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ISSUE #17

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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 #17, by the way. So if you haven't caught up on the other sixteen issues, you can do so at literaryhatchet.com.

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

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

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We really would love to read your work.

Stefani Koorey Editor and Publisher

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This issue of *The Literary Hatchet* is dedicated to Richard Behrens—friend and author. A gentle giant of a man, Richard died on April 17, 2017. Richard was the author and creator of the Lizzie Borden, Girl Detective series—an imaginative and amusing mystery series. Richard was also the creator and host of The Lizzie Borden Podcast, which explored the Borden

murders of 1892 and related history of Fall River, MA.

To those interested in contributing to the funding of the continued publishing of Richard's writing, please do so through GoFundMe at gofundme.com/richard-behrens-publishing-fund.

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THE STAIR CASE

by rick mcquiston

For the first time since the accident, Jamie was afraid to go downstairs. She felt fear and worry gnaw at her gut. It was irrational but distinct, foolish but frightening, vague but crystal-clear.

Reaching out, Jamie felt for the light switch. She found it in the darkness and flicked it on, immediately flooding the staircase with warm yellow light.

The stairs trailed down to the basement.

"Get a hold of yourself," she mumbled. "There's nothing there."

But her attempt at rationalization was marred by memories of the accident.

She looked down at the foot of the stairs, her eyes straining to see the faded smear of blood on the concrete. It was faint, but it was still there.

It was her father's blood, still staining the floor where he had died. He had fallen down the staircase as he tried to join the other guests in the house. It was her fortieth birthday, and he had planned a surprise party for her. There were ten other people hiding in the basement, all of whom had walked down the stairs without incident. But when her father came down he tripped and tumbled down to his death, splitting his head open and snapping his neck.

He died instantly.

Jamie stood at the top of the steps. She was afraid, but she needed to go downstairs. She had to, otherwise her fear would win, and that was no way for a person to live.

"Get a hold of yourself," she repeated under her breath. "There's nothing to be scared of."

The first step was difficult, the second one easier, and the third easier yet. Jamie felt better with each step she took, so much so that she let go of the handrail.

"Jamie? Come down here and help me." Jamie froze when she saw her father, alive and well, standing at the foot of the stairs. He was smiling, beckoning to her to join him.

"Come down here, honey."

She pitched forward. The suddenness of the fall pulled the breath from her body, further crippling her ability to right herself.

The last thing she saw before her neck snapped was a fleeting glimpse of her father.

He was lying in a pool of blood at the bottom of the stairs.

The staircase shuddered.

Missy paused. She held a clothesbasket in her hands, in her trembling, sweaty hands.

Frank was at work, having just started his new job, and for the first time she was alone in the house. They got a great deal on the place (due to its dark history: two people falling down the stairs and dying), but those were simple accidents, she reasoned with herself, nothing more. Unfortunate and tragic, but just accidents.

Missy stood at the top of the stairs, glaring down at the dingy basement floor. It seemed so far away and yet so close, like looking at a horizon or a cloud in the sky.

She hesitated. There was laundry that needed to be done, but she didn't care. She did not want to go into the basement.

She did not want to go down those stairs.

Setting the basket on the floor, Missy backed away from the staircase. She suddenly wanted to be in her bed. Not because she was tired, but because it was a warm, cozy sanctuary for her. She loved bundling up beneath the covers. It let her clear her mind.

She moved through the kitchen, never once taking her eyes off the basement stairway. She then turned down the hallway and ran upstairs for the security of her bedroom.

But when she reached the top of the stairs, the welcoming comfort of her bedroom waned to nothingness.

Missy turned and faced the staircase.

At the bottom, two spectral figures, a man and a woman, urged her to join them.

She felt herself fall forward.



A Dogmatic Grammarian

A dogmatic grammarian, a know-all, with a frog's face, croaks from a well. He glowers at error-insects with his bulging eyes.

Children gape with their tongues stuck in rules. Expressions hobble. Emotions are mangled. There's a relief in yawning.

Ma, grandma, pa and grandpa never learned grammar, yet their dreams, doldrums, squabbles, calumnies, ecstasies, and all other throbs of life, sounded through their language without inhibition.

—fabiyas mv



Bluebeard

Alas, I loved them all, pure ladies that they were, And how they loved me back; yet sometimes they do err: They learn of secrets dark - the ones which I withhold, And they become aware - suspicious rush like gold. The red fire ants of crime run through my veins anew, And after, always there - new bloodstains in my view.

-shawn chang

A Lunatic Lady

In the harvested field near the canal, she roams with a mind slid from its rail. Her muddy skirt and brownish hairs flutter in the salty wind like flags of insanity. A lonely night – the west wind smells burnt canal fish. Fire burns like her emotions on the bank.

"During the windy season, lunacy's let loose" – her shrieks and shouts are neglected in the rural logic a night.

As her stomach swells like a ball day by day, many questions bulge out.

—fabiyas mv

THE THEORY OF DOORS

by jeff haas



Chief among Henry Klein's phobias was the fear of dying alone. That's why he persuaded his wife Rachel to agree to a suicide pact to commemorate their fiftieth wedding anniversary. He imagined them swallowing cyanide pills together, laying down on their king-size bed, and cradling each other in one final embrace. Unfortunately, Rachel died unexpectedly in a car crash two years before the appointed date, leaving Henry grief-stricken and terrified that his worst nightmare would come true. He considered killing himself right after the funeral—even to the point of holding a loaded revolver to his temple one dark night—but he simply lacked the courage to go through with it on his own. There was something romantic in a loving couple choosing to end their lives together that was missing from a run-of-the-mill suicide. After much deliberation, Henry decided that he would just have to find another woman with whom he could share a meaningful death.

Working through an online dating agency for mature adults, Henry arranged a lunch date with a lady named Constance Reynolds at Sugarville's most popular Mexican restaurant. He arrived a half-hour early and sat at a booth with a strategic view of the entrance, anxiously sipping sweet tea and forcing himself to breathe deeply. He stood to greet Constance when she arrived and escorted her under a brightly colored donkey-shaped piñata to their table. She had to be over sixty to join the agency, but with her light auburn hair, trim figure, and modest-but-appealing black jumpsuit she didn't look a day over fifty. Of course, the fact that she was attractive made Henry all the more nervous, and he found himself talking non-stop between forkfuls of his chimichanga.

"I think of life as a series of doors," he said. "When you're young, you're presented with an almost infinite number of doors from which to choose, and the future seems limitless. But as you mature and you've chosen and walked through a number of doors already, there are fewer and fewer doors to select from, and once you select a particular door it closes behind you and locks forever. Finally, in old age, you're presented with only two doors, and you know for a fact that once you've made your choice that you must walk down that long final corridor alone. You'll never know if you made the right decision because you can never find out what was behind the other door."

Constance, barely picking at her chalupa, smiled and nodded in all the right places, emboldening Henry to proceed.

"But then I had another thought. After all these years of choosing doors and having them lock behind me, what if I decided to stop choosing? There's no law against it, you know. In fact, not choosing is a choice in and of itself, a choice that's not forced on you, the only choice that you can really make on your own."

"But how can you stop choosing?" she asked.

Henry took a deep breath. "By ending your life before your life is ended for you. I'm sitting here on the threshold of those two doors, doors that look exactly the

same to me, and I really don't want to know what's on the other side of either one of them. Why not just stop right here before I have to make that choice?"

Her smile faded and she whispered, "You mean...suicide?"

"Yes, but not alone. That's the beauty of my plan. I'm looking for someone to share that final journey with me—the journey into the unknown."

"What?" Constance threw her napkin down on the plate and stood up. "Well, it's not going to be me. I came here for a casual lunch, not a murder-suicide pact."

Henry jumped up and bumped his head on the donkey piñata, causing it to swing back and forth like a pendulum. "But...but...we'd get to know each other first"

She turned to face him. "You don't need a girlfriend. You need a therapist. Thanks for lunch."

Constance fled the restaurant like a bandito escaping the Federales.

Henry reached up to stabilize the donkey piñata, but despite his best efforts it detached from the ceiling, crashed to the floor, and broke open, covering him with multi-colored confetti.

The next candidate, Nancy Unruh, met Henry at a nearby Chinese restaurant for an early dinner. They sat under a large three-dimensional relief of the Great Wall of China. Nancy was a high school English teacher in her early 60s with dirty blonde hair pulled back severely from her face and half frame reading glasses that she forgot to take off when she wasn't reading.

After a dinner of sesame chicken and shrimp with lobster sauce, Henry started in on his theory of doors and the need to find a suicide companion.

"If I were you, I'd be concerned about my immortal soul," she said. "Suicide is a mortal sin in some circles."

"I'm not Catholic," he said.

"Neither am I. I'm a recovering Southern Baptist, but there are good reasons why Catholics think that way. People only commit suicide out of desperation, when they lose all hope. The sin isn't necessarily in the act of committing suicide but in willfully giving up on hope. That's why suicides are considered lost souls."

"I haven't given up on hope. I just realize that the best years of my life are probably behind me, and I want to end it on my own terms while I still have my wits about me."

She looked over the top of her glasses. "That's God's job, not yours."

"And what if I don't believe in God?"

"Even so, how do you know that the best years of your life are behind you? Do you have a crystal ball?"

"Well, no..."

"Look, Henry, how old are you?"

"Seventy-three."

"And do you have any major illnesses?"

"Not that I know of."

"What about money? Do you have enough to live on comfortably?"

"Well, yes, I have a pension from the university."

"So you feasibly have twenty or so years left to enjoy. You could travel, take up a hobby—fall in love, for heaven's sake."

"Or I could watch my body deteriorate and spend the rest of my life eating cat food."

There was a long pause during which Henry looked up at the Great Wall of China, which seemed to descend from the mural and divide the dinner table in half.

Finally, Nancy said, "Well, I guess we'll just have to agree to disagree. Frankly, I doubt you'll find a woman who will go along with your plan. Most people go out on dates to find partners for life, not death. Maybe if you meet the right person you'll change your mind."

Henry paid for the dinner and they parted amicably.

Henry considered canceling his third date because he hadn't slept well thinking about what Nancy had said. What if she were right, not about the God part but about the cowardice of giving up on hope? Anyway, maybe God was just another name for hope, and by turning his back on hope he was turning his back on God—whoever or whatever that might be. He was starting to think that by committing suicide he would be making a mockery of his life up until that point, including the most meaningful part, his time with Rachel. He kept mulling that idea over and over in his mind and started having second thoughts about his plan.

And then there was Nancy herself. Of course, no one could ever replace Rachel, but he had enjoyed talking to Nancy, felt comfortable in her presence, and sensed a spark between them. Maybe it had been a bad idea to bring up his philosophy of life so early in the relationship. He hadn't dated in so long that he hardly knew what the rules were anymore. He could apologize for that faux pas and see if she'd like to go out on a second date. He decided to call her.

But that would have to wait for now. He had arranged all three dates in advance, and Henry was nothing if not dependable, so he found himself sitting in a dimly lit back booth in his favorite Italian restaurant waiting for Maggie Treadwell to arrive. Unfortunately, Maggie was late. He took a sip of his second glass of Chianti and scanned the restaurant for a lost older woman. He was about to give up and head home when a decidedly younger woman with short black hair and a ring through the side of her nose appeared at his table.

"Are you Henry Klein?" she asked.

"Yes."

She threw her purse on the seat opposite him and sat down. "I'm Maggie." Her dark red lipstick and pale white skin gave her an otherworldly appearance, and her black lace dress made her look like she was on her way to a funeral.

"You're—?"

"I know, I'm a little young for you. Do you mind?" She grabbed his wine and promptly swallowed half of it. "Wow, that's good. I hacked my granny's account."

"You what?"

"The dating site for 'mature adults.' Her name is Maggie Treadwell too."

"Why would you do that?"

"Because guys my age bore the hell out of me. They're just a bunch of posers. They're too busy following their cocks to have anything intelligent to say. I saw your profile on the site. I liked the quotes you put out there."

"Um...thanks." Henry was partly aghast and partly flattered, torn between the desire to leave and the curiosity of finding out more about this audacious young lady. However, when he glanced down at her ample bosom rising from the tight lace corset, he decided to stay.

"I particularly liked the one that went, "If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him.' What did you mean by that?"

"It's Voltaire. It's just a clever way of him saying that he didn't really believe in God. He argued that man created God in his own image, not the other way around. I used to teach him in my philosophy class at the university."

"Oh, so you're a professor?"

"I was. I'm retired now."

He looked down at her cleavage and wondered if a man his age could still get lucky.

"Is that what you believe?"

"More or less. I believe that man created the concept of God as a survival mechanism. The only way that humanity has been able to survive up until now was to have a baseline code of ethics that spanned all religions. Evolution itself was amoral. We needed an artificial means to overcome our natural instincts, and we called that God. In a sense, God is a collaborative art form."

"Intense," she said. Henry was happy to have an audience again. This girl could easily have been one of his students.

"But belief in God just isn't enough anymore. That idea worked for centuries, but ever since science backed God into a corner even the most devout have had trouble believing in Him. I think that it's up to us individually to come up with our own meaning, our own God, if you will. You can't expect to do it by joining some kind of group. But that's a monumentally difficult task for most people, maybe even impossible. It certainly takes a good imagination, something that's in short supply these days."

"So how would you go about doing that—making your own meaning?"

"By taking control of your life and accepting total responsibility for your actions. It's not up to any authority—work, family, government, or even religion. And it's scary. It never fails to amaze me how otherwise free Americans are willing to give up their freedom for an illusory sense of belonging and comfort. You have to have the courage to be an outsider."

"Well, that's not a problem for me," she said.

And so Henry launched into his theory of doors once more, but his heart wasn't in it. Perhaps he had taken his philosophy a step too far. Was he trying to play God by taking his fate into his own hands, and was it wrong of him to attempt to convince another person to go along with his plan? However, he managed to finish

the analogy as if he still believed it, having spent so many years trying to convince himself of its veracity.

When he was done, Maggie said, "So let me get this straight. By committing suicide you'd be taking control of your life and giving meaning to your death?"

"Yes," he said. "After all, suicide is the fundamental question of philosophy, and how you answer that question helps determine what kind of person you are."

"Uh-huh. It seems to me that there's a much simpler explanation."

"What's that?"

"Life really is meaningless, and you're afraid to admit it. You're twisting yourself into a pretzel trying to pretend that there's meaning where it doesn't exist. I don't think your suicide would be any more meaningful than anybody else's death. It seems to me that you think too much and feel too little. What are you so afraid of?"

At first, Henry was taken aback that this young girl would openly challenge him. But when he looked into her eyes and realized that she was being sincere, he took a deep breath, centered himself, and made a conscious effort to identify his feelings. Finally, he said, "I'm afraid of dying alone."

"Now, that wasn't so difficult, was it? I don't know why you didn't just say so in the first place. Nobody wants to die alone."

She reached into her purse, pulled out a small handgun, and laid it on the table.

"What's that?" Henry asked, his eyes widening. "Is it real?"

"Of course it's real. A girl's got to protect herself."

"What...what are you going to do with it?"

"I'm going to determine if you have the courage of your convictions. You see, I don't need to build an elaborate house of cards to tell me that life is meaningless. I feel it in my gut. I've never believed in God, and if there's no God then there's no basis for ethics either. So it doesn't really matter what we do. There's no point to any of it. The only point is to end your suffering as soon as possible. So if you really want a suicide partner, here I am."

She released the safety and pushed the gun toward him, but he recoiled from it as if it were a snake.

"What are you waiting for? This is your ticket out."

Henry started to shake and pushed back into the seat cushion.

"I thought so. After all that talk, you're just a poser like everybody else." She picked up the gun and pointed it at him. "But at least you don't have to die alone."

"God, no!" he shouted.

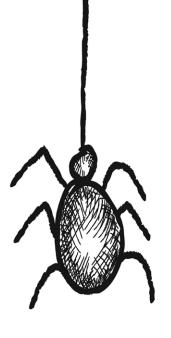
She shot him three times in the chest point-blank. Pain began seeping into his body as blood started pouring out. As he was losing consciousness, he watched her put the gun to her temple and say, "There's no such thing as a meaningful death." Then she blew her brains out.

Henry slumped over the table, his final door having been chosen for him.



DIABOLICAL NATURE

That little spider moved quickly into my small cabin on the lake. Through a slight crack by the door I stared, undaunted, eerie but inquisitive as it slowly began weaving a lovely web. I thought of all the cans of bug spray and repellents waiting in the back room but I was rather intrigued at her brash nature and egotistical style displayed. I guestioned whether I should let her stay, after all; less mosquitoes, flies, and those infernal crickets, cricketing all damn night never to be found. She finished the web by nine o clock soon the sound of a cricket echoed then stopped and I checked my spider. She let the cricket go, so I stomped her. a size ten at eleven and went to bed. The diabolical in nature will not win! I awoke at two with a mosquito bite itching on my forehead and that damn cricket under my bed cricketing away. scratching and tossing shoes all about, am sure it's now a great time for Plan B.



-ken allan dronsfield

Black Perfume

She wears black perfume that stings like wasps before a summer storm, the sum of her whispers deeper than graves minus shadows of flowers.

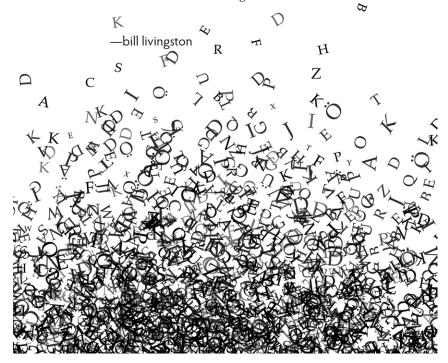
Wherever she goes, the eyes of time either close or weep, or roll like frozen marbles.

Who dare remain to bathe in song along a moonlit river, play a tambourine in the sunshine of some memory?

—darrell lindsey

RENOVATION

The ladder rested against the library – leaning like Huck Finn – defiant against a grand old southern plantation in disrepair. Its opening hours fading. The leaves in the books within, as dead and unloved as the leaves on the ground – rotting as the mountains crumble, as in an H.G. Wells novel. Yet trees survive in the park that embraces the building like an estranged father. The leaves become earth after the curtain falls on their bright colors of autumn, when they looked like startled peacocks about to be murdered. The Spanish tiles of the roof that protects its history in parchment are about to disappear under snow. Some days, the keys to structures and minds are lost forever. And sometimes the sun sets in the wrong direction.



HELL

If Hell is where the other guy is headed: where he gets to dress up for Hallowe'en and scare survivors daily, and be dreaded and feared; and where he never has to mean what he says; where there are no consequences for lying; where he's not required to sing on key, or worry about mending fences, or burning bridges—about anything, in fact; and where, even if he'd been wedded in life, it wouldn't matter, he could do whatever with whomever, any way and as often as he'd want—and without you; and if it's where the other *gal* is headed as well: I'd like to visit there, some day.

-james b. nicola

Night Music

by wayne scheer

It was just after some remodeling began on our house that we discovered the home we had just moved into was haunted. That's right. Our house is as haunted as Edgar Allan Poe's mind.

No, we don't see ghosts in white sheets or little girls in flowing nightgowns carrying candles down narrow staircases. But our house is haunted nonetheless.

We hear music, beautiful music. It's taken us a while to accept the soulful cry of what sounds like a cello coming from somewhere deep within the house, but there's no question it's there. Late at night, after the tornado-activity of the kids has quieted and the TV is silenced, once the telephone no longer threatens to break the calm and our family sleeps peacefully—it starts. At first, a low hum vibrates through the dark; then it grows. The volume does not increase yet it intensifies—until it keeps pace with our breathing.

"What's that noise?" my wife asked the first night after construction to the house began. We had hired a crew to tear down the old, dark addition to the house with its leaky roof and knotty-pine paneled walls and replace it with an airy, window-filled room to give the kids additional play space.

"I don't know," I said. "Probably the wind."

"Would you check it out, please?"

I sighed, making sure my wife appreciated the sacrifice I was making leaving the comfort of our bed to traipse around the house trying to identify the source of a peculiar sound.

The hum was low and steady, like a gentle wave or a bow caressing a note in one direction and then slowly caressing it in the other direction. Instinctively I headed for the addition, watching out for nails and other sharp objects, but the sound wasn't coming from this part of the house. I checked the windows in the kitchen and the other rooms on the ground floor. Everything appeared closed tight. I climbed the stairs to the children's rooms as quietly as I could and stood outside their doors listening. But all I heard was the peaceful breathing of our two children.

I opened the door to Tommy's room, trying hard not to wake him. I could hear the cello-like strain in the distance but it wasn't coming from his room. Deep in sleep, I could see his little eyelids twitch, a slight smile on his face.

I entered Beth's room. It was all pink and frilly with stuffed animals everywhere. We overdid it, I know, but Beth seems to like it. The sound was audible, but definitely not coming from her room. I tried tiptoeing out, but she woke. She had always been a light sleeper.

"Daddy, do you hear it?"

"Shh, honey," I said. "Go back to sleep. I think it's just the wind."

"I think it's an angel. Or a ghost."

"Maybe, honey. Maybe it's an angel. But you need to sleep now." I kissed her forehead and pulled the covers over her shoulders.

"Don't be ascared, Daddy. It's a good sound. Even if it's a ghost, it's a good ghost."

Before I could say anything, she closed her eyes and returned to a peaceful

I eased out of her room and back downstairs to our bedroom. Robin snored rhythmically in the darkness as if she had never sent me out in the night. Annoyed, I climbed back into bed and listened as the sound seemed to compliment Robin's soft snore. Hearing my daughter's reassuring words in my head—"Don't be ascared, Daddy, even if it's a ghost, it's a good ghost"—I fell asleep.

When I woke in the morning, the sound was gone.

But it returned the next night and, once again, I made sure windows and doors were shut tight. I admit I felt silly, but I even grabbed a flashlight and checked closets and behind shower curtains. I refrained from looking under the beds.

I told the contractors about it and after jokes about ghosts and goblins, they said it would probably go away once they completed the construction, guessing that somewhere a seal was broken that would be tightened, sheet rocked or painted over. It sounded reasonable enough.

"Of course," one of them added, "the house could be haunted."

We all laughed.

But the sound—we took to calling it the night music—didn't go away, even after the contractors had completed their work. It returned in the stillness of the house and remained until early morning, vanishing with the first sounds of life in the street outside our home.

I researched the history of our house, half expecting to find a musically gifted

child who had died mysteriously or that a group of traveling gypsies had rented the back room one dark and stormy night. Instead, I found that the Coopersmiths were the original owners—he, an accountant and she, a schoolteacher. Their pet poodle stayed in the back room when they had company. None of the neighbors remembered the Coopersmiths or their poodle playing the cello.

When we bought the house, the Pelhams had lived there for about a year before he was transferred to Denver. Mrs. Pelham was eager to join her husband. He flew in for the closing and seemed a nice enough gentleman. Neither of them played a musical instrument as far as anyone knew, although I was told that Mrs. Pelham had a lovely voice and was a member of the First Baptist Church choir.

I called the Pelhams a few months after construction was completed and the sound remained. After small talk and assurance of how much we loved our new home, I asked them if they ever heard any strange noises in the house after dark.

There was silence on the other end of the phone. Then Mr. Pelham asked, "Do you mean like a ghost?"

"Well, yes," I said.

"Of course not," the Pelhams said in unison.

We all laughed and I assured them it was nothing.

I considered investigating further but felt foolish.

We've grown accustomed to living in a haunted house. In fact, we've learned to enjoy it. Even Tommy, now four, asks us to turn on the night music so he can sleep.





Breathe

exhausted wings carries the cries

across the void

echoes on the loose

makes the world tremble

I can feel all the sounds that drowned here

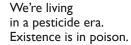
inside

intensified

as they bounce between these cellular wars not time, nor distance can make it fade

-emma-johanna henriksson

Chemical Weapon



Peasants are persuaded. Their minds are mulched with chemical thoughts.

Vegetable gardens are gruesome. Not green, but a toxic shade of death dominates.

Even deep purple grapes in the vineyards don't tempt birds.

Nostalgic smell of cashew blooms steeps in *Endosulfan.

Flies aren't extinct, yet they keep distance from the fruit stands.

An apple a day won't keep the doctor away.

Chemical weapons are widely used. Corporate target is profit. Corpses of ethics lie scattered.

*Endosulfan is a deadly insecticide.

—fabiyas mv



A TRICK OF THE LIGHT

by jay caselberg

I saw a ghost in the night. She was just standing there, a white shift, long black hair. She wasn't moving, nothing. She stood just a metre from the bed. Somehow, I knew it was a she. I reached over in the dark, touched Jasmine to check whether she was there or whether it was her standing there in the shadows, but my touch had been too heavy and she awoke. I wanted her to wake up properly then, to look and verify what I was seeing, that it wasn't merely a simple trick of the light, but it was too late. The ghost had gone. Then there was denial. I was half asleep, barely awake, and your eyes play tricks on you in the dark. Or so I told myself then. If I looked over at the open doorway to our bedroom, I could roughly see the darkness and light that could shape such an image in my head. What is it they say? That the brain fills things in for you in the absence of the proper stimulus? Perhaps that was it.

We talked about it over breakfast.

"It was probably just a dream," said Jasmine. She was always the more grounded one in our relationship.

"Yeah, probably," I told her, not wanting to get into a detailed dissection of what did and didn't exist. Besides, the house we were renting wasn't that old. I didn't think there was enough history there to warrant some sort of event that might cause something paranormal to attach itself to the place. It's hard to tell though. Television has a lot to answer for, confusing and embellishing the received lore about such things and yes, I watched them all. My expectations may have been muddied.

That would have been that, had I not started noticing other things. Perhaps I was looking for them, but they were there all the same, not some imagined shape conjured to fill the gaps in my perception. I was sure of it.

The house itself was big and rambling. One of those places that real estate people said could benefit from love and attention. Probably too big for just the two of us. The rent was well within our reach, being as it was out at the edge of town near a golf course. It wasn't the view; it was the golf balls. It's impressive the amount of damage one of those small hard spheres can cause. Most of the time

we weren't there for the occasional impact, but when we were, well, you never quite get used to the noise. Mostly it was the roof. A wide veranda protected us from most of the impacts and the old sash windows never suffered. We'd sit out there on warm summer nights, having drinks watching for comets, tracking the bats as they chased insects through the heavy air. You had to look for them, but if you concentrated, you could see the flittering of dark on dark. You have to know what to look for. And so it was with the ghost. You had to know what to look for. Sometimes it's not the light that you have to find, but the dark within the dark.

That night, we were making love. Something caught me, twisted an awareness into the space between my shoulder blades. I felt like someone was in the dark room watching us. I stopped in the middle of what I was doing.

"What is it, hon?" said Jasmine. "Is something...?" She shifted her hand from my shoulder to my cheek. Her fingertips were warm, damp.

"Shhh," I told her.

I stayed there, not moving, propped up on my arms, arched back. I heard nothing, but I could feel it. I stayed like that for a few moments. The desire had trickled out of me.

"Carl?"

When I didn't answer, didn't move, she rolled away from me.

Slowly I lowered myself and turned, seeking something in the dim light.

"Carl, you need to tell me what's going on," she said quietly.

There was nothing there. Of course there was nothing there. But I had felt it.

"I'm sorry," I told her. "It's just I have stuff on my mind."

That much, at least, was true. I lay back down, staring up at the darkness, at the ceiling stretched above the gloom. The sensation of a presence hadn't left me.

Jasmine reached over to stroke my face. "It's all right, hon," she said. "It's all right."

The next morning, neither of us spoke of it as we got ourselves ready for the workday but the memory of that feeling lingered. I knew there was something there in the house with us. I thought about that. Actually, it wasn't something. It was someone. And she had a habit of watching us in the night. That thought didn't make me feel comfortable. It was creepy; more than that, it was creepy.

In the few days that followed, I felt her more than once. I wasn't sure whether it was just my imagination, that I was conjuring the feeling now that I was aware of her presence. I didn't see her. But I knew she was there. There was no growing chill, no breath fogging in the air, none of that. I just felt her there. It was like that feeling on a bus when you sense someone watching you from behind, nothing you can define, but some awareness. A couple of times I asked Jasmine if she felt it too, but she made it pretty clear that she thought I was imagining it.

"There's no such thing as ghosts," she said. "Just get a grip, Carl."

Fine, if that was the way she wanted it, I would keep it to myself. And that was the start of it. I wanted to find something solid that would help me prove to her that I wasn't going out of my head, something that would constitute evidence in her mind. Though the house wasn't that old, there had to be a history. It wasn't

something we had thought about when first signing up to take it on, but then you hardly ever would, would you? There had to be something there, something that explained the presence. And I knew there was a presence. I started online, but that didn't lead anywhere. Property searches and the like only tell you so much. A couple of times, Jasmine asked what I was doing, but I made something up and left it at that. After a while, I gave up and decided I'd seek other avenues. I thought I might have two different ways left to find something. The first was the local library and old copies of the local newspaper. The other was the guy who'd rented us the house in the first place. I gave him a call. He turned out to be a dead end. There was some holding company. He didn't know anything about the history of the place—only that it was about forty years old. That left the library.

Over the next couple of days, I saw her once. I'd woken with a thirst in the still dark of night and stumbled out to the kitchen to suck down some water. I didn't switch on any of the lights, not wanting to disturb Jasmine; her breathing was heavy, even, and deeply asleep. Creaking floorboards and light made it all the more likely that I'd wake her. I was standing in the kitchen, drinking from the water bottle, bathed in the glow of the refrigerator door. I couldn't see much, but I felt something there, standing in the doorway, watching. At least that's what it felt like. I couldn't see anything when I turned to look. The effect was merely dark on dark. Carefully I replaced the water bottle in the fridge and closed the door, waiting for my eyes to adjust. It was cold inside me, and not just from the water. There was certainly something there. I just stood there, my heart pounding. Then I could make out the image. She wasn't in the doorway; she was in the middle of the living room, watching me through the kitchen door. Again, the figure was wearing some sort of pale shift, dark hair around her face, almost insubstantial. There was something familiar about her. I closed my eyes, and then I willed them open again, but she was gone. I walked softly back into the bedroom and climbed under the covers. I couldn't have been imagining it. It was a long time before I found sleep again, and when I finally did, it was light and troubled.

In the morning, I debated whether to discuss what I'd seen with Jasmine, but decided I'd keep it to myself for now. I already knew how she'd react. I went out for a run, and all the way as I pounded along the street, my breath making fog trails in the chill morning air, images of what I'd seen kept flashing through my head. I had to find a solution to this. I had to find out who she was and what she was doing there. I came back home, showered, dressed and then, as I sat sipping my coffee, I knew that I didn't have a choice. Jasmine bustled into the kitchen in her morning whirlwind, made a cup of tea for herself and started preparing her breakfast. She obviously caught me staring in the distance, because she asked me what was wrong.

"Nothing. I'm just thinking about work."

It seemed to satisfy her. "Speaking of which, don't you need to get moving?" I glanced up at the wall clock. She was right.

All day I had difficulty concentrating. I couldn't wait for the clock to tick over to home time, and when it finally did, I hurried out, heading for the library. It

was still open for a couple of hours yet, and I felt thankful that we were lucky enough that our town still boasted one. After asking at the desk, I headed for the section holding the local papers, maneuvered one of the hefty red-bound folders to a desk and started reading. I read till my head hurt and my concentration started drifting, until my eyes were skimming across the pages without really absorbing anything. There was nothing there. I glanced over at the shelves and looked at the stacked folders, a sinking feeling growing. It was already closing time, and I'd achieved little more than giving myself a headache. It was a fool's errand. Despondently I made my way home. Jasmine asked me where I'd been, but I shrugged her questions off, muttering something about drinks after work. She'd made something for dinner, but I merely picked at it and then spent the rest of the evening staring blankly at a screen full of flickering images, my arms folded across my chest. I heard her cleaning up in the kitchen until finally she emerged, and then I watched her as she crossed to the couch and sat.

"What are you watching?"

I shrugged in response.

"Fine, if you're going to be in one of those moods, I'll pick something I want to watch," she said.

I ignored the comment and she reached for the control and turned the TV to some home improvement show. After a while, I stood and went out to the veranda, to watch a clouded sky as the dark strands whipped across the pale disk of the moon. She hadn't even acknowledged my departure. I stood thinking about that, about the other things that accumulated through our day-to-day life, things that annoyed me and things that she didn't care about. Each one sat there as a tiny knot of resentment. Had it always been like this? There seemed to be so many. Eventually I sighed and wandered back inside. Jasmine had already gone to bed.

