing the return of "more hooligans," he suggested it might be best for me to look for alternate employment. I opened the thermos when I got to my car and found more warm orange mash, a cup of which I drank. It seemed to settle me.

At home, I found the Imanis absent and both the porch and the cooler untouched. I dialed the number on the card that Rivera had given me and got a recorded message promising that all messages would be answered after 6 p.m. on the day they were received. I left my name and phone number, then checked the card closer. A post office box, no other address.

The Imanis came in just as I hung up, and I was relieved to see that Neil looked as unscathed as he had that morning. He carried a shopping bag from Saks and a small, somewhat worn-looking paperback book.

"Ready to run?" K.G. asked.

"I was worried about you," I told Neil.

"You mean because of those boys?"

"What happened?" I asked.

Neil shook his head, smiled. "They won't be bothering you again," he said.

In my dresser, I located a pair of sweatpants without a problem. Like most fat

people, anything with an elasticized waistband is standard wardrobe. I took a scissor and halved the legs, creating what I hoped resembled shorts. Then I dug out this chocolate-colored T-shirt my ex-wife had given me, a Double XL that said, “Squirrels Rule.”

The three of us jogged the half-mile toward the public library, Neil and K.G. moving as smoothly as ripples in a satin bedsheet, myself plodding and sweating like somebody locked in a sauna. They tried to encourage me—I guess that’s what it was—by saying things like, “You’re doing well!” and “Keep at it!” But most of my attention was on the people who stared at us, two perfect physical specimens and a man who moved like a steel wrecking ball with legs.

After we got home and I’d showered, I weighed myself. I try to avoid scales—just too depressing—but I hadn’t really eaten all day and figured how bad could it be? I was two-twenty, the lightest I’ve been in some time.

I was also pleasantly surprised when I walked into the kitchen, saw that the table was set, and heard K.G. say that she had prepared dinner. Neil had shed his running outfit and now sported a pair of blue and white checked trousers, a shirt with a nautical flag pattern, and a pair of brown braided loafers. He had the book with him, which I now noticed was some discounted remainder generally found on folding tables inside Hallmark stores. The title was “The Square’s Guide to Street Slang, 2005,” and I wondered how current the information inside could be.

We sat at the table and were served bowls of that by-now-familiar orange mush with something that looked like a broad egg noodle floating on top.

“What precisely is this?” I asked.

The Imanis exchanged looks, and Neil finally told me that it was something called “foybay,” an extract of tapparo root, “something we grow back home.”

“In Texas?”

Again, their eyes locked on one another a moment, and K.G. said, “Yes. Texas.”

Under other circumstances I’d have politely had a few spoonfuls, excused myself, gotten into my car and driven to Wendy’s. But I wasn’t hungry, and if I’d been a condemned man, asked to order my final meal, I think I would have requested the exact dish that was in front of me.

Before bed I turned on my laptop, searched for “foybay,” and found nothing. With “tapparo root,” the computer seemed as confused as I. Perhaps you mean tap root, it suggested.

I heard nothing from Alex Rivera that night and, despite daily calls that I tried to keep civil, heard nothing for the remainder of the week. The following Monday, when I studied the exterior damage, that four-by-four supporting post was leaning at an increasingly disturbing angle, so much so that the overhang above the porch was beginning to sag.

Dinner with the Imanis had become a regular event, one I looked forward to, and when I mentioned one evening that perhaps it might just be better if I paid some carpenter to make the repairs, Neil urged me not to give in.

"Maybe I can help," he said.

The suggestion concerned me, primarily because no one had seen a trace of T-Mac or Kev since that day, but I was growing frustrated and didn't rule out his proposal.

We conversed freely over our nightly meals, or perhaps I should say that I did. I told the Imanis about my failed marriage, my teaching job which I found unsatisfying, the fact that I'd wished that my ex-wife and I could have had a family.

The questions I asked K.G. were answered politely and succinctly:

"How long have you two known one another?"

"Forever."

"Where did you meet?"

"We grew up together."

"How did you get to Connecticut?"

"We flew."

Neil, more gregarious, had started making regular trips to the mall and was becoming, in my estimation, rather stylish. He'd even picked up a couple of casual blouses and a pair of jeans for K.G., which she started wearing around the house and seemed to enjoy modeling at dinner. Neil had started calling me "home boy" and "brother from another mother," terms I surmised he picked up from that silly book he'd bought.

Once, I asked him about the advertizing jingles he'd written. He said he'd done the one for Purina where the dog has just made love to the midget, and the Budweiser "spot" where the beer bottle slits the man's throat while he sleeps. Both, I thought, sounded perverse and somewhat implausible, but I held my tongue. There were certain other things that struck me as odd. I never heard the upstairs shower running, never heard the toilet flush, and never witnessed either of them washing clothes.

Still, I enjoyed their company immensely. They were like teenagers: cryptic and perplexing, but fun to be around. During the week I had lost another ten pounds and found I could button my pants without sucking in. I was living exclusively on foybay; it was warm and thick as oatmeal, fried like hash-browned potatoes, frozen and served for desert. Along with my morning coffee, it was all I desired. I was running three days a week, increasing my distance, feeling energetic and hopeful.

One day things began to become indefinable. I had been out of the house a few hours—a teachers' conference regarding future textbooks, a trip to motor vehicles, shopping for an honest-to-God pair of running shorts—when I came home to find my porch totally repaired and my front lawn newly seeded. Not only had things been fixed, they'd been put into an almost identical state of how they'd been.

Once inside, I phoned Rivera, thanked him and praised his expertise.

After dinner, I turned on the television to watch the news. The Imanis, up until then, would say their good-nights and disappear upstairs. But this evening was

different. I became aware of them standing behind me as I sat on the sofa. The story was certainly not anything that would qualify as hard news; it was about a man claiming he'd been abducted by beings from outer space.

"Why don't you have a seat?" I started to say, but before the words were spoken Neil had taken the armchair and K.G. settled on the sofa cushion next to me.

The person being interviewed said that while driving from Levelland, Texas, to Wichita Falls, his car—with the exception of the dashboard radio—suddenly "died" a few miles east of Lubbock. He stated that he'd made the journey numerous times before, almost always at night, leaving his home at seven and arriving at his brother's place by eleven. This night, however, he'd seen "a diamond shaped light come out of nowhere," and seconds later he was transported onto a craft, the interior of which he described as "sterile-looking."

"They drew some blood from my chin, but the incision healed instantly," he said. "The entire ordeal took less than two minutes. I know this because I could still hear my car radio somewhere in the distance. Glen Campbell was singing 'By the Time I Get to Phoenix,' and before he reached Oklahoma I was back in my car approaching Wichita Falls. When I checked my watch, it said almost four hours had gone by."

"So these aliens manipulated time?" the reporter asked.

"It's called simultaneous eternalism," Neil said absently, and K.G. quickly hushed him.

I was about to ask Neil what he was talking about, when the phone rang. It was Alex Rivera. "What are you trying to do?" he said. "Bust my balls?"

I told him I'd just called to thank him for his professionalism.

"I don't appreciate sarcasm!" he told me. "Sarcasm moves you to the bottom of my list, asshole!"

It was around 11:30 that same night when I was awakened by rhythmic movement outside on the porch. I worried that it might be T-Mac back for revenge, or Rivera, so I padded into the living room and looked outside.

It was Neil Imani, seated in my wicker rocker, pitched back and gazing out at the clear night sky. I stepped outside, unfolded a plastic web chair, and set it up next to him. He seemed pensive, but undisturbed by my company.

"Excellent job repairing the porch," I said.

"Thank you," Neil said, and then catching himself he added, "What I mean is, yes. It looks very dope."

"I don't think anybody uses the word 'dope' in that context anymore," I said.

"Really?" he said. "What about 'Baby's got back'?"

"I'd avoid that one."

We let a silent minute go by.

"You never told me what happened at the mall," I said.

"You mean with those two kids?" He smiled that sheepish grin of his. "Just know they're in a better place."

"You make it sound like they're dead."

"No," Neil said. "Just in a better place."

We looked out into the darkness.

"So what's simultaneous eternalism?" I asked.

"I don't think I'm familiar with that term," he said.

"Come on, Neil. I thought we were starting to become friends."

He looked over. "Really?"

"Friends aren't something I have in great supply," I said.

Neil hesitated, rocked forward, and turned his chair toward me. "Don't say anything to K.G.," he said.

I mimed locking my lips with a key and throwing it away.

"You know how people believe in past, present, and future?"

I nodded.

"Well, it doesn't quite work that way," he said. "It's more like it's all happening at once."

I shook my head and shrugged my shoulders.

"We're in this moment now—sitting here and talking and looking at the stars—but at this very instant we're also being born and falling in love and having our hearts broken and dying."

"All at the same time?"

Neil nodded. "It's why certain humans can see into the future and others can recall past lives."

"Can you do those things?"

Neil got up from the rocker, put both hands on the porch railing, and stared out.

"Tell me about Texas," I said.

He began to rattle off something that sounded prepared, studied. "Texas is a large land mass in the southwest region of the United States. It is famous for cowboys and cattle ranching. Austin is its capital."

"Where are you from really?"

Neil turned, walked to the door and opened it. "I'm sorry it has to be you," he said.

"What do you mean?"

To this I got no answer, just the sound of my tenant as he gently eased the screen door closed behind him.

I waited some minutes before going back inside, then closed my bedroom door and turned on my computer. I searched for "Alien Visitations," and "Alien Abductions," and finally "Space Alien Sightings in Texas." I read about Donna Lee of Houston who claimed, in 1995, to have had a fetus taken from her, and the 1973 story of Tammy Stone, a waitress from Waco, who recalled being pulled from her car by two beings and transported to an examination table where "a small machine hovered over me like a big eye."

Texas was packed with so many reported UFO sightings and alien abductions that one researcher compared Highway 114—from Dallas to the New Mexico

border—to the Port Authority bus station in Manhattan. “Cosmic visitors arrive all the time,” he stated, “and from there it’s anybody’s guess where they end up.”

After our run the next day, I saw Jasmine Fitch standing outside her house watering her rock garden. I signaled K.G. and Neil to continue on without me, and then I strolled over.

When a fat person loses weight, even if it’s only a few pounds, he often makes the mistake of thinking he’s metamorphosed from Quasimodo to Johnny Depp. The positive aspect is an improved sense of confidence. The negative side is that he’s still a fatty, albeit in a slightly looser clothing.

“Hello,” I said. “Beautiful evening.”

Jasmine released the handle of the hose nozzle, turned, smiled pleasantly and said, “Yes. Isn’t it?”

“Forgive me if I’m being forward,” I said. “But there’s a musical performance of *Oliver* over at the community center next weekend and I thought you might like to go.”

“With you?” she asked, and then she shook her head. “No offense—nothing against you or men in general—but after Carl died, I took a good look around and promised myself to take my time with things. Stay focused. Don’t simply reach for the low-hanging fruit.” She must have seen disappointment wash across my face, because she quickly added, “Not that I’m comparing you to low-hanging fruit, just that I...”

“Want to stay focused.”

“Exactly,” she said.

I pointed to her garden. “You want to be careful. Don’t overwater those daisies.”

“They’re asters,” she said, and before another word was exchanged, she’d turned and returned to her watering.

The man who showed up at my door two days later, while Neil and K.G. were at the mall, wore a brown suit and tie the same color as his closely cropped hair and wing-tipped shoes. He introduced himself as Special Agent Jeff Holton and showed me an ID card and badge from the National Aeronautics and Space Agency.

“I just have a question or two and then I’ll be out of your hair,” he said.

Holton looked like a recent university graduate, a collegiate baseball player perhaps, and he was neither dire nor intimidating like his television prototypes. I invited him in and asked if I could make him some coffee. He smiled pleasantly and passed, and then he indicated the kitchen and asked if he might have a look.

“This concerns the two people whom I believe are your tenants,” he said as I followed him around.

“Are they in trouble?”

“Let’s just say they’re persons of interest,” he said. “Is there anything out of the ordinary you’ve noticed?”

How would you like that list? I thought. Timeline or alphabetical order? But I simply said, “Not really.”

Holton grabbed the handle on the refrigerator door. “You mind?” he asked. I shook my head.

He looked over several items—a browning head of lettuce, a half-quart of skim milk, a plastic container with week-old tuna—but apparently didn’t find what he was looking for.

“Do you suppose,” he asked, “that I might have a peek at the rooms they’re staying in?”

“I can’t do that,” I said, surprising myself. “But they should be back soon if you’d like to wait.”

“I’d prefer to avoid that,” Holton winked. “I tend to be the anti-social type.”

He asked a few more questions, then gave me a card and told me to call if anything bizarre happened.

“Like what?” I asked.

“I think you’ll recognize it when it happens,” he said.

After he left I used a tiny magnet shaped like a wine bottle and stuck his card to the refrigerator right above the one I’d gotten from Alex Rivera.

For lack of anything else to occupy me, I started cleaning the house.

I was dusting the living room blinds when The Imanis came in about an hour later, he dressed in a grey shirt with a Mao collar and white cotton trousers, she wearing a floral printed jumpsuit and black platform wedges. They both carried shopping bags, and Neil had retrieved my newspaper from wherever it had been flung that morning. They both seemed as carefree as Catholic kids after First Holy Communion.

“For you,” Neil said, and he produced a plastic bag from Sports Authority and handed it to me.

“I have something to tell you,” I said.

“In a minute,” Neil said. “First look inside.”

It was a pair of running shorts, real ones, and the benefits listed on the packaging included “perspiration absorbing crepe liner,” and “mesh side panels for greater ventilation.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“Do you like the color? ‘Fierce green.’”

“Very nice.”

“If they’re a little tight,” K.G. said, “we can just—”

“There was somebody here looking for you,” I said.

“Us?” they said simultaneously.

“A man from NASA.”

They both paused, and then K.G. said, “Already?”

I shrugged.

“Damn,” Neil said. “And I just bought a linen bomber jacket.”

“Listen,” I said. “Whoever you are, whatever you’re doing, maybe I can help.”

They both looked at me for what seemed like an uncomfortably long time, and then K.G. turned to Neal and said, "I guess it has to be tonight then."

"For what?" I asked, but the question was ignored as my guests started away and up the stairs.

I sat on the sofa and tried to calculate what to do next when the newspaper, which Neil had dropped on the coffee table, got my attention. It was folded like a burrito, but I recognized the photograph on the front page. I opened it up and read the headline: Local Man Hospitalized.

A few words and some phrases caught my eye: backhoe trench; unexplained; several broken bones. I took another look at the picture. I couldn't tell if it was from his high school yearbook or perhaps his driver's license. But I did know Alex Rivera when I saw him.

That night I had a dream. I was jogging through foreign terrain—it was flat and sandy like pictures I'd seen of South Australia—when I was enveloped in darkness. Seconds later, light returned, then grew brighter, until I realized I was on my back on some kind of examining table like, I imagine, poor Tammy Stone had experienced. I heard my name whispered lovingly, and when I looked up I saw a woman—my mother, I think—reaching long, tentacle-like arms toward me.

If fact, I was hearing my name. It was enough to wake me, to cause me to roll over on my side, to squint in order to make out the form of K.G. as she stood in front of the window silhouetted by the approaching dawn. She was dressed in what appeared to be a sleeveless, peach colored lounging outfit.

"Is anything wrong?" I asked.

She came closer and said, "No. Nothing's wrong." She put her hands on her hips and started to gather the material of the skirt, exposing first her legs, and then higher up. With one easy motion, she drew the entire garment up and over her head, dropped it to the floor, and stood naked. "Move over," she said.

I didn't budge, but she still squeezed in.

"Are you serious?!" I said. "Your husband is right upstairs!"

She laughed softly and I realized this was the first time I'd heard her do so. "He's not my husband," she said. "He's my brother. And he's fully aware of what's going on."

She started to unbutton my pajama top. I can't explain why—the foybay maybe, or months of involuntary celibacy—but I became immediately aroused. "What are you doing?" I said.

"Relax," she said. Her hand popped open the metal snap on my pajama bottoms. "It'll all be over soon."

But I don't want it to be over! I thought. I was totally nude at this point, as much from my own effort as from hers, and she was right. It was over soon. And after it was repeated a second time, I ran my hands over her hairless body and discovered a stomach as smooth as the desert I had just dreamed about.

"You have no navel," I said.

"No what?"

"No bellybutton. Look."

I showed her my own and she laughed again, and as she explored it with her finger she said, "My goodness. You seem to be missing a tube." I moved to kiss her, but she turned her head away and said, not unkindly, "We don't do that. We find it cannibalistic."

We lay side-by-side—our bodies pressing—and I dozed off for what seemed a few minutes. But when I opened my eyes, K.G. was gone and my bedside clock indicated that almost three-and-a-half hours had lapsed. I got up feeling buoyant, the morning sun shining like polished metal. I put on my new running shorts and a plain gray t-shirt. At the bottom of the staircase, I called up but got no answer. And when I looked outside, I saw that their car was gone.

That's all right, I convinced myself. They're at the mall. They'll be right back.

I started to brew a pot of coffee and went to the refrigerator for the milk, but when I opened the door, I saw that it had been cleaned out, that everything had been replaced with jars of foybay. A note was taped to one of the jar lids that read: These will last three months, longer if you're careful.

I plucked Holton's card from the refrigerator door, moved to the phone, lifted the receiver, and then stopped. The future flickered in front of me. Neil and K.G., isolated in some Air Force facility like a mutant disease, while I'm branded this nutritionally-depraved lunatic.

I hung up the phone and dashed upstairs hoping to find at least a clue, and discovered everything just as it was the day they'd arrived. The bed appeared to have never been unmade, and I wondered if they slept hanging from the ceiling like bats, or if they even slept at all.

On the dresser, I noticed the roll of cash that Neil had flashed that first day, discarded like something worthless. Something was beneath the money and I slid it free. It was a photograph anyone could take with a standard film camera, a snapshot of a baby in a white onesie lying on a butterscotch-colored blanket. On the back was some writing: This is your child, it said, one year from today. It was signed Krystal-Gineya (K.G.) I turned the picture over and studied the child once more. He or she was nothing extraordinary. Pink-skinned, bald-headed, chubby. And just that quickly, as my body went numb and my face became as warm as toast, I was overwhelmed by some emotional connection I'd never felt to any other human being.

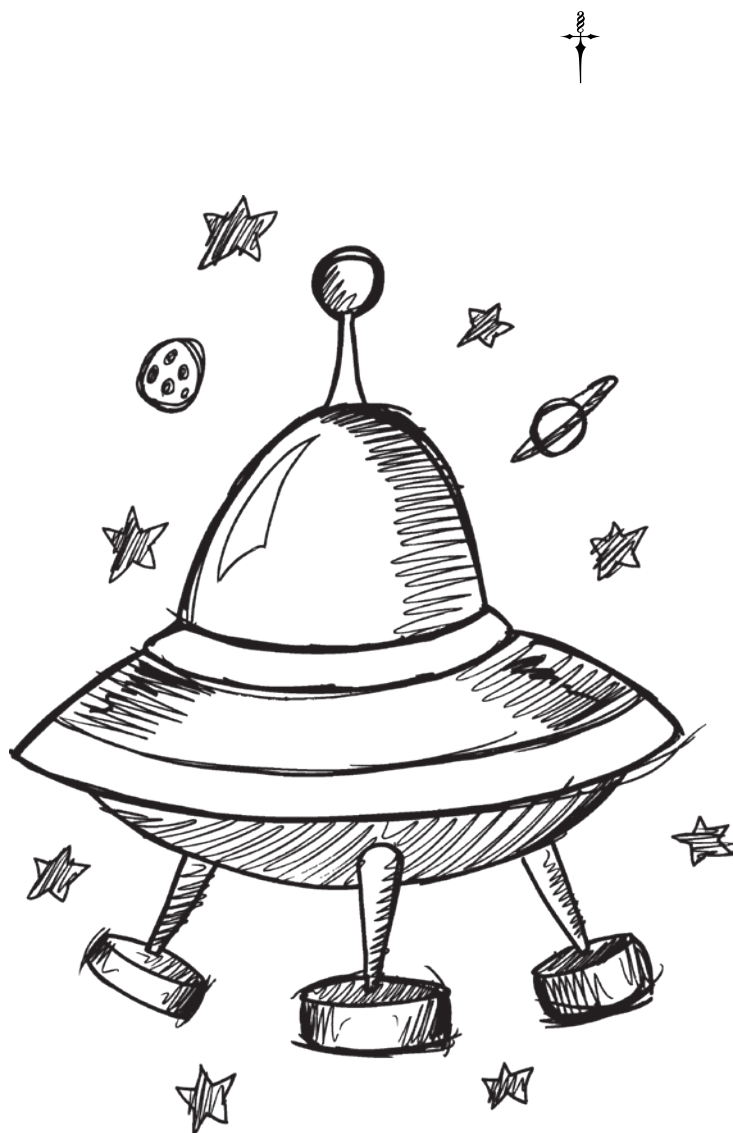
The town of Seymour, Texas, is small and friendly and relatively accepting. During the day I stay at a place called Dottie and Hal's Settle Inn, and in the late afternoon, when the blazing sun becomes a bit more forgiving, I run. At night, I park on the side of Highway 114—all four wheels off the blacktop—and wait.

My first evening out, a police cruiser pulled in behind me and a uniformed officer requested identification. I gave him my license and explained why I was here.

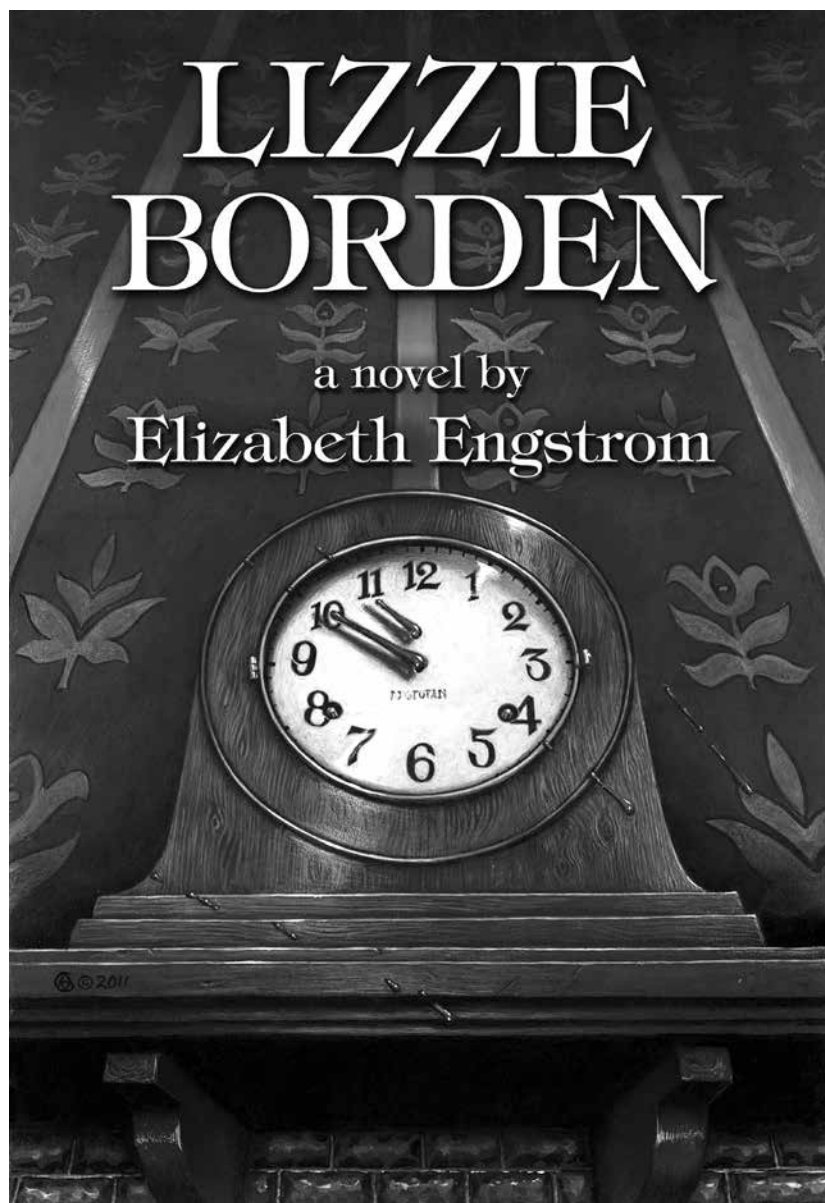
"Am I breaking the law?" I asked.

"Not hardly," he said. "We get you true-believers all the time. Y'all keep this place goin'."

Then, around 11:00 tonight, I thought I saw something. I'd just reached back and taken a jar of foybay from the cooler on my back seat when I noticed a light coming from the east and getting brighter as it approached. It turned out to be a mammoth SUV pulling one of those Airstream travel trailers and it shot by like a streak, but I'm pretty sure the driver raised his hand and waved as if he, too, were in search of something not all that easy to find.



[review]



a review by sheila gazlay

Lizzie Borden by Elizabeth Engstrom is not a whodunit but a what-if. Ms. Engstrom is not afraid to invest her inspiration with strange imagination. It's a pondering of the real life of Lizzie Borden before the murders for which she was acquitted and what incidents or themes in her family life could have led her to commit such an act.

This book—somewhat refreshingly—doesn't just concentrate on clinical psychological possibilities of why she may have killed her parents, the trial transcripts and the gory details, but shows what many Lizzie Borden aficionados agree to be true of Lizzie's life before the murders. The book explores in some detail Lizzie's day-to-day life with a creative speculation atypical of so many books that simply rehash information extrapolated from the Borden trial in addition to popular gossip.

This portrait of Lizzie's life includes things we know such as that she lived with her father, stepmother, and sister. But Engstrom also engages in the probabilities, according to her own unique vision, of what that life was like given the times in which Lizzie and her family lived. The book also unpacks and expands upon what are actually unknowns and speculations about Lizzie—that Lizzie was gay, for example.

This *Lizzie Borden* explores some intriguing characteristics about the family members, their habits, and private relationships. One such invention is Lizzie reading to Andrew and rubbing his feet—a rather intimate practice that may imply an abnormality in the relationship. Another one is that Emma's trips to the city were for the purpose of drinking and getting into trouble. It may not be a popular possibility but does add color and a bit of tension to this work of fiction. It is also said that Emma went to Boston twice a year to get her fur out of storage in the winter and put it back in storage for the summer. Lizzie and Emma go to the city to pick out material for spring dresses. And Lizzie, given her enjoyment of fishing and as a sort of foreshadowing of the importance of fishing lures in her alibi, goes on fishing trips with her dad while she is young and longs for them when she is an adult.