I had no visitors that night, real or imagined, nor for the following few days. The atmosphere between us was cool. By the time the next weekend came, we were barely talking. I decided I had to do something about it. Clearly we couldn't go on like this. There was an answer somewhere and it lay within that house. First thing in the morning, not even bothering with breakfast, foregoing the morning run, I was down and under the house. I'd found a flashlight out in the back room and lay peering into the gloom, dust and spider webs and old plastic pipes. The smell of old mouldy earth and dust was all around me. There wasn't really enough space under there to move without sliding along on my belly. It didn't take long for me to realise that there was no way anyone could be effectively buried under there. Not unless the deed had been done even before the house was built. I had to try another angle. I wormed my way back to the entry and stood, slapping at the dirt. Maybe there was something in the attic, but if that were the case, surely we would have smelled it. Somebody would have noticed it. Nonetheless, I made my way inside, pulled down the ladder and ventured up into the gloom. There was nothing there but insulation, a water tank, wooden joists, little shafts of light filtering through the overlaps in the roof tiles. I scanned the space, looking for something, anything, but I knew I'd find nothing there. With a sigh, I carefully took the rickety steps, one by one and back down into the hallway. Jasmine was waiting for me.

"What are you doing, Carl?" She still had on the pale shift she wore to bed, her dark hair tousled with sleep, a frown upon her face. She rubbed at one eye.

"Just seeing if there's anything up there." I folded the ladder back up and pulled the trapdoor shut.

"What have you been doing? You're filthy. Have you lost your mind?"

I stared back at her, narrowing my eyes.

"Oh, I can't be bothered," she said, shaking her head and pushing past me toward the kitchen with one hand held up, warding off anything I might have to say.

"Fine. I'm going to have a shower," I called back over my shoulder. There was some muttered response from the kitchen, but that was it.

As I stood letting the steaming water beat down upon my shoulders I had another idea. Perhaps there was something hidden in the walls. But I'd need to wait until Jasmine wasn't there before I tested out my theory. If I started in straight away, she'd be convinced I'd lost it. I killed the water and stepped out of the shower. I grabbed a towel, and then reached for another to wipe the mirror. I stopped with my hand halfway to the towel rail. There on the mirror, clearly written in the fog, beads of moisture trailing from the letters, was a single word: WHY. The bathroom door was closed. I hadn't heard anyone enter while I was in the shower. I stared at it for a couple of seconds, and then took a deep breath. Still wrapped in my towel, I stormed out of the bathroom, heading for the kitchen. Jasmine was curled up in one of the armchairs with a book in her hand, a steaming mug of tea resting on the small table beside it. I stopped in the doorway.

"What the hell are you playing at?" I asked her.

She looked up from her book with a frown. "What are you going on about now?"

"If you want to make a point, you can tell me to my face. You don't need to go sneaking around leaving little messages."

She stared at me. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"The bathroom mirror."

Jasmine had put down her book. "Listen, Carl. I have no idea what you're talking about and quite frankly, I'm starting to get a little concerned."

I knew then that she wasn't playing games. She was deadly serious. It seemed that our visitor was back, unless I'd imagined it. I headed straight back to the bathroom without saying another word.

"Carl?" she called from behind me as I left the room, followed immediately by a deep sigh.

When I got there, the only thing on the mirror were trails of water. The steam fog had gone completely. I peered at the surface and then looked sideways at the mirror, leaning in close. There was nothing there, no sign, no residual marks, just glass beaded with moisture. I closed my eyes, my hands resting on the sink. I took a few deep breaths. Perhaps I'd imagined it after all. Was she right? Was I

losing it? I slowly opened my eyes and looked at myself in the mirror, seeking for something—I didn't know what. I dressed slowly, shooting an occasional glance back at the glass, but there were no clues there. Why? That had been the word. It was a good question. I dumped my dirty clothes from earlier in the washing basket and padded through to the bedroom to finish dressing.

As I wandered through to the kitchen to make coffee, Jasmine was still in the chair. She looked up from her book and watched me, saying nothing. The chill was almost palpable. I shrugged it off, grabbed my coffee and headed outside to sit out on the old wooden bench and watch the day emerging. A little later, I heard the front door close.

"I thought I'd find you out here. I'm going shopping. You can come or not, as you please."

She stood at the corner of the house, one hand on her hip, head slightly tilted to one side, clearly predicting my answer.

"I'll stay," I told her.

She gave a brief toss of her head, a thin-lipped nod and then she was gone.

I waited a few minutes, finishing my coffee, making sure she truly wasn't coming back. I headed to the front of the house, checked up and down the street, but she was nowhere in sight. I had my opportunity. It would be at least an hour or more before she returned. I headed inside and started checking the walls. There was something there, I knew there was. There had to be. I started tapping in the front hallway, moving from as far as I could reach and moving down to the level of my feet. As far as I could tell, there was nothing there. Taking a step to the right, I repeated the process. I continued till I reached the end of the hall, and then worked my way up the other side. I found nothing.

Step by step, I worked my way through the rest of the house, the bedrooms, the living room, the kitchen, the small back room, even the tiny storage room crowded by the water heater. In the end, I hadn't found anything. Jasmine finally returned, packed away the shopping, and started cleaning up. I sat in one of the armchairs, slumped, arms hanging loosely over the sides simply watching her, despondent. She gave me a few hard looks in passing but said nothing.

That night, she was back. I woke in the darkness. Jasmine, her back turned to me, was breathing deep and even. I was being watched. I knew it. I tried to pierce the blackness, give something form, and then there she was, flickering into being, a vague lighter shape against the charcoal background. A car went past, headlights fanning illumination across the curtains. For that instant, she was clearer. She wore a pale shift like Jasmine's sleepwear. Her dark hair hung around a pale face, the features indistinct. She almost looked like.... Her image shimmered, but I could tell. She was mouthing something—a single word. She lifted her arm, pointing, accusing.

"What do you want?" I whispered, though the words would barely come. My insides were filled with a cold, cold emptiness.

Without looking, I reached back with one hand and shook Jasmine's shoulder. "Wake up," I hissed and shook her again. "Now you can believe me."

"Carl, what..." she mumbled, turning and sitting up.

I risked a look at her. "See," I whispered.

"What?"

I turned back, but there was nothing there.

"But..." My heart was still pounding, my insides like winter.

"Jesus, Carl," said Jasmine. "You really need some help."

I stared into the darkness where she'd stood. There really was nothing.

"She was here," I said. "She was saying something. Trying to... I don't know."

"Listen, if you aren't going to sleep at least let me." She turned, dropped back down with her back toward me and wrenched the covers over her shoulders.

By the time Monday came, we were barely talking. I made excuses about not feeling well, that I wasn't going in to work. I had a plan. I was going to prove her wrong by showing her there was something hidden within this house. I knew that it was the only way I was going to make things right. I waited about an hour after she had gone. Then I got started. I went to the shed out back and rummaged through the tools and things until I found the big club hammer. I started on the kitchen walls first.

When she finally came back, I had made it as far as the spare bedroom.

"Carl!" she shouted. "What the hell?"

She grabbed my arm. I couldn't allow her to stop me. I had to find the answer. "Carl, stop it!"

I swung, trying to loosen her grip. There was a feeling of rage inside me, of desperation. The big hammer swung with me. As she tried to stop me, the hammer cracked the side of her head. She gave a little sound and then she fell, her eyes wide open. The hammer slipped from my hands and clattered to the floor. She was still. Not breathing. A thin trickle of blood ran from one nostril, but apart from that, it looked as if nothing had happened at all. I stared down at her for a moment, the cold growing inside me until I felt numb. Then I dropped to my knees beside her and cupped her face in my hands.

I was like that when they came. Finally, of course, I called them. There was nothing I could do.

I worked out the answer, of course. It was more than a simple trick of the light. It was so much more than my brain simply filling the gaps in my perception. It was the dark within the darkness. It had been there inside me all the time. Jasmine had simply walked into its shadow and become a part of it, just like she was a part of my life. For those moments, briefly, when I had first seen her, she had stepped outside of that darkness and into the light. I should have known it was her. I can still see her, but it's different now. She is always there, always will be. Light is like that.



Dark Dreamer

Assaulted by chords Of apocalyptic thunder Gliding forth from

The deepest pits Of some Stygian hell, Chords of fey emancipation

And wild enslavements, Enabled by demons Conversing in a humid

Garbled gutter tongue As they debate my fate, I am of a single mind

Of manifold illusions, A tree whose branches Never stop sprouting

Leaves and flowers In networks interlacing, Immersed in a fey world

Of glyphs and ruins, And amaranthine terrains, Adrift in rich persecutions

And megalomanias, I am crowned The King Of My Own Distorted Dreams.

—bruce boston

CURSE OF THE SAGES

These headlands now savage and feral,
These spirits most restless and coy,
These spirits most angry and coy.
And the moon seems a wan purple beryl
Like a pawn or some dark witch's ploy.
And this night it is full of such peril
As each ghost is a token or ploy,
And is set to enmesh and imperil,
Attack and to crush and destroy!

It is here in the deeps of November.
That I move on this trail by the sea.
On this witch-haunted trail by the sea.
It is here I forget to remember.
This curse that has long followed me.
This curse that has long staggered me!
And be it in June or December
It meets me out here in this lea,
Yes, ever in June or December
In this witch-haunted, shadowed dark lea.

And these stars drip the dust of the ages.
That fall on this headland and hill.
That cover this headland and hill.
Like spilt silver for sin and its wages.
Like base rogues that rejoice in the kill!
Like wild beasts that rejoice in the kill!
A curse that was chanted by sages.
Until all the realm had grown still.
That was cursed by implacable sages.
That cursed with a flamboyant will!

It was under those oaks in my dreaming
When Orion sprung up in the sky,
Where Orion would shine in that sky,
With its rubescent and sinister beaming
All the heavens to curse and defy,
The heavens to threaten, defy!
Then a feminine ghost in her seeming,
With her sisters for me would she vie,
Most lovely and elegant seeming,
Was caught by my dreamer's swift eye!

Most gallantly would I approached her Under Orion's dim glow,
Under Orion's strange glow;
Attracted, I would not reproach her,
But I gladly took her in tow.
Hand in hand, I took her in tow.
Then I loved her and kissed her and coached her In the ways that we ought to then go.
In the ways that we nightly now go.
I am glad that I met her, approached her,
For such love would that spirit bestow.

These headlands now savage and feral,
These spirits most restless and coy,
These spirits most angry and coy.
And the moon seems a wan purple beryl
Like a pawn or some dark witch's ploy.
And this night it is full of such peril
As each ghost is a token or ploy,
And is set to enmesh and imperil,
Attack and to crush and destroy!

-michael fantina

Lock, Stock, and Barrel

by sherry chapman



She hated him and for some time her feelings had developed into wishing him dead. But God doesn't grant those types of wishes. She didn't know why. If He has to take X many people each day, why couldn't one of them be him?

She had thought she loved him on their wedding day. She meant her vows. Connor rushed through them, and then later he latched on to her like she was some earned award he wasn't going to let go of. Missing were loving looks she searched for on his face, a spontaneous kiss, a tender touch. At the reception, someone had put up silver balloons that read, "Suzanne & Connor Forever." Even then she wondered if "Forever" would be true.

A scant three weeks into their married life there was disagreement. Suzanne couldn't remember what it was about—that was 35 years ago—but she did remember he was wrong. She was talking in her normal voice when he seemed to snap; he began to yell at her so loudly it stunned her in its ferocity. She escaped to the bedroom and heard him bark, "I have to take a walk!" She was crying on their bed when he came in and held out a bouquet of wildflowers he had picked for her. She just stared at them.

"These are for you. I'm sorry."

She said, "I-I'm not ready to talk about it yet." She turned around, away from his face.

He had his hands on her in seconds, rolling her back, then slapping her openhanded with such force that she knew then what people meant when they said they saw stars.

Had they not been legally married, she would have walked out the door for good that night. But it wouldn't be that easy now. She spent most of the night crying on the floor by the couch until she was worn out and went into the bedroom. He had been sleeping soundly for a long time. She had heard his snoring from the living room. She laid on her side of the bed and fell asleep quickly. In the morning while she was still asleep, he started kissing her, and then made such good love to her that she was barely able to remember the night before. The feelings of anger toward him were gone almost as if the abuse had never happened. But she remembered. She remembered.

She was learning that anything could set him off. When they were in their first starter home, Suzanne became pregnant with their only child. While he was at work, she saw a cardboard box full of tools that definitely weren't hers. So she moved them from her side of the garage to his.

He announced that he was home that day by stomping in the back door and yelling for her. She went as far as one room away and asked what was wrong. Apparently the sun was in his eyes, and he had run over the whole box of tools with his new car. She started to smile, which angered him more.

"I want you to come out here and see what you've done!"

He was unhinged, and she was not going to get near him. He wasn't her boss. "No!" she snapped back at him.

Again, he ordered her out there, and again she refused. So he took her by both wrists and dragged her, seven bloated months' pregnant, through the kitchen to the mud room. If not for the doorbell ringing just then, he would have dragged her down the stairs to the back patio.

When Suzanne went to the hospital to give birth to their baby, the nurse gave her an enema and directed her to the bathroom in the labor room. "Take your time," the nurse said. Connor was downstairs filling out paperwork.

It wasn't long before someone knocked sharply on the bathroom door. "Come on, Suz," Connor ordered. "Let's get this show on the road!"

The nurse, who at first had been on the mean side to Suzanne, called to her, "Don't listen to him, honey. You take all the time you want." That shut him up. And it felt so good to hear someone oppose him for her sake for a change.

When their beautiful baby girl was born, Suzanne was still on the delivery table after being shown the little miracle. In all the birth films she'd ever seen the husband always came up to the wife and cried or kissed her. Connor said nothing and followed half of the baby team out with the glass bassinet.

She didn't want to think about how he had treated the baby. It was too upsetting. But she had an ally in little Annie. No matter how lowly and unloved Suzanne felt, the pain went away whenever she held her precious daughter.

Now Suzanne was less likely to end the marriage. She didn't believe in divorce. Not with children involved. She had lasted this long. She could keep going. She was taking tranquilizers that helped her cope with this marriage.

When Connor fell ill with the flu, or anything that confined him to bed, he was a baby—a big mean baby. Suzanne liked to take care of him, thinking he would see that she was caring and therefore start to change. She just got abused verbally whenever she went into the room. He wouldn't take his medicine responsibility, so she had to bring it to him. And when she did, he would just complain. She didn't always keep her mouth shut and just take it. She had learned to be somewhat assertive.

One time when he had a bad foot infection and he could not so much as move off the bed, he started his tirade. Suzanne made sure she was just beyond his reach when she looked him in the eye and said, "Connor?" She had his attention now, then she spat out, "So when did you change your name from Connor to Dick?" She laughed hard and left him very surprised in the bed with his bad foot.

All the times she was in bed sick he ignored her. He never checked in on her, even when she had the flu one year with a temp of 104. He acted put out when she had to call downstairs for his help in getting her in a tub of tepid water. He was watching a hockey game, for Christ's sake!

In time, Annie would come and check on her. She always made Suzanne smile. Annie would say I love you to her mother many times a day. Connor never did. Even if he didn't mean it, he could have said it. But he never even thought of it.

One time Suzanne was so sick that she could not drag herself downstairs to

grab anything to eat. During one of Annie's nursing rounds, her mother asked her to please ask Daddy to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich that Annie could bring up to her.

A while later Annie came up with the sandwich. It was made with two heels of the loaf of bread and—as an extra treat—featured a long hair in it.

There were incredible slaps across the face that sent Suzanne flying across the room—one for coming home at 10 p.m. from a Tupperware party. "Fuck you, Suzanne!"s whenever anything went wrong, mostly over things she was not remotely involved in. "You stupid bitch!"s whenever she made the smallest error. Pushes, kicks, punches, black eyes, red handprints. Blood. Sometimes an astonishing amount of blood.

Annie grew up and had a family of her own, moving out of state due to her husband's job. This was how it should have been. Suzanne did not expect—nor want—Annie to be single all her life and coaxed to live with her parents.

A few things kept Suzanne married to Connor, and none due to any good behavior on his part. About ten years earlier, when she had decided she had suffered enough and was about to leave him, Connor refused to accept a divorce from her. She knew it was not love that soured him on it. But she could not fathom anything sensible. "Sense" and "Connor" didn't belong in the same thought in general, but Suzanne sensed a big puzzle here.

He finally admitted that he had a sizeable inheritance coming, as an only child of parents that were wealthier than Suzanne had ever known. And if they were to divorce, he would lose his half to her.

"That doesn't make sense," Suzanne said. "If you get that 'inheritance' after we're divorced, you do get the whole thing. It's things that are acquired during our—" She understood an incredible thing then. "Oh, my God. You got the inheritance already, didn't you? And you never told me!"

"Sort of." Connor looked down at his shoes that he was scuffing on the ceramic tile. "My parents put it in a trust for me—"

"—Because you never could hold onto money! And they didn't want you to have too much until you're older."

"Yeah." He cleared his throat. "Okay. But, well, I got a lot of it when my father died. Trust A. When my mother dies I'll get Trust B."

"How much are we talking, Connor? The cat's out of the bag now and it ain't comin' back."

"Really, not that much. Some thousands. I can't even remember what it was the first time. Really."

"Really?" She knew he used 'really' when he was lying.

She had no recourse but to take him at face value for the time being. Things were coming into focus to her, and half-consciously she spoke of them. "Your boss. He never gave you that Ferrari."

"No."

"And your coin collection. Most of it was paid for by this first inheritance." "All of it actually."

"And I have no idea how much is in the collection because you keep getting more and more all the time."

Connor raised his brows, surprised at her intelligence. "That's right." He had to smile. His wife was a bitch, but not a stupid one. "And this house. I could not have afforded it on my salary. And retiring early. I couldn't have afforded to do that, either. And don't forget I bought you a car."

"Yeah. The green Ford Escort that in its last years I could have gotten killed driving it." There was something wrong underneath it; according to a mechanic's opinion, she would not have survived a wreck in that Escort.

"And I replaced it with a vehicle of your choice!" It wasn't an expensive vehicle, but it was her choice.

"Because I didn't know you—oh, forget it. You make me sick."

He blocked her from leaving the room. "Ah, ah, ah, Suzanne. A divorce at this point will affect you the same as me," he said authoritatively.

And at that he had her. Their house was beautiful. More than beautiful. Grand. He did buy her expensive gifts, but that wasn't out of love. More likely it fed his spending addiction. She had to admit she was accustomed to it. And Annie. Every now and then Annie and her family needed a monetary injection, and Suzanne realized that Connor never failed to meet their needs. Their pets had excellent veterinary care whenever needed. They had pretty great vacations, even though she disliked her fellow traveler. But they could fly, drive, take a train or a cruise to seemingly anywhere any time. Connor loved to spend money, but he also never stopped her from spending it either.

Once she was let in on the secret, she stopped clipping coupons and shopped at better stores with none. She came up with more vacation ideas and they went. She got a Jaguar. She went places on her own. She wasn't happy at home, but she wasn't there a lot of the time anyway. Eventually she took a lover.

Then came a day when Connor came to her looking pale. "Mother is dying," he said—and was that a tear in his eye? Suzanne had never seen one of his tears and, therefore, had no other tear of his to compare it to.

They flew out to Montana in time to say goodbye to Ramona. It was the only time she saw Connor express emotions that came from the heart, during Ramona's death and funeral. He seemed to take his mother's death so hard that Suzanne actually wondered if he would ever get over it.

The rest of the inheritance was arranged for Connor's convenience of only having to stop by an attorney's office and sign some papers. The family house had been sold some time ago when his mother wanted a smaller place, and she had willed that to her caretaker Estelle of many years.

When they returned to their home, Suzanne felt sorry for Connor and whatever grief he concealed from her. She felt as if she should put her arms around him to comfort him, but when she came close to him he always walked away. "You wanna cut out the cute stuff, Suz?"

"What?"

"You know what. I know about Frank. Your lover. And you a married woman."

"Oh, come on. You haven't touched me in 15 years."

"You never made me want to," he said. "You know, you should have divorced me years ago. You would have gotten more."

She frowned. "What are you talking about?"

He came closer, as if to make sure he missed nothing on her face as he spoke. "The first trust fund is gone. We spent it all."

"All of it? I spent some, yes. But nothing like you. You just ordered and ordered guns for your gun collection, coins for your coin collection, paintings for your art collection. And for what? To stockpile. I always thought you should have been on that Hoarders show. You spent far more than I did."

"I admit that. My things are not only an enjoyment but a marvelous investment as well. And what have you? An old car and some slutty clothes."

"Well, there's still your mother's trust."

It had been eons since she had seen him laugh. "I never signed any papers in Montana. I will. Once our divorce is final. And we each keep our personal items."

Her head leaned back as if it were being stretched and she let out a soft moan. "You would do that to me, wouldn't you?"

"I want you out of this house before I come back. You don't have a thing to say about it. I got my legal papers on that a while ago. I'm going to the basement to work on some of my things. I'll be down there a couple hours. That will give you time to get you and your debris out of here. The rest will be split down the middle in court." She could swear he purposely threw all of his weight into each step that pounded the floors on his way to the basement door. He opened it like a madman and closed it behind him with a thunderous slam. She could hear the loud thumps of each step he took down the stairs.

Trip! she whispered. Trip! And die! Die, you pustule! D-

That was it, she suddenly knew. She had wanted him dead many times before. She had even come up with a half-way decent plan. But she had not been able to take herself seriously. To actually kill someone? A human being?

Yet she deserved this one act of justice. She was doing a community service as well. Of course, the police would have to be called. But what could they prove?

In the days when she played fantasy-murder, she never got caught. She had already paid the price in her real marriage.

She remembered her best plan, and it didn't require thinking now. He would eventually come up the stairs at his usual rapid gait. If he had things in his hands better yet. He would put his hand on the doorknob to fling it open. Only it wouldn't open. The force he would use to try opening the door would push him backwards down the thick wooden stairs. He would scream out of fright! It would be lovely for her to hear. How many times had she screamed from fear of his abusing hands? This would be even better than mere fright. He would know he was going to die in seconds as he shot back, and back, and back. Or maybe he would do a fast roll. No matter. The ending on the concrete floor would be the same. Some broken bones. And a head of red mush.

She could see the slit of a light underneath the basement door. When Annie

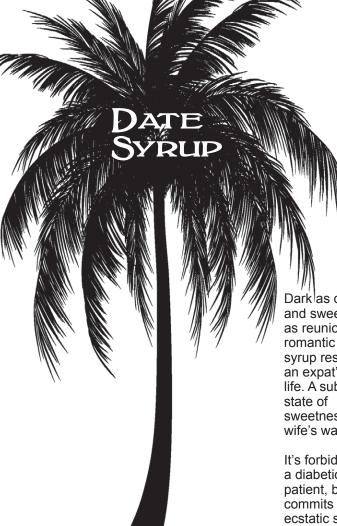
was little, they had installed a slide lock near the top of the door outside of it so their little girl couldn't open it and take a treacherous tumble. They didn't use it anymore. Connor had probably forgotten it was even there.

She got a dish towel from the kitchen. She could hear his Chuck Berry CD playing through the furnace vent. He liked it loud, which was in her favor. She put the dish towel over her hand but could still work her fingers. Slowly, noiselessly, she leaned into the wood. It didn't slide as easily as it once did. It hadn't been used in so long. With more pressure it started to move. Half-way there now. Her fingers were hurting and she had to take a break. Just a few seconds so she could rub the dents the sliding bolt had made in them, and then she was right back to her task. Slowly and quietly. It clicked slightly when it was secured.

She held on to the dish towel to remind herself that, above all, when it happened, she had to unlock the slide lock. She walked carefully to the bathroom to rehearse surprised faces in the mirror. Hey, some of them were pretty good. Maybe she should have been an actress. She would have to put on quite a performance for the cops. If it went really well, maybe it would give her a taste for acting. I wonder if I'll like it. Tears would come easily. She had had them so often.

She went quietly to the living room, sat down, and waited for the show to begin.



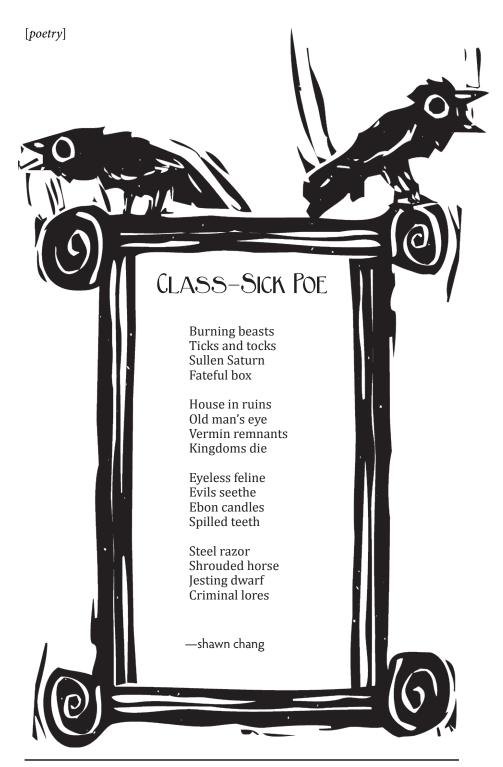


Dark as departure and sweet as reunion, it's a syrup resembling an expat's life. A sublime sweetness like a wife's wait.

It's forbidden to a diabetic patient, but who commits an ecstatic sin, violating. Rapture of now is in a negative impulse.

The expat squeezes dry desert for sweet syrup. One sip tempts into another.

—fabiyas mv



Emperor of Idioms

Envy, how like a carnivorous tide you erode contentment. unashamedly dragging the color green (an otherwise pleasant hue) into your toxic patois.

Oh, the injustice: green - a symbol of hope; a crocus shoot's promise to weary sufferers of winter's pall that monotonal landscapes are not a permanent condition thus defamed by unpredicted proximity.

Were I emperor of idioms, I'd decree that purple or azure share its spectral bed with envy's sordid soul. But rage has already staked a claim on purple. And, though azure with envy rolls off the tongue as smoothly as a Kenny G solo, evoking crystal skies makes azure an idiomatic misfit.

But my cardinal act would be to extract green from envy's evil grip freeing it to socialize with more charming companions, like horns and gills and garden-friendly thumbs enabling blue-blood poets to praise its viridian attributes in rose-colored odes flush with purple prose.

-rick blum



THE GHOSTS HAVE FORGOTTEN THEY ARE DEAD

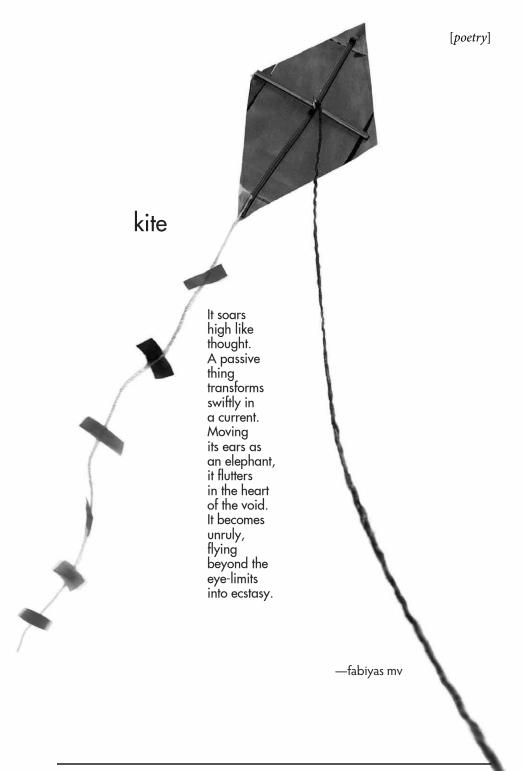


That's why they coerce me to let go of every nightmare I attempt to reiterate as it rests languidly on my tongue

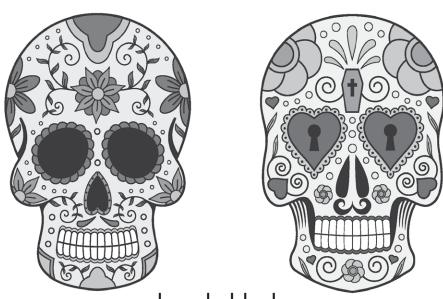
A temporary matrimony, my nonsense brain bullying me into agreement with a hypodermic needle to my ventricle

But I am more than six feet under, the crows already dancing on my soul It's just a matter of time before they remember I am one of them

—jenny santellano



One More Chance









Cuajimalpa, Mexico October 31, 1976 Dia de los Muertos

Miguel Rivera, two weeks shy of his thirteenth birthday, lay silent in his bed listening to his Abuela pray in the opposite bedroom. Aware of the coming three days he needn't ask for whom she prayed. The shrine in the living room said it all. In anticipation, the memorial stood adorned with photos, jewelry, and trinkets of her departed daughter, Consuela, his Madre. Abuela Maria had devoted countless hours preparing sugar skulls of crimsons and yellows, which now lined the floor in a grinning formation. Each one carefully constructed from his Madre's favorite sweets. Throughout their modest home, the aroma of burning spices and incense found passage under the door into his room.

Miguel shook his head at her silly prayers. In his opinion, the ritual was stupid and a waste of candy. It was just as his papa used to say before the cartel came for him. Ghosts and resurrections of the dead were tales of the imagination. Stories passed from generation to generation, each one more elaborate like the American comic books his friend Pedro received from his cousins in California. He had seen his mother's body lowered into the ground. And she wasn't coming back. No matter how much his grandmother prayed.

October 31, 2015 Westchester County, NY

"We commit her body to the ground; earth to earth; ashes to ashes, dust to dust. May the Lord bless and keep her in his arms," Father Miguel Rivera said.

He took a minute to reflect, his eyes examining the faces of those who had come to say farewell to the deceased. Despite having given his last twenty years to the church, it remained an arduous task to send the dead onward. He knew it was the ones who remained behind that suffered. Often the family took solace in his assurances of heaven and eternal peace in the kingdom of God. Other times, his words fell empty, as they demanded more answers than he could give.

In the first row of mourners an adolescent boy stood gripping the hand of a man. Father Rivera supposed the man was the boy's father. The boy's father held a single red rose in his other hand. With swollen eyes and tearstains on his cheek, it was obvious the woman who lay in the casket was the boy's mother. But even at his tender age, he struggled to be fuerte. Father Miguel likewise had struggled to be the man he believed he should be as he said goodbye to his mother those many years ago.

"For every beginning..." he continued.

All Tim Murphy could think about was dead flowers. Blankets of crimson roses covered his wife's casket while heart-shaped stands stood watch. Every plot

in the line of headstones had flowers planted in front. Everywhere he turned, he saw dead flowers. Each grown from a seedling like a devoted parent until reaching its peak of beauty when it was then cut from its roots and arranged in a box.

He found it disturbingly familiar.

"Dad?" his son asked, pulling on his arm.

"Yeah?" he said, his mind still fixated on the casket.

"You're bleeding."

One thorn remained behind, passed over in haste by an overworked and understaffed florist. A trickle of blood flowed across his palm and dripped onto his shoes. Clutching the stem so tight, he hadn't noticed.

"Yes. I am."

Week after week Father Miguel Rivera sat in the same confessional as the same man confessed to the same sin. Christ may have displayed patience but even He himself would have called it quits by now, he thought. For the last ten minutes, the man lamented over the guilt he had in his desire for his neighbor. Rivera checked his watch. At 6:45, it permitted him fifteen minutes before mass to sneak a smoke.

"God forgives you, my son. Now say three 'Hail Mary's,' one 'Our Father,' pick up flowers for your wife, and go home."

"Yes, Father. Thank you," the man answered with a sniffle as he exited the confessional.

In the rear alley of the church, away from the discerning eyes of his parishioners, Father Rivera dragged on the one vice God hadn't thought fit to help him in giving up. Exhaling smoke rings skyward—referred to as halos when caught indulging—each one hung in the chilly October air before evaporating. He had a perfect four in a row when he felt the muzzle of a gun press into his back.

In the twelve months since burying his wife, Tim had received more advice than he wanted to remember. And after a year, all he had to show for it was a bookshelf of self-help books and a stack of cancelled checks. Grief came in steps the books instructed—from denial to depression to anger. Tim wondered why psychiatrists and psychologists saw the need to compartmentalize everything into steps.

But be it five, six, or twelve steps, it didn't matter because Tim had passed go and gone straight to anger. He challenged any Dr. Phil wanna-be asshole to watch your wife carried away in a body bag. That's one big reality check right there. But the well-meaning doctors and grief counselors had missed the step about obsession where Tim currently resided.

Over the course of a year, he had burned a substantial hole in his savings account on tarot card readers, mediums, and any douchebag alleged to have an aptitude for connecting with the dead. But it was all smoke and mirrors. The same recycled bullshit handed out over and over. Frustrated, Tim questioned whether it was time to call it quits until an article in National Geographic asked,

"Is There Truth to the Dia de los Muertos?" According to the author of the story there was. The writer claimed to have spent time in an inconsequential town in Mexico where the locals say the village minister had not only experienced—as a boy—the return of someone from the dead, but also had provided others in bringing back their loved ones. Tim stared at the photograph of a young priest in front of a church; the caption underneath read, Father Miguel Rivera, Cuajimalpa, Mexico, 1999.