Engstrom's text agrees with the common knowledge that after the trial Lizzie changes her name to Lizbeth. In this book, however, people call her Lizbeth before the murders. Was this why Lizzie chose "Lizbeth" over "Lizzie?" Was she trying to disengage from a name that had been so tarnished while not altogether giving it up out of personal pride? Or was it a matter of personal taste?

In some books on the murders, much is made of how a writing desk in Lizzie's room was pushed against a door that divided her room from the guest room in which Abby's body was found. In Engstrom's divided Borden home, we see that Lizzie may have had her reason for this arrangement. At any rate, it is interesting that she shows Lizzie doing it.

That being said, as Engstrom implies, obstructed or locked doors was a common practice, whether this practice was tied to a mystery or a simple arrangement for

privacy. Is placing a piece of furniture against a door a barricade—or does it merely show the need for more space to accommodate furniture? The reader can make up his or her own mind about the importance of this.

Some purists of the historical nonfiction Borden book may be put off by this work, because for these people the Engstrom work is not about a believable, realistic theory that may solve the crimes. Although this book is inspired by an actual case, *Lizzie Borden* is a work of fiction—a novel. It is not a serious attempt at solving the crime according to what the world understands as fact. On the other hand, there are those individuals in the world who seriously accept forms of mysticism as explanations. Still other people may enjoy this book for any number of reasons. Engstrom's *Lizzie Borden* is certainly not the book one goes to for an introduction to case facts or information about the Trial. But the author can be commended for her daring imagination.

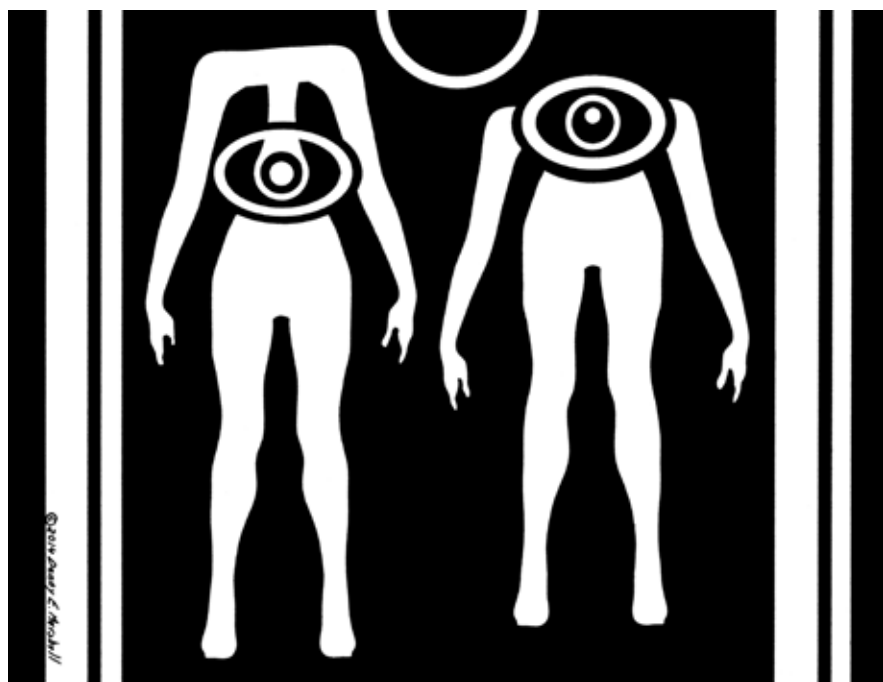
There are implications that Lizzie did not commit the murders and that Emma was in on it—if for no other reason than unhappiness with the parents. Engstrom also touches on the theory that someone in Abby's family, maybe a brother-in-law, committed the murders out of suspicion that Andrew Borden was not going to make provisions for him or Abby's sister. This whole theory is almost reminiscent of the JFK plot and the bums at the fence theory.

Lizzie did have friends before and after the murders, and the author creates a particular woman that has a profound influence on Lizzie that at least plays a role in the tragedy. This strange woman sends Lizzie a book with exercises in it she must do daily. On the face, they seem to be what we'd now call aspirations but some are so strange—such as getting in touch with one's Angry Self—that they resemble mind control exercises. Even the name of the book, "Pathways," is reminiscent of mind control in this author's opinion.

It's the supernatural power of these exercises and the subsequent behavior and trances of Lizzie's that add a whole other spooky realm to the question of who killed Abby and Andrew Borden. What Lizzie becomes able to do through some form of magic is an absolutely unique solution to the murders.

Elizabeth Engstrom turns out what is a real page-turner but not just because it's a murder mystery but because it is such an unexpected story. She has written a fantasy novel that features unexpected vulgarities and imaginative details that should startle many readers. This book would be entertaining had the Borden tragedy never even happened.





—denny marshall



Moralist to Seducer: How Fiction Inverted Dracula

by denise noe

Dracula lives forever undead in the common imagination. As Clare Haworth-Maden observes in her book, *Dracula*, his name instantly brings to mind a vampire in tux and cape, fangs bared, leaning over a prone woman. His intended or actual victim is not always but is usually a woman.

Although possessed of supernatural powers and strength, Dracula has significant points of vulnerability. His powers do not survive daylight. Garlic keeps him away. He can be repelled by the sign of the cross. Perhaps most tellingly, as Haworth-Maden also writes, “He may not enter a dwelling unless invited.”

Most people know that there was a real Dracula. He was a 15th Century Prince named Vlad Tepes III. He was nicknamed Vlad the Impaler or—the name he often used for himself—Dracula. He ruled Wallachia, a country that is part of what is now Romania. He possessed no supernatural powers but, as an absolute monarch, he exercised his earthly powers in extraordinarily cruel ways. He may have been responsible for the deaths of as many as 100,000 people and his favorite means of execution was impalement by which means a person was shoved atop a sharpened pole. The pole slowly tore through flesh until it penetrated a vital organ.

It is also common knowledge today that Transylvania is a real place, a region within Romania.

However, little known or at least remarked upon is the way in which the motivation and meaning of the violence perpetrated by the real Dracula has been curiously inverted in his fictional incarnations. Vlad the Impaler was a stern moralist who terrorized vice out of his country. According to *Dracula, Prince of Many Faces* by Radu R. Florescu and Raymond T. McNally, during Vlad the Impaler’s reign, a cup made of gold was “purposely left by Dracula near a certain fountain located near the source of a river. Travelers from many lands came to drink at this fountain, because the water was cool and sweet. Dracula had intentionally put this fountain in a deserted place to test dishonest wayfarers. So great was the fear of impalement, however, that so long as he lived no one dared to steal the cup, and it was left at its place.”

Vlad the Impaler’s fiercest wrath fell on “immoral” women. Florescu and McNally write that adulteresses, unmarried females who had lost their virginity and “unchaste” widows were all punished in the following grisly manner: “Dracula would order her sexual organs cut. She was then skinned alive and exposed in her

skinless flesh in a public square, her skin hanging separately from a pole or placed on a table in the middle of the marketplace.”

Yet Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* represents sexual temptation. When he greets Jonathan Harker, he tells him, “Welcome to my house! Enter freely and of your own will!” Stoker’s *Dracula* speaks as the voice of sin, which each person must freely allow into his or her heart. By contrast, *Dracula*’s subjects, and victims, were born into his realm and automatically under his thumb.

The Count of Stoker’s classic novel lives with a harem of three young, pretty women. When they approach Jonathan Harker, he is overcome with fear and sexual longing: “I felt in my heart a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips.” The Count discovers the women hovering over Harker and responds with words of transparent homosexual jealousy and possessiveness, shouting, “How dare you touch him, any of you? . . . This man belongs to me!”

The Count in Stoker’s novel is quite ugly as he is in the classic 1922 *Nosferatu*, one of the first *Dracula* films (although one in which the name “*Dracula*” is not used). He is described as an old, cadaverous man with pointed ears, hairy palms, thick eyebrows that meet over his nose. He is said to have bad breath. Hawthorth-Maden has observed that Stoker’s villain has “a physiogomy . . . consistent with the Victorian age’s concept of the ‘criminal type.’”

Dracula has, with occasional exceptions, gotten even sexier since Stoker’s time. While the repulsive *Nosferatu* might have to force his lust on his victims, film *Draculas* like Bela Lugosi, Christopher Lee, and Frank Langella are suave, handsome sorts who can easily seduce.

Equally inverted in the fictional *Dracula* is the real *Dracula*’s relationship to religion. The fictional vampire is instantly stricken into helplessness when confronted by the sign of the cross. Roman Polanski did a witty comic send-up of this in *The Fearless Vampire Killers* when a Jewish vampire laughs at an outstretched crucifix.

Vlad the Impaler was ostensibly a Christian. According to *Dracula Prince of Many Faces*, Wallachia’s brutal ruler “was often seen in the company of Romanian Orthodox monks” and “when he imposed the death sentence, he insisted upon proper ceremony for his victims and a Christian burial.” He founded many monasteries and churches.

When *Dracula* showed two monks the usual scene of impaled cadavers in his courtyard, one said, “You are appointed by God to punish the evildoers.” The other monk remonstrated and was immediately impaled. Vlad reigned before the enunciation of the Divine Right of Kings but the concept of submission to earthly authority, often advocated by religious authorities, was quite congenial to the tyrant.

Moreover, *Dracula* believed himself to be and was seen by others as a Christian patriot, protecting his country and religion from Muslim invaders. The evolution of the name “*Dracula*” is instructive on this point.

Along with several other distinguished European royal figures, *Dracula*’s father, Vlad II, had been inducted into an organization entitled the Order of the Dragon. Florescu and McNally write that among its stated purposes were “the defense and

propagation of Catholicism against . . . heretics, and . . . crusading against the infidel Turks.”

As a member of the Order, Florescu and McNally continue, Vlad II took on the constant wearing of a medallion inscribed with mottoes that “symbolized the victory of Christ over the forces of darkness” and a black cape which would later be the trademark of the fictional, cross-fearing Dracula. Florescu and McNally write that Vlad II, and others of the Order of the Dragon, wore it “only on Fridays or during the Commemoration of Christ’s Passion.”

Vlad II was called “Dracul” because he was a member of the Order of the Dragon; his son, Vlad III became “Dracula” meaning “son of the dragon.” Far from being an epithet, the title was a term of pride, bestowed on courageous men who had fought valiantly against the Turks and for the Christian faith.

Why was the meaning of Dracula’s violent life so utterly inverted in fiction? The answer to that lies, at least partially, with the Victorian society in which Bram Stoker lived and wrote. In many ways, the Victorians were a progressive people who believed, as Florescu and McNally wrote, that they could restrain “an untamed nature through the application of science.” Although they imprisoned men like Oscar Wilde for consensual homosexual acts, their primary method for ensuring chastity was social opprobrium. As much as they shared the real Dracula’s disdain for “immoral” women, the Victorians would have been genuinely appalled by his bloodthirsty methods.

Victorianism was not distinctive for the restrictions it put on sexual activity (many of which are fairly cross-cultural) but, as David J. Skal writes in *Hollywood Gothic*, the separation between “the public face and the private behavior” may have been especially pronounced in this era.

Bram Stoker was a good Victorian. As such, he wished to warn against the consequences of sexual immorality and to sexually titillate without ever being explicit. Finally, it suited his purposes to link savage cruelty with the sexual indulgence both he and his society scorned rather than the sexual restraint they championed.

Hollywood has no moral agenda and is free to titillate unabashedly. Thus the alluring, handsome seducer is generally preferred to Stoker’s ugly rapist.

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The Hope Crasher

Hope, the ever- bright flame of a candle
Burns, tramps, kills and turns into ashes
the dark side of man.
Wind, the piercing sound of the hills,
Extinguishes, smothers, destroys and blackens
the white wick of the candle.
and in the cold winter air,
They leave man alone with his err.

—himan heidari



—denny marshall



kino | nowe horyzonty

WERNER HERZOG
NOSFERATU
WAMPIR 1978

NOSFERATU • PHANTOM DER NACHT

KLAUS KINSKI • ISABELLE ADJANI • BRUNO GANZ • ROLAND TOPOR

Herzog's *Nosferatu*

a commentary by eugene hosey

This is the great filmmaker Werner Herzog's remake of the original *Nosferatu*. Murnau's silent classic was made in 1922, while Herzog took on the project in 1979. Herzog uses color and sound rather remarkably, but the movie appears to be largely an homage to the Murnau film. Herzog is known for documentaries and for filming in real locations such as the dangerous wilderness of South America. Herzog believes that real places in the world have real spirits or vibes that influence the whole project and communicate experience that cannot be replicated in a studio and captured on film. *Nosferatu* is Herzog's only true remake. He made a movie, *Bad Lieutenant*, that was called a remake, but the guts of that film were Herzog's own vision of a bad lieutenant to the extent that the movie title was the only actual "remake."

Herzog's admiration for the classic Murnau film is obvious. He does not change Murnau's story or how it unfolds. In fact, to at least a great extent, Herzog's film could be watched, appreciated, and understood without sound—though one would miss Herzog's gifts—for Herzog is able to add much to the experience of watching *Nosferatu*. Realtor Jonathan Harker is sent to Transylvania to do business with Count Dracula, and the count journeys by ship to Harker's home in pursuit of the man's wife, hungry for her blood. Even several key scenes and images are faithful to the original. The first example of this that comes to my mind is the low-angled image of the vampire standing on what has become a death ship.

Images of vampires have gone through so many changes in film since the 20s

that we now have two extreme possibilities when it comes to the portrayal. Since the 1922 film, the image of the vampire has become that of the handsome man with concealable fangs and supernatural powers. Like Murnau, Herzog makes the vampire an obvious monster. This creature is powder white with fangs impossible to miss and big pointed ears; his clothing is black; his fingernails are long needles. Generally the vampire's movements, usually on a wall as shadow, are slow and even graceful. His voice is a strange groan, his personality on the passive side.

Interestingly, what is on the one hand a faithful remake is also saturated with Werner Herzog's talent and vision. His addition of color and sound are used with effective purpose. Many horror lovers will be seduced by the first scene. In some dark cavernous place, a long line of mummies are on display as the camera pans them. No less important than the frightful mummies is the eerie music that plays as we watch. The soundtrack is a kind of humming and chanting that produces growling, piercing sounds that seek to get under one's skin, while high refrains of impenetrable mystery come in above it. Herzog does two things here even before the story begins. He sets a morbid mood and establishes the theme of this film. Death.

There has been so much to say about Herzog's on-location eccentricities and difficulties that his purely visual talents have not been given their due. In *Nosferatu* he gets his chance to focus on the art of the screen. One might say he becomes a painter. Herzog's palette is one of his major contributions to this movie, but not because he decides to throw out the black-and-white sensibilities of the Murnau film. Perhaps Herzog made decisions with the following questions in mind: Can I maintain such quietness that it retains the spirit of the silent film? Can I still make special use of black-and-white in a color film? In the exterior natural settings, the greens and blues are muted. Special effects that might make something pretty or impressive are avoided. There's not much talk. Harker's walk by himself to the castle along the cascading waterfalls is a spooky statement of aloneness. In the interiors, there is a striking arrangement of the deepest blacks (death) and the bright whites (life). Klaus Kinski manages interesting visual performances on the white walls as a shadow, mostly of arms and hands.

Herzog makes interesting use of the foreground as images move into view from out of nowhere—or one might say, from behind us. One of these is the ship as it comes into the canal, scraping tree limbs as it slows to a stop and hundreds of white rats emerge—all human life once on the ship now dead or missing. That strange music effectively announces the arrival of the vampire along with the ship. Another is the way the vampire's first visit to Harker's wife (Isabelle Adjani) is portrayed—a technique I cannot recall from any other vampire movie. The wife Lucy sits at her dresser looking in her mirror. She hears the creak of the door behind her. We are looking in the mirror with her. We see the door open but nothing else. Then we see the vampire's shadow on the wall as he approaches her. By the time he can actually touch her, we see him and she repels him with a cross. Lucy is strikingly beautiful, pale, oval-faced, big-eyed, and with long black hair—the Edgar Allan Poe ideal woman.

The townspeople believe that a plague has come upon them. And actually it is an incurable plague—the plague of death. The medium and close shots of the rats are repulsive and overwhelming. Soon death is to be seen everywhere. There is a bizarre scene of people eating a “feast of death” or “the last feast” followed by the rats consuming the leftovers.

Jonathan Harker does escape the vampire’s castle and makes it home, but he is insane. There is also something else about him revealed at the end that is cryptic. Or is it? In meaning the cryptic issue I refer to might simply be that death continues no matter what, that it cannot be destroyed. The whole time the vampire and the other repulsive images such as the rats and the big bat flying we see now and again are all metaphors for a plague that cannot ever be stopped—Death.

Nosferatu is portrayed as a simple, low-key story of inevitability in spite of its fantastic theme. It is a very different vampire story from so many we have seen throughout all the years of vampire films that somehow evolved from an effort in 1922. Now typically the vampire stories are focused on supernatural fights and vampire killers. On the other hand, the vampire story is apparently never going away. Filmmakers are still tackling the story, and in a minority of cases there are some great, unique results. One such example is the 2013 film, *Only Lovers Left Alive*. Possibly or probably the subject of death fascinates humanity, and the vampire happens to be one of those death metaphors just naturally rich in story possibilities.

In Herzog’s *Nosferatu*, the vampire dies by spending too much time drinking Lucy’s blood. He does not seem to have any brilliance but seems, rather, to represent a part of nature that is not even equipped to put up a fight. There is no apparent struggle between the vampire and the victim. The vampire and Lucy both are destroyed. Death is the victor. The great joy of this film for me, as a film lover, is the atmosphere and the visuals. I recommend watching the 1922 film and immediately after it the 1979 Werner Herzog version. Forced to choose, I prefer the Herzog.



[review]



Sexing The Werewolf

by denise noe

I Was a Teenage Werewolf is a movie title that grabs even as it brings an inevitable smile. It is likely that many people have stayed up late to watch the old 1957 Michael Landon motion picture on their TV sets expecting something funny and special and satiric—only to be disappointed to see a pretty run-of-the-mill, albeit reasonably well-made and entertaining horror flick.

Yet the kinky title conveys oddly deep truths about both real-life teenagers and the legend of the werewolf. It is this writer's contention that a werewolf can be viewed as a creature that symbolizes the sudden, often frightening, almost always disconcerting, and paradoxically both bizarre and ordinary physical and psychological transformations of adolescence.

But whose adolescence is symbolized by the werewolf—the adolescence of the boy or that of the girl?

At first glance, the werewolf might most easily be seen as a metaphorical teenage boy. After all, during puberty a boy finds his face suddenly growing hair, his impulses turning sexual and aggressive. “Wolf” is an old-fashioned, but still used, slang term for a horny male. The fairy tale of the dangerous, threatening Big Bad Wolf out to get innocent Little Red Riding Hood is quite obviously an allegory about a man attempting to deceive or even rape an adolescent girl or young woman out of her virginity. (Interestingly, in the earliest versions of the legend, Little Red Riding Hood lost—she was eaten by the wolf. In the version that has come down to us, the girl and grandmother are rescued by a good man and the wolf—a symbolic bad man—gets his well-deserved comeuppance.)

The famously lusty Lord Byron wrote, “Lycanthropy I can comprehend, for without transformation, men turn into wolves on many an occasion.” It seems likely that the word men is here used in the sex-specific sense rather than the inclusive sense of humanity.

However, it is this writer's belief that the werewolf legend has a distinctly feminine aspect to it. The strongest clue to the werewolf representing the female teenager is that the transformation occurs once a month—when the moon is full. This strongly suggests a connection between werewolves and the menstrual period that begins for the female during adolescence.

There are other aspects suggesting that a werewolf represents the teen years of the female. A girl turning into a woman finds her pubis and armpits suddenly sprouting hair. Indeed, puberty often finds a girl with facial hair but, unlike her brother who looks anxiously and quite hopefully for signs of a beard, a girl is apt to be horrified by a downy mustache or even a hint of chin whiskers. She fears she is turning into a monster.

Finally, it is only the young girl whose sexuality is apt to leave her with a guilty secret inside her belly.

After tallying up the complex and contradictory evidence, I find myself quite perplexed as to the gender of the werewolf, so I will leave it to the reader to sex the werewolf: Is this legendary creature metaphorically a boy or a girl?



Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque: Joyce Carol Oates' Exploration of the Eerie

by denise noe

Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque by Joyce Carol Oates is a collection of short stories that explores the meanings of the words, “haunted” and “grotesque.” One of the collection’s strongest achievements is that it searches for—and finds—the ordinary in the grotesque and the grotesque in the ordinary.

Perhaps the most eloquent section of this collection is the Afterword. In it Oates states, “I take as the most profound mystery of our human experience the fact that, though we each exist subjectively, and know the world only through the prism of self, this ‘subjectivity’ is inaccessible, thus unreal, and mysterious, to others.” Thus, “all *others* are, in the deepest sense, *strangers*.”

Oates continues that, in writing stories of the grotesque, she follows a long, grand tradition. The grotesque includes *Beowulf*’s “saga of Grendel’s monster-mother” and the “carnage in the *Iliad*” as well as the “impish-ugly gargoyles carved on cathedral walls.” She notes that such diverse writers as Franz Kafka, H.P. Lovecraft, and Isak Dineson have written stories of the grotesque; painters Hieronymus Bosch, Goya, and Dali have put the grotesque on canvas; and directors F.W. Murnau and David Cronenberg have placed the grotesque on the silver screen.

The author to whom the collection pays tribute in its very title is Edgar Allan Poe. Oates praises his 1840 collection, *Tales of the Arabesque and Grotesque*, a clear inspiration for Oates’s own collection.

Oates observes a conflict in the human psyche because of its “predilection for art that promises we will be frightened by it, shaken by it, at times repulsed by it” and the “counter-impulse toward daylight, rationality, scientific skepticism,

truth, and the 'real.'" Oates considers the "forbidden truth" that "evil is not always repellent but frequently attractive." She speculates: "Mankind's place in the food chain—Is *this* the unspeakable knowledge, the ultimate taboo, that generates the art of the grotesque?"

Just as the collection explores the nature of the "haunted" and the "grotesque," this essay will attempt to pinpoint the ways Oates examines those concepts. Throughout these stories, Oates plays with expectations. What she refuses to disclose, what she makes obscure, leads to a lingering sense of wonder at what we have read. Precisely because the nature and degree of grotesquerie is vague, we are haunted.

This collection of short stories is divided into four parts. Part 1 begins with "Haunted." It is narrated by an aging woman trying to come to terms with traumatic childhood events. The narrator feels compelled to revisit these events and is at the same time terrified of them. For this reason, the passages circle around and draw back from the most upsetting parts of the story.

The narrator, Melissa, had a childhood best friend named Mary Ann Siskin. Living in the country, they enjoyed visiting abandoned houses. The multiple meanings of the word, haunting, are underlined on the story's first page. Melissa recalls when she asked her mother if houses were haunted and was told there was no such thing as ghosts. Melissa explains, "She was irritated with me; she guessed how I pretended to believe things I didn't believe, things I'd grown out of years before." She notes it is a "habit of childhood" to pretend one is "more childish" than one actually is.

Often mistaken for sisters, the girls are especially fascinated by "the old Minton place." Early in the story we are told it was located on "Elk Creek where Mary Lou's body was eventually found." There was also a previous ugly history because the "old Minton place" was where Mr. Minton beat his wife to death before committing suicide with a shotgun.

When Mary Lou and Melissa explore the ruined Minton residence, they fear things in which they do not believe, wondering if "ghosts" are watching them.

Something unexpected happens when Melissa explores this residence-with-a-past on her own. She encounters an adult woman in baggy men's clothing. Although the woman is clearly not the owner of the property but a derelict passing through, she tells Melissa she has previously seen Melissa and her "sister" on the property and takes Melissa to task for their trespassing. The woman, clearly trespassing herself, insists Melissa be punished for trespassing.

Even though the woman has no authority to discipline Melissa, the awe children feel before adults leads Melissa to allow her pants and panties to be pulled down and her bare bottom to be repeatedly swatted with a willow branch. The woman tells Melissa that this punishment is their "secret."

There is an aura of the perverse, even the perverted, about the incident. Since the perpetrator is female, we do not immediately assume the incident is one of sexual abuse. However, it is an act of pain and degradation inflicted with the victim lying on a mattress and her buttocks exposed. We are left to wonder how much of

physical abuse, indeed how much of what is considered normal discipline, may possess a sexual undercurrent—a possibility that is indeed grotesque.

In a secret conversation with Mary Ann, Melissa confides that she has a secret about the Minton place but cannot reveal more. Mary Ann swears to discover this secret.

Mary Ann's naked, mutilated body is discovered ten days after this conversation. A coincidence? Or did she encounter the same odd female derelict Melissa encountered—and suffer a much more brutal punishment? “Haunted” is the title of the story because these questions haunt Melissa's life. The grotesquerie is that there is no making sense of them.

“The Doll” also goes back and forth between the protagonist's adulthood and childhood. Writing in the third person, Oates tells the story of college president Florence Parr. On her fourth birthday, Florence was given a large, antique dolls' house. She kept a collection of dolls that would play beside the house. Two of those dolls appear important later in the story: the red-haired little boy doll and the little dog doll. She names the doll family Bartholomew.

Over forty years after receiving this childhood “treasure,” (she no longer has it) Florence visits Lancaster, Pennsylvania, to give a lecture at a university. In Lancaster, she comes across a home that looks like a greatly enlarged version of her dolls' house. In her hotel room, the vision of the house, and the possibility that her childhood dolls' house was a replica of it, haunts her and she feels emotionally compelled to visit the place. She resists this compulsion as silly and inappropriate.

The night before she is to give her speech, she cannot get to sleep. She drives to the “haunting” house. A red-haired man “of indeterminate age” opens the door. He politely invites her in. He has a small dog.

Trying to learn if this house served as the model for the dolls' house, she asks if he remembers a Parr family. He answers uncertainly that the name sounds “familiar.” She inquires about a family named Bartholomew. He ruminates on this name as well. She begins to notice that his clothing is odd, the pants without zipper or snaps. They fit him tightly in the crotch, which is smooth and seamless. Indeed, doll-like.

His manner changes, becoming “querulous” and then “mocking.” Florence notices that the dog put a puddle of urine on the carpet. The man notices it and makes a bizarre accusation: “You did something nasty on the floor there. On the carpet.”