From the rear of the church, Tim followed the poor souls lining up. They were eager to purge themselves of the sins they bore. They herded in like overfed cattle to a slaughterhouse. He had not come to declare his sins, nor did he feel the desire to do so. What difference would it make? As quickly as you confessed, you would stroll out and do the same shit again. If there's a God, he'll be keeping score and we can settle up later, Tim thought. He had matters more important on his mind. So when he caught sight of the priest sneaking away for a cigarette, he followed.

"Father Miguel Rivera?"

Father Rivera's first thought when he turned to see the gun now positioned at his chest was "drug addict." But after a few moments, the gun was quickly put away, and he realized this man was no tweeker desperate for money.

"Yes?" Father Rivera said.

"You may not remember me, Father, but you performed the services at my wife's funeral last year."

Father Rivera wished he could lie and say yes he remembered him but couldn't in good faith. Over the last twelve months, he had performed more funerals than he cared to recall.

"I'm sorry..."

"It's okay, Padre, I understand. I didn't expect you to, anyway. Father Rivera, I want to know about Dia de los Muertos."

"Mr . . ?"

"Call me Tim."

Father Rivera sighed and said, "Tim, Dia de los Muertos is nothing more than a tradition of mourning the dead. One that's centuries old. But there's nothing more to it. The dead do not rise that day or any other day of the year. I'm sorry. I understand you're grieving but consider when I tell you your wife waits for you in heaven even as we speak."

"No offense, Father, but that's bullshit. I've done my research and I know you're from Cuajimalpa, Mexico. And the funny part is it's a notorious hot spot for spiritual activity—especially during the three days of Dia de los Muertos. I need you to teach me how to bring my wife back, be it one night or one minute. I know you've seen it done."

"Tim, some questions aren't meant to be answered," Father Rivera replied.

"I'll be the judge of that, Father."

Father Rivera shook his head and lit another cigarette, offering the open pack. "No thanks."

"Okay, Tim, I'll tell you what I know. The rest is up to you."

Miguel Rivera, who would later grow up to become Father Rivera, watched with envy as his neighbors danced through the streets in brilliant costumes and oversized papier-mâché skulls. He longed to celebrate with them but his Abuela had forbidden him.

"Only fools mock the dead!" she yelled when he asked if he could take part in the parade.

"Miguel, tonight is a holy night when the gate between life and death is unlocked to those who understand how to open it. But if you mock the dead or offend them, you could summon a demonio or wake to discover yourself in the land of the departed," she said later after her anger had passed. Demon or not, Miguel wanted to dance in the streets in an oversized skull.

He nibbled on his dinner alone while his grandmother handed over her share to the altar with the favorite candy and orange juice his mother loved while she still lived. Later as the sun retired for the night and the full moon rose to secure its place, the shouts in the streets grew louder. Chants of "a drink to the dead" floated through the open window. In his dreams, Miguel danced the streets in a blur of colors.

Later that night when he awakened with an urgency to empty his bladder the noise outside had grown silent but despite the late hour, his grandmother was still awake. She was no longer praying but speaking in hushed tones to someone.

Tiptoeing his course across the floor—careful to sidestep the boards that squeaked—he squinted through the crack of the open door. In the living room his grandmother knelt, her hands a flurry of movement, her voice both elated and uncertain as if her eyes betrayed her. But when the visitor replied, he no longer wished to see.

His grandmother looked over as he caught his breath and for one instant they made eye contact. With a swift retreat, he raced to his bed and prayed he'd gone unnoticed. Feigning sleep he shut his eyes tight but worried his pounding heart would give away his secret. The voice that came from the other room was not his Madre. His Abuela must have summoned a demonio and now it concealed itself as his mother.

When the whispers settled, he knew she stood over him. Although the door never opened, he sensed her presence. The air felt still despite the crisp October breeze drifting through the window.

"Creer en lo que usted no puede ver, Miguel," his mother breathed in his ear, brushing his hair away before planting a kiss on his cheek with lips that were neither warm nor cold.

"What does that mean?" Tim asked.

"Believe in what you cannot see."

Tim Murphy sat at his kitchen table with a bottle of wine thinking of the priest's words. "It's true, Tim. The layer between life and death thins one night

a year permitting the dead to cross over. But there are others who wait for the opportunity to slip through."

"What? Demons?" he asked with a chuckle.

"If one can accept the resurrection of his dead wife, then one must believe there is more than just heaven or hell, Tim. There are factors here you don't understand. You're blinded by your grief."

Bullshit. He understood perfectly.

"Go big or go home, Padre," he declared as he walked away.

As he poured himself another glass, he set to work on a mental inventory of needed supplies. After the fifth glass, he wondered how to build an altar.

October 31, 2016 Dia de los Muertos

Tim Murphy stood back, admiring his work. From top to bottom were photographs of his wife, Linda. Their wedding day, their honeymoon when they swam with the dolphins, holding their son taken minutes after being born, her face pale and sweaty but elated. Their entire life together now memories.

Along the kneeling pad were her favorite chocolates, a bottle of Pepsi, her favorite perfume, and four yellow and red sugar skulls. He had even discovered strands of his wife's hair in her brush. From the stereo, her favorite Van Halen songs played on an endless loop.

"Dad, what is this?" his son asked, stepping into the room.

"It's an altar. Today's a special day. Your mother's coming to visit with us. Isn't that great?" he asked with a grin so broad that it appeared his face might split in two.

Timothy Sean Murphy Junior, a week shy of his twelfth birthday, lay quiet in his bed as Van Halen reverberated through his walls. In his closet, a Teenage Ninja Mutant Turtle costume hung unused. The orange shopping bag with the grinning pumpkin bought to fill with enough candy to make a dentist happy for weeks remained folded and flat on his dresser. Outside in the streets kids yelled trick or treat. And from the opposite bedroom, his father slipped into madness.

As "Hot for Teacher" played, his father's voice rose over the music, giddy and childish, and he guessed that trick-or-treaters came now and again for sweets. Maybe his father was showing off his "altar," as he referred to it.

While Tim Murphy was discovering he had done something wrong, Miguel Rivera knelt before an altar dedicated to his Madre and awaited her return.



I MISS HER

I felt her hand gently caress my face. She has been gone for so long And there she is leaning over me. A specter there in the dark There were no words Just her presence. I think of her voice, A kiss on my cheek, Calling me from play, Braiding my hair. Chastising me for wrong doings Telling me about boys And then about men. When I left home she Was sad and angry at the same time. I didn't want to be like her I didn't understand who she was I miss her.

-aurora lewis

I HAUNT MYSFLF

I feel the ghosts inside me reeling for a taste of beauty on their severed tongues I'm forced to cherish this pound of flesh but it is no longer a precious gift

I haunt myself with shattered moons cut deep into reluctant wrists I split the tears amongst my peers: six glasses for the evening doldrums

Drop by drop, the tide comes in and drowns us one by one Alone we sink. We haunt ourselves There is nobody else to blame

There is no more room in our shallow graves except for the luminous moon-that ravenous light that taunts us in the night when the ghosts have all gone home

-stephanie smith



by bruce memblatt

The phone rang. His sometime-girlfriend Sophie all the way in Greenwich Village. Miles away from his Connecticut palace. Sophie cried about a broken pipe--a flood. Poor girl all alone drowning in her new apartment. The phone. His mother. The stuff in his head. He had to get out of bed. He had to get to Sophie.

Just him here now. Under the fading hazy shadow of a girl without a name—the one who just left with his last cigarette . . .

Sean pulled the sheet off his legs. He stood up, running his hands through his hair.

Then he stumbled to the door. He flipped the lights on. The mess on the floor. The mess in his head.

The boy. The memory of the boy he sold his old car to eluded him.

His eyes returned to the floor. Underwear and jeans. The bottle of Seagrams he grabbed from the bar. Cigarette butts from an overturned silver ashtray on the floor near the bed. Nevertheless, he felt good. He still felt so good and ready in spite of that small empty space that was always there, that empty feeling that never went away.

It didn't matter.

Stepping over to the full-length mirror on the wall across from the bed, he

stretched. He flexed. He ran his hands through his hair again, and then he ran his hand down his chest, and he whispered, "You sexy thing," to his reflection.

He shook his naked hips. He could stand in front of that mirror all day, all night-forever.

He would never look this good again. This was his prime. He was the cat on the prowl, the moon on the rise, the tiger in ecstasy.

The beat of his heart—he could almost hear it on fire.

He wrapped his arms around his back, hugging himself. In the corner of his eye, he caught the phone on the night table and he remembered Sophie. He had to get to Sophie.

When did she move to Greenwich Village? She didn't tell him. He didn't ask. How long had it been? It didn't matter. She needed him. He was the one she called when she needed someone. He was the one she ran to still, after all that trouble.

The phone rang. "Fuck," he said, nearly tripping over his underwear. He grabbed the receiver, pulling it to his ear; he heard a male voice repeating, "Elizabeth, Elizabeth." Oh, it was him. The man his mother said was going to call before she went out on the town again,

"Hello, hello, sorry, Sir, my Mom's out. She wanted me to take a message from you, I guess."

A gruff voice responded, "Okay, just tell your mommy the property is sold." Then there was a click.

Tell your Mommy? Did he sound like a six year old? Property sold? What property? Mama and her complications. Mama and her deals. What he didn't know couldn't hurt him. The whispers were just soft voices. Sean in Wonderland. Anyway, in two months he'd be out of Wonderland and upstate in Oswego in University learning how to run Daddy's bank.

And Mom would be all alone in this big house, just her and the bar, and the maids, and all that money.

Maybe she'd get a cat or a boyfriend. Could she get one of those? He didn't want to think about it. Some young hung gigolo bilking all the money, stealing all the gold. Nah, Mama was too sharp for that jazz. Mother had been around the block; she knew the score. Ever since he was a little flea, it was mother who took care of everything, everything except that one angry thing-Dad. Mother couldn't save him from Dad's temper. No one could.

The phone was still in his hands. He couldn't believe he was still standing there naked with the phone in his hands while Sophie needed him. He smelled like frustration, sexual frustration from his legs to his chest. He searched the floor for his robe. Where was it? It didn't matter. No one was home. Well...Maybe a maid in the hallway, but probably not at this time of night.

It was just a small sprint to the shower in the bathroom.

The boy . . . How did it happen? What boy?

Hold on. First, Sophie. Maybe he did love her, if there was anyone in the world that he could love, even if it was for just a little while, it would be her--wouldn't it? He rummaged through his top drawer for fresh underwear.

She loved him—that was for sure. He had to watch that. She was already watching that, but still he was the one with the faulty heart and roving eyes. Black socks, another roll of black socks. Where were the white socks? Black socks didn't go with white sneakers. He'd grab the bag of sandals. Bare feet, sandals, jeans, briefs, a black shirt. Where were his black T-shirts?

He pulled the draw below open. Green T-shirts, red shirts where were the . . .

Sophie would meet someone nice, solid, and true. She'd have kids and maybe he'd run into her once in a while at the mall, or some such ordinary place, doing ordinary things. He'd have a girl with him, some knock-out; he'd always have one around. And Sophie would smile at him, but her eyes would squint, as if they were faraway, wondering what might have been.

Towels. He prayed there were towels in the bathroom. He looked at the pile near his feet. Levis, briefs, black T-shirt. No socks—he'd have to wear . . .

He stumbled over to the closet. Sandals (scandals).

When he was at the beach last summer there was a girl just like Sophie though a hair shorter and a hair duller; still, for an instant he thought it was her. Funny how Sophie was always somewhere in his mind; funny how he was always running out of white socks. He picked up a pair of sandals and threw them over to the pile of things on the floor.

They made a small thud like a whisper.

Some days were better than others. What time was it? He had to get into that shower. He grabbed the pile, and holding it over his crotch, he barreled through his bedroom door and made a b-line down the hall. It was only three doors down, past his mother's room and a lot of strange memories to the bathroom.

He threw the stuff onto the stone bathroom tiles. He flung the toilet seat up, spread his legs, and then he pissed a flood. He had to go so bad, and there was nothing like relief. Relief was everything. Maybe that was his problem--instant gratification, the constant orgasm. He could have just about anything he wanted now. But what would happen when the money ran out?

He watched the yellow water flush down the bowl.

Just like my future.

There was a long florescent light on top of the mirror above the sink. He turned it on and watched the light hit his chest.

Then he ran his fingers across his skin. All he ever wanted was to feel good. The car—was there enough gas to get to Greenwich Village? His shiny black Mazda RX-7, not the strange car, his old white Chevy. He couldn't think about his old white Chevy anymore. What happened to it had to be some fluke, some strange collision of space, time, and fate—some horrible coincidence.

He sold it for a lousy fifty bucks—his future for fifty bucks? He couldn't go near the thought of it. Talk about backfires. The poor boy he sold it to said it was cursed, yet the boy bought the damn car anyway. Then the next day, there was a report on the radio—the boy was dead, the car totaled.

He glanced at his hands because they were shaking over the sink. That poor boy who bought his old white Chevy, his haunted cursed old white Chevy. The soap—where was the damned bar of soap? He turned the faucet on and ran his hands under the water. Then he ran his hands through his hair.

He caught his refection in the mirror. Where was he? Who was the scared little boy staring back at him in the mirror?

The soap! He had left it in the shower before, of course; it had to be in the shower.

He pulled the gold shower door open. There it was on the rack, the shampoo by the windowsill.

Everything had to be washed away—the piss, the frustration, the memories. The time—what time was it? He had to get away from the memory of the boy. He had to get to Sophie before she drowned in the . . . water! He turned on the water, stood under the showerhead, and scrubbed his chest with the found soap.

The water felt so good rolling over him—so clean and so wet.

He remembered that lake last year with what's-her-name. Now that was a good memory. They drove up upstate. They stopped for BBQ chicken and had a picnic by the lake. What color was her hair? What color were her eyes? His eyes were on her breasts that were peeking through her bikini while she unpacked the coleslaw—the fucking coleslaw. There's always some small detail remembered with perfection.

He was getting excited in the shower thinking of her--another nameless memory, but a good memory. He was only nineteen. Why all this now—a cursed car, bad love, and a crazy mother? He ran the soap over his chest. The water pouring down his chest felt good. His hair, all fresh and wet, also felt good.

The shampoo—he reached for it.

His hand felt another—a hand that wasn't his, a hand that was cold, not from the water, but from within the hand itself, touching him.

He pulled back and screamed.

He felt a cold leg next to his. It couldn't be! He reached for the shower door. A cold chest pushed against him. The door! He couldn't get the damn shower door open. All he could do was scream.

And then standing on his feet—cold feet, cold legs—pushing him, holding his feet down. Who was this? What was this? Where was he?

Somehow he had to break away. He couldn't see. The water was blasting now-hot steaming water. He would burn to death under the cold thing--the cold arms, legs, thighs—cold from within forever.

What could he do? Where was the door?

He cried, "Help me, please! Someone help me, please!"

No one was home. Maybe there was a maid at the other end of the palace polishing something crystal.

No one would hear him die.

Cold arms wrapped around his chest now, pulling him back into the shower.

The lights went out. It was dark now. It was just him all alone in the dark now—him and the . . . cold hands and legs grabbing him again.

He screamed, "Let me go! Let me go!" to the powerful guilt in his head.

The water stopped running. He heard the last of it dripping down the drain. The cold hands were gone. It was over. He could run away! The door opened.

The bad dream was over. Thank you God for freeing me from this tragedy. He barreled out of the shower.

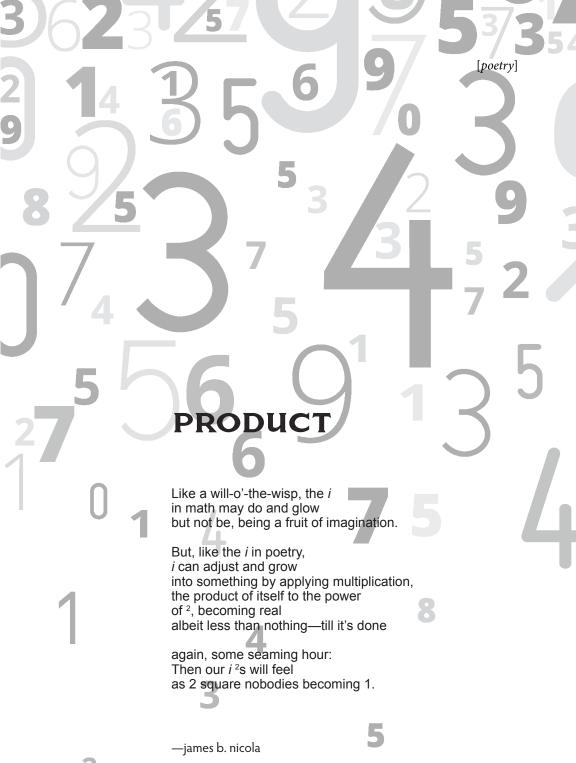
The bathroom was still dark.

There was a mist—a mist from the hot water. The steam, of course that's what it was. But what about the light? He saw a dim light with a strange glow. Where was it coming from?

No! It wasn't over.

Then he saw the reflection in the mirror. The boy, Brian—the dead boy, the poor boy who died in his old white cursed Chevy.





THE LITERARY HATCHET

the london eye baby



The idea formed in a flash of inspiration.

Alan leaned across his pregnant wife and peered out of the taxi window at The London Eye: a hulking, monstrosity of reinforced steel in the shape of a giant Ferris wheel, but instead of rickety swinging seats, each section was punctuated with a metal-and-glass pod large enough to fit a family or two, and the inside of the contraption was supported by tensioned steel cables, giving it the look of a spoked bicycle wheel. The Eye stared over London—a centrepiece of machinery at its finest and most wasteful. Alan sometimes wondered if the edges of the wheel were covered in powerful micro cameras, millions of tiny recording devices watching over London, documenting every action.

He wouldn't put it past the government, but then again, they were always watching; everyone was watching—YouTube, Facebook, Twitter. It wasn't covert anymore. Nowadays, with technology at its scary heights, half the world had turned into ravenous voyeurs. And anyone could be famous. All it took was the right story at the right time.

He sat back in his seat and looked at his wife. "I just had the best idea," he said.

"You're planning to shave?"

"No. I told you, I like having a beard. It's sophisticated."

"It makes you look angry."

"I am angry," he said. "Now listen-"

"Ooh, he just kicked me," she said. "He keeps doing that. I think he's going to be a footballer or a kick-boxer. Here, feel—" and she held his palm to her belly button.

"I can't feel anything."

"Maybe you scared him off."

He kept his hand there a little longer, the taxi cruising at a gentle pace per his request. Eventually his future son kicked out; he felt the blow, and also saw Spirit's stomach distort at the point of impact. He said, "He's got a strong kick, that's for sure."

"He must get it from my side of the family. Your side are all golfers."

"And your side are all Mexicans, so does that mean he'll be lazy too?"

She slapped his wrist. "Be nice. Our little Mexican-white boy will be a genius." "Like his daddy."

"Like his mother," she said. Then, rubbing her hands over her large tanned stomach, she sighed, but it was a contented sigh, one filled with happiness and warmth. "I can't wait for him to be born. Six more weeks of hell and he'll be here for us to hold."

"Which brings me back to my idea," he said. "How'd you like to give birth on The London Eye?"

When they arrived home, the first person Alan called was Dr. Liam Poe—a smart man and good friend from his college days. They didn't see each other so much anymore, not now they were both grown up with responsibilities, but he made sure to keep in touch; invite him around for dinner sometimes, go out for drinks every couple months or so.

Liam picked up almost instantly. "Hello?"

"It's me."

"I know, it says on my screen. How you doing?"

"I'm good. You picked up fast."

"I was in the middle of sending an angry email to my boss. I think calling him a wanker might get me fired."

Alan chuckled. "Maybe just call him incompetent instead?"

"I might just tell him to go fuck his mother in the mouth, what do I care? I'm so sick of this job." He paused. "But anyway, enough about all that, what's been going on with you? Did you call for a reason, or just so you could hear my mellifluous voice?"

"Mellifluous? That's a new one, I like that. Mellifluous."

"It means sweet-sounding or smoothly-flowing."

"I'll mark that one down in my vocabulary builder," Alan said, chuckling again. "Hey look, man, the reason I called is—you know how to deliver a baby, right?"

"It's not my specialty. I'm a neurosurgeon, not a gynecologist."

"Yeah, I know, but—come on. Brain surgery, delivering a baby . . . one's clearly harder to do than the other. I'm sure a monkey could be trained to deliver a baby under the right circumstances. But no one would ever trust a chimp with their brain. Right?"

"Yes, but—"

"I mean, you got trained to do both, right?"

"Yes, but—"

"So technically, you're able to do it." He said it like a statement, not a question.

"Well, yes, technically I'm able to deliver a baby. However—"

"That's all I needed to know," he said. "I'll get back to you soon, okay?" And then he hung up.

Alan cooked a large English using a pan for the beans and a wok for everything else.

After his timer buzzed, he split the food onto two plates and pushed around the food with his fingers to form a smiley face. The little details, often overlooked by most people, could make all the difference sometimes, and not just with food but in general. He based his whole career, his entire success in the field of advertising, around tweaking the minutiae. He picked up the plate and brought it through to Spirit in the bedroom.

"Your buffet has arrived, Madam Princess."

She took the plate with a smile. Tested the bottom to see if it was hot, then shuffled up the bed into a slanted position and placed a pillow on her bulging

belly. She rested the plate on top of the pillow. "Thank you, Prince Alan. It is much appreciated."

"Do you like the smiley face?"

"I like that I'm about to eat it, that's what I like."

"It adds a little something though, right?"

"If you think so, honey," and she speared a piece of sausage, pushed it into her mouth. She chewed for a moment, the room silent now. Alan retrieved his own food from the kitchen and sat at her side. Then she said, "I really don't want to do this thing."

"What thing?"

"You know what thing. Don't act dumb. The London Eye thing."

"Are you insane? Do you know how much exposure we'll get for this?"

"Yeah, I get that-"

"We could milk this for a year, five years, maybe longer, who knows?" He put his plate to the side on the bed. "We could be the next Posh and Becks. We'd make at least a hundred grand from magazines and papers just from the interviews and pictures alone. We'd be invited to all the best shows. We'd be famous and rich. Do you not get that?"

"I know, but—" She paused and looked down at her food. "It's degrading, though. To me and to our son. We're going to use him for our gain. Don't you think that's a little perverse? Or—I don't know, wrong? I just don't feel comfortable with it."

"You'll feel a lot more comfortable when you start seeing the cash roll in."

"I don't care about being rich," she said. "And I don't care about being famous. As long as our boy is healthy—"

"Oh, don't give me that bollocks, Spirit. Your family come from a tiny little farm in the middle of Mexico. You've barely known what it's like to have money, apart from being with me. This would change your life forever. It would change our life. You're being selfish and moralistic about something as meaningless as having a fucking baby."

"Yeah, but it's me who has to spread her legs whilst dangling one-hundred-foot in the sky—"

"So what? I don't think you realise how big this could be: the whole pod-in-a-pod irony is perfect—people will be cheering us on, Spirit. They'll love it, and so will we."

"But I really don't want to do it. Please, can we just think of something else?" "No," he said. "If you really love me like you say, then you'll do it . . ."

In the evening Alan staked out The London Eye and waited for one of the operatives to finish his shift. To pass the time, he sat on a nearby bench and read a novel. The night sky was dark, but lights along the riverbank kept his spot illuminated. Behind him, the river Thames looked murky and polluted; moonlight shimmered across it, adding a milky glow to its dark surface. He hated the Thames—just a long stretch of shit-flavoured water.

Around half past eight, he noticed one of the workers saying goodbye to some of the others: handshakes, fist bumps, and a long hug for the ladies. Then he walked away, throwing out a wave to the group. Alan closed his book—a spy novel—and followed.

He tracked him through the street, calmly weaving between people and keeping on his tail. The man strolled along unaware, headphones in ears; a burly, dark-skinned, security type—could probably crush Alan's throat with one hand—his back wide and no doubt reinforced with toned muscles and iron bones. His arms seemed like missiles.

Eventually, Alan snuck up closer and said, "Excuse me?"

The man stopped. "Yes?"

"You work on The London Eye, right?"

"How'd you know that?"

He gestured to the man's jacket. "It says so on your top."

"Oh right. I forgot I was wearing this."

"I'm Alan," he said, holding out his hand.

The man shook it, suspicion in his eyes. "Nathan. How can I help?"

"Do you want to make some money?"

"I'm okay, thanks," and he started to walk off.

"Hey wait, hey, stop a second." Nathan stopped, looking at him with irritation now. Alan held up his hands. "Just give me a second to explain. I'm not trying to fuck you down an alley or anything. How would you like to make a thousand pounds?"

"Do I look stupid to you? You approach me in the street, at night, asking if I want to make a thousand pounds? And you think I'm just gonna be like, 'Oh sure, man, here's my bank details, here's my home address and keys too'? What do you take me for?"

"It's nothing like that. I don't need your details. I'll pay you in cash."

"If you want me to kill your wife, you've got the wrong guy."

"What? No. It's nothing like that. Look . . . " A pause. This wasn't going to plan. "On The London Eye, you must have some kind of security measures, right? In case of emergency, there must be some way to lock down the wheel and stop it from moving."

"Of course," he said.

"And you know how to work that?"

"I know how to stop the wheel, if that's what you're asking me."

"Okay," Alan said. "So I'll ask again: you wanna make some money or not?"

Five weeks later, Alan had everything in place. He sat at the table in his kitchen, going over the final plans and wondering if he'd left anything out. He had one shot at this, no more. Nathan, the burly London Eye worker, was ready and waiting—Alan had paid him half up front with the promise of more to come—and his trusted brain surgeon friend, Liam Poe, was in the bedroom with Spirit right now, inducing early labour with drugs.

He drew a glass of water, downed it in one long swallow, and placed the glass on the table. Then he twisted it around on the surface, spreading the water circle around.

Moments later, Liam stepped from the bedroom. "I've induced her," he said.

"Great. So when can we leave?"

"This isn't as easy as you think," he said, taking a seat at the table. Sweat dotted his brow. "There's no science behind something like this: she could go into labour in five minutes or five days. Inducing her speeds up the process somewhat, but it doesn't work to a schedule. Do you understand that? This is dangerous shit. Are you hearing me?"

"Just do what I tell you to."

"But Alan-"

"Listen," he said, his voice turning to a low growl, "if you don't want me to tell your wife about that hooker you banged in Earls Court, you'll do exactly as I tell you."

"But if you just hear me out—"

"I don't care. Everything will work out fine, so long as you follow my lead."

"And what about after the birth? You don't think it'll look staged, a doctor being there? They'll never believe you. This will all be for nothing. Is that what you want?"

"I want you to shut up, that's what I want. I know what I'm doing."

"But-"

"I said no. Now go in there and wake my baby up. We're leaving soon."

When the time drew closer, Alan called for a minicab to take them to The London Eye. So far, so good—everything was going to plan, just as long as the baby didn't try to squeeze out of Spirit on the way there. Liam protested mildly during the ride, something about dangers and suffocation and the baby being stillborn, blah blah, Alan not taking any of it in. The doctor was merely trying to scare him, to manipulate his way out of the situation. He wouldn't let that happen. This was his big moment. Spirit also had some worries, but he'd already put her straight this morning by promising to send fifty-percent of the publicity earnings to her family in Mexico. It was a lie, but she fell for it.

They arrived by The London Eye fifteen minutes later, Spirit now screaming like a dying banshee. "You better shut her up," he snapped at Liam. "Give her some drugs for the pain or something. This has to look like she suddenly went into labour on the wheel."

The cab driver said, "You want me to take you to the hospital?"

"No." Alan handed him a twenty, twice the fair. "Just keep quiet, okay?" "Thank you, sir."

Before they got out, Liam injected Spirit in the spine with a clear liquid.

Within seconds she calmed down and stopped all her shrieking, although she remained agitated, and it was clear the contractions still bothered her. They helped her out of the taxi and moved her along gradually, like jockeying a drunk from a club, a hand under each arm. They'd need Nathan to sneak them onto the

pod. If they tried to wait in line or stand around for too long, somebody would notice the distress on Spirit's face.

Alan caught Nathan by one of the pods and explained the issue. The security guard thought about it and said to give him five minutes. He'd usher them directly on to a pod, one with no one in it. He'd work out the reason for this later on, if the press asked.

"Perfect," Alan said. "I'll bring her over in five, make sure you're ready."

Once inside their private pod, with Nathan following through on his end of the deal so far, they took a seat on the wide bench bolted to the floor. Spirit went into her own zone, breathing in and out, concentrating on her rhythm and nothing else. Alan slipped his hand into hers and she held it tightly, not looking at him, not breaking from her exercises.

"This baby cannot come yet," he said to Liam. "We have to wait until we hit the top, then Nathan's gonna pull the emergency brake and we'll be above London. Okay?"

"There's a brake?"

"So to speak."

"I don't get-"

"He's going to stop the wheel. Okay? That way, Spirit gives birth up top, with no one watching, and then Nathan says something about the wheel malfunctioning and it adds to the story. Like, wow, isn't it such a coincidence the wheel stopped right at the top, at exactly the moment she was giving birth to her child. That's so freakin' amazing."

"This is . . . it's a ridiculous idea."

"No, it's not." This was his career: advertising. He'd been manipulating perceptions for years, tweaking and reworking ideas. "I know how to create headlines."

"This isn't the way—"

"Just shut up and do your job."

Spirit lurched forward and groaned. "Can both of you shut up? Please . . ."

Alan said nothing. He knew what battles to fight, and which ones to let slide. She could have her moment of peace. Pretty soon she wouldn't have any peace at all: just a life of money, fame, and endless photo shoots. And what more could she possibly want?

The pod continued its journey to the top, and they waited in near silence.

At the pinnacle of its cycle, the Millennium Wheel ground to a stop right on schedule.

The expansive, concrete beauty of London lay before them: a sweeping polluted vista of love, crime, and false hope—a land of shattered dreams and colourful nightmares. The sun glittered through the pod, warming the metal bench in the centre. Spirit lay against it, her breathing choppy, angry, her face red with pressure. She squirmed to get into a comfortable position. Alan pulled her knickers down to her ankles.

"Okay," Liam said. "I'm gonna need you to push. Just breathe in and push out." Alan took her hand, sat by her side. "Come on, baby, you can do this ..."

Suddenly, she lurched forward and let out a feral growl, squeezing and pushing, her nails gripping Alan's palm so hard it felt as if she'd broken every bone in his hand.

A vein popped up on her forehead. She squealed through gritted teeth.

But . . . nothing. The baby remained in its warm comforting habitat.

Spirit fell back on the bench, took a deep breath, and released her death-grip from Alan's hand. Then, with another gust of energy, she shot forward, screeching in pain, crushing Alan's bones again, her scream seeming to come from the depths of hell, a raging angry fire that threatened to burn them all. But still, nothing: no baby, no crown.

She sat back.

Liam wiped sweat from her forehead. "It's okay," he said. "You're doing well."

As she continued to push and scream—her painful shrieks echoing in the metal-and-glass pod—Alan zoned out, thinking of the headlines: Baby In A Pod, or maybe Giving Birth On Top Of The World, something dramatic like that. So far everything was going to plan. The only part that wasn't on schedule was Spirit's womb and its inability to spit out his money ticket. It wouldn't be long until someone found out why the wheel had stopped, pushing Nathan aside if need be; and then they'd restart it, getting the wheel rolling again. She had to push for God's sake, put some effort into it, the lazy Mexican.

"Come on," he said. "Push, baby, spit our son out, just push."

"I'm trying!" she screamed, leaning forward again and gritting her teeth as she gave it another attempt. A second worm-like vein popped on her head. She looked as if she were trying with every ounce of strength to lift up a truck. "Argghhhh!" she velled.

Then Alan heard it: the clunk as the engine restarted. Slowly, the wheel began to make its descent back to the ground. She'd no longer be giving birth at the precipice. But they could still do it; they could still complete this story if she pushed the boy out now.

"We have about ten minutes," he said. "So start bloody pushing, Spirit, you useless mare, or this whole thing was pointless. Come on, push, push, bloody push."

"Arrrgghhhh, fuck OFF!" she shouted, the words ripping through her throat, the strain in her muscles showing all over: thick cords sprung up on her neck and back and arms, but the baby wouldn't come out. She took in a few deep breaths, relaxed a second.

Alan kept an eye on the time, watching as the moments ticked by, as his chance of fame and money dwindled. He wondered if it would be enough just to have her almost give birth—but no, that wasn't a story. That was worth about two hundred lines, maybe not even that. No front page picture, no interviews, nothing. She needed to complete this.

Gradually, throughout all the screaming and pushing, the pod came closer to

the ground. By Alan's guess, they had maybe a minute or two before they'd reach the bottom; or before the paramedics—who he could now see waiting for them below—dragged her off and brought her to a hospital. "Come on," he said. "Hurry the hell up."

Liam said, "I'm not sure if this baby is gonna come out. We need—"

"It has to come out. Just push harder, Spirit, come on, you stubborn mule."

Once more she flew forward, pushing with all her energy, her muscles taut with effort. Then, thankfully, Alan could see the baby crowning, the head coming out: a patch of thick dark hair. They were almost there. His son was seconds away. He encouraged Spirit to push some more, to get him out, turning to see the pod broaching the exit port.

Finally, as the pod stopped with a hard lurch and the doors were opened, Liam pulled Alan's son from Spirit, holding him up tentatively for her to see, the baby still attached by the umbilical cord. It broke into a small cry, and she laughed with joy and relief, tears leaking down her cheeks. In the background, flashes popped, smartphones clicked, and everybody joined in the momentous occasion. A roar of approval came from the crowd, followed by applause. But Alan merely crumbled to the floor of the pod, staring at the child, his beautiful baby boy. It couldn't be. He couldn't believe it. Liam snipped the umbilical cord and held the newborn up to the crowd, showing him off. Alan felt his insides go cold. His baby was dark brown, and Liam had exposed it to the world.

"That isn't mine," Alan said weakly. "Put that black bastard back inside and pull out my kid. It's not mine, I don't want it, stuff it back in her bloody womb and then—"

"Congratulations," Liam said drily. "You've finally got your headlines . . ."



| Wish it Were

I wish it were enough to feel. It was, when there was you. Even feeling bad was good: It was a bad I knew.

And now your absent days reveal My feathers are absurd As they lift me through the neighborhood Like half an airborne bird.

—james b. nicola

IT'S ALL IN THE FACE

You really should have said hi Especially after you caught my eye

I thought you would feel Love in the glances we'd steal

Behind you I wouldn't have to creep And with my cloth put you to sleep

I carried you to my car In the trunk that's where you are

I drove out to my hunting lodge All the roadblocks I had to dodge

Here in my special place I am going to cut off your face

I start behind your left ear Pausing only to open beer

I slid the knife in Not noticing my grin

I follow your jaw line Not hurting features fine

I just now become aware Of your terrified stare

I find the nose is always tricky All that cartilage makes it sticky I need to knock you out Before you start to shout

I twist your head Oops now your dead.

I curl your silky lashes The police light flashes

I sneak out the back As the cops ready the attack.

I am sad I left my work undone Ohh we could've had such fun





by fabiyas mv

Thachu fears the dark lonely nights. She lives in a three-storied mansion with countless empty rooms. Only the ground floor gets human warmth. A flock of temple doves live on the second floor, whereas an owl is the sole occupant of the top story. Jouhar comes to stay with his grandmother in the evenings. But the presence of a grandson aged eleven doesn't get rid of her fear at night. She thinks of appointing a night watchman.

Thachu's husband had passed away following a car accident. His body was not brought back to India, his homeland. It was buried in the Dubai desert. Though he could heap up immense wealth, he had forgotten to live. He spent most of his life in Dubai. Even when her husband was alive, Thachu had to live as a widow. Similar widows were plenty on the bank of Kanoli canal.

Thachu cannot turn down Maji's pleadings. He has come in search of a parttime job. Soon he becomes the night-watchman in her mansion. He finds the house very comfortable. It is serene, secure, and solitary. Here he comes across Jouhar for the first time. They are attracted to each other like magnet and iron. A friendship thrives between Maji and Jouhar in Thachu's old house. The boy always gives his friend some sweets or parched peanuts. Maji is not accustomed to say "thanks," but he eats it voraciously.

Jouhar won't come today. Since his father has gone to Cochin for a business purpose, his mother is alone at home. Maji is disgusted. He feels like he is sitting, lonely, on the barren surface of the moon. And he goes to sleep early, hugging his cotton pillow.

Maji is turning and twisting on his mat, while the wizened woman Thachu is fast asleep in her bedroom. Quite unexpectedly, Maji hears footsteps. He gets up, sharpens his ears. "Who's there?" He climbs up the wooden staircase softly.

He looks around. Seeing no one, he comes down. Again, the same sound from upstairs. Petrified, Maji climbs up again holding his breath. He sees a discarded cane chair swaying in a corner. All the hairs on his body rise. Rustling of the leaves makes the air more frightening.

Maji goes to his mat. He has become restless with fear. Now he feels the smell of surgical spirit in the air. All of a sudden a window slams shut in the above floor. Temple doves flutter their wings. He simply shuts his eyes and lies on the mat, burying his head under the black-streaked red pillow.

Next evening Jouhar comes as usual.

"What a horrible night!" Maji can't wait to narrate his frightening experience in his typical style.

Jouhar is all ears; he sits with awe and interest. "What was it, really?" Jouhar says. The boy cannot control his curiosity.

Maji doesn't reply. Instead, he sprawls on his mat. He is between reality and fantasy. "Your grandma's calling. Go and sleep, my buddy."

Jouhar goes to sleep beside his grandma. The boy racks his brain until he zones out.

June has appeared with the monsoon clouds on the Kanoli bank. It rains cats and rats, creating a tiny stream in the yard. Maji comes holding a black umbrella. He notices a violet light moving in the air. It is a tiny comet in shape. He stops on the way and rubs his eye-lids. "Yeah, it's real," he whispers. He has never seen such a moving light before. It is a poisonous snake flying with a stone that twinkles like a star in its mouth. The light vanishes in a minute. Afraid, he walks quickly.

Jouhar makes paper boats to float in the monsoon water in the yard, while Thachu rests in an arm-chair on the veranda. The water level in the paddy field in front rises. Frogs croak, breaking the silence. Thunder rumbles.

Maji comes, panting.

"What happened?" the boy asks.

Maji is anxious to tell the boy about what he watched on the way. He begins his narration, but his words stumble over fear and wonder.

Then Thachu puts in, "Nonsense! Don't frighten us!"

Maji winks at the boy, makes a gesture with his right index finger, implying that he will relate the remaining part of the event later; then withdraws into pindrop silence. Maji believes that the snake has flown away to the Arabian Desert beyond the sea, and that it aims to hide the stone somewhere in the boundless sand. He is immersed in thoughts about snakes.

Jouhar usually spends his day drooping in the class room. Meanwhile, Maji walks about on the Kanoli bank. Sometimes, he catches crabs, prawns, and pearl spot fish from the canal. He always charges fifty rupees, irrespective of his quantity, which is a really good buy for his customers.

Maji has come earlier than usual today. He is sipping a cup of black tea with lemon juice mixed in it. He eyes Jouhar playing with a yellow rubber ball beneath an old palm tree, nearly a hundred footsteps away.

"Hey, Jouhar! It's not a good place to play in the evening!" Maji screeches.

"What's the matter?" The boy stops playing and comes to his bosom friend.

"I don't want to frighten you, Jouhar. But I'm telling this for your safety." Maji's voice is heavy. "I heard it from my dad. When a wood-cutter had tried to cut that palm tree once, it shed blood. It was really a shocking scene. The wood-cutter dropped his axe and fled from the place, crying out, 'BLOOD, BLOOD'..."

Jouhar is silent.

Maji says, "Jouhar, don't you hear an owl hooting now?"

"Yah, I do."

"This owl spends the daytime in the top floor of our house. When the darkness falls, it goes to the palm tree, where it stays the whole night. Its hooting," Maji goes on in a grave voice, "foretells the death of somebody here or there. It often hoots at midnight."

Suddenly Jouhar gets anxious about his grandmother. He prays for her good health.

"Don't worry, Jouhar. An owl's hooting before the midnight isn't disastrous."

Maji always likes to keep aloof from society. He is a tall lean man with a gloomy countenance. He has only one friend on this earth—Jouhar. Only when he meets this friend does Maji becomes eloquent; then his melancholy shade vanishes from his countenance.

A breezy night. Maji wanders on the canal bank. There are stars like beautiful blooms in the sky. He loses himself in the moonlight. He gets a vision of his mother, who drowned in the canal while collecting black oysters three years ago. She sits on the embankment with a smiling face. She calls his name, "Maji," softly. Then clouds cover his mother and moon. Slowly, darkness spreads around. An owl starts hooting loudly. His mother's voice is lost in a thunderous sound. Maji's eyes get moist with rain and pain. And he returns to the old house.

"Why are you gloomy?" Jouhar says.

"You can't follow it. You're a child" Maji says centuries-old ready-made words to hide a secret from a child. A few things in a man's life die concealed. Maji goes to his mat and buries his secret sorrows under the pillow.

Jouhar has really been flummoxed by his friend's unusual behaviour. Fumbling in the darkness, he reaches near the bed where his grandma sleeps snoring. He jumps into the bed, jerking grandma, who opens her eyes, and then closes them slowly. He hugs her tightly.

Mystery is an integral part of Maji's character. His subconscious mind has absorbed all the superstitions of his parents during his childhood. His world is really an amalgam of reality and fantasy.

Five months have elapsed since Maji was appointed in Thachu's house.

Hearing a bolt from the blue, people gather in Maji's yard on the bank of Kanoli canal. Jouhar stands among the crowd with his head drooping. He is in a huff. Maji's body is hanging on a rope tied to a bamboo pole supporting the roof of his hut.

There is a whisper among the people, "Why did he do that?"

Mystery prevailed throughout Maji's life. It prevails even after his death. He

had no companion in this universe except Jouhar, who unfortunately was not mature enough to make out the depths of Maji's loneliness and secret doldrums.

Funeral ceremonies are completed by the evening. Thachu and Jouhar come back from Maji's house. Thick darkness. Barking stray dogs can be heard. Jouhar lights a torch. His grandmother walks through the pale light of the torch. They reach the gate of their mansion.

When he opens the iron gate, he sees a strange black cat curled up on the veranda. He has never seen it before. Grandma goes inside. Jouhar tries to drive the cat away, but it doesn't move. The boy is struck dumb with horror. He takes a small missile-shaped stone. The cat saunters away to the shrubs.

Maji lives beyond a suicide.



PROPOSITION

It isn't me or you, it's that the sweetest men are Peter Pans and we too long denied there was no chance to have them grown and true.

But we would make fine mates, just not with them. So rather than turn sour let's turn to one another for an hour as sergeants of our fates:

unloved is living yet! And if we were to mingle a late ember, the stir is sure to help when we remember and help us to forget.

—james b. nicola

SANCTUARY



As the young blackbird emerges from its nest in the stone cherub's mouth, members of the congregation cough through pauses in the benediction. Others sleep, dream of sodomy and stirring up sweet fruit from the bottom of a yogurt cup. Convicted child molester sneezes, rudely spraying sickness two rows in front of him. A stranger awakens with a start blesses him, unknowing, unqualified, insincere, under that beautiful vaulted ceiling, bolstered with alternating columns of hope and futility, sacrifice and greed, they're both damned.

—bill livingston

FERRY POINT

Perseid scores the black canvas sky With cat-scratch meteors, Banishes the dog from Cassiopeia's throne. The bath-warm lake pleasures the willing shore With its tongue-like waves Before tiring and turning in for the evening. Even the supermoon brightness Cannot overpower the starshine eternal. Now close your eyes. The galaxies repeat themselves on your lids Like a memory that refuses to leave. Close them tighter, As the white flash of a knockout punch Brings human impermanence into view. Now open your eyes. The painful shadows of distant pasts The inevitable pleasures of tomorrow Present themselves in the pre-dawn canopy Until Orion, watching over you, Drops his club Releases the lion Turns and walks away.

-bill livingston



Stilettoed covered feet sink into unstable earth

the slender holes left by heels

fill up with foamy salt water

then slowly empty, erased by the tide

the maker, erased with time.

—ingi house

Assassins "R" Us

by tracy blake

I love my job, but let's face it, a single mother of four making minimum wage barely scrapes by. Every day I search the internet for a get-rich-quick moneymaker while my kids scream and argue in the background.

On my computer screen a peculiar ad pops up:

WANTED: Lady Assassin, will train.

Must be smart, willing to learn, and agile.

Serious inquirers only.

Jobs pay \$50,000.

Email us at assasinsRus@gmail.com.

My first thought? This can't be real. My second thought? I could really use the money. What the heck. I send an email telling them of my interest.

Within seconds I receive an email back:

Hello Roxy,

Thanks for your interest. For obvious reasons we'll call you Agent R. Your first target is Mr. Manfield. Motel room number 9. Address, 1245 West Main Street at 9 p.m. tomorrow. You'll be overnighted everything you'll need. Good luck and welcome to the team.

Best Wishes,

The Assassins "R" Us Team

When I wake up the next morning, I almost forget about the job. I grab a cup of coffee and head to the door to retrieve the morning paper. Sitting there is a large package, no names or addresses on it. I bring it inside and open it. Inside is a briefcase and a key card; however, I can't get into the case because there's no code. Well, that's useless. Ding, my email alert goes off.

Hello Agent R,

This is a reminder of your appointment tonight at 9 p.m.

Best Wishes,

The Assassins "R" Us Team

Evening comes and I dress in a business suit and pull my hair up in a severe bun. Need to look the part, right? I'm ready to kill some people. The babysitter arrives. I grab the briefcase and Map Quest the address, which is ten minutes away. Making it to the motel, I grab the case and keycard and head for the room.

Walking up to the door I slide in the key card.

Red, no access. Just my Luck. I take a deep breath and try again.

Red, no access. "Ha." I laugh out loud. Right from the start it's all going wrong. I ready myself to break it down, kicking it as hard as I can. I bounce backward

falling on my ass. A door clicks and squeaks open. From the ground I turn to see a man's face peeking out.

"Agent R, wrong door, it's the next one down," he said, pointing.

I look up, realizing the nine was actually a six but it had lost a nail and was hanging upside down. My face is hot from embarrassment. I pick myself up off the floor and walk to door nine. I slide the key card in and it opens right away.

I walk to the bed and put the case on it. A puff of dust rises through the beam of light coming through the closed curtains. There's a manila envelope on the bed that says: "Read me." Inside is the code for the case.

I enter the code and open the case. Inside is a gun, a long piece of metal, and a small bean-looking thing. I pick up the bean, remembering a film I saw, and speak into it.

"Hello? Testing, testing, HELLO!"

Nothing.

Click. The door connected to the room opens and the same head pops in. "Agent R, it goes in your ear," he says and shuts the door.

I put the bean in my ear; again my face is hot. There's a knock at the door.

"Answer the door, R," the voice says.

"I know how to answer a door," I say, opening the door to the man on the other side. "Evening, Mr. Manfield."

He walks past me in a rush. I stand confused.

"Well? Are we going to do this or what?"

"Do wha—"

"He thinks you're a prostitute, R."

"He WHAT?" I say out loud.

"Excuse me?" Mr. Manfield says.

"Sorry, talking to myself."

He looks through me and shrugs his shoulders. "Well?"

"Offer him a drink," the voice in my ear says.

"How 'bout a drink first?"

"Fine, fine, that's not gonna be extra, is it?"

Ignoring him, I walk to the mini fridge and grab two of the little bottles of bourbon. I drop a piece of ice into two plastic cups and pour the drinks.

"Escort him to the veranda," the voice instructs.

Picking up the two cups I walk to the veranda, Mr. Manfield behind me. He sits and I hand him the drink. I bring mine up to my mouth.

"Eh! No drinking on the job, R."

"What? Why not?" Again, I spoke out loud.

"Excuse me?"

"Sorry, talking to myself again."

"Are you okay? You're not crazy or something, are ya?"

"Offer him another drink, and get your gun on the way back," the voice says.

"No, I'm not crazy, Mr. Manfield. I have kids."

"Don't give him any personal information, R."

"He won't be alive long anyway," I say.

"Who won't be alive?" Mr. Manfield says.

"Let me get you another drink."

I grab his cup and hurry into the room. Setting the cup on the mini fridge, I walk to the bed. I enter the code again to open the case and pick up the gun, turning it over in my hands. Then I tuck it in the back of my pants and start back to the veranda.

"Agent R, you need to put the clip in the gun," the voice says.

"I knew that. I was testing you."

"What was that, darling? I can't hear ya too good," Mr. Manfield says.

"One or two pieces of ice?" I yell back at him.

"Two."

I walk back to the bed and look in the case and pull out the tube.

"It's too big to fit in the hole."

"That's what she said," the voice says. He laughs at his own joke.

"I mean the round tube piece won't fit in the bottom of the gun," I say.

"Screw that into the muzzle; it's the silencer. The clip is long and skinny. When you've inserted the clip, cock it...so a bullet slides into the chamber. Now you're ready. In one swift motion take the gun from your back and aim it at his head," the voice says.

"Like this?" I ask. I grab the gun from the small of my back as fast as I can, right foot out, and it falls out of my hands, THUD. "Wait, I can do it better." I put it back and again ready myself for the exercise. I shout, "STICK 'EM UP!"

From the veranda I hear what sounds like a body hitting the floor. Suddenly a pair of hands grab my ankle. I look down and there, on his belly, is Mr. Manfield.

"Are we being robbed, lady?" he mouths up at me.

Click, the door opens again and the same head pops in. "Agent H, get off the floor. Agent R, you've failed the Assassins' Tutorial: 101."

"This wasn't real?" I ask.

Both men laugh robustly.

"Goddammit, Agent H, get off the floor, already!"

"Did you honestly think we'd send you into an actual assassins' job without training? Those aren't even real bullets in your gun."

"Yes, I did. You advertised on Craigslist for an assassin for hire job, for god's sake!"

"Time to pack it up and go home. We'll let you know of our interest."

I leave confused and angry. The next day while drinking coffee and reading the morning paper my email alert goes off:

Hello Roxy,

The team at Assassins "R" Us want to thank you for participating in the training exercise, and hope the \$10,000 helps; your effort didn't go unnoticed. However, we are sad to inform you that you did not make the team. Best of luck in your future endeavors.

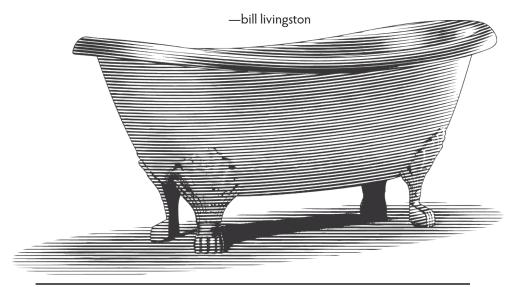
With Great Regrets,

The Assassins "R" Us Team



PAPER TENEMENT

He sleeps in an iron bathtub to avoid the gunshot stares from the angry woman below. The smooth, porcelain surface crippled by the missiles of her abhorrent, bulls-eye glances. The tub-foot talons long ago loosened from around their prey by the essence of her breath. They live that way - exist rather on dirty parchment floors, under cracked vellum ceilings, until they are old, grey and useless. Eyelids heavy as anvils, he coughs, slumbers in illness on sarcophagus armchair and expires in silence, begins to decay. She looks up from her laundry, smiles at him for the first time, then looks straight ahead as she irons smooth her corrugated indifference within her cardboard walls.



GLINDA

Where was Glinda the Good Witch watching from so that when Dorothy and Toto were confronted by the bad witch with the broom and black smoke, she knew it was time to come down in her magic bubble and help her and Toto, too—and show which way to go to find the wizard who might send them home?

And in the poppies, how did Glinda know to remedy their sleepiness with snow?

And can we get a magic wand and bubble so that when one of us is lost, in trouble, or watching hope fly off like a hot air balloon, the other might know and respond by suddenly appearing with a wand?

Or, absent Glinda's magic, isn't there a modern method, I don't mean a phone, but one more magical, to curb despair and summon someone, when we feel alone?

—james b. nicola

ALL-NIGHT DINER

by david greske

The bell tinkled when the diner door opened. A disheveled man stumbled into the room, his clothes torn and dirty. His face was smeared with drying blood, and his eyes were glazed with the fear of a mouse trapped by a hungry cat.

As the man staggered inside, the diner door slammed shut. The bright neon signs hanging on the wall reflected their bright colors in the chrome of the décor. Table tops were covered with red and white checked plastic. A jukebox played in the corner near the restrooms. The tune was familiar, yet he could not name it.

A handful of people were in the place. Some solemnly drank coffee from chipped china cups. Others poked at their meals. Another group stood in a corner smoking cigarettes in a place where smoking was prohibited. The ashtray they were using overflowed with smoldering butts. An old man with skin wrinkled and dark as leather finished his cig, crushed it in the smoking ashtray, and shook another from his pack. A fellow smoker lit it for him, his hand trembling as the flame touched the tip of the cigarette.

The man who had just stumbled inside made his way to the counter and sat on one of the vinyl-covered stools. He plopped his arms on the Formica counter hard enough to make the salt and pepper shakers jump.

The man sitting next to him turned, a runnel of egg yolk dribbling from a corner of his mouth. "Easy, Mac, you almost spilt my coffee."

"My name's not 'Mac.' It's Joe. And I need some help."

"Well, whatdaya know, Joe," the man with egg on his face said. "Alice can help you with that."

"You don't understand," Joe said. "I don't need a waitress. I need help."

"I know what you said. Alice can help. She's been here forever. Alice! Alice!"

The waitress, a stout woman, emerged from the swinging doors between the

kitchen and the dining room. She held an order pad in one hand and a pen in the other. Her jet-black hair was put up in a bun and covered with a hairnet. She wore too much makeup. The uniform strained to keep the woman's bulk from bursting at the seams. She snapped her gum with the enthusiasm of a cow chewing cud.

Alice waddled to the counter, pen poised above pad, and asked Joe, "So, what'll it be, Hon?"

"I don't want anything to eat," Joe said.

The waitress dropped the pen and pad into her apron pocket and righted the china cup on the saucer in front of Joe. "Coffee, then," she said. She turned and grabbed the coffee pot from the burner.

"I don't want any coffee, either," Joe said. "I need some help. People need help. There's been an accident."

Alice shrugged and looked at the egg-faced man. "How about you, Frank, you wanna warm-up?"

"That'd be nice, Alice. Thanks."

Alice refilled Frank's cup. Some of the scalding liquid splashed over the cup's rim, spattering his hand. He didn't react when the hot coffee touched his skin.

"Do either one of you hear me?" Joe said.

"We hear you, Joe," Frank said. "There's been an accident. Probably at Greenleaf and Trillium Streets."

"Happens all the time," Alice said, setting the coffee pot back on the warmer. The jukebox stopped, and then played the same tune again.

Frank looked at Joe. "You should be glad you wandered into this joint instead of the one across the street. This place is much . . . nicer."

"What is wrong with you people?" Joe said, addressing anyone who would listen. "There's been an accident. People need help and you all are just ignoring it."

Frank took a drink of coffee, pulled a napkin from the dispenser, and wiped the smear of yoke off his face. He turned to Alice and said, "You want to show him, or should I?"

"I did the last one. It's your turn."

"Show me what?" Joe asked.

Frank slid off his stool and grabbed Joe's arm. "Come with me."

They left the diner. Emergency lights flashed, lighting up the late evening like fireworks brighten a Fourth of July sky.

"See? No need to panic. Help has arrived. I just hope we're not too late," Frank said.

"Too late for what?"

"You'll see."

They hurried down the street to the accident scene, the red and blue emergency lights intensifying with each step.

"I don't get it," Joe said. "I don't understand."

"You will."

Organized chaos dominated the scene. Half a dozen squad cars blocked the

streets. Yellow and black warning tape surrounded the area. A fire truck stood ready in case the car wrapped around the light pole suddenly burst into flames. Police radios crackled with requests for more assistance. The air reeked of gasoline and oil. Blood was on the sidewalk, gutter, and pavement.

An ambulance, the rear doors open wide, was parked away from the wreck. A waiting gurney stood near the warning tape. A pair of white-clad attendants were loading a body on it.

"We best hurry," Frank said.

The two men arrived just in time to see one of the attendants about to draw a sheet over the deceased.

"Look now," Frank said, "before it's too late."

Joe did and dropped to his knees.

Joe's own body was on the gurney.

Frank bent down and placed his hand on Joe's shoulder. It was always like this. Once the newcomers saw who was on the gurney they always fell to their knees like that simple action could change things.

"Come on," Frank said. "Let's go back to the diner. Alice and I will explain everything."

Frank helped Joe to his feet. For the first time Joe noticed the street was lined with vacant buildings. The windows were black with soot. Doorways were boarded over. Weeds sprouted from crumbling moldy foundations. Most of the streetlights no longer worked and those that did hummed and flickered with pale light. The bright red neon glimmer of the All-Nite Diner that had attracted Joe to the café in the first place was gone.

"What happened to the café?" Joe said.

"It's still there, Joe. I assure you. You're just seeing things a little differently now, that's all."

"But I can't go back there."

"I'm afraid you will, Joe. There's nowhere else for you to go."

They returned to the diner. Inside everything was the same. Bright colorful neon still reflected off the chrome furnishings. Checkered plastic sheeting still covered the table tops. The Rockola still played the same tune.

Joe and Frank made their way back to the counter. Frank held Joe firmly around his waist. Joe was still unsteady on his feet and Frank didn't want him collapsing. Joe slid onto a stool and when Frank was certain Joe was stable, he sat on the stool next to him.

Alice poured Joe a cup of coffee, then reached beneath the counter and pulled out a bottle. She splashed a good portion of the contents into the cup.

"Drink this, Joe. It'll make things easier," Alice said.

Joe looked into the cup. "What'd you put in this? Some kind of magic potion?" "No, honey, just some good old whiskey."

"What is this place? Heaven? Hell? Purgatory?" Joe took a drink of coffee. "And who are you?"

"This ain't any of those places," Frank said. "And Alice and I are sort of like the Welcome Wagon."

"We're a little like that psychic in Poltergeist that wanted Carol Ann to go into the light," Alice said. She refilled Joe's coffee, sans the whiskey. "This place is a waiting room of sorts until the Big Guy upstairs figures out where your soul will go."

"There are several such places all over the world. All are designed to make those waiting feel comfortable. You wandered into this one because you frequently visited a diner similar to this one while you were alive," Alice said.

"You mean there's a wait to get into Heaven?" Joe said.

"Or the other place, yeah," Alice said.

"Unless you had wandered into the place across the street instead of this one. Then you would've gone straight to Hell," Frank said. He pushed his coffee cup toward Alice, who dutifully filled it.

"So how long am I going to be waiting?"

"We have no idea. We're not privy to that. We know there's a whole process that happens first. Background checks. Reference checks. Referrals. Council meetings. Voting. Could take ten minutes. Could take ten years."

Suddenly the diner filled with brilliant white light. The jukebox stopped and the glassware on the shelves vibrated. When the bright light vanished the old man that was smoking cigarettes in the corner of the diner when Joe first arrived was gone.

"I see Jasper's gone," Alice said.

"Good," Frank said, "I hope it's for the better. He was one of our long-timers. How long was he waiting, Alice?"

"Fifteen, twenty years. It's been so long I can't remember."

"Do you know where he's gone?" Joe asked.

"Again, that's classified," Frank said. "Our jobs, Alice's and mine, is to keep you comfortable until your time comes. No matter how long it may be."

"And speaking of being comfortable, there's a shower and a change of clothes in the back. Have at it."

"I'd like that," Joe said. He finished his coffee and slipped off his stool. As he headed toward the back of the diner, the bell above the front door tinkled and a distraught woman walked in.

"It looks like we're going to have a busy night," Joe told Alice. Then he went to greet the newcomer.



Personal Trainer: Lizzie Borden

an important career decision has been made she's dressed up and got her tool of the trade

isn't she lovely,
our sweet Lizzy Borden?
personal trainer
to Michael Jordan.



One Way Ticket

Some delirious day when you let those spiders crawl out of your fists, & your eyes become the flavor of an unclouded spring sky, I will buy a one way ticket right into your skull & be quite content to sleep on the cortex couch of your unchained dreams.

—darrell lindsey

WAYNE'S LAMENT

Starving hummingbirds alight on rotting lilies, as liquor-soaked homeless men pile up at my basement door. Melting like chocolate in the Brooklyn sun or a forgotten invalid during a Con-Ed outage.

The notes of Stravinsky in the air, hanging like young fruit in September orchards plucked from their stems by our hungry ears. Stradivarias breezes drawn across catgut strings never sounded so lovely, so real.

Breath drawn into smog-darkened lungs is finally expelled in high note fighting the urge to retch in perfect pitch. The familiar overture is ending as the lock clicks behind you

in a symphony of tumblers and pins. Another breath goes in, preparing for the aria of morning. The first step of a long walk is taken as the chorus begins in full.

—bill livingston

TATTOO

The serpent winds its way around your thigh your hip in blue and green undulations

his fangs scar my lip as I kiss you

of course it hurts a little, you said but I like the way it looks it's erotic, you said it makes me feel sexy

as I kiss you I feel him stir against your leg, a protector, a lover.

-robert beveridge



DECOMPOSING CORPSES: A LOVE STORY

by douglas j. ogurek

Part 1: ME Is Where It's AT

To me, nothing is more beautiful, more intense, more profoundly fulfilling than a decomposing corpse. Just thinking about it gives me goose bumps. Actually, I guess it's vulture bumps.

To say that I like my meat rare is an understatement. I love plunging my head into a bloody mess and tearing out the putrid insides, feeling the warm death grease coating my head, the intestinal glop sliding down my throat, the snap of muscle tissue.

I used to fly by myself and conceal any carnage I found. Let those other vultures find it themselves. And those hyenas? I'd sooner eat fresh fruit than deal with them. Unless, of course, they were dead. But like a refreshing mix of blood and bowel juice on a scorching afternoon, Resplatty changed me.

Part 2: A Raw Deal

One day I was soaring over the savanna and searching for a shredded carcass, a rotting head, a fly-infested ribcage with a few shards of meat. Anything. Then I spotted something.

It was in a cross-shaped cluster of trees. I swooped down and discovered my treasure. It was delightfully repulsive. It reminded me of an experience when I was a child: the aroma of week-old remains filling the nest as mom ripped apart a gazelle, dad coming back with a dripping, decaying zebra bladder. Sometimes they spoiled us rotten.

I couldn't believe what was beneath those trees. There in unliving color were three wildebeest corpses, untouched by vulture or hyena or lion. A feast just for me. With the taste of blood and organs already in my beak, I chomped down.

Problem! I couldn't break the hide. I tried again. No luck. So I left. Figured I'd come back in a week or so. Let it age. I just hoped that nobody would find my treasure.

Part 3: Two Vultures, Meat

After having a little fun vomiting on hyenas later that day, I was resting in a tree, when a female landed next to me.

Her cheeks were rosy, with the blood from her last meal. She had a very polished appearance. It must have been the innards covering her head. Her neck had all the supple elegance of a section of intestine, but her beak was one of her most striking features. And it wasn't just the spleen hanging from it.

Her first words were an immediate indication of her boundless generosity. "Hey, want some spleen?"

"Why would you want to share with me?"

"You look hungry."

So I tore off a hunk of the organ. "Thank you. It's delightful. You're quite the organist."

"I'm Resplatty, and I'm glad to help."

Her eyes were like the rising sun, illuminating a heap of bloody carnage.

As we talked, I found out Resplatty and I had a lot in common.

"I want to show you something," I said. "Just you, though."

Part 4: The Plan

So I took her to the wildebeests. She said, "These are beautiful."

"I'd love to have dinner with you. I just can't get them open."

"Well, we might as well have an appetizer." So we started eating their eyes.

As we were eating, I looked into Resplatty's eyes. How beautiful they were. They seemed to hold the world in their humble shade of brown.

"Hey, I've got it," she said. "I know how to get these open! Hyenas!"

"Hyenas? I'd rather pass by a putrid elephant carcass and not eat it."

"Come on. Have a heart."

"I'd love to, but there won't be any left if we let hyenas know."

"They're not as bad as you think. A couple are even in my disemboweling league."

"That must take a lot of guts."

She told me her plan, and I started to like this vulturess even more. She made me feel weird . . . all mushy, like the eyeballs sliding down my throat.

Part 5: It's All Fun and Games Until . . . No, It's All Fun and Games

Later, we swooped down to five laughing hyenas. I made a really, really bad joke about the zebra leg in one's mouth. They all laughed.

One said, "Get out of here."

Resplatty said, "We want to talk to you."

"I don't want to talk to any vultures," said another. "A vulture just vomited on me this afternoon." I couldn't help but chuckle. They all laughed too.

One hyena was fuming with laughter. "You vultures fly way up there, and you only come down when there's meat for you. You swoop down and pick these things apart. Every last piece. Some of you even eat the bones."

Resplatty got to the meat of the matter. "Listen. I know where three untouched wildebeest corpses are." There was silence. Then they laughed.

One said, "Completely untouched?"

"Well, there's one minor thing missing," I said. "But still, they're out of sight."

"All you have to do is follow us and leave some of the meat for us," said Resplatty. "We'll fly low and slow for you."