Florence is understandably shocked that he is attributing the dog's “accident” to her. He brings “his hands smartly” together twice in front of her face and then slaps her on both sides of her face at once. He shouts, “Liar! Bad girl! Dirty girl!”

The scene cuts to a stylishly dressed Florence Parr at a podium. She confidently gives a speech that is well received. After the speech, as she circulates among the admiring people, she recalls the previous night's insomnia, the dream that she had driven “to see the dolls' house” while her mind firmly asserts: “*She'd never left her hotel room.*” She later thinks: “*Day is the only reality,*” a thought like Oates's observation about the pull between the human love of the “grotesque” and “counter-

impulse toward daylight, rationality, scientific skepticism, truth and the ‘real.’”

The last sentence of this story reads: “Like an exquisitely precise clockwork mechanism, a living mannequin, she would always do well: you’ll applaud too, when you hear her.”

The ending is a kind of wry trick on the reader. Florence has played with dolls, remembered dolls, searched for dolls, and dreamed of dolls. The story appears to be about the grotesque way in which dolls haunt Florence. However, the ending tells us that cool, collected Florence Parr, “an ascetic not through an act of will but through temperament,” is the doll of the title.

“The Bingo Master” is the next story and it is deliberately baffling. The protagonist is not the title character but Rose Mallow Odom, unmarried, 39, and residing with her Dad and an aunt. In her youth, she was a promising writer. Health problems damaged her ability to concentrate so she gave up writing. She has no job and we are not told if she receives disability aid or is supported by family. She spends much time writing letters. In one letter she jokes about divesting herself of her virginity. That joke leads her to adopt it as an actual “project.” It is not a project she anticipates to be pleasurable. However, she holds the belief that painful experiences, and even pain itself, has a generally salubrious effect.

Her efforts to find a sex partner meet such obstacles as having difficulty finding a singles bar and then feeling so out of place when she does that she leaves before entering. She attends various events but finds herself in unusually interesting circumstances when she spends an evening in Joe Pye’s Bingo Hall, an establishment presided over by a tall, broad-shouldered, and flamboyantly masculine figure flaunting a white turban. Figuring there “are worse ways to spend Thursday night,” she sits on a chair, bingo card before her. She wins but it is a player to the side who shouts out the news of Rose’s victory, saying, “She won! Right here!”

Rose makes her way to the front to receive the \$100 check for winning. When the game is at an end, it appears Rose will indeed lose her virginity, for Joe Pye turns his attention to her, flattering her and suggesting she come to his room for a nightcap. Rose accompanies him to his room. She tells herself to regard it “as an impersonal event” similar to a gynecological exam. However, things go wrong as she begins to disrobe. Joe Pye appears confused by her behavior, remonstrating, “I think you must have misunderstood the nature of my proposal.”

He strikes her and shakes her before literally throwing her out of the room. It is an odd, but perhaps appropriate, comeuppance for a woman seeking to treat sex as a painful rite of passage. It is also possible to see Rose’s grotesque non-sexual humiliation as a punishment for using health issues to stop writing. To Oates, betraying writing talent may constitute a very real “sin.”

The next story is “The White Cat,” an homage to Poe’s classic, *The Black Cat*. In Oates’s tale, a man of independent means, Julian Muir, suddenly takes a strong dislike to his wife Alissa’s Persian white cat, Miranda. Julian is in his 50s; Alissa is a lovely blonde part-time actress in her 20s. As soon as we read that his pretty wife is much younger than this affluent man, it is not hard to suspect—or at least believe Julian must suspect—her fidelity. Thus, his hatred of Miranda is a diversion from his

jealousy of Alissa. However, the suspicions that are not consciously acknowledged come out in the terms in which he thinks of both Miranda and Alissa, thinking of how the cat “wantonly” rubs about the ankles of his wife’s friends and seeing his wife as having a “wide, rather promiscuous circle of acquaintances.”

Since Julian represses the reasons for his antagonism toward the cat, he is perplexed by it. Nevertheless, he begins a grotesque campaign to kill the cat. He secretly poisons Miranda. She is nowhere to be seen. Alissa is upset; Julian is secretly triumphant but also, to his own surprise, somewhat saddened.

Miranda shows up. Julian figures she probably vomited the poison. He resolves to make no further attempt on her life—but soon does. He runs over a white Persian cat with his car—or thinks he does—only to suffer the shock of seeing Miranda after he gets home.

As he wages a losing battle against Miranda, his marriage deteriorates. Oates does not depict beatings or even arguments. The marriage simply deteriorates. Passion erodes, companionship crumbles. Julian’s emotional turmoil, coupled with bad weather, leads to a car accident that leaves him incapacitated. Largely paralyzed and mostly blind, he finds one source of comfort: the softness and purring of the cat that regularly settles against him. The story ends with his calling Miranda, “My love!”

Part II of this collection consists of a single, novella-length story entitled “The Model.” Pretty Sybil Blake, 17, is jogging in the park when an older man, Mr. Starr, offers her money to pose for him. He is an amateur artist and wants to draw her. The drawing will take place in the park. Sybil turns him down but later thinks it might be a good idea. He offers good money and she is wary of placing too many more financial demands on her Aunt Lora Blake. The aunt functions as her parent because Sybil’s parents, George and Melanie Conte, died in a boating accident when she was a baby. Since Lora adopted Sybil, her last name was changed from her birth name of Conte.

When Sybil meets Mr. Starr again, she accepts the offer and begins posing for him. He shows a great deal of interest in Sybil, wanting to know about her background, and the reader is likely to expect a romantic or even sexual relationship to develop.

His questions lead her to want to know more about her own background. She questions Aunt Lora about the parents she cannot remember and about the accident that left her an orphan. Memories seem to come back in bits and pieces. She is haunted by the sense that she has been lied to all her life about the basics of her life.

Sybil guesses that her father is not dead: Mr. Starr is George Conte. But once she guesses that, the desire to know the full story consumes her. Going through her aunt’s records, she finds newspaper clippings telling how George Conte quarreled with wife Melanie, shot her to death, and then attempted suicide by shooting himself. He was convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced to from twelve to nineteen years imprisonment. Pictures show her the physical resemblance of George Conte to Mr. Starr. Oates writes, “So Sybil Blake learned, in the space of

less than sixty seconds, the nature of the tragedy from which her Aunt Lora had shielded her for nearly fifteen years.”

She keeps her appointment to model for “Mr. Starr.” Before meeting him, she slips into her bag “the sharpest of her aunt’s several finely honed steak knives.” The story ends with her getting into his limousine, clutching that bag, feeling as if “she might have been on a high board, about to dive into the water.” We can only imagine whether the grotesquerie of patricide will be added to the violence already haunting young Sybil Blake.

Part III commences with a chilling story about a mother who brutally murdered her two-year-old child. Told in the voice of the peculiarly pathetic murderer, most sentences begin with “Because” and then give a reason/excuse/motivation. The murderer is a superstitious woman who clings to astrology, lacks marketable skills, lives in desperate financial straits, and is simply incompetent to cope with the demands of life. The father of the murdered child deserted the mother and it is to him that the explanations/excuses are addressed. In some sense the murder was committed for him: “Because I wanted to tell you these things.” Part of what makes the story hauntingly grotesque is that the reader is unable to refuse the narrator sympathy even though her deed was monstrous.

It is fitting that after a story dealing with the grotesquerie of homicidal motherhood, Oates places two stories dealing with abortion. The stories seem to be written from opposite sides as regards the ever-contentious debate over whether abortion should be legal or illegal with “Don’t You Trust Me?” coming in on the legalization side and “The Guilty Party” on the illegalization side. However, it is probably wrong to confine Oates’s fiction to political or social messages.

“Don’t You Trust Me?” takes place in a future America in which Roe has been over-turned and abortion outlawed. However, Oates strikes a false note in postulating an anti-abortion organization calling itself “Physician Friends of the Fetus.” People who support criminalizing abortion avoid terms like “fetus,” applying the word “baby” to the unborn.

The story starts: “This occurred early in the second year of The Edict, when the first wave of arrests, fines and imprisonments, and frequent deaths had run their course.” After that, “all but the most desperate women” carried to term. However, our protagonist is among the most desperate. She is in college, has little money, no chance of making adequate money before she graduates, and fears the pain an unmarried pregnancy would cause her own mother. Using the old saw about seeking help for a friend, she finds her way to Dr. Knight. Oates may have given the abortionist this name to indicate that he appears to be a “knight in shining armor” to one in our protagonist’s circumstances. Also it ironically suggests the grotesque distance between an illegal abortionist and such a heroic figure. It is possible to see the name, pronounced the same as “night,” as redolent of the “darkness” of abortion under any circumstances and the double darkness when unlawful.

Dr. Knight hardly appears “knightly” as he demands his money up front and counts it as the young woman undresses in a place that smells of “garbage” and “stopped drains” or when he reacts to her sudden expression of pain at the cold

entrance of an instrument into her vagina by telling her he is willing to stop “but no refund.” The doctor asks, “Don’t you trust me?” in a “touchingly sulky” tone; she is reminded of this same question being asked by the man who impregnated her. The story ends with the terrified woman closing her eyes and waiting for the abortion to be completed.

Oates follows the above story with “The Guilty Party,” a tale focusing on a woman who brought her pregnancy to term despite the impregnator’s pressure to abort. As the story opens, she is the mother of a grotesquely mature toddler. Or she imagines that her child is abnormally mature. This could be a horror/science fiction story or the protagonist may be deluded. As with “Extenuating Circumstances,” it is possible that the woman is so haunted by her desertion by the father of her child that her mind has become grotesquely unhinged. Although only two years old, Jocko, as he has nicknamed himself, appears to talk like an adult when he and Mama are alone. Around other people, he reverts to the language and manner of a normal toddler.

Jocko knows that his father wanted the pregnancy of which he is the result aborted. Jocko declares that his awful father wanted “me sucked up some tube and dumped into a toilet, like shit! Me!” Thus, he demands that his mother murder his father. Jocko insists it is justice since he would have been killed “before I could even draw breath” had his father had his way. The monstrous Jocko bullies his mother into agreeing to murder his father. Like “The Model,” the story ends before the foreshadowed violence and with a would-be murderer secretly holding a knife as she meets up with her intended victim.

“The Premonition” is the title of the next story. It is the week before Christmas and Whitney Paxton has a bad premonition about his brother Quinn, an affluent man given to domestic violence. The uneasy feeling Whitney has bothers him enough to lead him to pay a visit to his brother’s home. Wife Ellen answers the door looking oddly fatigued yet feverish. Her pupils are dilated and her smile appears forced and phony. Her pre-teen daughters appear similarly “off.” One wears sunglasses to cover what Whitney suspects is a black eye, while sporting a brittle gaiety. The trio informs Whitney that Quinn was suddenly called away on business and is in Europe. Ellen and the girls will join him shortly for a trip they believe will be long. As Whitney goes around the house, he is troubled by an odd cloying odor and the way the kitchen and bathroom appear to have been freshly scrubbed. The house is filled with packages wrapped in Christmas paper. Whitney is given a present after promising he will not open it prematurely. The reader is left to wonder. Oates leaves it ambiguous as to the nature of the “present” but readers are apt to shiver at the possibility that it is a body part of the recently killed Quinn.

“Phase Change,” the next story, is even more ambiguous. It centers around Julia Matterling, an art museum assistant curator and wife of scientist Norman Matterling. The story’s title is explained as follows: “A phase change was a change from one state to another, as when gas changes to liquid, liquid to solid, solid to gas, the seemingly whole into the infinitely fragmented.” After learning that an old friend from college was raped and beaten, Julia is plagued by nightmares in which

she is going about her business when sexually attacked by a man or group of men. Then she awakens, sweaty but relieved, in her own bed.

Although the story is accomplished, one segment does not work. Julia is at the “Center for Advanced Study,” attending a lecture. Her search for a women’s restroom is described as follows:

“Gripping her handbag so tightly her knuckles turned white, she was thinking only of the weakness in her bowels.

And then—what relief! She found a women’s lavatory just around a corner from the Center’s kitchen facilities.

She used a toilet; then stood at a sink splashing cold water onto her face.”

Soon after the event described above, Julia is brutally attacked and then wakes up from the nightmare. The problem is that the above is just too good of a description of searching desperately for a restroom and then enjoying the soothing “ah” that accompanies evacuating into a toilet for it to be—as it is described as being—part of a dream. That is, unless the dreamer was to awaken to find feces on the bed, and there is no indication of that.

Nevertheless, “Phase Change” fits this collection: the haunting knowledge of her friend’s tragedy leads to grotesque dreams. Julia appears to be changing but the ending is ambiguous as to the change. Her awakening from a dream of assault to attempt to seduce her husband may indicate a surprisingly positive change: The horrors of her nightmares have led to a renewed appreciation for the positive aspects of her marriage.

The last section contains some of this collection’s most powerful works. The first story, “Poor Bibi,” is narrated by a happily married wife. A few years previously, she and her husband appear to have brought a pet into the family. Bibi is described as the “most delightful creature imaginable.” We are told that people “marveled at his frisky antics.” Bibi’s “ears pricked up erect, his pelt crackled with static electricity when we brushed it, his small, sharp teeth were glistening and white.” The couple relished watching this lovely pet and playing with him. However, the pet has become ill. When Bibi awakens the couple and they find him “not in his pile of rags in the warmest snugget corner of the cellar but in a far, dark corner,” they realize he is dying.