They laughed their agreement.

Part 6: Side-splitting Humor

We led the hyenas to the find: perhaps the largest collection of untouched wildebeest carcasses they would ever see, a semi-miracle that would be passed on for generations of hyenas. So they laughed.

As the sun set on the beautiful African horizon, Resplatty and I reminisced on the day's events while watching our new friends rip carcasses open and laugh hysterically.

Soon, they called us over, and we ate together.

"You see?" said Resplatty. "All we had to do is lead them to it, and there's plenty for everyone."

"You've got brains," I said. "And I don't mean the ones splattered across your face. Without you, I would never have thought of this; today has been one of the most mystical days of my life. A true life-altering experience." Then I tore off a piece of throat.

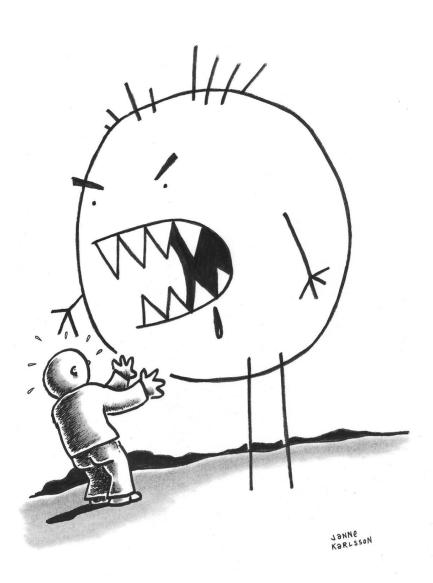
Part 7: A Meaty Lesson

Today, Resplatty and I still lead many of our savanna friends to meat. We soar high to find it, and then come down to lead others to it. Not just vultures, but all scavengers. In fact, Halloween comes in a couple days; all the scavenger children will "Trick or Meat" together.

We've all learned a lesson as clear as eyeball liquid: by loving our neighbors, we always find a way to carrion.



Nightmare



Litany

Is all this acting up then but our adolescent efforts to try to get an avuncular, gadding Father to turn His Head for once even if it's to smack us a Good One?

And if so good that the smiting slays then at least we know we got His goat, that the Whole Thing hasn't been for naught and should we get to meet Him, we'll be able to say We won! We won! We—

Which we won't, of course, but simply knowing we can might be enough for us to be able to cope with this inferiority complex, make forever almost bearable.

—james b. nicola



She is not the woman of a thousand dreams untold

rather she is earth rich and loamy between my fingers

she is not the relic of a thousand myths unwritten

rather she is legend a kiss asked and never answered

she is not the queen's passageway guarded at all hours

rather she is knowledge mine alone and yet available to all

she is subject to interpretation what is between her flyleaves is what you make of it

under examination hard yet still silky at the curves

the sweetness, the depth below the bitter skin trickles forth the floods, the first bite into a crabapple

she who is knowledge craves only more she who is my love covers me like chocolate like the wings of birds

and as she kisses me my tongue imparts that knowledge

—robert beveridge

MINE CANDLE!

In dark recesses of my room, what evil lurks there, spelling doom? Shadows cast to terrify me, I wish them gone, yet they defy me. Prayers sent skyward, said with feeling, while I'm at my bedside kneeling. Yet nothing shakes the evil there, that ever taunting, strokes my hair. That ever haunting stills the air.

Eerie music floating, drifting as those shadowed shapes are shifting Into beings dark, macabre, that whisper, laugh, cry out and sob. I lit nine candles one by one, the room fell dark as though there're none, Snuffed out by malignant breezes seems to blow just where it pleases. My heart within me falters, freezes.

This presence prowls and encumbers any hope of easy slumbers.

Any pleasing thoughts I've known upon it's damned black wings have flown!

I acquiesce as it takes hold, the fear has left but not the cold,

This evil thing I no more dread will let me rest now in my bed.

Will let me rest now with the dead...

-michelle deloatch

LOVE ME

Two friends. Chalk and cheese, gelled with want. The shy one with silver sticks That clunked on wooden boards Skipped to a secret song.

And him, a gauzy giant, The bitter scat his excuse. It shines for special occasions, Shouting about life of biting tongues: I am history reinvented.

Blink twice. I am not out of the ordinary. He tells me how I have a nervous laugh And how nice The mice looked, strung up in grey wire. An easy spear through each socket.

Would I like to walk with them? It would be like kissing the flute With my eyes smoking and hissing, Ash sinking in each pit. Let me roll in icy pools.

The Other does that. Hair wet and black. Tossing acid. Do you ever sleep? He wants to be loved.

I do not react. The sun lets them in. The moon breaks in two. Bell, once. Bell, twice.

One is finished.

-natalie crick

SEARCHING FOR MICKEY

by bruce harris

An arched-shaped rail delineated "The Park" from the rest of society. The Pacer scraped against a crumbled curb and jerked to a stop. "Finally! Shut that damned engine off already before my head splits open and the whole neighborhood is out here looking to see where a distressed WW2 fighter plane just landed." Frank got out. "Last time I ride in this decibel-busting rust bucket until you get that muffler fixed." Little remained of the car's original two-toned black cherry red and marshmallow white paint. "Do everyone a favor and take this wreck to Midas and then to Earl Scheib for Chrissakes," implored Frank.

Sylvester showed a gold-toothed smile. "After this I won't have to fix or paint it. Going to dump this AMC junker and get myself some new wheels. Already got my eye on a red Chevy Monte Carlo SS, 3.8L, V6, Turbo Automatic with streaking orange comets painted on the doors. Sweet bitch can get up over 110 mph!" He reached into the backseat and pulled out a baseball bat, examined it, and smacked the fat part of the bat against a hardened palm. "You call this dump a neighborhood?" Sylvester asked, and then gestured with the bat's tip sweeping across the rows of dilapidated trailers. "Some hell hole neighborhood this is. They call this 'The Park?' More like 'Trailer Trash Park."

"What's with the bat?" asked Frank. "For Charlie? We can handle him easily."

"Insurance," was the response. "Got to admit though, it's funny." "What?"

Sylvester looked at the scarred bat. "It's a Mickey Mantle model. I can't believe I found this thing. What are the odds?"

"Let me see that," demanded Frank. "Oh wow! That is funny! My old man used to talk about The Mick like he was a god. He saw him when he was a kid and Mantle was a rookie. Must have been nice. We were born too late, my friend."

Sylvester had a far-off look. The two men paused, and then walked in silence toward a sun-bleached blue trailer with a busted lawn chair, broken glass, a stack of unread yellowed newspapers, and the remnants of a shredded retread tire. "Blue Moon" was crudely painted onto an oblong wooden sign that hung askew near a screen-less front door. They didn't bother knocking. Frank tried the door. It swung open. Despite the noontime sun's brightness, the interior of Charlie Haskell's digs was funereal. The only light was dull and flickered, its source a small-screen television displaying porn. The reek came from stale everything. Smoke to urine to puke to an overused toilet that hadn't been seen by a plumber in years gave both men the dry heaves. "Oh Jeez," managed Frank. "Let's get this done quick and get the hell out of here. This place is disgusting."

Sylvester and Frank stomped on crushed beer cans and kicked empty whiskey bottles as their eyes adjusted to the poorly lit room. On the television screen, a girl with crudely applied red nail polish wore only the top of a cheerleader's outfit. She had her hands where they didn't belong on what was a poor excuse for a bored college professor, some lowlife actor reading a book, wearing black-framed glasses and smoking a pipe.

Sylvester squinted. "Hey, Charlie, where are you?" The jackass faux professor on screen held up a finger and recited some weird poetry. "Charlie!" yelled Sylvester.

"What?" The voice was barely audible coming from the direction of the back wall.

Both Sylvester and Frank turned toward the sound. Prostrate on the couch lay Charlie Haskell.

"Get up, Haskell!" demanded Frank.

Charlie stirred. Again: "What? What is it? What time is it?"

Sylvester took the bat and smashed the television screen.

"What the hell?" Charlie jumped off the couch. He coughed up phlegm, looked around, spit into a butt-littered ashtray, and unconsciously grabbed his crotch. "What the shit you do that for? What the hell am I going to watch now? That's the only TV I have."

Frank found a light switch and flipped it up. Nothing. He tried it again a few times. "Doesn't work. How do you turn on the lights in this hell hole?"

"Damn. I can't believe you did that." Charlie addressed Sylvester. He moved toward the trailer's sole lamp, bent over and pushed the on-off switch. The light was muted. It was better than nothing. "What the hell do you want?" His eyes went from the baseball bat to Sylvester to Frank. "You can't come in here and..."

"Shut up!" ordered Sylvester. "There's a little matter of a balance you owe the

Cisco Disco Dog, remember? We're here to collect." No one called Cisco Alvarez "Disco Dog" to his face.

Charlie looked around for something to drink. He belched. "I'm good for it. Got plenty of money coming my way."

Frank laughed. "Yup, that's why we're here."

A perplexed look overcame Haskell's face. "Um, I'm good for it. Trust me. I came into some money. I mean, I came into like an investment or something and I'm going to have a lot of money real soon and pay off Cisco. He'll be dancin' to his own beat. Okay?"

"Not okay," answered Sylvester. "We're here to take the so-called investment off your hands and save you the trouble. You can thank us later. Where is it?"

Charlie croaked, "What? Where's what?" he feigned confusion.

Sylvester pointed the bat at Charlie. He let it rest under Charlie's chin. "Enough." He looked around the cluttered trailer. "We know you don't have the cash," Sylvester said. He hesitated a few seconds before adding, "Not yet anyway. But your pal the Cisco Disco Dog is out of patience and so are we. You have a big mouth, Charlie. And it spits stupid words. So before it begins spitting yellow teeth, I suggest you come up with the goods, and fast!"

Charlie Haskell needed a cigarette, found a crushed pack but it was empty. He touched his shirt pocket and then experienced relief when he felt the comfort of soft packaging. He grabbed a cigarette, lit a match and inhaled, and tossed the match on the floor. "I told you I've got something as good as cash."

"Forget the money. We're collecting baseball cards again and we need only one more to complete the set," said Frank. "A particular Yankee. A New York Yankee."

"So, you know?"

Sylvester walked closer toward Haskell, but backed up when the stench became stronger. "Where is it, Charlie? Make this easy for all of us."

Hours earlier, Charlie Haskell ran his mouth at Tad's Tavern. He bragged to one of the regulars imbibing in the High Life that his money woes were over and that after he paid off Cisco he'd move out of the dump trailer and into one of the newly built apartment complexes in the ritzy part of town. Charlie mentioned that his mother had died. "Just decided to keel over." Moments before the condemned house in which he grew up was to be razed, he raided the attic and found a stack of baseball cards. Among the pile was a 1952 Topps Mickey Mantle card in what appeared to be in new condition. Charlie had taken the card to Dave's Diamond Hobby Shop, and Dave's eyes nearly popped from his head when he saw it. "Dave offered me a grand for it, but I ain't no sucker," he told the barfly. "Card is worth much more than that." Now Charlie cursed himself for not taking the money and getting rid of the card earlier.

"The Mantle?" he questioned Sylvester.

"I'm not asking again. Where is it?" Sylvester raised the bat.

The bat came down hard inches from Charlie.

"Holy shit! Watch it with that thing."

"Where is it?"

It was Frank's time to add his stank. "I thought you weren't going to ask that question again?"

Sylvester glanced Frank's way, said nothing. He aimed the big Louisville Slugger at Charlie's head. The drunk spoke up. "It's there! Right there!" he pointed toward a dusty end table.

Sylvester took a few steps over. "Where? There's no card here."

"Yes, there is. That's where I put it so I can keep an eye on it."

"Well, it ain't here now, asshole. And if you don't come clean, the ball I hit next is going to be a double."

Frank strode over to the end table and shifted some videos around. He wiped his hand on his pants. "Where's the card, Charlie?"

Charlie's heartbeat pounded blood at a sobering pace. "It's got to be there. I swear it's there. I...oh shit!" Neither Sylvester nor Frank spoke. "Shit! I betcha it's at the video store."

Frank tried speaking without breathing in the putrid air. "What are you talking about?"

Sylvester was losing patience. Charlie beat him to the verbal punch. "King Videos, on Montrose."

"What about it?"

"That's where the card is. Shit! They called me and told me I had outstanding videos and that I needed to return them right away or else I couldn't rent from them anymore. I grabbed up the stack on the table. I slipped the Mantle into one of the boxes for safekeeping and forgot about it. That's where it is. I swear it."

"Well, if that's true, and I hope for your sake it's true, it will be easy enough to get it back as long as no one has rented that video out again. Which movie was it?"

Charlie shrugged his shoulders. "How do I know?" He hadn't graduated from Harvard, but Charlie knew he'd have to explain more fully. "I don't know. I don't know the titles. I just rent a handful at a time, watch 'em and return 'em and rent another stack."

Frank spoke. "You forgot to add the jerking off part between watching them and returning them."

Charlie pretended not to hear Frank. "King Videos has the best selection."

Sylvester stared at the cobweb-covered ceiling. "Are we going to believe this asshole?"

"About what? That the store has the best porn selection?"

"Oh, you're a regular comedian." Sylvester glared at Frank, then continued. "One way to find out," continued Sylvester. "Let's go down there and see."

"See exactly what?"

"Jeez, Frank. See if he's telling the truth is what," responded Sylvester. "We'll just look through every porno movie in the place until we find the card."

"Are you crazy? How long will that take? And, like you said, what if someone already rented the movie with the card?"

"Then we're all screwed, especially him." He turned toward Charlie. "When did you return the stack of videos?"

"Today. Earlier. Right after the store called. Before I fell asleep."

Sylvester stared into Charlie's eyes. "You'd better not be lying."

"I swear I'm not. I wouldn't lie to you."

"Let's go, Frank. We'll search every damn video until we find it, and if we don't, we're coming back here."

"What makes you think this loser will stick around in this palatial setting for us to come back?"

Charlie jumped in. "I will. I swear it. You have my word."

A sick smile crept across Sylvester's lips. The gold was on display. "This is how I know he will stick around for us to come back." And, with one motion, Sylvester swung the Mantle-signature model lumber low and hard, through Charlie's kneecaps. For Sylvester, it was the satisfying feeling one experienced in his hands when connecting on the bat's sweet spot and watching the horsehide sail over the fence. For Charlie, it was more like being hit by a pitch, specifically, a Nolan Ryan out of control heater. He went down hard, his face flush against the trailer's grimy floor.

"Wow! You know how much I abhor violence. Did you have to do that?" Frank asked Sylvester. "I'm sure Mr. Charles Haskell is as good as his word."

"Me too. Problem is, he and his word suck."

Frank tried to tune out the Pacer's obnoxious clamor. "You really think we'll find The Mick?"

Sylvester touched the red-hot cigarette lighter coils to the end of a Kool. Smoke escaped through his nostrils and mouth as he spoke. "Yup. Hell, we're as good as driving away from that video store in a brand spanking new red Monte Carlo. I got a good feeling about this."

King Videos was a one-story stand-alone brick building. Two large fully robed kings holding videocassettes in each hand stood back to back, rotating on the roof. A circle of rainbow-colored light bulbs that blinked on and off 24-hours a day, creating the illusion of motion, framed them. A large sign under the kings proclaimed, "The World's Largest Video Selection. It's Good to be the King." The Pacer was two blocks south of Montrose when Frank saw the crowd. "What's going on?"

Sylvester got a look and drove closer. "Some kind of line, for something. Jeez, it's long. Let's see, I think I can get closer to the store. The quicker we do this the better."

There was no place to pull over. The line, which snaked its way through parked cars and into the street was for King Videos. "This can't be," said Frank. "You think it has something to do with the card? I'll bet someone's found it!"

The Pacer's muffler was about as effective as a Swiss cheese-made condom. The noise had created a sort of wave in the line as heads turned liked falling dominoes toward the caustic sound. For some perverse reason, the movement reminded Frank of the Radio City Rockettes' kicking legs. He liked that. "Let's find out."

The two approached a short man, his head balding on top. What hair the little guy had was greasy and hung over his ears and collar. "What's up, buddy?" asked Sylvester. "What's with this line?"

"Don't you know?" he spit through crooked, stained teeth.

For a moment, Frank thought he'd have to restrain Sylvester from going Freddy Krueger on the man, but Sylvester responded uncharacteristically with a controlled, "No, I'm afraid not. That's why I'm asking."

The pervert was eager to tell. He blurted out, "It's Gigi Geestring! In person! She's in there," he pointed with a dirty fingernail in the direction of King Videos. "She's signing videos of her latest movie, Gigi's GeeSpot. I gotta get one!"

Sylvester and Frank stared at each other. Words weren't necessary. The short balding man interrupted their mental telepathy. "Listen," he said in much lower tones, "you didn't hear this from me..." He looked around before continuing, "but word has it if they sell at least 500 videos, Gigi is going to have sex with one lucky customer!"

As Sylvester and Frank neared the video store, they noticed a sign on the sidewalk across from the door. It read:

TODAY - IN PERSON - PORN STAR GIGI GEESTRING STAR OF JIGGLIN' GIGI AND GIGI AT THE DOUBLE F RANCH SIGNING COPIES OF HER NEW VIDEO - GIGI'S GEESPOT

Frank lightly smacked Sylvester on the shoulder as they cut the line and entered King Videos. Giddy customers clutched their autographed videos. Below a "YOU MUST BE 18 YEARS OLD TO ENTER" warning sat Gigi. She was dressed, barely. Garters wrapped around one black stocking and one red. Her spiked shoes sported heels taller than Hakeem Olajuwon. The porn goddess wore more face paint than Cochise. She chewed a bright green-colored gum with an open mouth and held a blue sharpie pen in her left hand. She appeared to be bored but managed a weak smile as she looked up at everyone who approached the table.

"Can I help you?" The yuppie with polka dot suspenders and matching bowtie behind the counter asked a couple of young customers. The worker wore a ridiculous cardboard crown.

Two kids in their early teens asked for a movie recommendation.

"Do you like boxing?" snorted the cashier. He adjusted his faux crown atop his head. "Because if you do, you gotta see Raging Bull. Just came out in video. We got ten copies and can't keep them in stock. In fact, one just got returned so I can rent you that one if you want but you gotta tell me quick because I have a waiting list for it and I'll have to call the next person on the list."

This guy spoke a mile a minute. One of the boys said, "Sure. That's with De Niro, right?"

A couple of quick snorts and further crown adjustments. "Right. Right. Should win an academy award for his performance. You boys know the story of Jake LaMotta?" He didn't wait for a response. "Toughest middleweight ever according to some knowledgeable boxing experts, and I have to agree. I looked up his record and he was one tough cookie. Do you boys realize LaMotta fought 106 times? You know what that amounted to? I'll tell you, 869 rounds of boxing! Can you imagine? Amazing. I'm telling you this is a must-see movie. It's really violent, but in a good way. And Martin Scorsese directed it. How can you go wrong? For my money, he's the best Hollywood director today. Hands down. I recommend it to any and all of my customers and no one has been disappointed. I've heard the best comments and reviews from customers for this movie. It's just a powerful and emotional ride that will keep you engaged and interested, even if you've never seen a boxing match in your lives. I'm telling you..."

This guy thought he was Siskel and Ebert rolled into one. Trouble is, he didn't take a breath between words. The boys finally got him to shut up long enough to take their money and then sped out the door, but not before each took lingering glances in Gigi's direction.

Sylvester approached the jittery employee. "All the porno movies in there?" He pointed toward a separate room where Gigi sat signing for her fans.

"Yessir, sure are. King Videos has the largest selection of adult entertainment in the world. That's not just a claim, that's backed up by facts. And, if you join our King Videos Frequent Renters Club, you get to rent one free video a month. That's a really good deal. And we own and rent over..."

"Enough!" interrupted Sylvester. "Okay if we look around in there?"

"No, not at all. Help yourselves. Of course, today as you can see is a special day here at King Videos. We have a real celebrity in the adult entertainment field autographing..."

Sylvester and Frank didn't hear the rest. They pushed their way through the line and into the porno room.

"Who should I make this out to?" they heard Gigi ask a pimply-faced loser in a torn T-shirt.

"Did you say you want to make out?" The loser laughed at his own lame attempt at a joke.

"Behave yourself, you," responded the porn goddess with a slight chuckle. She had patience, if nothing else.

Sylvester instructed Frank to work one side of the room while he checked the other. "Just pull it out, check the insides real quick and see if the card is in there."

"Who croaked and made you my boss?"

"Just do it!" shot back Sylvester.

"There must be a thousand videos in here. Why couldn't we be in Pawn Videos, instead of King? You know, someplace with the smallest X-rated department on earth?"

"Shut up and start checking. If that asshole Charlie sent us on a wild goose chase, I'll finish off the job and kill him. Cisco will kill us if we don't find that Mantle card."

Frank responded. "I'm not too worried. Cisco's quack is worse than his whack." No one paid any attention to Sylvester and Frank. The two worked quickly,

efficiently. Their approach was neat at first; pull a video box off the shelf, check for the card, and return the video to its slot after finding nothing. One by one they were like pistons shooting boxes in and out. As the afternoon wore on, they became sloppier. An errant box hit the floor. It was not picked up. Soon, the floor was littered with videos. Frank stole a glance at Sylvester. Sylvester shrugged his shoulders and motioned for Frank to continue. The number of remaining unchecked videos dwindled, as did the line for Gigi Geestring's autograph.

"Shit!" exclaimed Frank. "Card isn't here. I knew that son of a bitch was lying to us."

Sylvester kicked a stack of videos. Gigi momentarily looked his way, then stood up and stretched. Sylvester turned away from Gigi and toward Frank. "Um, right. Maybe we missed some. Maybe there are other videos we didn't see? Let's ask that nervous cashier movie critic."

"Waste of time," responded Frank. "This is the porno room. This is where all the porn is. All Charlie rents is porn, so he lied to us. What the hell are we going to tell Cisco?"

Frank followed Sylvester to the cashier's counter. "Scuse me," said Sylvester. The clerk looked up from a copy of The Hollywood Reporter. "Do you have any other porno...I mean adult entertainment videos in addition to the ones in that room back there?"

"I'm afraid not. We are bound by law to segregate our adult videos. I'm sure you understand? We own and rent over..."

Sylvester had to jump in. "Nothing? No others in the store? Did you rent any, like in the last few minutes?"

The clerk thought for a moment. "No. We've been so busy with our superstar Gigi Geestring here. Did you gentlemen get a chance to obtain an autographed copy of Gigi's Geespot? I haven't seen the movie yet, but I hear it's..."

"That's not why we're here. You're sure there are no other videos?"

He rubbed his nose. "None. Only these three back here that were returned this morning." He turned to find them. "Just haven't had a chance to restock them, with all that's been going on here today. You know Gigi is such a big..."

"What? Where?" Sylvester practically jumped over the counter.

"They're here somewhere. Let's see...oh, here they are." The clerk grabbed three videos that sat next to the day's incoming mail. "Here."

Sylvester grabbed them and looked quickly.

"Well?" asked Frank.

"Nothing! Shit!"

Sylvester and Frank were about to head toward the exit door when two colors, light blue and yellow, caught the corner of Frank's eye. He stopped short. Sylvester bumped into him. "What are you stopping for? Move."

"Wait a second," said Frank. He pointed into the garbage can behind the counter. "What's that?" He could see the interlocking "N" and "Y." It was like a skewer through his pupils.

The cashier looked behind him. "What?"

"In the garbage can. What is that?"

"Um...nothing. Nothing. Look, I'm busy. I'm really..."

Frank grabbed him by the collar and nearly yanked him over the cash register. "Listen to me, you little shit, and listen good. What's in the garbage can?"

The Siskel and Ebert wannabe swallowed hard. "Oh, that. It's nothing. Just an old baseball card."

"What?" Sylvester said. "A card? What kind of card? What'd you do to it?"

"Okay, okay. Take it easy, will ya? Jeez. It's nothing. See, I found an old card in one of the returned videos."

"And you cut it up?"

The clerk had a peculiar smile. "I can lose my job for this. You see, Gigi got here early and she wanted to score some coke. Said she needed something to help get her through this stupid signing event. Her words. I, well, I didn't want to disappoint her. We...I didn't have anything to use, and well, you see, I found the card, cut it up and used it to divide up the blow and we..."

"Holy shit!" was all Sylvester could say. "I don't believe this. Let's get the hell out of here."

The two headed for the door. The balding man they had spoken to earlier while he had waited in line greeted them. The man was all smiles. "So, how did you two make out? I got my copy signed." He proudly held up his video. "Now I'm going to wait around a little while and see if..." he winked, "I can, you know, get a piece of the real thing from Gigi."

Sylvester ignored him and continued outside. Frank stopped, and then spoke. "I heard they sold 499 videos, so this is your lucky day. You just got fucked!" Frank winked back.

"Well, are we just going to sit here, or what?" asked Frank as the two men remained in the video store parking lot. Frank rolled down the passenger side window.

"I'm thinking."

"Good," said Frank. "Hopefully not about the Monte Carlo we are supposed to be driving back in right now because that isn't happening. But I can see you trading this heap in for a good 10-year old Gremlin with brake problems." He waited for a response but got none.

The motor roared.

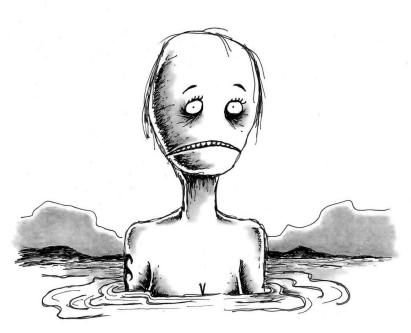
"This noise is really bad with the window open!" cried Frank. He shouted over the unmuffled engine. "Whaddya think old Disco Dog asshole will say when we tell him we don't have the card or his cash? Not that I really care, but you know he'll be pissed."

"Not if we found Charlie dead, he won't." Sylvester glanced back at the Mickey Mantle model bat on the backseat. "This time, I'm going to smack two balls out of 'The Park."



Submerge

even in your Pill fueled nightmares



You're struggling to submerge.



LULLABY

Don't fear the shadow of the night
The cold dark stranger at your door
He's just a ghost he is not real
And has not come to haunt your dreams
He only wants to stay a while
For comfort in the lonely hours
And when his silent time has passed
He'll thank you as he fades away

—richard schnap



SEXUAL PERVERSION PAGE 141

She thought they'd buried her too early but the earth around her was wet and light

she thrust her hand out and discovered an ocean black, full of silt never occurred to her to wonder how she got there

keeping her eyes open
hurt like hell
silt and no light
she she closed them
flailed, searched
for air
until her lungs filled
with the blackness around her

she came to on shore shivered in a torn robe poem clutched between her teeth

she is scared to go to sleep again tonight wonders if the poems are worth this new rattle that moans in her lungs

-robert beveridge

Parattu Beevi's Face

Her face is a preindependent Indian make. Its pale white reminds of the British rule. Red rash on her cheek seems a remnant of old blood-shed during the despotic rule.

Her orthodox society had nipped her love-pimple, but its hole remains.

A miniature portrait of her parched paddy farm in an old drought gets visible in a mole below her nose. A stitch scar lies on her eyebrow like the carcass of a worry-mouse.

There are wrinkles as the tree rings with imprints of life on her face.

Now she looks at the hypocrisy around with a cauliflower-frown. Today's plastic life doesn't leave behind any impression on her visage.



—fabiyas mv

an open letter from still waters

by darin z. krogh

Most people, including you, probably fall into one of two categories. Either you blow your top when you get angry—or you are the kind who smolders.

We who quietly smolder get frustrated with you who blow your tops. Why? Because five minutes later you've forgotten that you were angry.

We waste hours festering over a provoking incident. You vent (outrageously) and then you quickly return to your former selves. Damn you. We "smolderers" just can't seem to get over it.

And those of us who do the slow burn are at a huge disadvantage when we go face-to-face with one of your emotional eruptions. You go off on us and a fire starts within us

But we don't let it show; no, we'd rather quietly stew in our juices and brood over how to get back at you.

Meanwhile you've returned to your happy ways, oblivious to the consequences of your outburst, you sons-of-bitches!

After a while you figure out that we are angry but you can't suppose why. You don't realize that your asinine tantrum caused us to feel this way.

And then you really make us angry. Since you cannot understand why we are angry, you tell us that we are being "passive-aggressive," a term coined by some self-justifying prick psychologist with a short fuse who pissed off everybody around him.

Passive-aggressive, my ass! We were just fine until you fucked with us!

The next time you try that bullshit, I've got a little promise for you. We're gonna get a gun and shoot your goddamn mercurial asses.

Fuck you everywhere, all you explosive bastards!



Malevolence in Passivity

Don't Be Doormant:

Resist the...

Hostility in Complacency,

Resentment in Sufficiency

Malevolence in Passivity;

Shrug off the-

Comfort in Animosity.

Or Snugness in Antipathy,

Remember the..

Convenience of Enmity;

Nothing Worse than a

Detestation in its Initial Facility?

Respond in full-

Conclusion.

Simple?

Don't Be A Doormat!

—bob eager



drizzle into me, lazy, then pick up force as the clouds darken the first time

the first time you uncovered your frail body for me showed me the butterfly at the ebb tide of your back

your arms around me as I, sick, emptied myself into your brown plastic garbage can

the time I asked you as we lay in bed on a lazy Sunday to marry me how you said yes

when you told me that you slept with her how a man could never give you that kind of pleasure make you feel so feminine

how I cut my fists on shattered windows when you left with an "I don't know you any more"

these moments
hail down
with the force
of golf balls
shatter their way
into my memories
so that even cheap wine
can't quench them

—robert beveridge

For Laura Lee Zerns

Pharmanonphobia



I depend on my meds, need them on a daily basis All kind of tablets To regulate my blood pressure, my heartbeat, my respiration That's why it's important to count my pills accurately Five pills in the morning to get a good start of the day Two pills in the evening to effectuate a healthy digestion And, when needed, a pill to prevent insomnia Sometimes I get confused Have to re-check if I took the right medication at the right time My little box contains all my life savers in a particular order If my preparation wasn't right something bad might happen, so I have to be sure Besides my chemical worries I live a wonderful life without excitement and stress No room for love though Since I'm on blood thinners I can't afford a bleeding heart

daginne aignend



I35-E, October 14

I haul him down the ditch by bent and twisted horn

like handlebars of oak wheezing blood and flailing

an errant, broken beast.

I didn't swerve in time to make a difference

and failure burns heavy burst from coffee seeping

acridly, through denim.

-erika lumen



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 belovèd 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-removed 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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A KEEN EYE

by craig moorhead

Dang. Professor Harmody had really been through the wringer. Couldn't have been a nicer lady, especially for somebody who spent most of her life at the college. What a thankless job. And I should know—I dropped out of high school at sixteen and there wasn't one time between the day I started to the day I left that I felt thankful for any of it.

But teaching wasn't the cause for Prof. Harmody's sad state. Her husband had just passed about six months before. It wasn't even natural causes. One of the Harmody's gas pipes sprung a leak one night while they was sleeping. Prof. Harmody was the lucky one—she woke up before it was too late and ended up spending the next two weeks in the hospital. But Mr. Harmody never stood a chance.

So I wasn't sure what to expect when the old lady called me up that morning. The only times she'd ever called me before was to ask if I'd give her lawn a cut and here we was, halfway through November. Truth is I ain't good with sentimental whatnot. So I was praying she didn't want to talk to me about her feelings, as a woman is prone to do.

But then before she hung up she said, "It will be a bit of dark business, but I think you're the man for the job." So I gathered that meant it'd be something more physical than emotional, which set me at ease.

What Prof. Harmody didn't know when she called me up was that I already had a pretty bad feeling some kind of dark business was going on in town. For one thing, people's pets had gone missing lately. Now if it was just one or two, you could blame it on a coyote, maybe. But they had been disappearing about one a week

since March. The Vanders' boxer, Max, was the first to go. Then John Granger's two bull mastiffs—and those are not animals you easily lose sight of. Even the stray cats had seemed to thin out. Not a lot of people would notice that kind of thing, but I had always had a keen eye for the mysterious.

Most of my neighbors would have said it had something to do with Gerald Wells, that kook that lived out on Piney Branch Road. A while back, my paps told me Gerald had seen his mama, daddy, and baby sister get all tore up in that bad twister in '72 and that did a real number on him. Spent a bunch of years in a mental hospital and then they said he was okay enough, so now he lives in a shack on the outside of town. Anytime something bad happened that nobody could explain, they'd send the Sheriff out to talk to him. He never got took to jail, though. Guess that's worth something.