Husband and wife take their dying pet to the Family Pet Veterinary Hospital and Emergency Clinic to be put to sleep. Our narrator is puzzled at seeing the doctor “stare at Bibi so—incredulously.” The baffled veterinarian asks, “Is this some sort of joke?” Then he asks, “Are you mad?”

The reader remembers that the narrator never specified Bibi’s species. We know he has been treated like a pet. We are left to wonder: Was Bibi mentally and/or physically disabled when he came into the family? Or has neglect and abuse caused a human child to take on the characteristics of a non-human pet? In either case the reader is haunted by this indisputably grotesque story of a human child cared for and then killed like an animal.

One of the most startling aspects of some of the stories in this collection is how ordinary they seem when given a synopsis yet how extraordinary they are when read. “Thanksgiving” shows how Oates weaves the grotesque into the commonplace. A 13-year-old girl accompanies Dad to town to buy food for a Thanksgiving meal. Ailing Mom is left home. When the pair drive to town, we are told the neighborhood “didn’t look familiar.” The houses are “boarded-up and empty,” there is little traffic, “old rusted tireless hulks of cars” languish at curbs and there is a “smell of scorch” in the air. The front of the store is “blackened.” What has happened? Has a disaster befallen this area? The country? The world? We are not told what has caused this situation, which the characters appear to accept as a matter of course.

They enter an A&P in which the automatic doors are not working. The fresh produce section is anything but fresh as much of bins and counters are “bare” and aisles “partly blocked by mounds of decaying debris and plywood crates.” The floor has puddles. Yet despite the store’s devastation, others as well as our protagonists are shopping.

Dad and daughter dutifully pick up items despite “a gaping hole in the floor about the size of a full-grown horse,” and despite a ceiling that has parts missing and from which “rust-colored drops of water” fall. Finally, the butcher informs the pair that the turkeys have been sold except for a few in the freezer. To get into that freezer, someone must go through “a gaping hole, a kind of tunnel.” The little girl squeezes through that ominous hole to find another shopper, an adult woman, going through this freezer. The girl is described as “squatting in bloody waste to my ankles.” These repulsive conditions lead the girl to recall “helping Mother in the kitchen” despite being repulsed by the sights and smells of animal carcasses. This haunting memory leads her to reflect on the process of cooking: “As dead-clammy meat turns to edible meat. As revulsion turns to appetite. How is it possible you ask, the answer is it is possible. The answer is it is.”

This child manages to drag a large turkey through that little opening. Her father says, “Well, *hell*.” The brief story posits a strange parallel between this grotesque shopping market freezer and the “hell” of eternal punishment.

“Blind” is the next story’s title. Like “Thanksgiving,” it is set in the country. Our narrator is the wife of a retired college professor. The wife awakens one night to find she cannot get a light to turn on. Frustrated but assuming this is just a power outage, she manages to fumble her way to the bathroom. Her return to the marital bed leads to the discovery that her husband is not sleeping but dead. She immediately vacates the bed “desperate to be gone as from a grave.” Making her way downstairs, she manages to light a candle but it does not light: There is the smell of sulfur sans the sight of the flame. She soon discovers that the world has apparently suffered a catastrophe: Everything is dark. Oates writes, “For it was not the mere absence of light (which is of course derived from our Sun) but *the presence of dark itself thick and opaque as any matter*.” She makes her way to the cellar, having accepted a life of shelter without light. She knows that, since the world is in chaos, she must act to protect herself “against looting, burning, rape

and pillage of every kind.” She barricades herself in the cellar. She has “provisions to last for many months—for the remainder of my life.” Apparently, this elderly woman knows that her life must be measured in months rather than years. She has adapted herself to the extent that, the story’s final sentence tells us that she looks forward to rain leading water to “trickle freely down the rock walls where I can lap it delightedly with my tongue.”

It is appropriate that “Blind” follows “Poor Bibi.” The latter dealt with a human child born or neglected in such a way as to be grotesquely “animal-like”: “Blind” tells of an aging human led to grotesque animal-like behavior through the grotesquerie of catastrophe.

Oates’s next story, “The Radio Astronomer,” is narrated by live-in nurse, Lilian, who is caring for the elderly and disabled Professor Ewald who retired from the profession of the story’s title. Much poignancy results from the grotesque fact of life summarized in the old saying, “Twice a baby, once a man.” Helpless and often childish, Ewald is haunted by his work which appears to have concentrated on the possibility of extraterrestrial intelligence. Lilian, a simpler and more pragmatic person, points to a possible grotesquerie when she suggests that alien life forms might “eat us all up.” This echoes the famous episode of the original *Twilight Zone* entitled “To Serve Man” and echoes Oates’s observation in the Afterword that the “unspeakable knowledge” is “mankind’s place in the food chain” by pointing to the possibility of an alien species usurping our place in the food chain.

The next to last story of the collection is an inspired reworking of *The Turn of the Screw* entitled “Accursed Inhabitants of the House of Bly.” In this story, Oates assumes James’s novel was a “real” ghost story and tells the tale from the viewpoints of the ghosts. This story may be the most intricate in the collection in exploring the multiple dimensions of “haunting.” The ghosts of Miss Jessel and Quint haunt the new governess and the children but the ghosts themselves are also haunted: they are haunted by the living and haunted by memories of their own lives. Oates also explores the grotesqueries inherent in any conception of an afterlife, which must, after all, be imagined by the living. The story begins with both Miss Jessel and Quint having “crossed over.”

This afterlife is not one of peace. Of the ghost-governess, Oates writes, “How painful then to conceive of herself in this astonishing new guise, an object of horror, still less an object of disgust.” Jessel is tortured that she is “a ghoul.” The passion that bound Quint and Jessel in life haunts these ghosts. Quint declares, “We are both accursed by love,” giving insight into the title of this tale.

Quint suffers because being a ghost entails a kind of impotence. Oates depicts the frustrated passions of spirits: “They grasp each other’s hands, they slip their arms around each other, they stroke, squeeze, kiss, bite, sighing when their ‘material beings’ turn immaterial as vapor—and Quint’s arms shut around mere air, a shadow, and Jessel paws wildly at him” but then they “shift in density and become porous.” Thus Jessel tries to touch her lover only to “recoil in horror” as her hand “passes through his insubstantial body.”

In this re-telling of the classic, Jessel and Quint battle the living governess for

the affections of Flora and Miles. There is a suggestion that the governess “exudes an air” of “punitive zeal” and that of a “Christian martyr.” It seems the ghosts may have appeared because they fear the problems this “punitive” woman might cause the children Jessel and Quint love.

The story ends with Miles fleeing the governess in the night to search for Quint. As befits a story steeped in passion, Oates eloquently comments, “The night air is warmly moist as the interior of a lover’s mouth.”

The last story of the collection, “Martyrdom,” is the most flamboyantly grotesque story in this “Tales of the Grotesque.” Divided into many small segments, it is horror, sci-fi, satire, and surrealism. Parallel stories are told, one of a nameless (four-legged) rat and one of a submissive human female named Babygirl.

Both births are greeted with joy. The rat grows robustly, having “doubled, trebled, quadrupled” his weight within days of his birth. Driven by hunger, he is “gnawing ceaselessly” on both edible and inedible materials.

Babygirl grows quickly into “rosy female beauty” with “dimples belly and buttocks” as well as “lovely thick-lashed eyes with no pupil.”

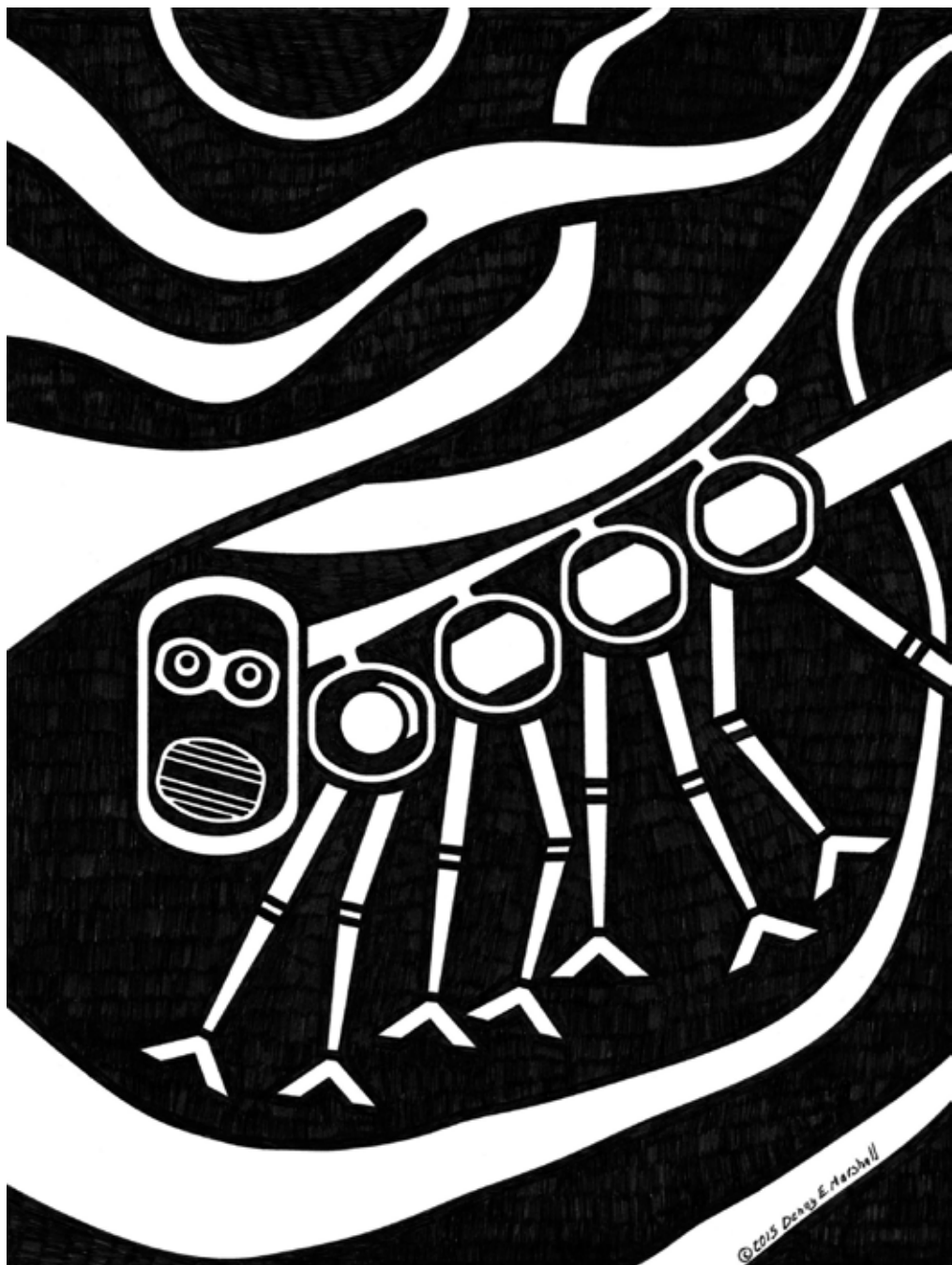
The rat is among a multitude of siblings equally driven by “ravenous” hunger, “the squeak! squeak! squeak! of hunger multiplied by accounting.”

Babygirl’s family socializes her into becoming the ultimate man’s plaything, alternately forced to fast and feast, her caregivers having “scrubbed her tender flesh with a wire brush, they rubbed pungent herbs into the wounds.” Many other things are done so she will possess “power over men’s inflammable imaginations.” The rat lives in a world in which the dominant species seeks to exterminate “filthy vermin” like him but are up against a powerful will to live—a will to eat—implanted by nature. Oates writes, “If the time allotted to him were infinite as his hunger it’s certain he *would* gnaw his way through the entire world and excrete it behind him in piles of moist dark dense little turds.”

Both rat and Babygirl suffer through scenes of mind-boggling pain and degradation until, at the story’s end, Oates finally brings the two of them together in a scene of final and deliberate grotesquerie.

Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque will haunt the sensitive reader long after he or she has finished the stories. Perhaps more importantly, that haunting will also be accompanied by a sense of wonder at the many permutations of the grotesque.





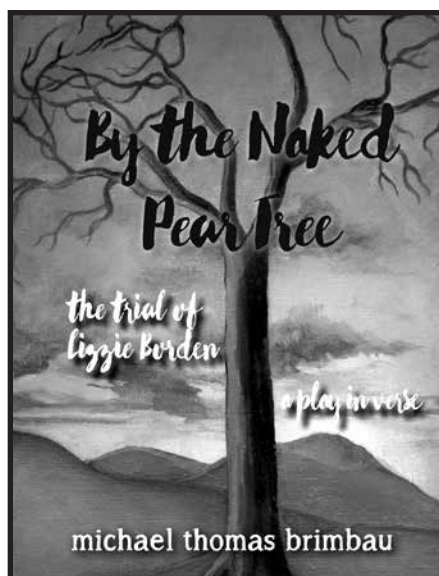
—denny marshall

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By the Naked Pear Tree

The trial of
Lizzie Borden in verse

by Michael Thomas Brimbau
\$12.00



By the Naked Pear Tree, a play in verse, was written in the spirit of Steve Allen's unconventional television program, *Meeting of the Minds*.

Our satirical performance begins outside a New Bedford, Massachusetts, court house. The year is 1893 and the trial of Lizzie Borden is about to begin. Dispatching his oration, the tragedian, Euripides, stands in the street preaching the merits of womanhood and relating the concerns he has for the outcome of the trial, and how it may corrupt the honor of the fabled heroines he has written about. Not long after we are introduced to Clarence Darrow—progressive attorney and respected member of the American Civil Liberties Union.

Hired by Euripides to allusively defend Lizzie Borden, Darrow invites his colleague and adversary, William Jennings Bryan, to a challenge, giving the dubious Bryan a chance to play prosecutor—to change the course of history, and help convict Lizzie Borden of the murder of her parents. In doing so, the two men agree to a friendly game of poker. Winner of the ensuing card game gets to decide the fate of the accused. But the outcome is not what one would expect, and those who tamper with history are left to reap the consequences.

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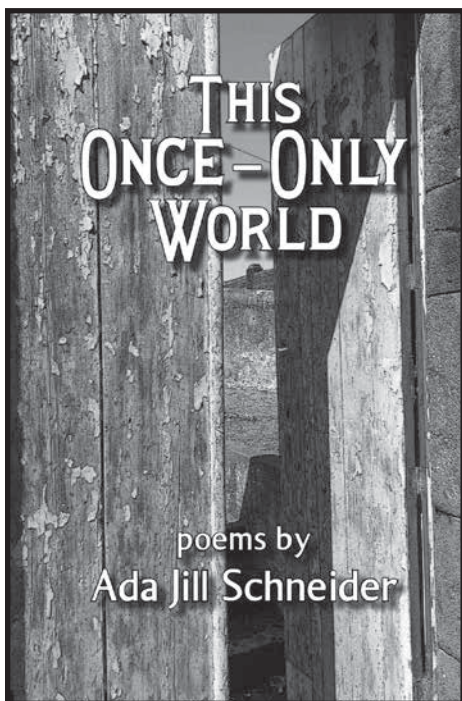
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This Once-Only World

poems by Ada Jill Schneider



This *Once-Only World* is a collection of personal, yet universal, poems that dance on every page with gratitude and poignancy: poems that celebrate long love and reflect on family; poems that appreciate the world and plead for justice; poems that know what lies ahead for someone turning eighty but who insists, like Edna St. Vincent Millay, "I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned."

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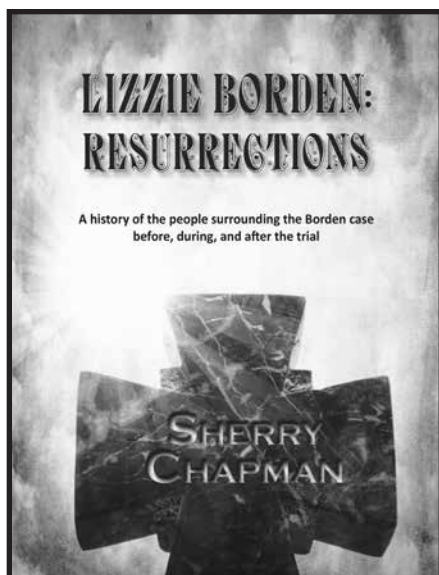
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Lizzie Borden: Resurrections

A history of the people
surrounding the
Borden case before,
during, and after the
trial

by Sherry Chapman

\$21.95



Whatever happened to Lizzie Borden after the trial that accused her of bludgeoning her father and stepmother with a hatchet in 1892 Fall River, Massachusetts? It's all in here, and it doesn't stop with Lizzie. A plethora of persons were involved around her in some way. From her friends to her foes, from the doctors to the policemen; from her Manse to The Nance, at last comes the first book of its kind that tells what caused Officer Philip Harrington (who greatly disliked Lizzie) to die suddenly in 1893. What happened to neighbor and friend Dr. Bowen after the crime and trial? Why doesn't Edwin Porter, who covered the trial then wrote the first contemporary book on the murders, *The Fall River Tragedy*, have a gravestone – and who is buried with him? Not by him. Actually with him.

From original source documents, photos of the graves, obituaries and death certificates each on whom records could be found has their story told in details unknown until now. What were they doing before anyone much had heard of Lizzie Borden? What was their role in the case? When did they die and how?

Some of the results may surprise you, whether you read this book for pleasure or research. There are no legends here, but a factual telling of the stories of these persons who are today all gone but need not be forgotten. And with this book they may be hard to forget.

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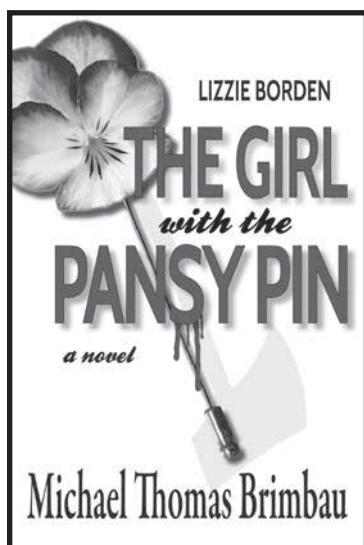
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Lizzie Borden: The Girl with the Pansy Pin

a novel by Michael Thomas Brimbau



Lizzie Borden and her sister Emma lived a life of privilege and entitlement, with wealth and social status far greater than their neighbors. But it was not enough. In time, Lizzie and Emma grew restless, aching for a more opulent life—to reside on the Hill in a big house amongst their peers and Fall River's finest families.

But Father's riches were window dressing, dangling just beyond their reach—quarantined by a frugal patriarch who was unable or unwilling to change his scrimping ways. Andrew Jackson Borden had no intention of moving to the Hill and abandoning the home he had purchased for his second wife, or spending the money he had worked so hard for all his life. Now he

was planning to give it all away—to his wife, their stepmother.

In time, discord in the family began to ferment and fester—and there were signs that things were not as they should be.

On a sultry August morning, in the naked light of day, someone entered 92 Second Street and brutally hacked and murdered Andrew and Abby Borden. Soon the finger of guilt pointed to Lizzie. But she loved her father. He meant everything to her. The gold ring she had lovingly given him and that he always wore said as much. She would never have harmed him. Or would she?

The Girl with the Pansy Pin tells the gripping story of a desirable and vivacious young Victorian woman desperately longing for adventure and a lavish life. Instead, she was condemned to waste away in a stale, modest existence, in a father's foregone reality, with little chance of ever discovering love, happiness, or fulfillment. Now they have charged poor Lizzie with double murder.

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Fall River Revisited

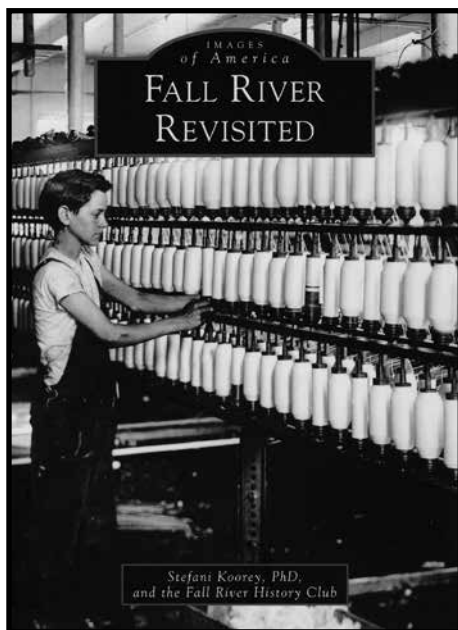
by Stefani Koorey and the
Fall River History Club

Founded in 1803, Fall River changed its name the following year to Troy, after a resident visiting Troy, New York, enjoyed the city. In 1834, the name was officially changed back to Fall River.

The city's motto, "We'll Try," originates from the determination of its residents to rebuild the city following a devastating fire in 1843. The fire resulted in 20 acres in the center of the village being destroyed, including 196 buildings, and 1,334 people were displaced from their homes.

Once the capital of cotton textile manufacturing in the United States, by 1910, Fall River boasted 43 corporations, 222 mills, and 3.8 million spindles, producing two miles of cloth every minute of every working day in the year. The workforce was comprised of immigrants from Ireland, England, Scotland, Canada, the Azores, and, to a lesser extent, Poland, Italy, Greece, Russia, and Lebanon.

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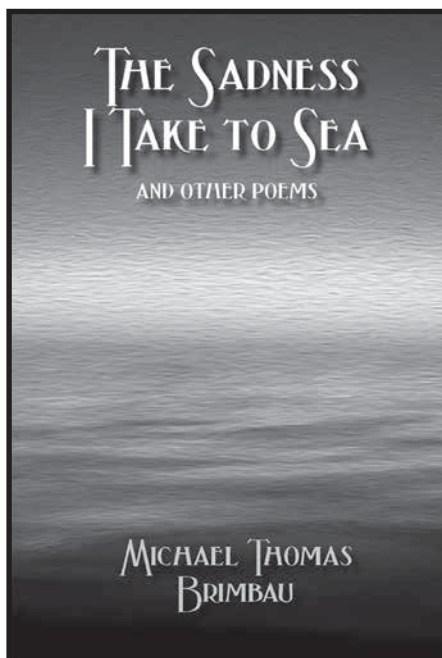


The Sadness I Take to Sea and Other Poems

by Michael Thomas
Brimbau

Putting pen to paper and allowing its ball tip to bleed and spill out is a good thing, and helps with the venting as well as needed healing. After all is said and done, following all the missteps and failings, to move on and search for lost love all over again is not only essential but the absolute specimen of a yearning and healthy soul—and the fundamental spirit conveyed in *The Sadness I Take to Sea*.

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Do Come In and Other Lizzie Borden Poems

by Larry W. Allen

with a new Lizzie Borden
sketch cover by Rick Geary,
famed author and illustrator of
The Borden Tragedy.

Lizzie Borden. For some, the name conjures an innocent young woman who bravely faced her trial with strength and fortitude. To others, she has become the icon of all things gruesome because of the bloody nature of the crimes for which she was charged. And yet others see Lizzie Borden as a woman who got away with murder.

These 50 poems trace the life of this enigmatic woman—from the 19th through the 20th century. We meet her as a young adult and watch her develop into an old woman living alone on “the Hill.”

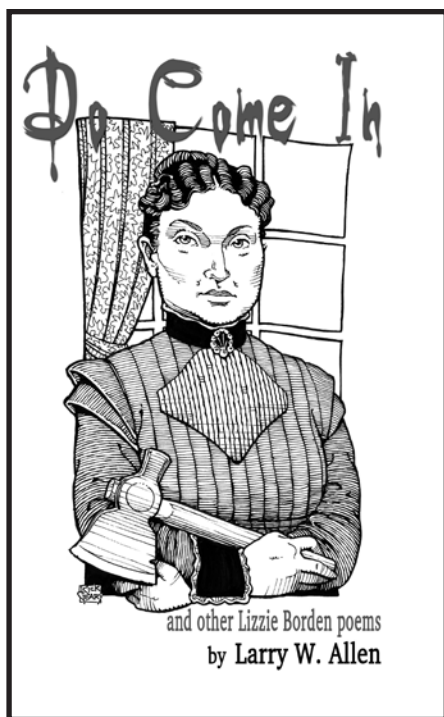
Do Come In is a remarkable collection of poems entirely devoted to the Lizzie Borden story.

So *Do Come In*, and meet Lizzie Borden and other characters as diverse as Jack the Ripper, Bob and Charlie Ford, and Rachael Ray, in poems that range from humorous to horrific.

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Lizzie Borden: Girl Detective

by Richard Behrens

Introducing Miss Lizzie Borden of Fall River, Massachusetts, a most excellent girl detective and the most remarkable young woman ever to take on the criminal underworld in late 19th century New England.

Many years before her infamous arrest and trial for the murders of her father and stepmother, Lizzie Borden pursued a career as a private consulting detective and wrestled unflinchingly with a crooked spiritualist, a corrupt and murderous textile tycoon, a secret society of anarchist assassins, rowdy and deadly sporting boys, a crazed and vengeful mutineer, an industrial saboteur, and a dangerously unhinged math professor—none of whom are exactly what they seem to be.

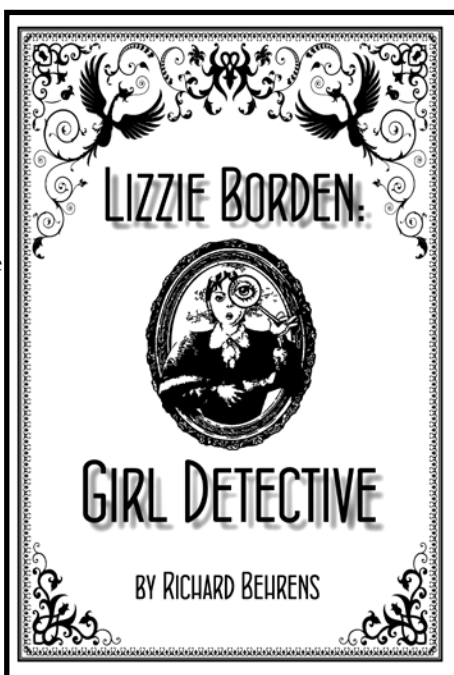
In these five early tales of mystery and adventure, Lizzie Borden is joined by her stubborn and stingy father Andrew; her jealous and weak-chinned sister Emma; her trusted companion Homer Thesinger the Boy Inventor; and the melancholy French scion Andre De Camp. Together, they explore Fall River's dark side through a landscape that is industrial, Victorian, and distinctly American.