When I got to Prof. Harmody's big ol' brick mansion, I found out she didn't want to talk to me about any of that, though. No, her problem was that someone had abused her husband's grave on two occasions. The first time, this someone had dug into the mound of dirt and then knocked the tombstone in half, leaving it soaking in a pile of mud. The second time, they'd left a big iron bar sticking straight up out of the ground, right where the old man was buried. I figured it was teenagers, but Prof. Harmody was trying to lay it on Gerald's doorstep. The old lady was real riled up about it, as most people would be. She was a frail old crow and wasn't up to much revenging, but I could tell if she had a younger woman's body, someone would be bloody pulp, for sure.

No doubt Prof. Harmody had called me because she knew me to be a bit of an amateur detective. It was me, after all, who out what hooligans had stole our high school mascot when I was in the 10th grade. I got wrote up in the school newspaper and everything. It was a big deal. I figured that's why neither one of us ever brought up calling in the Sheriff.

So I told her, "All right, Prof. Harmody. I'll catch found them that did this to your husband's grave." And even though she looked like she was all tore up about it, she squeezed my hand pretty hard for an oldster and told me, "God bless you, son." I've never been much for church, but that felt pretty good anyhow.

So that night I set up shop in the Hamilton Presbyterian Church cemetery. I hadn't told nobody about me and Prof. Harmody's agreement. I figured if somebody got tipped off, I'd end up sitting in a cold, dead graveyard all night for nothing.

The first thing I did was chain together the gate on the yonder end of the graveyard. That way, there was only one way a body could walk in or out. Then I used a deer stand to set myself up in a tree, so I could see both Mr. Harmody's grave and the entrance to the cemetery. After that, alls I had to do was watch and wait.

I took a minute to get the lay of the land. There was a little cinderblock building in the center of the graveyard, about fifty paces from my tree. Graves and markers stood all around it, apparently no rhyme or reason to how they was planted. Almost directly under my tree was Mr. Harmody's grave. And hat's off to the graves keeper—it didn't look like his grave had been messed with a'tall.

Then about a half-hour after sundown, I heard a rattling at the yonder gate. I froze up and listened. It weren't violent, but it sounded purposeful. When the rattling stopped and I didn't hear nothing else—not even footsteps—I figured it could've just been the wind. Then I realized I was holding my breath for some stupid reason. I blew it out and laughed at myself for getting spooked.

Some more time passed and I got to thinking about all those missing pets. For some of them people, their pets is like their children. I can't imagine just losing a child like that, just gone in the night. And how about them that took 'em? What kind of a person is that? Some pets might not mind so much, but I'd imagine there'd be plenty that would howl something awful. How could you sleep at night knowing that poor critter was missing their master so bad? I can't imagine somebody being that cold. Just the thought of a person like that started to put me on edge.

I thought maybe if I could solve the mystery of Mr. Harmody's grave, I'd move on to the case of the missing pets. Could be it wouldn't be that hard to do and then I'd have three solved mysteries under my belt. I thought about how Brandy Wooldridge would look at me, then. Not as just some ol' grimy janitor—but something more. Somebody important.

Right then I realized I'd been staring up at the stars instead of down at Mr. Harmody's grave place. And sure enough, when I looked down, I saw there was somebody standing down there, right at the foot of his grave. Whoever it was, they wasn't moving. They was just standing there, staring at the ground like they expected something to come up out of it. I guess I didn't half expect anybody to show up, but still I thought if they did, it would be some drunk high schoolers at worst. And either way—what kind of weirdo goes sneaking around cemeteries in the middle of the night?

I grabbed my Louisville Slugger and shimmied down the tree without making a sound. Nothing more than a squirrel would make, anyway. I was always good with that sort of thing. And sure enough, whoever it was didn't pay me no mind at all—he just went right on staring at the ground.

So I come around the tree and I had the bat up in front of me, ready to swing if that was how he wanted it. I ain't afraid to get my hands dirty.

But he don't turn around and I mean I was close enough to tap him on the shoulder with that bat. So then that made me a little nervous, because on the one hand he might be hard of hearing, but on the other, he might know I'm right there, but he also knows I'm the one ought to be scared.

So I cleared my throat and I said, "Mister, I suggest you get away from that there grave right now if you know what's—"

"You ever get the feeling something strange is happening around here?" this guy said.

And that catches me off guard because, I mean, yeah, I do.

Then he turned and looked at me and I recognized the face immediately. I'd seen it a couple times in the local paper—always the same shot because there was probably only one shot of him in existence.

It was Gerald Wells.

I took a step back and gasped like some goldurn sissy. I even nearly lost a hold of the bat. But Gerald didn't make a move for me at all. He just watched my reaction, studied it like he had been studying the ground minutes before.

Once I got my senses back, I raised up my bat again and looked him square in the eye.

"What're you doing out here in the middle of the night?" I said to him.

"I was asked to come out here and see if I could find out who it was that's been messing with Mr. Harmody's grave."

And I said, "Hold on a minute, now. I was the one who was asked to come out here and find the vandals of this here grave. By Prof. Harmody herself."

And Gerald was just staring at me, with a skeptical look on his face. "What in tarnation are you talking about?" he said. "Prof. Harmody asked me to find the culprits."

Now I figured he was trying to mess with my head cause that didn't make no kind of sense. And I wasn't gonna have any of it.

Then we both said—and I ain't kidding about this—at the exact same time we both said, "Why would she ask the town kook?"

Well, Gerald nearly jumped a foot in the air at that—lookin' real agitated. And I saw he was reaching for something in his waistband. So I figured before he got it, I should swing my bat. BUNT.

He fell straight to the ground like somebody flipped his switch. I checked his waistband for a gun or weapon. Nothing. Maybe he was just reaching for his phone.

I stood there for a second, puzzling over what he said. Gerald Wells called me the town kook?

Well, there wasn't no point in stewing over the ramblings of a loony. I'd haul him back to Prof. Harmody and she'd set everything straight, I figured.

Not three hours later I was standing out at Prof. Harmody's back basement door. I figured that would be the most hidden place to handle our business. I had Gerald wrapped in a tarp to make it easier to move him. I drove most of the way, but the last half mile was a walk across a deserted field, so the plastic tarp made the work real easy.

While I waited for Prof. Harmody to open up, I got to puzzling over the fact that the old lady turned out to be right. It was Gerald Wells after all. Then I realized if I'd had my wits about me, I would've asked him some questions before I knocked him cold. I thought for a second about making up a story to tell the professor, but making up stories was never my strong suit.

It didn't matter, though, because a'fore I could've thought of anything, there was Prof. Harmody, opening the door in her robe and bed slippers, looking pleasantly surprised.

"Good evening, Prof. Harmody," I said, with a big ol' satisfied grin. "I thought you might like to know that I caught Gerald Wells at your husband's grave, preparing to do who knows what to it."

She looked down at Gerald—who looked like a crumpled up tarp more than

anything else—and she said, "Of course, of course. Well, bring him on inside, then, young man."

I dragged the tarp into the basement and looked around. It was about what you'd expect an old chemistry professor's basement to look like—lots of glass stuff and tubes and whatnot.

I sat down in a lawn chair leaning against the wall just to take the load off my aching feet. Dragging a body around is some tough work. Especially when it's a big of bird like Gerald Wells.

"That must've been some hard work. Can I get you something to drink?" she asked me.

And I said, "Why, sure, Prof. Harmody! That'd really hit the spot!"

Prof. Harmody hustled on out of the room and I heard her going up her old creaky stairs and I got to thinking about what was in store for me from here on out. This was a much bigger deal than finding some ol' mascot. I was righting wrongs, now. I was doling out justice. Heck, maybe I could be the Sheriff, I thought. Maybe I'll run. I just might.

Then something came over me. Don't know how else to explain it except to call it dread. I ain't felt dread too many times in my life, but boy oh boy, I felt it then—sitting under that old buzzing light, a body laying on the floor. I started to wonder what somebody might say if they walked in the door right that second and saw me there. I'd probably get hauled off to jail and nobody would believe what good I done.

Prof. Harmody's feet scuffled down them stairs again and she walked in with a glass of water for me.

"Here you go, my boy. I hope you're not in a hurry to get home. I've got something to talk to you about."

I took a big ol' swig of the water and felt the cold go all the way down. Then I said, "Nah, I'm not in a hurry, Prof. Harmody. What's on your mind?"

Prof. Harmody smiled and walked over in front of me, like she was standing up on a stage.

"All right. Well, again, I want to say that you did a marvelous job this evening. I'll be honest with you—I didn't expect it, but I certainly hoped for it. And here you are. It was all sort of a test, and you passed with flying colors. A man who will go off and do something like this after just being asked—and not even ask for money—well, I believe that man is a special man."

Shoot. I didn't even think to ask for no money.

Prof. Harmody went on.

"I need such a man for a very special and ongoing bit of work." Prof. Harmody paused and smiled. It was such a long pause that I wasn't sure if she had already told me what she wanted to tell me. I was about to say "I accept, Prof. Harmody," when she started talking again.

"Behind these bars... is a miracle," she said.

That's when I noticed the bars behind Prof. Harmody. Tell the truth, half the basement looked like a goldurn old west jail cell. Big iron bars went from the ceiling

and dug down into the concrete floor. There was one big door held closed with a padlock so big it looked like something phony, like something from a cartoon.

On the floor in one corner, I saw some pet collars laying in a pile that looked like they'd been chewed up by something fierce.

"A true miracle. It might be startling at first, but once you get used to it, I think you'll agree—it's more beautiful than anything you can imagine."

With that, Prof. Harmody wrapped her hand around a big electric switch on the wall and heaved it upwards until it clicked. I heard something that sounded real heavy squeal and slide and then clang into place. Prof. Harmody didn't move. She didn't say a word. She looked like she was on the edge of her seat, though, like a woman waiting to see if her pitch was gonna get her a strike.

I realized I was barely even breathing again, just out of the sheer anticipation of whatever was gonna happen next.

Then I heard a rustling from the cage and out of the dark crawled this pale, wrinkled thing. Two arms and two legs, but all hunched over and twisted up. Drool runnin' out of its mouth. If it was human, it had been down a few miles of bad road—covered in sores, slick, and shiny.

It came closer and I could see it had these eyes that looked like they was dipped in milk. The lines on its face seemed real familiar, too. I couldn't place it, but I was almost sure I'd seen this thing before. I think I would've remembered seeing this thing.

But then when it lurched to the side and the light hit it just right, it dawned on me.

I said "Mr. Harmody?"

The thing snapped its head in my direction, looking right at me. I ain't afraid to tell you that I felt a bolt go right through my spine at that. It weren't like when a human person looks at you. It felt like something went into me, down into my stomach, and made it all cold.

"That's right. It's my dear husband."

"But... he's alive?"

"Well... not really. Here, help me with this."

I looked over and saw Prof. Harmody lifting up Gerald's legs. Her old bony frame was struggling just with that small load. So I went over and got my hands into Gerald's armpits and lifted him.

"Where to?"

"We just need to get him as close to the cage as we can. Right in front of the door."

So we bobbled and stumbled over to the cage and laid Gerald down next to it, right on top of a big panel of wood. Mr. Harmody lunged at me and I jumped back, trying my best to keep my cool.

"Stand well away from the bars. He's a quick one!" Prof. Harmody said as she pulled a chain that was hanging from the ceiling.

And then lickety-split, that big iron door lifted up off the ground and the panel of wood underneath Gerald lifted up, tipping him into the cage. The door slammed back down again and what I heard then could just about put you off eating forever. Mr. Harmody done tore into poor Gerald like a lion into whatever them lions eat on them nature shows. I heard stuff tearing and splashing and bones popping and breaking.

Oh, it was awful.

I couldn't look at him, but I looked at Prof. Harmody and she had a smile on her face the whole time, like she was watching a child eat all its vegetables.

Finally, all them sounds stopped. I never was more relieved in my whole life. It took me a few minutes to get control of my breath. And then I thought of something.

And I said, "Hey, Prof. Harmody, Gerald said that you asked him to go to the graveyard, too. Is that true?"

And she said, "Yes, it is."

So I said, "But you asked me to go."

And Prof. Harmody looked at me with a smile and went, "Like I said, it was a test. I knew the better man would win, and he has."

"But... a test for what, exactly?" I asked her.

And she said, "For this. To feed my husband."

Now, this took me a minute—to tell the truth. Was this old lady asking me—"To kill people?"

"Oh, no. No, no, no. Just as you've done here. You didn't kill Gerald. Mr. Harmody did, isn't that right?"

Oh, boy, my head was a-swimmin' then. I knew Prof. Harmody would be a good employer and she certainly had the money for it, but I just didn't think I could stomach that kind of work.

"Prof. Harmody, I appreciate your offer, ma'am. I do. But I'm not sure this is the kind of thing I would be good at."

Prof. Harmody's happy mood seemed to sour, then, and she nodded her head at me.

"Yes, well," she said, nodding her head. "I understand. That's disappointing, of course."

"I sure am sorry, Prof. Harmody."

"There's one last bit of business, though."

"What's that?"

"You know about Mr. Harmody now."

I turn and look at the cage, at Mr. Harmody all crouched down, blood all around his mouth, looking at me with those white eyes.

I heard a scrape behind me, something heavy and metal, against the concrete. I was able to turn just enough to see Prof. Harmody's body in motion before I felt a sharp pain on the back of my head that was there one second and then gone.

I never found out what happened next.



Hebrew in the Mulberry Trees

Flowers had seizures the day the psychedelic starship dipped into our skies, & men leaning on hoes had teeth extracted by its force field. Children were blown into the tops of mulberry trees, & started speaking in Hebrew of something warped & warring, warning their mothers to run toward the caves before myriad alien men could tear the songs right out of their cherry mouths. The elders of the tribe then dreamed dreams that would shatter windows, reverse the curse, startle the marauders onto another black path far, far from these crystal seas.

-darrell lindsey

Pressing Clouds

Mauve grave clouds Pressing their weights on the ground Their grudge is about to burst Only stopped by the thin glass of tear. No moon, no stars, only lonely men Dragging their own to find, Carrying heavy weights on their shoulders Unidentified. And I gulping down the way Remembered the day The elongated noon When I lost my mom. The time that was gray dear The sky, my ragged boots, Stopped me shy To join my laughing peers. The darkening clouds crying crows, Enlarged boots with peeking holes for me To see you from afar Damned shy and free.

—mehdi deilami

[Sea going]

Sea going

Leviathan of Metamorphosis ha!-swallows men as Jonahs and spits them out as fluid gargled, changed.

My eight-day excursion was marked by three of storms. I staggered in the wake of that first sea voyage. Landlubber once again, my legs kept wobbling and I'd hallucinate the rocking of the ship under me every two hundred steps or so. Once I swore my kitchen floor was rubber.

The wake effect did fade, but not everything: for I can never pass by piers without pausing, or look at oceans, ships, or ports, or bristle-sniff salt air or hear a harbor's rote without a surge of some queasy, thrilling imagination.

—james b. nicola

HE BEULY OF THE BEAST by arthur davis

I'd walked past Scully's Bookstore every day on my way to work since moving to the South Side of Chicago a year ago. My job was adequate, nothing special—just as I perceived myself to be. And with few friends to count and lacking the social graces to evolve beyond the fiber of my religious upbringing, I kept my fantasies and disappointments to myself.

I usually glanced in at Scully's, then crossed the street to catch the Q32 bus, which would snake its way along the outskirts of the famous Chicago Loop and spew me out a block away from the firm of Murphy & Morgan, one of the less notable accounting firms. It was easy, straightforward work, and I was glad to have it, with the flood of soldiers returning after the war.

Why I turned to reflect that brisk December morning upon the still darkened bookstore, in spite of the fact that my bus was approaching, I do not know.

I could make out movement in the back of the store. There were a few light bulbs dangling from the ceiling like nooses waiting to strangle spent fireflies. As the wind swept around me, there was a mustiness that increased in intensity as I came closer to the window. It was thick with the scent of the earth and all that crawled and wiggled below.

Again, there was movement. It flashed in the deepest recesses of the store. There were aisles and aisles of disjointed, teetering bookshelves stacked to the rafters. Ramshackle and decrepit, Scully's looked like Charles Dickens had a hand in its design.

A grayish haze enveloped the center of the store. I half expected a bent and wizened wizard to shuffle out of the dimness and wave me away with a magic wand.

My hand clutched the brass doorknob. It was warm to the touch while all around was caught in the grip of another dismal, Chicago freeze. The knob turned freely in my hand. I pushed open the door a crack, then a few more inches, then a full foot toward the unknown.

"Hello," I called out.

I closed the door and listened to the distant clock chime ring itself quiet. I announced myself again. The floor creaked beneath my feet. The air clung still. Although winter was roaming the streets, you couldn't tell it by the warmth in the store that lay still as the dead.

Scully's Bookstore was already what I had hoped it would be, and more. I stood entranced. I was curious and comforted at once.

I moved past one of three large oak tables strewn with papers, stuffed envelopes, ledgers, and record books. Boxes sat unopened. Invoices, financial records, and correspondence were scattered like sagebrush in the wind. And dust had collected everywhere, a seal of authenticity and antiquity.

Standing in the middle of the confusion was a large cash register that might have been as old as the building in which it was housed. It was made of brass and exotic burnished woods and what had to be-to my disbelief-gold-capped register keys.

"Is someone there?" a faint echo sounded from a distant aisle.

"Stephen Connors," I answered, but just barely.

The shuffle of tired feet against an older floor came closer until a small man framed into view. A cassock of unkempt white hair fell over his shoulders and onto a sweater that was as old as I was.

"Cold day out there," he said with a grimace of a smile and wended his way behind the desk to a tall stool that he mounted with more dexterity. He patted down his trousers and glanced up. "What brings you to my shop so early, or do you have nothing better to do with your life than wander the streets?"

What engaged me first was his voice, clear and distinct and far younger than I had expected. "I was just passing by."

"Looking for what?" the old man said, shuffling papers and stacks of books as if he was suddenly capable of instilling order to the confusion.

"I'm not sure."

He glanced up without taking real notice of me. "A man needs to know where he is going if he ever expects to get there."

"I agree."

"So your interest in my store is an accident?"

"I pass your store every day on my way to work."

"Curiosity is good. Curiosity is how all things begin: inventions and explorations and adventures. Without that spark there is only a sullen tomorrow. Henley. Peter Christopher Henley, to be exact," he said. His radiant blue eyes were encircled by the curse of age.

"You have a wonderful shop here, Peter Christopher Henley."

"It serves the purpose."

"Which is?" I asked, more out of politeness.

"Are you really interested?"

What could I say? I had already missed my bus, and the possibility of rushing out to make the next, or to think of an excuse for being so late, never entered my mind. "I am."

At ease within his bones, and his store, Peter Christopher Henley offered an appreciative nod. "Then take off your jacket and I'll show you around."

It was only when he asked me to remove my jacket that I realized how really warm it was in the shop. I folded it respectfully and set it on the side of the desk and followed him into the belly of the beast. It was a large store. Much larger inside than might be assumed from the street.

Every step drew a sigh from the uneven wooden floor. As we inched through the aisles, he explained with measured gesture and great pride the expanse of his collections.

"Who was Scully?" I asked as we came to a flight of narrow stone stairs.

Henley braced himself for the descent. We moved slowly downward, taking cautious, deliberate steps down two flights. He stopped at the bottom. "He was the original owner. Nasty, cantankerous old man. Never liked him. He had bad habits, bad breath, and a worse disposition. Smoked nasty, short black cigars. Took a decade to get rid of the stink after he passed away."

"Then how did you get here?"

"Quite by accident, much like you," he said and switched on the overhead light as a bell chimed overhead. "Customer."

"How can you tell?"

"The bell, didn't you hear it?"

Of course I did, I just chose to ignore it. My tour was over. He switched off the basement light. We marched back upstairs and moved toward the front of the store. Henley wished me a good day and tended to the two librarians anxious with questions.

After making dutiful apologies to my manager, my day passed in fits and spurts and lingering doubt. By the time I got home that night, I was so tired it felt like I had been without sleep for a week. I fell into bed without supper, so consumed by the events of the morning that sleep and whatever followed only added to my fatigue.

I awoke the next morning too early for work, or for much else. I consumed two bowls of warm cereal, and coffee, and sifted through the sequence of questions that had sprung from my encounter with Peter Christopher Henley.

The day broke as cold as the one that preceded it, only a little less windy. However, in Chicago, less windy was a relative description. I buttoned up, left my apartment with gloves and cap this time, and made my way along with a few familiar faces toward the bus stop.

Scully's was cloaked in familiar shades of gray, black and dismal. I checked my watch. It was exactly the same time I had approached the shop yesterday, and yet it seemed that more than a day had passed. The street and the shop looked older, more worn and weakened.

I crossed the street and stepped up onto the sidewalk. It was pitch black within. I moved to the door, grasped the knob and turned it. There was no life or movement within.

"Makes no sense," I muttered. I repeated this mantra all the way to work and several times after dinner and through whatever dreams plagued me long into the next daybreak.

The shop was shuttered and dark the next day and the day after. I inquired at the butcher shop across the street, who confirmed that the "old man" was prone to not showing up every day at regular hours. "Nice enough. The guy keeps pretty much to himself," the butcher said. "He doesn't bother anybody. That's the way it should be."

I also learned that Henley came to the shop thirty-eight years ago, a week to the day before Scully passed away at ninety-three years old. Henley came from a small town in western Ohio. It was believed, if somewhat romantically I suppose, that he had been a poet.

I made my way to work and was greeted by a dyspeptic manager waiting at my unoccupied desk. I was put on notice that if I continued to disrespect the principles and routine of the firm, I would be dismissed.

Considering I was a hard worker and contributed to the success of several of

our larger clients, the threat came as a surprise. What didn't was my indifference to losing my job. Getting fired from a respected firm could permanently affect my career, especially if I decided to remain in Chicago. While it was hardly glamorous, it was secure and at times interesting. As one of my early mentors had said, metaphorically, "The books of a company reveal the lifeblood of their soul and spirit."

Saturday came and, even for eager junior accountants, it was a prescribed day of rest and an opportunity to probe beyond the shell of my own fears and darkest suspicions, and to try to come to terms with why was I so driven with curiosity.

At exactly 10:00 a.m. on the following Saturday, there was a steady light shining within the bookstore. Relieved and delighted, I opened the door and called out, "Henley?"

Clutter was an anathema to me, the confusion unacceptable and a clear disregard for order and sound managerial practices. Everything in the store was in a state of disarray. I called out again, refusing to accept that the lights went on and the front door was opened by magic, a word that had come to mind many times over the last few days.

"Stephen?" the soft whisper called out. "Is that you?"

I advanced along one of the aisles until I spotted Henley sitting on a short stool with a book clasped tightly in his hands. I knelt at his side. "Are you all right?"

"Better now," he said as I helped him to his feet. "I can't move as fast as I once did."

"And still do," I said with some affection.

"Sometimes, and not bad for a man a few years shy of a hundred."

I stopped in my tracks. "A hundred?"

"Have most of my own teeth too," he said, grinning from ear to ear. "And all of my own hair, white shambles as it is."

I self-consciously touched my forehead. My father had gone bald early. My older baby brother, Charlie, over in Evanston, was not yet thirty and he was bald. It didn't bother Charlie's wife, though it did make him feel vulnerable.

"Shouldn't you be thinking of retiring? Getting some rest?"

"This is not the time for rest," he said, mounting the stool behind his desk.

I watched Henley catch his breath. A hundred years old? "Do you know why they throw rice at weddings when the marriage ceremony is concluded and the bride and groom are leaving the church?"

"No," Henley said. From the look of him, it was difficult to tell if he was being polite or patient. "Hopefully you're going to tell me."

"I once read that it was an old English custom designed to distract the Devil from interfering with the happiness of the newly married couple. The rice is meant as food for the Devil, a distraction, so he'll be preoccupied and leave the couple alone so they can escape his attention."

"And do you believe that?"

"In the custom?"

"That, and the part about the Devil. Do you believe in the Devil? In a Satan?"

"I'm not a very religious man, so I suppose a part of me doesn't believe in the existence of such a creature," I answered, curious as to why he didn't ask, why the riddle, and why about such an obvious subject.

"But is there a part of you that does?"

"The part of me that spent nearly a dozen years in Catholic school listening to tales of doom and damnation if you fail to do or say the right things. It was always about fear and the elusive reward of the afterlife."

"Life is a little more complicated than how many 'Hail Marys' you chant."

"Is that why there is no religion section in Scully's?"

Henley nodded appreciatively. "Few people would take note of that."

"And still fewer would get a tour like I did."

"Most, in fact, don't."

I had hoped the old man would mention where he'd been for the last week but, instead, decided on a more direct approach. "This store and you are all I've thought about, Mister Henley, if I'm not being too forward."

"You sound like I did, many years ago."

"Thirty-eight years ago?"

"When I moved into the neighborhood with the intention of retiring."

"What changed your mind?"

"We're all searching for something that few of us understand. A reason to get up in the morning, a passion, an experience that will challenge our heart and soul. An opportunity to prove ourselves, and give greater meaning to life. I came here to retire and met Scully much in the same way as you've met me, by accident or chance, though I do not believe in either. I walked by, came in, and disliked him from the beginning. I couldn't help myself. I was as drawn to this place and, as you seem to be, equally unable to grasp why. Things like that happen. You see a woman across the street and know you're going to spend the rest of your life with her. It happens."

"Not to me," I said. "At least not with women."

"Women are a most wondrous experience. They make us so much better than who we are alone."

"Then you're married?"

"I was, a lifetime ago. To the most, dear, sweet person you could imagine. She passed away and I couldn't stay in our home any longer. I came to Chicago, not around here at first, and tried to make a new life for myself. I was a carpenter many years ago. Built quite a few homes in my time. Hard to believe it, looking at me, more withered than most. Bent back and all, I'm quite good with my hands."

"You're a lucky man."

"And now I have all these friends," he said looking down the rows of shelves, "who need my care."

I'd never embraced literature, instead doing as little as possible to pass related courses in high school and college. I suddenly realized they might have made me think and inquire, making me a better, more fulfilled person.

"It's cold outside."

"I've never gotten used to these winters," the old man said.

"And yet, the doorknob on the street side of your door is warm in the coldest weather."

"You noticed?"

"Anybody would."

The old man let the phone ring itself back to silence and slipped off of the stool. "Not really."

"And do most not realize that the back of your shop is warmer than the front and that your basement is uncomfortably warm in the middle of winter in a store that has no radiators?"

"You're a very observant young man."

"Where are you going?"

"I have to set up for a book club, pay my bills, get out some correspondence, and place my orders. It never stops."

"Can I help?" I asked, unable to accept that the old man decided my time in the store had ended.

Before he disappeared down one of the aisles, he pointed to a broom and suggested that I take a turn. I bounded off the stool, grabbed the broom, and began sweeping.

When I finished, Henley asked me to log in an order of books from one of the publishers and to set the books on the shelves, which I did, mentioning that his system of record keeping and posting to his account ledger could use some updating. To my delight the old man welcomed my advice.

By noon, Scully's Bookstore was busy with the curious and the collector. The phone was ringing. Questions popped from all directions. For the first time in my life, I felt a real purpose, of being a part of something special. It amused me to be so helpful, taking orders and figuring out how the cash register worked and guiding people to places in the recesses of the shop as though I had spent a lifetime here.

I made Henley an offer to work there on Saturdays for next to nothing, which, if my business instincts were any good, was probably all the shop could afford to pay. Henley beamed agreement.

If Sunday was supposed to be a day of reflection and religious consideration, a respite where you set aside time to communicate with your spiritual inner voice, I was instilled with a sense of energy and rebirth in ways I could not reconcile.

At Murphy & Morgan I was more diligent and dedicated to my daily tasks. Even my manager, who was more likely to be the Devil incarnate than anything brooding in Scully's basement, cautiously praised the results of my heightened efforts.

The next Saturday, my second as a part-time employee, Scully's was even more frenetic. There was a morning book club reading and one scheduled for early afternoon, in addition to a large shipment, which had to be recorded and the volumes set on the shelves after they were priced out.

I quickly mastered the cash register and was even recognized by a few of the neighborhood locals, as well as scholars from the state university who themselves enjoyed spending part of their Saturdays shuffling around Scully's wonderfully antediluvian maze.

The day rushed by quickly, and on more than one occasion I was praised by the old man, grateful for help. He couldn't imagine how the shop had been managed on weekends with only one man for as long as it had. At the end of the day, we sat and considered what we'd accomplished.

"We did well today," Henley concluded, taking in the chaos that lay everywhere in spite of my noblest efforts.

"We're a good team," I said.

"Good. Yes, good."

"Scully's is the second oldest book shop in Chicago. I've been to Burlington & Brown. It's nothing special. I think there may be opportunities to get more business."

"More business? Stephen, we can't manage what we have."

"I think we can."

"Three Saturdays and already you're an expert?"

"I thought you wanted more business," I said, disappointed at the disapproval in Henley's tone. I had so many suggestions and ideas I wanted to share with him. However, one of us was almost a hundred years old and probably not so eager to work even harder.

Henley tightened the sweater across his chest and sat back, pressing down the folds of his pants, which always looked two or three sizes bigger than his frame called for.

"I appreciate what you've done for me, Stephen. It's made a great difference. And I like what you said about how to keep the books and records. I think that would be very helpful. But, really, and this may come as a disappointment to you, I don't want any new business."

For no reason that I could think of, I asked Henley, "Does it have anything to do with what's going on in the basement?"

"My basement is my business."

I'd been down there retrieving books for customers several times over the last two Saturdays. The heat down there was stifling. And the basement ran further than the full length of the shop.

"Doesn't the heat damage the books?"

"Stephen, I am very grateful for your time and effort, but can we leave it at that for now?"

I wanted to protect what little beachhead of friendship and confidence I had established with Henley and erase any doubt in the man's mind. "Yes, yes, of course. Let's get things in order and close up."

"Yes. To the task at hand," he said, his voice ringing with resolve.

I walked through the hours and days of the next week as if I'd been given medication that wouldn't let me think or feel. The haze of my greatest fear was populated by craven images of naked, screaming men and women being slowly lowered by chains into cauldrons of boiling oil, of flesh being pierced and torn by jagged metal teeth and the floor of the basement covered in a wash of human blood and twisted organs, and of Peter Christopher Henley holding back the evil torrent waiting to breach through the basement floor of Scully's Bookstore.

It sounded all too fanciful. It took me back to a time when teachers threatened and words like damnation, hell, and retribution terrified me, a world populated by evil and forces well beyond human control. It forced me to reflect on how I had spent the early years of my life, as though I were afraid of the rest of the days of my life.

The following Friday may have been the worst I can recall. I couldn't concentrate on work, read, or rest, or think straight. I got home, had dinner, and went out for a walk, a distraction to keep my mind off the obvious, that I'd been right all along about the fact that the basement of Scully's Bookstore was harboring an evil spirit.

I made my way around the neighborhood, drifting past restaurants and saloons, and when I was two blocks away from the store, I caught a glow in the window. A faint yellow light was coming from deep within the shop. Henley lived in a small room in the rear and often boasted he had to be in bed by 9:00 p.m., if only to maintain his "youthful" appearance.

It was well past 10:00 p.m. As I crossed the street to the shop, the light grew dimmer, shifted position for a moment, then faded out of sight. I mounted the curb and paused. I grasped and pushed against the warm doorknob and continued toward the rear of the store and the glow that was coming from the stairwell leading down into the basement. The air grew warmer and was ripe with a thick, damp odor I couldn't identify.

I heard voices, muted and distant, rising up and swarming with intensity. The closer I got the more uncertain and fearful I became.

Visions of devils and goblins being belched up from the earth, cloaked in a film of red and orange flames, pitchforks in hand, all surrounding a withered Peter Christopher Henley, would not relent.

As I approached the opening, lights danced against shadows and were thrown up to the ceiling and splattered across bookshelves at my side. Deep, guttural tones raced up from below. A foul smell choked me, squeezing out the air in the center of my chest. I coughed, knowing I had just compromised any element of surprise. I held fast to the frail banister and moved into the torrid glow and heat rushing up from the steps below.

The rows of bookshelves and the few battered tables laden with books and manuscripts were gone, vanished, as was everything else I had seen on my few visits. This was a different world. A glowing and transformed landscape.

The once smooth dirt floor was misshapen and felt unstable beneath me. The walls were not physical in any conventional sense, but rather darkened shadows that surrounded the perimeter where the floor should have ended.

Toward the far end, Henley had apparently fallen and he too was retching from the stench. If I was having a hard time breathing and holding on to my senses, I couldn't imagine how a man so old and infirm could still be conscious, or how long either of us would survive.

Crouched over him was the dark shape of something, a creature. The animal—I didn't know what else to call it—had a head and a shape that held only a vague resemblance to even the most disfigured human form I'd ever seen.

Where there should have been eyes and mouth, there was an irregular opening from which burned a red and yellow fire. It was making a horrible, deep sound, somewhere between a growl and a groan. It was holding something at the end of what looked like an arm, though it was two or three times the normal thickness and proportionally longer. Another similar apparition was raised threateningly over Henley's huddled frame.