You have met Lizzie Borden before—but never like this!

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Contributors

Jarid Goodman is a neuroscientist at the University of Texas-Dallas, and studies the neurobiology of learning and memory in rats.

Rick McQuiston is a forty-eight year old father of two who loves anything horror related. He has had nearly 400 publications so far, and is currently working on his sixth 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.

Bruce Boston is the author of more than fifty books and chapbooks. His writing has received the Bram Stoker Award, the Asimov's Readers Award, a Pushcart Prize and the Rhysling and Grandmaster Awards of the Science Fiction Poetry Association.

Z.Z. Boone's first collection of stories, *OFF SOMEWHERE*, was published last November by Whitepoint Press.

George Garnet is a pen name. The author's fiction has or is due to appear on *eFiction* (Literary), *Romance Magazine*, *GKBC*, *Needle in the Hay*, *The Lady in the Loft* and *not forgetting*, *The Literary Hatchet*.

Shawn Chang is a sixteen-year-old writer. His writing has appeared in *Under the Bed*, *Shot Glass Journal*, and *The Australia Times Poetry Magazine*.

Jonel Abellanosa resides in Cebu City, the Philippines. His speculative poetry has appeared in journals like *Star*Line*, *Lontar: The Journal of Southeast Asian Speculative Fiction*, *Eye to the Telescope*, *Pedestal*, *GNU Journal*, *Liquid Imagination*, *Inkscrawl*, *Inwood Indiana Press*, and the 2015 *Dwarf Stars Anthology* of the Science Fiction Poetry Association.

Eugene Hosey holds an MFA from Georgia State University. He has written articles, film and book reviews for *The Hatchet: A Journal of Lizzie Borden & Victorian Studies*. Also he has done editorial work for research documents, books, and personal journals. But he is primarily a short story writer, a regular contributor to *The Literary Hatchet*, and a fiction editor.

Tonalea L. Chapman is a college graduate with a Masters in Education and a dissertation away from a PhD in 20th Century History. She has written a book of poetry and is searching for a publisher at present. Tonalea has been published in fictional books as well as writing non-fiction articles for magazines. She was a reporter for the *Ocean Pines Courier* for a year before going back to school. Tonalea enjoys writing horror stories as well as stories of the paranormal and other worldly entities.

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. Ashley is an Affiliate Member of the HWA and a member of the SFPA.

R. Gene Turchin is a retired professor of Electronic Technology and Mechatronics. Writing interest include science fiction, literary and comic books. Recently published works in *VerseWrights*, *365 Tomorrows*, *With Painted Words* and *Aurora Wolf*.

Shannon Lawrence is a fan of all things fantastical and frightening. Her short works have appeared in magazines and anthologies, including *Under the Bed* and *Dark Moon Digest*. Find her at thewarriormuse.com.

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.

Allen Kopp lives in St. Louis, Missouri. He has over a hundred fiction publishing credits to his name, including *Legends: Paranormal Pursuits 2016*, *A Twist of Noir*, *Danse Macabre*, *Dew on the Kudzu*, *Corvus Review*, *Penmen Review*, *Intellectual Refuge Magazine*, and many others. He is at home Wednesday evenings from six to eight.

Jennifer Crow's poetry has appeared in a number of print and online venues, most recently in *Mithila Review*, *Mythic Delirium*, and *Uncanny*. In the past, several of her poems have received honorable mentions in Ellen Datlow's Year's Best Horror anthologies.

Calvin Demmer is a crime, mystery, and speculative fiction author. When not writing, he is intrigued by that which goes bump in the night and the sciences of our universe. His work has appeared in a variety of publications including *Sanitarium Magazine*, *Morpheus Tales*, and *Devolution Z*. Find out more at www.calvindemmer.com or follow him on twitter @CalvinDemmer.

Kaitlyn Dennehy is a junior in high school and currently lives in New Hampshire. She's been writing seriously for over a year now and takes Creative Writing and AP Literature. "I Can't Sleep" is meant to be a thought provoking, abstract piece on false awakening and the meaning of dreams. Each object, feeling, and character that shows up in "I Can't Sleep" has a specific place in the dreamer's memory and shows who they are as a person during their most vulnerable state. Sleep.

Michael Brimbau is the poetry editor for *The Literary Hatchet* and is the author of *Lizzie Borden, the Girl with the Pansy Pin* (novel) and *The Sadness I Take to Sea* (poetry).

James B. Nicola's poems have recently appeared in *Literary Hatchet* (19 times), the *Antioch*, *Southwest and Atlanta Reviews*, *Rattle*, and *Poetry East*. His nonfiction book, *Playing the Audience*, won a Choice award. His first full-length poetry collection is *Manhattan Plaza* (2014); his second, *Stage to Page: Poems from the Theater* (June 2016). A Yale graduate, James has been giving both theater and poetry workshops at libraries, literary festivals, schools, and community centers all over the country. More at sites.google.com/site/jamesbnicola.

Sheila Gazlay is a virtual assistant and author who lives in Bellingham, Washington. She enjoys writing book reviews as well as short and long fiction.

Cindy Knoebel is a professional writer/editor, working primarily in business. Since retiring two years ago, she has turned her focus to fiction. Cindy has attended juried workshops run by novelists Meg Wolitzer (Aspen Summer Words) and Jennifer Gilmore (92nd St. Y) and runs a creative writers workshop in her hometown. Recently, her short story "Abundance" was published in the *Apeiron Review*.

Joseph Rubas' work has been featured in a number of 'zines and hardcopy publications, including: *[Nameless]*; *The Horror Zine*; *The Storyteller*; *Thuglit*; *All Due Respect*, and others.

Denise Noe lives in Atlanta, GA, and is a severely handicapped and struggling writer.

Wayne Scheer has been nominated for four Pushcart Prizes and a Best of the Net. He's published hundreds of stories, poems and essays in print and online, including *Revealing Moments*, a collection of flash stories, available at http://issuu.com/pearnoir/docs/revealing_moments. A short film has also been produced based on his short story, "Zen and the Art of House Painting." Wayne lives in Atlanta with his wife and can be contacted at wvscheer@aol.com.

George Spisak loves to ponder the 'what if's of the world, explaining her questions in the darkest ways possible. A lover of the dark, twisted, and grotesque, she writes about the things hidden in plain sight. Find her other twisted stories at georgespisak.wordpress.com or twitter, @GeorgeSpisak.

Darin Z. Krogh lives on a cliff overlooking the settling ponds of the Spokane Sewage Treatment Plant. He serves a demanding wife and delights in the fact that his three adult children no longer live at home. Darin has been published in several newspaper feature sections and in a number of anthologies. He claims to be curious but innocent.

Kyle Perdue was born and raised in Carlsbad, California. He is currently studying marine biology at University of California, San Diego and writes as a hobby.

Symantha Reagor lives in Washington state. In elementary school, Symantha spent recess reading or writing in journals, creating poems and short stories. She never dreamed she could make a career from the dreams and random thoughts in her head. She now works as a writer in the video game industry.

J. Cameron Kuban splits his time between three jobs, knocks out some weird fiction, drinks a lot of coffee, and combs the internet for funny pictures which he then plasters all over Facebook. Admittedly, his life would be a boring waste were it not for the companionship of his black cat, Estaban. His fiction can also be found on *Aphelion Webzine of Science Fiction and Fantasy*, and the now defunct webzines *Thunder Sandwich* and *Death Head Grin*.

Himan Heidari is an Iranian scholar. He received his B.A in English Literature at Urmia University and is currently studying in the same field at Shiraz University. He has published a series of short stories, essays, and poetry in both online and local magazines.

Hannah Marier lives in Georgia and has had the opportunity to meet several women from the Beloved house, a place for those escaping sex trafficking in Atlanta. She wanted shed light on this darkness which has infected so many young men and women.

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*.

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

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.

Mark J. Mitchell studied writing at UC Santa Cruz under Raymond Carver and George Hitchcock. His work has appeared in the several anthologies and hundreds of periodicals. Three of his chapbooks—*Three Visitors*, *Lent*, 1999, and *Artifacts and Relics*—and a novel, *Knight Prisoner* are available through Amazon and Barnes and Noble. He lives in San Francisco with his wife Joan Juster.

Janne Karlsson is a kind and gentle soul from Sweden who enjoys red wine, rain, and cemetery strolls. His highly amusing blog is at nouw.com/svenskapache and his website is www.svenskapache.se

Alan Meyrowitz retired in 2005 after a career in computer research. His writing has appeared in *California Quarterly*, *Eclectica*, *Existere*, *Front Range Review*, *The Literary Hatchet*, *Lucid Rhythms*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Shark Reef*, *Shroud*, *The Storyteller*, *Vine Leaves Literary Journal*, and others. In 2013 and 2015 the Science Fiction Poetry Association nominated his poems for a Dwarf Star Award.

Stephen Marino lives and teaches in New York City. He is the founding editor of *The Arthur Miller Journal*. His work on Miller has appeared in many journals, essay collections, and books. His new book, *Arthur Miller Death of a Salesman / The Crucible A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism*, was published by Macmillan/Palgrave in September 2015.

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 has reviewed poetry for *Midstream Magazine* and directs "The Pleasure of Poetry" at the Somerset Public Library in Massachusetts. Winner of the National Galway Kinnell Poetry Prize, Ada has an MFA in Writing from Vermont College.

Tina Stickles is an author and poet living in Texas. She works as a pediatric nurse, and also enjoys photography.

Rodney Wilder bellows death-metal verse in *Throne of Awful Splendor* and writes poetry, with previous work appearing in *FreezeRay*, *Tales of the Talisman*, and his first collection of poetry, 2012's *Ars Golgothica*. Currently working on his fandom-fueled followup, he enjoys horror movies, soundtracks, and all things otaku, geek, and nerd.

Manjary MK is an author living in Kerala, India. The wish to go back to the comfort of mother's womb....going back further to a state of non-existence is there in all humans.

Denny E. Marshall has had art, poetry, and fiction published. One recent credit is cover for *Bards And Sages* July 2016. See more at dennymarshall.com

Kelda Crich is a new born entity. She's been lurking in her creator's mind for a few years. Now she's out in the open. Find Kelda in London looking at strange things in London's medical museums or on her blog: <http://keldacrichblog.blogspot.co.uk/>. Her poems have appeared in *Nameless*, *Cthulhu Haiku II*, *Transitions* and *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*.

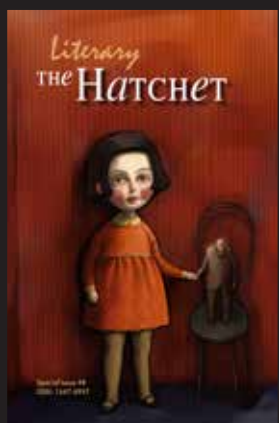
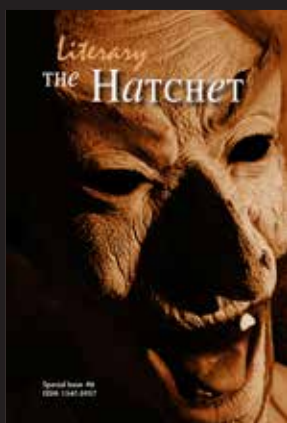
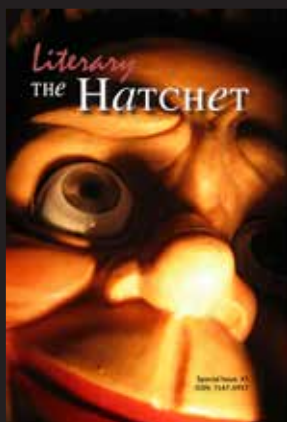
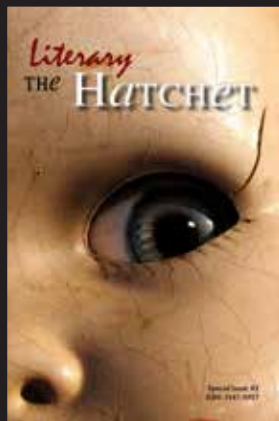
Christopher L. Malone is a Maryland native and has spent the past eight years teaching English on the high school level, while writing and playing music on the side. His work is soon to be featured by Cicatrix Publishing and will also appear in the next issue of *The Dark City Crime and Mystery Magazine*. He is currently working on his first novel.

Jeff Haas is a professionally published poet and short story writer who also teaches creative writing at Emory University.

Fabiyas MV is a writer from Orumanayur village in Kerala, India. He is the author of 'Kanoli Kaleidoscope', published by Punkswritempoemspress, USA, 'Eternal Fragments, published by erbacce press, UK and 'Moonlight And Solitude', published by Raspberry Books, India. His fiction and poetry have appeared in several anthologies, magazines and journals. His publishers include Western Australian University, British Council, Rosemont College, US, Forward Poetry, Off the Coast, Silver Blade, Pear Tree Press, Zimbell House Publishing LLC, Shooter, Nous, Structo, Encircle Publications, and Anima Poetry. He won many international accolades including Merseyside at War Poetry Award from Liverpool University, U K, Poetry Soup International Award, USA and Animal Poetry Prize 2012 from RSPCA (Royal Society for Prevention of Cruelties against Animals, U K). He was the finalist for Global Poetry Prize 2015 by the United Poets Laureate International (UPLI), Vienna. His poems have been broadcast on the All India Radio.

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