"And now..." the beast wailed.

The words cut through the heat and light and sank like a dagger into my heart. "Stand aside," the creature threatened, raising both arms and a dark object like a disc, a blackened piece of metal the size of a large serving platter, overhead.

I couldn't understand why the beast hesitated from striking the final blow. When it made the demand again, two dark slots opened up on the front of its head. Blackened eyes stared down at Henley. They seemed expectant, fearless, weighed with fury.

Henley kept his balance. His shirt and pants were torn and dirt-stained. There was a spattering of blood on his shoulder. Sweat covered his pale white frame. They were a dozen paces away. The blazing hot space was open, filled with coiling, dark smoke. I didn't know how long I could remain here.

The creature turned toward me and bellowed, angry and contemptuous. Henley turned, startled, and waved me away. His face looked different, determined not to break under the weight that was closing in around him.

The animal let the heavy metal disc fall at its side. Now, fully exposed, it was half again the size of the largest man I had ever seen. Its body was covered with a brown, uneven skin whose surface seemed to be undulating like a life within a life.

The creature growled; its gestures and threats were perfectly clear.

I considered prayer, though only briefly.

The beast turned toward me.

I didn't understand how Henley could withstand the onslaught, and judging from his condition, the tale of his courage was going to die with him.

I had to get Henley back up to safety, if such a place still existed. The idea of this monster getting to the surface, as I had believed for so many weeks was a real possibility that cursed me day and night, was difficult to imagine.

All these years, first Scully then Henley, and whoever had come before them in the guise of another simple shopkeeper, had been able to keep this thing at bay. And why here in this unremarkable place? Whether or not this was the incarnation of the Devil was secondary to rescuing the embattled old man.

Suddenly Henley reached for something in the dirt. The creature turned and was upon him before he could grasp it. I couldn't make it out in the smoke and heat. The monster swept down on the old man and grabbed the shining object. It crushed it in its paw, raised it overhead, and slammed it into the center of the metal plate.

At once, a flash of sparks filled the room. I turned away, but was stung by the red embers that flew in all directions. The crack of the impact of the shining object with the plate left me dazed and trembling. I saw that where there had once been two objects, there was now only the circular plate, but it was now considerably larger, and alive in the creature's hands.

"It's done!" it bellowed triumphantly.

"It is not done," Henley said, his voice hoarse with resolve. "It will never be done."

The creature looked down at the frail figure, its eyes now small and black like lumps of coal. "You're a fool."

Henley climbed to his feet, stood up as erect as I had ever seen, and uttered something unrecognizable, though not to the beast. There was a brief exchange, and then the creature dropped the plate and turned and moved toward me.

"Stephen, go. Run. Save yourself."

The closer it got to the stairs where I stood, the slower it moved, as though fighting through some invisible force. Again and again it growled and flung out its arms in my direction as Henley raised his arms toward the beast.

The beast stopped no more than a few meters from the base of the steps. It heaved its massive body forward again but could go no farther. It railed in frustration, raising its arms overhead, echoing some terrible, primal scream. It strained again and again but seemed to grow weaker with every effort.

"It's no use," Henley said and reached down and plucked out a small golden object embedded in the core of the plate, the one the beast had taken from Henley's grasp. He flicked a crust of dirt off the small medallion.

"I will have my way," the creature snarled.

"Not as long as I am alive you won't," the old man growled back.

Before he could finish the sentence, the animal turned and charged Henley, then just as quickly pivoted to attack me. The old man tried to close the distance between us, but his age was against him, and me.

The beast swung its massive arm, catching me across the chest and sending me flying backward. Before I landed, I knew that I been badly injured. The last thing I saw was the old man standing with the medallion in his hand as the animal turned on him.

There was a time in my life when I was filled with imagination frothed with fantasy. I dreamed the dream of heroes, of dragons and kingdoms, and in my dreams knew I'd created this fiction to satisfy hidden needs.

As I drifted back up from what I believed was all a bad dream, attempting to contain the sensation of foreboding, familiar images came into view. I was lying on the desk in the front of the store. The desk was empty of all clutter as well as the books, records, and the cash register. Henley was standing over me, his clothes torn and tattered, just as I recalled.

I was afraid to take a deep breath, or to accept the fact that I'd survived the assault. Slowly, regaining my strength, I asked, "What happened?"

"We won, for now."

"But, how?"

"I will tell you later."

"I don't understand."

Ragged and torn, the old man made himself comfortable against the side of the

desk. "You will in time. Right now, you've been hurt. You need to heal. Then we'll talk."

Every breath was anguish. My chest felt as if someone had stepped on it. The back of my head and right shoulder were badly bruised. "About that thing?"

"And you."

"What about me?"

"Whether or not you want to remain here when I am gone."

Shadows now moved about on the street outside the store windows. I had no idea what time it was or how long I'd been unconscious, or by what marvel of physics I'd been carried up from the basement and laid on the desk. "I'll do whatever it takes."

"Don't be too quick, my son. Even I was hesitant when Jonathan Scully put this same question to me. You must give it some thought. Much depends on your answer."

"I want to do this. I think I have to do this."

"Do you understand what you're asking of yourself? Of the true measure of an eternity of sacrifice?"

I wanted to believe, but had no real idea. I couldn't possibly grasp what I was about to give up, or what lay ahead. I only knew that I'd never felt such resolve. "You have to show me everything. You have to train me."

"I can only teach you what Scully and experience have taught me. The rest you must do for yourself."

I seized the old man's hand and shook it.

The next morning I woke to find myself coiled in a cocoon of damp sheets, my blanket crumpled on the floor. I was consumed by a terrible sense of urgency. I strained through the wrenching pain in my chest and back, washed some of the blood from the back of my head, and slowly, all too slowly, slipped on a pair of work pants, shirt, and sweater and rushed into the street. I hobbled the few blocks and paused across the street from Scully's.

A middle-aged man exited the shop with two volumes clutched under his arm. He noticed me on the sidewalk and nodded respectfully.

Getting me from the basement to the desk that once held the cash register was itself a feat of magic, or sorcery, but transporting me into my bed blocks away seemed more like a work of the improbable. Henley was hunched over his desk making notes in a ledger.

"Good morning," I said, somewhat relieved, and pushed open the door.

"And a good morning to you," he said, lifting himself up from the chair and turning full face toward me. "Welcome back to Scully's."

I stumbled back, as though struck by a gust of hot, soiled air. The figure rising before me was a foot taller than Henley and noticeably thicker in the chest and neck and longer in the arms and legs. It had familiar, riveting, jet-black eyes. The face bore no resemblance to Peter Christopher Henley, though I was certain I had seen it before.

"Please, close the door and come in."

I couldn't move. "Where's Henley? What have you done to him?"

"He's at rest. He deserves at least that, don't you think? I mean, as his friend, you would have to agree."

"You killed him."

"Actually, that's only a half truth," he said, spreading his arms out toward me in a welcoming fashion. "Please, don't stand there, come into my shop."

"You've killed him and taken over his body."

I glanced around the store. Everything was in order. Too much order. Books were stacked in well-mannered piles. Receipts and invoices lay in neat piles. Correspondence and other scraps that weeks ago might have littered the floor were now arranged in more reliable sequences.

"I've taken over nothing of the kind. That sort of thing only happens in bad novels, not reality."

"You'll fool nobody."

He shook his head a few times. "Stephen, I don't have to fool anybody. I've taken over the shop as Henley took it over from Scully. It's the natural progression of life, though I should announce his untimely passing, and of course, more importantly, I do need new business cards. I think a sign in the front window announcing Devlin Mercy as the new proprietor, who will continue the dedicated work of his beloved friend and predecessor."

"Devlin Mercy?"

"I like it. I hope you do too. It has a kind, benevolent ring to it, though I couldn't come up with a middle name, lord knows why."

"They'll find you out."

"And who will tell them? You? And what is it that you'll tell them? And who do you think they will listen to, an obviously unstable and increasingly unreliable young man? Even your supervisor has come to see you as less suitable for a position of responsibility."

"I'll make them listen," I said, trying to quickly figure out if I was in immediate danger and if there was a chance Henley was still alive.

"You will achieve nothing. And, if you will, consider I will sue for defamation if you speak poorly of me in public. Your legal remedies cut both ways, Mr. Connors, and I am not afraid of using every law and instrument I need. Scully's will go on and prosper as it always has."

"I want you out of the store. Now."

Devlin shook his head, an expression of exasperation replacing the previous calm. "As if you have the right to make such demands."

"Henley left the store to me. It's mine to protect against the likes of you."

"Excellent. Bravado in the face of failure. Quite touching, really, though a bit belated considering you left the old man to die."

"What do you mean, I left the old man to die?"

"Why can't you admit the dismal truth about yourself?"

I moved forward. "What do you mean, I left the old man to die?"

"You ran! You scuttled up the stairs and into the street like a frightened insect. The old man's concentration was broken by his concern for your welfare. His concentration had always protected him. His absolute resolve and focus were the gatekeepers I couldn't break through until, of course, you came to his aid. In that one fatal moment he turned to defend you. He could no longer protect you and the portal from my passage. I took the beat from his heart as easily as I could take the breath out of you right now."

"I don't believe you."

"You asked me if I killed the dear man and I said that it was a half-truth, if you were listening. Now, hopefully, you see you were my partner in his unfortunate demise."

This had to be a lie. "The plate?"

"What does it matter? Henley is dead. You left him to die. And now I am here." Then, suddenly, I felt an even greater horror. "How did I get back to my apartment?"

"Now that you know the truth, shouldn't you at least say 'Thank you'? Isn't that what a man of greater morality and dignity would say, 'Thank you for saving my life, and getting me home safely'?"

Then it was true. I had failed Henley, the old man's cause, and his trust. I had failed myself. This was who I was, not the fantasy hero ready to assume the mantle of ultimate courage and sacrifice.

The only fantasy, and my last, was the encounter I'd created after the confrontation in the basement, the one I created where a battered, but victorious, Peter Christopher Henley sanctified his confidence in his protégé, in the man he would leave to do battle with the Devil.

"Why?"

"Why indeed, sir. I can always use a man of your character. It made no sense to take your life. You were merely in my way. Think of my gesture as a reward for your helpful intervention and timely withdrawal."

Two women came through the door behind me. I didn't get a clear image of either as I tumbled past them and out into the street.

Years later, decades really, I was better able to piece together the details of what had happened and what I had so urgently and continuously denied. But that was long after I left Chicago to start another life.

No, to not start anything. To leave behind. To deny what had happened, who I really was and what I had let happen, and the curse I had let loose on humankind.

Finally, when I was so enfeebled I was no longer able to walk without help, when the cool New Mexico nights allowed me the safety and space to remember in full, I cursed who I was and vowed to return to Scully's, if only to say what had been left unsaid.

I needed to somehow justify what I'd done, if only to convince myself of my own innocence, and maybe to find out the fate that had befallen the legacy of Peter Christopher Henley.

A Valediction to a dead bird

He was cuddled beside a tree Crawled, covered, in rest, he seemed. All his feathers all his cunnings Couldn't save him from what he was running. Last night's bitter, bitter cold and wind Was his ever last, everlasting grin. In rest he seemed in rest in thee Or in rest in me in rest from thee No one wants you, no one wants me, Again they say, they say be happy. No one misses him, for all and once In one consensus they seemed to announce his absence as if as a good riddance. Poor birdy poor, poor crooked black No, the world is not without you in lack. Beside a tree beside his nest. He seemed to lie he seemed in rest. In Autumn it was in a fallen dough Before the winter one's better to go. In fall he fell in fall he fled Beside a tree to the world of dead. Sharply shattered at a stroke The invisible cord finally broke His clock of life struck the notch A mother to his babe "boy do not touch" "Do not touch" to me "Do not touch" to thee No one wants you no wants me.

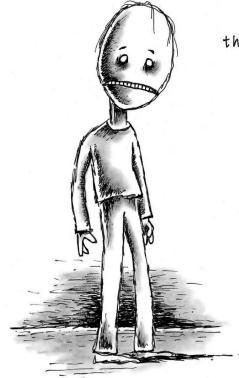
-mehdi deilami

WOULD IT FEEL ANY Better?

Would it feel any better

if You'd been

the only one?



RED

I drank a wine distilled and cold, By merchants from the East was sold In marts with booths of paper made Where wantons danced there on parade To sell themselves as is their way In dresses tattered, faded gray. Into their midst I boldly strode, They flashed their eyes, a tempting code! Then elbowed on through crowds of men To paper booths out near the fen. One merchant tempted me to halt Beneath the twilight's starry vault. There proffered me a pewter cup For free, and let me drink it up. His slave girl stood close by my side, Lips red as a blushing bride. She held the cup up to my lips. I drank it down in thirsty sips. I swooned and grabbed the girl to stand. She steadied me and grabbed my hand. The two of us were whisked afar, Beyond the furthest then known star! We lay within a grotto there, Side by side in autumn air. She roused me and she pulled me up.



I tossed aside the hated cup. Neither of us could explain This grotto, hill or nearby plain, Or in what realm we now would fare. We two, a most unlikely pair. I am soldier lean, a brute, Given to my own pursuit. I'd love to have that merchant here Show him what is meant by fear! The girl she said her name was Red. She too would see that merchant dead Who would abuse her at his will. A grinning blight, a worthless shill! She, not unlovely, pert and sweet, With pale long legs that made her fleet. We two set off to find our way Within that realm bizarre, outré. We came upon a homey town With denizens of green and brown, They all seemed female, glib and cruel, Who mocked us and they called us fool! I pull my blade and swung it free, Then all pledged loyalty to me!

A craven group by any strip. They fed us ale and sweet spiced tripe. We left that town as two suns rose As odd as one then might suppose, Through clouds of purple hewed with gold As we crossed there that grassy wold. We took the north trail, full of dust. Red held my hand there, full of trust As on we strode until that ark Of moon arose as fell the dark. Out in a grassy hidden lea I led here to an old oak tree. I wrapped her in my cloak and lay With pretty Red till dawn of day. Such dreams we had, such nightmares there That in the morning we would share. So it was we then arose, And straighten there or wrinkled clothes And took that dusty road once more lust as we'd done the day before. We felt the pall of magic hung Upon those trees we walked among. An air of sadness dripped upon The growing esoteric dawn.

Then little Red, now bold, drew near, On tiptoes kissed by my ringed left ear! Then full of blushes turned and sighed And said she would not be denied! I told her that she'd but to ask. That loving was for me no task. And there I kissed her near the elm Now deep within this magic realm. Then I awoke! Oh, yes, in truth! Inside that wizard's paper booth, Yet no sign of that dark adept Who cruelly little Red had kept. Yet now she stood before me grand, Like empress of this cursèd land! And by her silken beieweled dress I saw she was a sorceress! Was all a ruse to be with me There under that faux old elm tree! So angered now I cursed her so Yet her strong spells had me in tow! And truth to tell, I did not mind. For soon the priest would we two bind.

-michael fantina

PEARLY Whites

Death is near.

John sat on a bench, the hood of his coat covering his head from the cold breeze. The park was empty. A single streetlight gave a faint illumination. He was slumped, his face obscured by darkness.

Crunching leaves made him snap his head to the sound. A kid jumped from one pile of dried leaves to another until reaching the one closest to the bench. "Hello, sir; mind if I sit with you?" she asked with a smile, revealing a missing tooth.

"Where are your parents, kid?" John asked, looking around. But the park was dark and quiet, and he couldn't see anyone else. "You shouldn't be out here all by yourself."

The girl sat beside him, dangling her feet. "My parents aren't around and I can take care of myself," she said, stretching her arms out, causing her black coat to pull out with them. "I'm not by myself; you're here."

"I won't be here for long. I need to go back."

"Well, then, it's just you who shouldn't be here."

"Aren't you scared to sit here with a stranger? I could be a bad man."

The girl smiled. "Who said we're strangers? I've seen you before."

"Not sure how a kid like you would've seen me before," he said, removing his hood. Rain dropped on his bare scalp, and he leaned back to let it hit his sunken eyes. "Have we met in the hospital?"

"Yeah, a couple of times."

"How come I don't remember you?"

"Well, people usually don't know it's me until it's time."

He looked at her; she had leaves in her hair. "Where did we meet? Couldn't have been that long ago, considering your age."

A big smile appeared on her face and she looked at her hand, four fingers wiggling in her black gloves. "I met you in Chicago and it was snowing. I love the snow."

by noa assael

"You lived in Chicago? I haven't been there in years." He ran his hand across his head, removing an orange leaf.

"I got to visit," she said. "You can say I am privileged enough to travel around."

"I miss Chicago. I had good memories."

"But the bad ones kept you from going back," she said, her pinky going down. "Yeah..."

The girl stood up and twirled around before jumping, a pile of leaves crunching beneath her. "After that I met you in Cincinnati, but only briefly." She stopped, only two fingers up.

"Cincinnati? God, I've been there couple of times but not since—"

"But the first time was when I met your mom back in Indiana. I remember it was unusually hot that day." One finger went down.

He zipped half of his coat open, his breathing labored. "You saw me when you met my mom? That's not possible."

She stepped on another pile. "She held you."

He stood up, still at a distance from the little girl. "The only way you saw us together is if you were there at my birth." He looked at her, at the remaining finger. "When was the fourth time we met?"

"Well... I like to arrive early to meetings; we meet tomorrow if you want to be specific."

John looked at his watch. "It's two minutes to midnight."

She smiled, a full set of white teeth flashing at him. "Like I said, I like to arrive early." She wiggled her finger at him and pointed at his nose.

He wiped his nose, seeing crimson smeared on his pale hand.

"It was nice seeing you again," she said, pulling an umbrella from the inside of her coat. She opened it as the rain increased. Sirens blurred behind her.

Staring at her smile, he stood there bleeding.

Death is here.



Dealing It will probably collapse. Don't even stand on a poem. You may fall and break something and there is

Rules Don't build anything on top of a poem.

no point in suing a poet.

Don't smile at a poem, a unless it seems very sociable.

oem Don't laugh at a poem unless it is uproarious, good or bad.

> You may drink short poems as aperitifs.

You may eat long poems as full course dinners.

Don't take a poem to bed that you found worth eating or drinking, unless you want it to cling to your dreams.

Please remember not to stand on a poem, even one that annoys you to no end.

Perhaps this one.

-bruce boston





SERPENTINE

There are runes falling out of the sky of my palms like candy, a pinata split open by a blindfolded fiend with seeds sprouting in his throat. I wash the dishes and picture

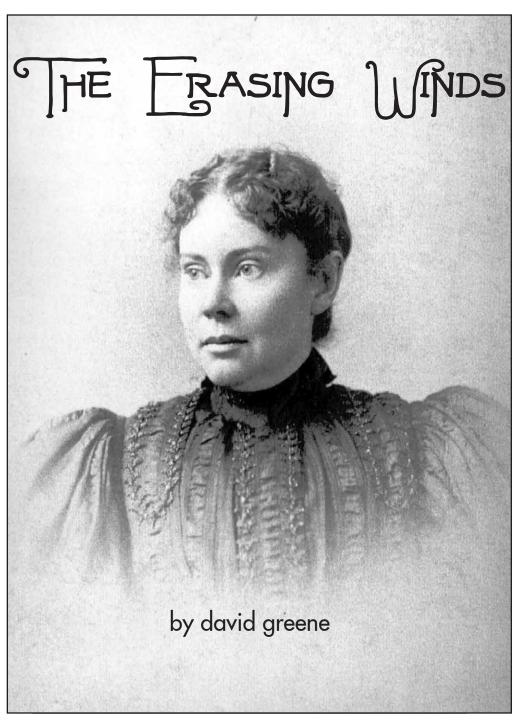
his face exploding his voice stuck in my mouth, an uncouth joke. I think of the taste of mint the way it settles on the tongue cool & piercing like an argument. I've nicknamed him

dictator. The fabric of my dress clings to my skin as if needing me to move the way my mind clings to his insults as if each blood stained word were true, as if women

with soft bones were rivers to avoid like plagues or accidents or pews or hurricanes or homes abraded by ghosts or the pull of

serpentine thoughts that shake loose the wrists, pilfering runes.

—mehnaz sahibzada



The first thing the boy noticed was her eyes. Luminous orbs grey as a stormy sky stared back at him. From the safety of the sidewalk they had merely been dark lines on a blurry face. Now, up close, he saw a kindly smile and a vivid light in those pale eyes. Countless times he'd been with children who taunted her, but Alston had always remained silent. He would come to understand that it wasn't pity which kept him from shouting, "Lizzie Borden took an axe....", but rather fear. Fear of offending she who always held her tongue when under assault from the hooligans of The Highlands. The Lady of Maplecroft must have noticed this boy who was silent as a monk, while his friends delighted in their bravado. She bore the abuse with a dignity his grandmother said she must have bought. "God knows Lizzie didn't come by it herself," she'd say in reproach, despite having never met the woman. On this particular day, she had called to Alston from her back porch as he passed her expensive home with its name carved in the granite steps. Lost in his thoughts, he'd been startled by the voice crying out with an unexpected sweetness. "Boy! Boy, please come here." She beckoned him with her finger and nodded encouragingly. And now he stood before the one his pals called "the witch."

Alston had not hesitated, but walked up her garden path just as though he were greeting his own dear mother. As he climbed the stairs she spoke again, only softer, as if they were not to be overheard by the cat asleep in the wicker rocker. "Would you be so kind as to go to the drug store for me? I am in need of some laudanum for my cough."

Still silent, he nodded, wondering where the rich lady's housemaid was and why she wasn't performing the errand. In his head he heard his best friend, a faithful abuser of the woman before him, saying, "It's a trick! She'll get you inside her house and split your head open like firewood!" But the city's most famous spinster reached into the pocket of her fine dress and withdrew two dollars.

"Tell Mr. Cain it is for Miss Borden. He will know the particulars."

She handed over the bills and Alston imagined what it would be like to pull money so effortlessly from a pocket. His had rarely held more than a penny or two, and more often than not, nothing but marbles. With the seriousness of a mortician he took the cash, nodded and finally spoke.

"Yes, Miss Borden."

The lady smiled again and cocked her head toward her left shoulder, grasping her hands before her waist.

"I know you are a fine young man and will be quick about it, won't you?"

"Yes, Miss Borden," he repeated. A final nod from the lady dismissed him and Alston was off about his business. When he returned, she seated him at her kitchen table, gave him a raisin square, a glass of milk, and most amazing of all, ten cents!

This simple, well-done errand established a relationship between the two. Little tasks eventually became part of Alston's day and kept his pockets jingling. In time, as a young man, Alston joined the Borden household staff. He mowed the lawn, hammered tight her loose boards and in winter, shoveled Miss Borden a path to the squirrel-feeder he'd made for her one Christmas.

Years passed and he watched her hair grey to a shade identical to her eyes.

"Alston," she said one cool spring morning, "come with me, please."

They went down into the damp cellar and to a room under the foyer which, as far back as Alston could remember, was always bolted and locked. Withdrawing a key from her cardigan pocket, she unlocked the door and pushed it open without entering. Gesturing at what appeared to be covered furniture, she said in a cold voice he had never before heard, "Hire a wagon and take these items to Shumway's Warehouse."

More instructions followed. No one was to know to whom the items belonged, he was to pay for several years' storage in advance, and he was to select a mover that he could trust to be discreet.

Before the man arrived to help cart away the pieces, Alston opened the now unlocked door and lifted the dusty sheets. Heavy bedroom furniture and a tufted sofa with curving lines were being banished rather than discarded. Alston smirked. Sensible Yankee thrift outweighed horror. These tragic pieces were being removed from the burden of keeping them under Maplecroft's roof. He looked back at the doorway and was sure he saw a shadow rushing past. "Ghosts are such cowards," he thought, "dashing off to wherever they go at the hint of a stare."

Alston knew what was before him. He imagined that had the bureau's mirror been eyes and the sofa in possession of a mouth, a brutal tale of the swinging of a hatchet would have been told. They would have cried out how they'd felt the warm spray and slow drip of blood from bodies whose hearts had ceased beating with the first blows. And told of how the murderer had ambled off, never to be punished while breathing this odd earth's air. He thought of how the genteel woman whose footsteps thumped above him had been tried and acquitted for the murders of her father and stepmother. But public opinion had been another matter and she had stayed, defiant, in a city that shunned her.

Later that day Alston saw to the task as directed and delivered the carefully draped pieces to the cavernous building squatting on the shoreline of the Taunton River.

The trusted laborer counted himself fortunate to have his job and spent the rest of Lizzie Borden's life caring for her properties. When she closed those pale grey eyes for the last time, he had mourned her much as he had his own beloved mother. In Miss Borden's will she had bequeathed Alston a generous sum, and ever-devoted, he spent the remainder of his years just as he had done as a child, silent on the subject of Lizzie Borden. But the dead woman still lurked about a city torn between its embarrassment at having produced her, while relishing the attention she brought. Lizzie lured in tourists who pointed at the residence which housed the murder scene and who rattled around the local historical society,

prying information from a staff of contemporaries reluctant to discuss the messy affair. More than a vapor, less than bone and flesh, Lizzie Borden was as bound to Fall River as feathers to a duck.

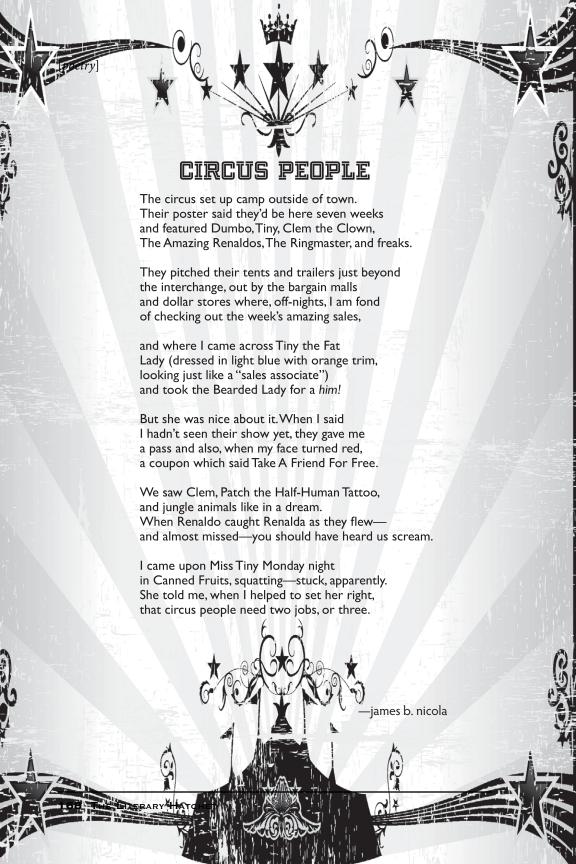
When eleven years had passed since Lizbeth of Maplecroft had gone to her grave and the rewards or consequences of her life had been realized, another tragedy befell the city. On a warm September day in 1938 an unwelcomed guest roared into New England like nothing anyone in those parts could remember. Born in the Atlantic waters surrounding the Cape Verde Islands, the monster began as a particularly violent thunderstorm feeding off the winds sweeping over the killing heat of the Sahara. Gaining speed, few were privy to its strength apart from the occasional freighter unfortunate enough to cross its path.

When at last the storm hit Massachusetts, Alston was unprepared for what was to come and unable to return home safely. He sought shelter in the granite fortress of City Hall. Tales soon spread of the Taunton River overflowing its banks, with buildings of every type and purpose vanishing like a conjuror's rabbit. Foamy waves slapped the clapboards of Shumway's Warehouse with unrelenting fierceness, eventually gaining entry. Once inside, they consorted with the fierce winds to disassemble the enormous old shell, and to draw the contents out with the powerful tide. Further and further into the river and then into ever deeper water they were drawn; rusty barouches, abandoned toys, trunks of mothholed linens, and the sheeted furniture from the Borden tragedy. The pieces were pulled out into the expansive Mount Hope Bay, and in a slow graceful spiral, they wound their way down to the rocky seabed. There, in the never-ending darkness of the bay's floor, they lay, erased from tangibility, as if God Himself wished them expunged from the earth.

When the sun rose again it struggled to establish its reign over night, but the feeble light was enough to draw Alston from his shelter. He wandered past the waterfalls which gave the city its name and picked his way downhill to the heart of Fall River's working waterfront.

Alston stood on a littered perch and gazed at where Shumway's Warehouse had once been, recalling the day he'd done his job for the kindly lady with the terrible burden. Pallid remnants of the erasing winds blew across his face and Alston drew a deep breath. He shifted his eyes heavenward and noticed the stormy sky was finally beginning to break. The sun lit the clouds from behind, casting them with an aura luminous and gray. He'd seen that color before.





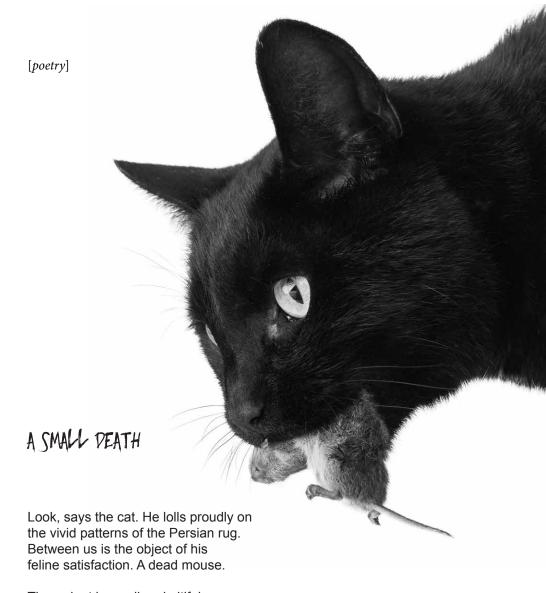
SWEETS OF ILLUSION

An unsightly scene me and my petty addiction, drinking licorice like liquor hoping it'll lodge in my throat because the whipped cream dusted with crystallized drugs isn't enough to keep me sober in my world—

where milk cheeks and butter teeth hide reality, the rusted razor on my taffy tongue; lips crusted red, I gnaw fantasy into my gums even harder. The peppermint rose garden at my feet, swirls endlessly in sugar grass, staining my legs and my white-barbed-wire lace dress. Encircled by coconut, air flaky and crisp, I breathe it in, dreading the metallic dripping down toward my chest. And my toes brush every glass thorn. Pink cotton candy puddles shaped by my footsteps waver behind me: beams the lemon sun among the strawberry clouds and the chocolate chip mountains-

I rest under the cherry tree, watching the sky turn orange then black, blueberry stars reminding me of this illusion I've created many times before. Stomach sour and dry, I swallow a few pills and wait for dawn.

-mckinley henson



The rodent is small and pitiful. It seems unworthy that such a tiny creature, just inches from nose to tail, should elicit such an egoistic sense of self-regard. I refuse to acknowledge the cat.

—paul ilechko

SPLINTERS

I draw spirals and think of imploding and lap at the Damocles sword hanging there like a masochist urging the blade down we are falling through space and I will still push and bite until my body hits the wine-dark waves

The splinters spread across my body inverse branches of trees on my thin ice-soul I creak and cracks are appearing in these dark gouges these aching crevasses sucking in light I am an anti-universe pulling ever in

I don't remember a time with pinpricks of light I don't remember forgetting but in every dream I suddenly remember all the things I've lost and cerulean water and an ivory sky and her purple sandal snapping

well your gods are still with you no matter if you push them away or pretend they don't exist they're there in the park or sitting next to you on the plane and all this time I only wanted to know what I wanted but I've just become more of a stranger in my skin

—selena martens

Stagger Lee

Come on kids, an' listen' to me Tell a tale from ol' St. Louie Where this gangsta by the name o' Stagger Lee Hung aroun' a corner, blowin' On them dice he'd been a-throwin' With this jive-ass, little sucka, Willy D.

Now, ol' Stagger swore to heaven, "Willy D., I tossed a 7!"

While ol' Willy swore, "You tossed yo' ass an 8!"

So, then Stagger said, "Yo' mama

Sho' can give a man a humma,

But I'd bet my ass that there's a fam'ly trait."

That got Willy D. to sayin',
"Who da Hell you t'ink yo' playin'?"
Then he made a grab fo' Stagger's Stetson hat,
While our hero said, "Now Willy,
Lawdy knows, I'll whip ya' silly
Fo' I'll evah let ya' get away wid dat . . ."

That's when Willy started reachin'
Fo' a gun to do 'is preachin',
But ol' Stagger beat po' Willy to the draw,
Sayin', "T'ink yo'll cash yo' bets in
On my legendary Stetson?
T'ink again, 'cause muddafucka, I'm Da Law!"

Well, po' Willy's heart was drummin' Knowin' what was sho'ly comin', So he got to beggin' Stagger fo' 'is life, Sayin', "Fo' you go a-killin' Don' fo'get I got five chil'en . . . Don' fo'get I got a sickly, liddle wife . . ."

But, ol' Stag', he wasn't carin' 'Bout a word that fool was sharin' As he stared straight into Willy's eyes, an' said: "Since vo' crack ho' wife 'd had me All yo' chil'en call me daddy!" Then he popped a couple caps in Willy's head . . .

O, a leaf was slowly fallin', An' three bulldogs were a-callin' To the yellow moon that glowed above the street, While that bad-ass known as Stagger, With a smooth, Mac-Daddy swagger Grabbed 'is Stetson where it laid, by Willy's feet.

Moral

Well now kids, this here's yo' lesson: Don't you evah go a-messin' With the Stetson that belongs to Stagger Lee, 'Less vo' good ol' days o' gamblin', Bootin' junk, an' midnight ramblin' Come a-crashin' to an end, like Willy D.

—johnny longfellow

Through the Walls

by peter emmett naughton

Greg had waited his entire life to be alone.

When he was young he'd had to share everything with his gaggle of siblings, brothers and sisters layered atop one another on bunk beds, each sibling always looking for a scrap of floor or an empty corner to claim as a personal spot.

When he went off to college he found himself stuffed into a room only slightly larger than a closet with someone he didn't know. Though far from ideal, he found this arrangement somewhat easier to manage. He had no personal stake in maintaining a real relationship with his roommate and simply tried as best he could to stick to his side and ignore his roommate's comings and goings. Despite these efforts they still seemed to constantly be in each other's way, intruding on each other's space.

They remained roommates throughout their four years at university—more, Greg suspected, out of a sense of familiarity rather than genuine friendship. After graduation they went their separate ways without any parting words or promises to keep in touch.

After college Greg moved in with some friends from back home while they all searched for post-graduate employment. He shared a sizeable bedroom, which was a step up from the dorms and worlds better than his childhood home had been, but despite the mostly agreeable conditions, it still felt like living in a circus tent to him. There was simply nowhere to sit and think alone or enjoy a quiet moment alone. That lasted for almost three years and Greg spent those long

months dreaming about a time when he would finally be able to move into a place of his own.

His dream finally came to fruition when the Director of Technology at his company retired. His department supervisor became the new director and Greg, much to his surprise, became the new head of the I.S. department at his insurance firm. In truth the new title was significantly more impressive than his salary increase, but it was enough to get a small condo a few miles from the office.

The size didn't matter all that much to him, so long as it was his and his alone. An image filled his head of a door that opened onto a completely empty space. It was an image of paradise.

Moving into the condo felt unreal to Greg. It was something he had wanted always, and every trip he made back to the rented truck and up the stairs filled him with a greater sense of wellbeing.

On his first night in his new place he had managed to locate his kettle in the pile of boxes and was enjoying a cup of tea on his ratty loveseat. That's when he heard it.

There was a noise coming from somewhere off to his left that sounded like

"Aw Christ, I've got rats," he thought, horrified at the idea of something marring his new oasis.

The sound came again and he listened closely and then sighed in relief.

It wasn't rats. Greg had heard and seen his fair share of rodents growing up and this was different. He walked across the laminate planks of his new floor and pressed his ear against the wall.

The sound coming from the other side was a long, stuttering scrape that reverberated against the drywall. It was the sound of a sneaker toe being dragged along asphalt from the low-slung frame of a slow-moving BMX bike. Greg suddenly saw himself at twelve drifting around his neighborhood at night wishing he could coast the empty suburban streets forever and that curfew would never come for him.

What the hell is making that noise?

The scraping sound continued on and off for another hour and then abruptly stopped. Greg held his ear to the wall for several minutes, waiting to see if it would start up again, but the only thing that filled his new home the rest of that night was the soft hum of the refrigerator and the occasional whoosh of the furnace in the building's basement.

He listened for the noise the next morning, but the other side of his wall remained silent. The same could not be said of his floor and ceiling, both of which bustled with activity during the early morning hours imparting their own varied offerings of bumps, thuds, and bangs interspersed with blasts of hollered conversations and bellowed arguments, some in languages he couldn't understand, all emanating endlessly from the units above and below him.

Greg knew that having a place of his own did not mean that he was actually alone. His past experiences with communal living had taught him to deal with such disturbances, but he hadn't counted on the seemingly perpetual invasion of his solitude. He actually found it a relief to head off to work where he could spend an hour in his car listening to the comforting rumble of the engine and the drone of the road. Nighttime was quieter, especially after the infants and young children had been put to bed, but there were still bouts of shouting and brayed laughter that pierced his unit as if he were standing only a few feet from the source.

When I have a bit more saved up, I can sell this place and get a house; something small and manageable with a modest backyard and maybe room for a garden. I will finally have someplace where I can truly be alone.

Until then he would just have to deal with the auditory intrusions and take comfort in the fact that this was still the best living arrangement he'd had thus far.

At least that's what he thought then.

The noise returned a week later.

He was lying in bed with his nose buried in the new Dennis Lehane novel when he heard a sharp keening coming from directly behind him.

Greg wheeled around expecting to see some animal, a bat maybe, hanging from the wall above him, but there was only the sound. It was different this time, reedier and higher pitched in a way that almost made it seem like a wail.

Is it coming from the radiator? Maybe some air trapped in the pipes of the baseboard heating unit?

He listened to the tone as it squalled at him from a place he couldn't see.

He said, "Hello?" not exactly sure why he'd said it.

There was no reply, but Greg thought he heard the pitch shift ever so slightly.

That night he dreamt about the sound. In his dream it had answered him when he spoke to it, a single word that came through as a barely audible whisper.

Listen.

He thought about the noise at work the next morning. The first time he'd heard the scraping it had evoked an image of him on his bike at night. It was something he had done a lot when he was young, cruising around the neighborhood while he daydreamed himself into another world with another life. It was then that he realized the sound coming from his bedroom had reminded him of another moment from his childhood.

His brother Zach was the youngest in the family and had come late in life for his parents. There had been complications for his mother from the very beginning of the pregnancy, and by the time Zach was due the doctors were more than a little concerned for both him and Greg's mom. Both baby and mother survived, but Zach was born with a respiratory infection that caused him to depend on a ventilator for the first few months of his life.

The sound from the bank of machines hooked up to his brother combined with Zach's own ragged struggle for breath had produced a high-pitched whine

that rose and ebbed with his respiration. Greg hadn't thought about that time in his life since he was little, sitting there staring at his infant sibling wondering if his new brother was going to live.

His initial instinct was to assume that he'd imagined the whole thing. Not the noise itself, he was sure he had heard it, but rather the association with his brother's breathing. He had intentionally pushed the memory out of his mind, partially because it upset him, but mostly because his brother had lived. There'd been no lasting medical problems or trips back to the hospital after that. It had been over and done decades ago . . . and then that sound brought it all back and suddenly he was sitting in that hospital room again.

Greg had read an article about auditory dementia that discussed case studies of people who swore they heard things that weren't actually there. He supposed it was possible that his ears were playing tricks on him, but he'd had no other experiences like it before and no reason to believe that his hearing would suddenly and inexplicably short out on him.

The simplest answer was that the noise was coming from the other side of the wall or from something in between them. He didn't have any desire to start randomly poking holes in his newly painted drywall until he had a better idea of where to search. The thought of introducing himself to his next-door neighbors by asking if they made a habit of scratching at the walls in the evening didn't hold much appeal for him either, but it was the logical place to start.

He made a mental note to pick up a six-pack on his way home from work. Even if it turned out that his neighbors didn't drink, he'd still need something to help him get through the conversation, especially when he got to the part about strange noises in the night.

When Greg knocked on the door he was greeted by a tall, blonde man that looked to be near his age.

"Hi, I'm Greg from next door."

"Paul," the blonde said, shaking without hesitation and smiling down at the offering in Greg's other hand. "Come on in."

"Honey, we've got a visitor," Paul said.

A woman, who looked to Greg to be a few years younger, came in holding a small child. "I'm Mary."

"Greg. It's nice to meet you," Greg said, nodding in place of a handshake. "I didn't realize you had children."

"Why would you?" Mary said.

Greg suddenly felt awkward. "I guess I'm just surprised that I've never heard any crying. The kid in the unit below us wails like a little banshee."

"I guess we're pretty lucky with Lauren," Mary said, smiling slightly.

The smile made Greg feel a bit better, but he still wasn't sure how to broach the topic he'd come here to discuss.

"Why don't we crack those open?" Paul said, and Greg was relieved for the temporary distraction.

It took Greg three beers until he finally got the courage to ask about the noise. His neighbors had put the baby down and the three of them had been talking about work, where they were all originally from and, of course, what they thought about the other tenants in the building.

"Have you met the old guy in the corner unit on the third floor yet?" Mary asked.

"Not really," Greg said. "I've only said hi in the hall once or twice."

"I'm pretty sure he works out of the house because I've seen him around a lot when I've left to go grocery shopping or to take Lauren to the park. I'm not sure exactly what he does, but I've heard him on his phone in the lobby; he always seems to be checking on orders and asking about things like shipping times."

"Maybe he's a shut-in addicted to QVC?" Greg said.

"I don't think that's it. He rattles off these long, complicated names that almost sound like hospital supplies or medical equipment or something."

"He's probably one of those guys who arranges shipments from overseas," Paul said. "You know black and gray market stuff from his home country. I mean the guy's accent is Russian or Yugoslavian or somewhere like that."

"I think he's Polish," Greg said.

"Right, Polish." Paul said.

"So speaking of mysterious things . . ." Greg said, hoping the segue sounded natural. "Have you guys heard any weird noises?"

"What kind of noises?" Mary said. She sipped from a mug of tea she had made after declining the beer.

"Sort of a scratching or scraping sound coming from the walls."

"Like from mice?" Mary said.

"I don't think so. This is higher pitched, like someone dragging their fingernails across a chalkboard."

"When did you hear that?" Mary asked.

"When I first moved in and again last night."

"There was a lot of construction going on when we first moved in, people renovating their units and such. We heard all sorts of crazy stuff and made a fair amount of our own ruckus tearing up the kitchen and bathroom," Paul said. "It dies down eventually, at least until another new tenant moves in and starts it all over again."

"So you haven't heard anything like that recently then?" Greg said.

"Not that I can recall," Paul said.

Mary started to say something and then stopped.

"I mean, you know how these old places are. All the creaks and moans from things shifting around and the foundation settling," Paul said.

"Yeah, that's probably it," Greg said, trailing off.

"New homes always take some getting used to."

Greg nodded in agreement.

"I should probably get going," Greg said. "I have an early day at work tomorrow and I'm sure you have to get up plenty early for Lauren. Thanks again for having me over."

"Thanks for the beer," Paul said.

"Nice to meet you," Mary said.

"Well, I guess I'll see ya around," Greg said and gave an awkward little wave goodbye.

Paul and Mary both smiled politely and closed the door.

"Way to give them the Adam's Family vibe," Greg chided himself and then opened his own door.

The noise didn't come that night, at least not that he heard, but when he woke in the morning there was a note under his door.

Greg kept glancing over at the folded piece of paper on his desk. He had read the note several times now-not that there was anything complicated or ambiguous about it.

It consisted of two short sentences, written in a slanted looping cursive that he assumed belonged to Mary. He supposed it could have been Paul's handwriting, but Greg doubted it, not only because of its feminine appearance, but because Mary had almost said something to him last night before she stopped herself. What she hadn't been able to say, she had written down.

The note read: It isn't just you. Meet me in the courtyard at eight tonight.

The message sounded like the beginnings of a clandestine affair, and had Greg happened across the note under other circumstances he might've assumed that Mary had been attracted to him, but he had not read that sort of thing in Mary's face. It had been pale and almost expressionless when she had started that aborted sentence.

Whatever happened to her had definitely left a mark.

He glanced at his watch. It was nearly 6:30 and it would be after seven by the time he got home. There wasn't enough time to fix something to eat before he'd have to meet Mary in back of the building, but he probably had time to grab a sandwich at the deli on his way.

This excuse was a familiar one. He'd often used it to justify getting a corned beef at Kaufman's or a burger at the greasy spoon off route 12. He'd never been much of a cook and he derived absolutely no joy or satisfaction from the activity. The food he ate out tended to be less healthy than what his doctor had recommended for him during his last checkup, but mostly it was the expense that nagged at him. Even with his new mortgage and his aggressive savings plan he still had enough to eat out several times a week, but it seemed so lavish to him after growing up in a home where outside meals were reserved for birthdays and anniversaries.

Greg licked at the yellow-brown splotches in his goatee as he rounded the corner at his street. He gave himself a quick look in his visor mirror to make sure he'd gotten the last of the mustard and then pulled into the parking lot. He didn't need a key to get to the courtyard, but it was quicker to cut through the lobby rather than having to walk along the outside of the building.

Greg was just about to put the key in the lock when the front door opened.

"Hurry," Mary said and grabbed Greg's arm, leading him through the narrow

first floor hallway and out the back. She kept going until they'd reached the far end of the courtyard. Finally they stopped behind a clump of tall hedges.

"Are you alright?" Greg said.

"I'm fine. I just didn't want Paul to see us. He usually goes for his bike ride around seven thirty, but he was running late today."

"So he doesn't know you're meeting me?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Paul doesn't believe me about the noises. He's heard them, but he thinks they're just normal sounds from the building and the other residents."

"Isn't that what they are?"

"If you really think that, then why did you come over last night?"

"I guess I was hoping you guys would give me some rational explanation for what I was hearing."

"When we first moved in I thought the same thing that Paul did, that it was just the radiator kicking on or noisy plumbing or someone working on their unit. I even knocked on a few neighbors' doors to ask them if they could stop their renovations after nine o'clock so Lauren could sleep. Everyone said they didn't know what I was talking about and I assumed they were just lying to me, but they weren't."

"So then what was it?"

"A greeting."

"What do you mean?"

"It happened late one night. The noises had been coming more and more frequently, but I was still trying to pretend that it was just my imagination getting the better of me. I was sitting on the couch in front of the TV waiting for Paul to get home from work; I remember not being all that into the show I was watching, some police procedural with bad dialogue and even worse acting. It was just something to have on in the background. This was before Lauren was born and I used to get kinda weirded out being there by myself."

"CHS."

"What's that?"

"You grow up with a big family?"

"Yeah, how did you know?"

"Crowded house syndrome. Your internal rhythms get so used to the constant background clatter that silence feels uncomfortable."

"Grew up with a big family too, huh?"

"Big family and not much room."

"I miss it, that feeling of always having someone close. I think it's one of the reasons I wanted to start my own family so badly. Does that seem strange?"

"You're asking the wrong guy. I've wanted to be off on my own ever since I was ten."

"Don't you miss them?"

"I do, it's just . . ."

"I'm sorry, that was rude of me."

"No, no, it's fine. Things with my family are just complicated. Anyway, I got us off on a tangent. What were you saying about a greeting?"

"I think the noises were a way of letting me know that something was coming." "I'm not sure I follow you."

"I was sitting on the sofa and I heard a muffled voice. I thought it was the television at first so I muted it, but then I heard it again and it was clearer this time. It was my mother; she kept saying the same thing to me over and over. It was, 'Wait for her by the water.' This happened about three weeks after we moved in. That was two years ago. My mother passed away nearly a decade ago."

"Um, I uh . . . "

"I know how crazy it sounds," Mary said.

"So did the message actually mean anything?"

"Lauren was born three weeks premature. I went into labor standing on a beach next to Lake Superior. I had seen my doctor at the hospital earlier in the week and everything had checked out fine. Nobody saw it coming except my mother."

"I'm not sure if I should be relieved or terrified."

"You heard someone too, didn't you?"

"My brother."

"What did he say?"

"He said, 'Listen.' At least, I think that's what he said. I thought I'd dreamed it, but now I'm not so sure."

"Is your brother . . . ?"

"Zach was really sick when he was born; the kind of sick where the doctors tell you to gather the family and say your goodbyes."

"Oh . . . "

"Turned out the doctors didn't know everything though, because he actually made it. Against all odds he pulled through and after a stint in intensive care he came home healthy and whole. It was my mother who never really recovered. She coddled Zach and worried about him constantly, always afraid something would happen and he'd have to go back to the hospital. She scrutinized his activities, his friends, every aspect of his life, and the more she clamped down the more Zach tried to pull away until the whole thing finally blew up in a huge fight when Zach turned eighteen. He took off three weeks after his birthday and the next thing we knew he'd joined up with the Marines. Then . . . he died a month into his first tour."

"I'm so sorry."

"After that my mother just collapsed into herself. I was a junior in college and I didn't know what to do, so I pulled away just like Zach had. Pulled away and never looked back."

Mary started to say something but then stopped.

"It's okay. I know I'm an asshole."

"You were still a kid."

"So what's my excuse now? I've pretended all this time like everything was

normal, but I've really just been running away from it and the longer I run the harder it is to come back."

"Sounds to me like you're just trying to deal with what happened."

"I'm not sure what I'm doing anymore."

Mary glanced at her watch.

"I'm sorry, but I have to be getting back. A neighbor is watching Lauren; Paul will be home from his ride soon."

"Thanks for listening. It's nice to know I'm not completely crazy."

"Oh, you very well might be, but if you are you're not the only one," Mary said and smiled.

She made her way to the door and was about to leave when she turned back.

"Greg?"

"Yes?"

"Keep listening for your brother, even if you think it's crazy."

"I will."

That night Greg waited up for his brother until his eyes grew heavy, but there was no scratching from inside the walls or keening from behind his bed, and there was no voice—only the whoosh of the furnace and the hum of the refrigerator.

He showered and dressed early the next morning and was hunting around for his keys when he saw it.

There, written in the fading steam clinging to the bathroom mirror, was a single word.

LISTEN.

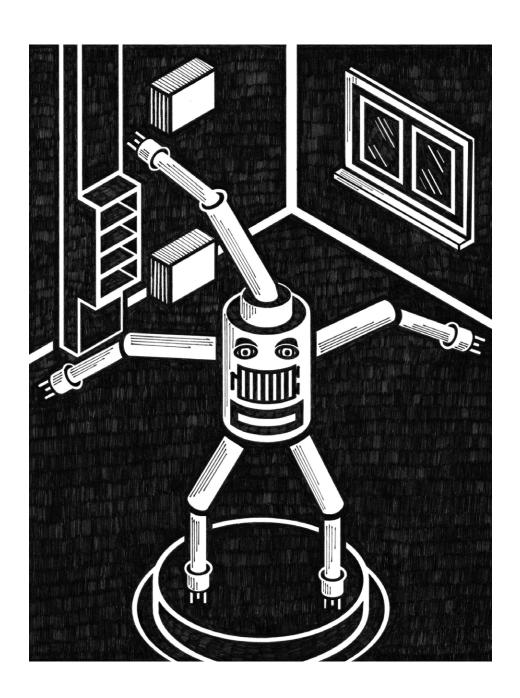
Greg's phone started to ring. He fumbled for it in his pocket, finally grasping it, and looked at the screen. The call came up as 'unknown' and Greg stared at it for a moment as it continued to ring.

On the sixth ring he thumbed the phone's little green button.

"Hello?"

A voice he hadn't heard in a long time returned his greeting.





Sweat

Sweat and the sea are salty

and alike.

A lazy man and a corpse never sweat.

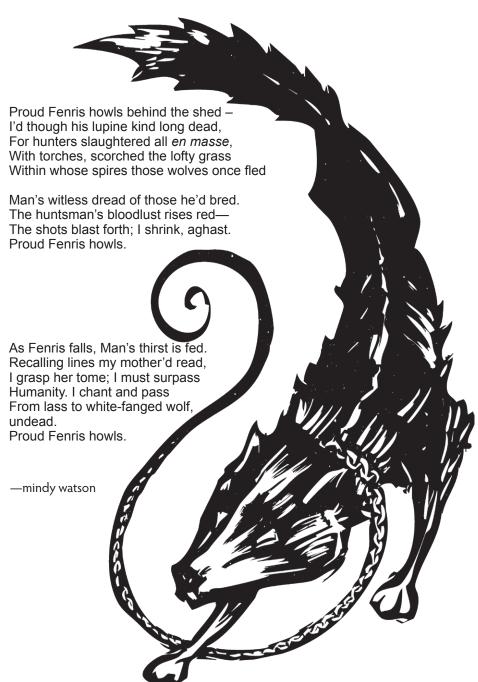
Mountaineers mount up the slithery mounts.
Resistance yields, dissolving in sweat.
Seeds sprout in the fallen beads, life-drops.

Success floats in sweat, depositing fresh joys.

Each victory in the history sparkles through sweat.

—fabiyas mv

(Re) Incarnate: a Rondeau



Her name rings a bell, though faintly. She stopped by this chapel to pray. Gave alms to the poor, most saintly, Then solemnly went on her way. Seens something troubled her greatly. I remember that furrowed brow. Was she a girl somber, innately? She was not! At least this I'll avow. She was the young ward of a stern man. He looked smart, in top hat and cane. Chapel But anyone filled with concern can Surmise what I've long ascertained. She'd a bright sunny manner, chiefly, But in darker moments I found That though I just knew the girl briefly, She grew fretful when he was around. One evening the young girl went missing And of the many rumors we hear, One that I'll not be dismissing Is she took her own life out of fear. Her body, though, wasn't discovered Until several days had passed. Those vultures that eerily hovered Had helped us to find her, at last. And now that stern man must grapple With what's right and what may be fair And although he stops by this chapel I have never seen him at prayer. Now her grave at the top of the hill Is situated most quaintly. When a breeze blows down, with a chill, The chapel bell rings, though faintly. -michelle deloatch

The Voyeur

Lured by the light in the bathroom, he comes, prowling through the layers of darkness. Seeing two paws clinging on the window bars, and a pair of blue eyes burning through the holes of lust, a village virgin whoops, when the voyeur slinks away.

As the hot sun rays warm the canal, he hides in the bushy banks, throwing his blue eyes into the distant nudity. Sometimes, he is seen being chased by the rustics with bamboo sticks. But quick oblivion is bliss; he gets duty bound again.

Hiding is a risk, but peeping is a pleasure. Through the twigs and bars, he stares at the other side of pleasure.

—fabiyas mv

The Rocking Chair

Found me at the second-hand store
Sitting right up front like I was something
All sanded down and vanished up, I was
She was a new bride fixing up her home
For her man and her children to come
Smiled when she saw me, said I was the one

Eased me gently into the back of an old red pick-up Didn't mind it being old, seeing as I was old too Tied me down with rope so I would survive the ride Looked like I was going to a good home this time None of the ignorant riff raff like before I could tell soon as they took me through the door

Yellow curtains at the window made by her hands
One of those used velveteen Victorian settees
Next to an empty space by the fireplace
Looked like that spot was waiting on me
A place to sit and get the chill off the bones
Had a rock in me gentle enough for babes in arms

And Lord, did the babies come one by one No rest from the last to the next, making 10 Then the doctor said can't do it again She kept the littlest ones away, least they fall Climbing onto my back pushing too hard Sprawling to the floor, crying like it was time's end

Pass'em a piece of butter pound cake or a bit of peppermint Kept in a carnival glass jar on the table to quite their cries As she rocked holding as many as her arms could bear In the summer I'd be moved out to the veranda While she sipped lemonade made with lemons Grown from trees she planted herself in the side yard.

The sun warming her gentle tired face, little beads
Of sweat falling onto my weathered arms making
Me a part of her as we rocked to my creaking rhythm
Timed by the weight of her body cooled by the evening breeze
Speaking quietly of her day, how that old Mrs. Gillis
Done gone senile accusing her of stealing food from the pantry

Like she was some common thief, forgetting she been With the Gillis' nigh 20 years, since their first was born Helped raised that child like he was her own She'd quit, but times were hard, her man dead and gone Jobs were not that easy to find. I'd lull her to sleep Far away from Mrs. Gillis' hurtful words

There were those days tears rolled from her eyes When she got sick and could no longer sit with me I was still there by the fire missing our time together Wishing she could come and rest a spell like the old days But her back was stiff, her legs swollen, eyes nearly blind Her hands twisted from pain that I could not rock away

After she passed I was put out with the trash Looked at like junk to be thrown away Heard they wanted something up to date As if I never had a place in her home My bottom splintered and my legs cracked Best not sit down on me or I might fall apart

My purpose outlived, all the comfort I gave
All those long years rocking babies, bringing
A bit of calm and ease to a fully packed house
Only to be busted apart and left at the curb
A little something for the junkman to light his fire
Bringing warmth, giving me a purpose one last time

When I was nothing but ashes rising above I looked for her who treated me as something Loved and with purpose in her life There she was at heaven's gate Smiling at the sight of me, waiting to sit And rock with me once again

—aurora lewis

THOR NFIELD

Some days I wonder if this blue mind could be near-sighted-there are thoughts that make the island beyond the lake visible--the island where my husband lost his sight, where the girl I hate was bewitched by the daughter of a French whore.

There are days that make me wonder why I keep pacing this castle with my blouse unbuttoned, skin glittering as though madness makes a woman shine her wrists two pulsing nutmegs.

There are vices in me stranger than the things this castle has seen. Centuries ago, I vowed to be good. But that was before a swamp surfaced in my head. Before my mind, this pink fruit, scraped itself

—mehnaz sahibzada



Horse Man

By schooling him in stable rows he trains his colts to run by rote and answer questions he will pose by hoofing it for hay or oat

while carrots hung before the snout keep asses pulling forth a plow instead of looking all about (which worthy masters can't allow);

and intermittent sounds of cracks from whips of yet another Master keep *him* circling racing tracks and coursing ever farther, faster.

The fact the Master's missing, and that there's no driver in the seat is something he can't understand so he, too, plies with equine feet

and the momentum of the race stirs up the breeze that keeps in place the blinders so they frame his face as long as he keeps up the pace.

And yet were he to take a pause the flaps would fall and free his eyes which with a little exercise could lead him right, left, up or down, to open fields, or into town where he could stand up like a man. Oh, help the Horse Man if you can!

But blind faith in a noble cause contents a beast to stay the course (as if commanded by a Book) and never stop and take a look but, for the Master, go full force

around and around and around and stay the horse.

—james b. nicola

Two Simple Roads

Robert Frost was a fine mathematician. He reduced his fractions efficiently down to two roads in one wood. Modern. Scientific. Beautiful. Binary reductionism and poetic refuge denying or avoiding quantum chaos and the probability of improbability of organic human irrationality which is not a four letter word but offensive anyway because rational thinking is key to science, our modern religion, and "irrational" sounds bad, a label for mystics and poets, when what I mean to say is simply that every one wants a forked road: left, right, even if you take the scarecrow's direction in Oz - both you still only have three options for travel.

The last time I was in a wood, there was a labyrinth, Bowie and all, that appeared - hall of mirrors, trap doors, secret passages - with a hundred entrances, billion exits, chess problem with no solution, and people raced back and forth no somber, solitary, reflective forest this. dominated by climate control, astroturf, pine scent, exposing the reality of Frost's apparent fiftyfifty game, clearly all or nothing in truth, this modern mathematical ruse to deny the beautiful array, meticulous matrix of maddening possibility available from one step.

I stuck out my foot to trip a passerby, then meandered aimlessly into the woods, foot following foot today.

—john reinhart

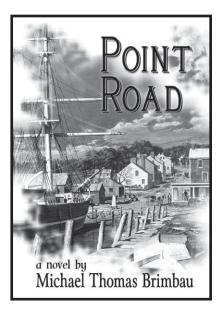
First published in Dirty Chai, February 2014

Point Road

by Michael Thomas Brimbau

\$16.95

Emily White lives with her grandmother, Charlotte, in a somnolent whaling village at the end of Point Road in Westport, Massachusetts where nothing much ever happens. The year is 1861. Civil War has broken out between North and South and



some in town have heeded the call for service to their country. Yet, life at Point Village continues with a quiet routine.

Emily loves living in Point Village and finds her adventures in books. She is a dedicated member of the Drift River Readers Club, which has recently taken up a book about the suicide death and hanging of Sarah Cornell in Tiverton, Rhode Island—an incident which occurred many years previous. Emily believes that the Club should investigate the thirty-year-old hanging. In her virtuous endeavor to solve the Cornell mystery, the mission at hand becomes derailed when a servant girl is found hanged on a nearby island and her passing regarded as a suicide.

Death has become a tormenting companion for Emily and she is determined to solve this crime. As circumstances unfold, the Drift River Readers Club is assigned a puzzle they cannot ignore when one of their members becomes the prey, and the war in the south moves north, complicating things and drawing Emily into the conflict.

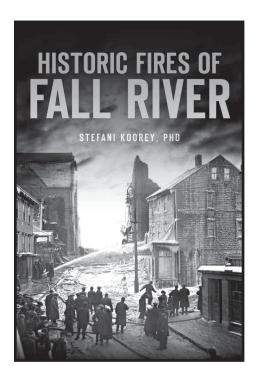
Follow Emily and Samuel Cory as they set out to sea on the grand schooner *Sphinx* to unravel a murder and rescue a friend from being the next possible victim.

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Historic Fires of Fall River

by Stefani Koorey, PhD



Fall River's textile boom in the nineteenth century brought with it a series of fiery disasters. The Big Fire of 1843 left more than one thousand people homeless and destroyed two hundred buildings, as well as twenty-some acres of land. After the Steiger Store Fire of 1916, mill owners pushed the city to replace horse-drawn brigades with fire engines. The intense heat from the Kerr Mill Thread Fire of 1987 melted hoses as first responders battled the blaze. Author Stefani Koorey chronicles the historic infernos of the Spindle City and celebrates the community's resilience in the face of adversity.

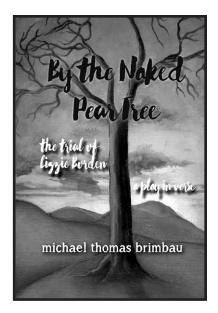
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By the Naked Pear Tree

The trial of Lizzie Borden in verse

by Michael Thomas Brimbau \$12.00



By the Naked Pear Tree, a play in verse, was written in the spirit of Steve Allen's unconventional television program, Meeting of the Minds.

Our satirical performance begins outside a New Bedford, Massachusetts, court house. The year is 1893 and the trial of Lizzie Borden is about to begin. Dispatching his oration, the tragedian, Euripides, stands in the street preaching the merits of womanhood and relating the concerns he has for the outcome of the trial, and how it may corrupt the honor of the fabled heroines he has written about. Not long after we are introduced to Clarence Darrow—progressive attorney and respected member of the American Civil Liberties Union.

Hired by Euripides to allusively defend Lizzie Borden, Darrow invites his colleague and adversary, William Jennings Bryan, to a challenge, giving the dubious Bryan a chance to play prosecutor—to change the course of history, and help convict Lizzie Borden of the murder of her parents. In doing so, the two men agree to a friendly game of poker. Winner of the ensuing card game gets to decide the fate of the accused. But the outcome is not what one would expect, and those who tamper with history are left to reap the consequences.

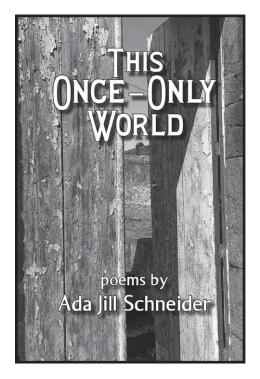
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This Once-Only World

poems by Ada Jill Schneider



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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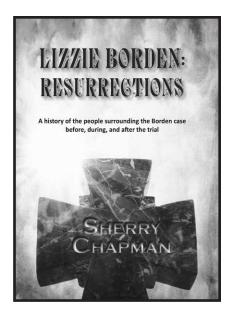
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Lizzie Borden: Resurrections

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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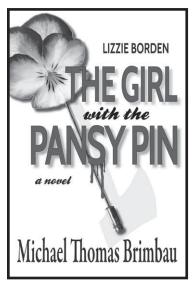
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Lizzie Borden: The Girl with the Pansy Pin

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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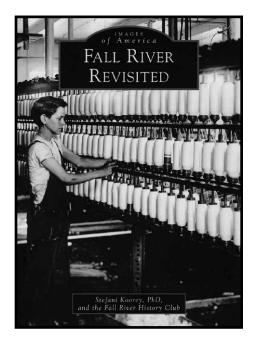
Get the latest news at girlwiththepansypin.com

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.

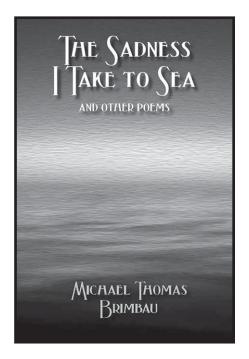
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The Sadness I Take to Sea and Other Poems

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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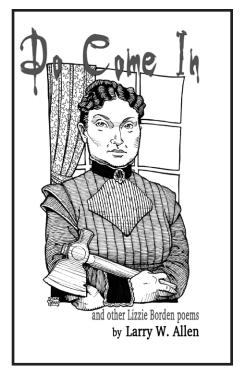
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Do Come Inand Other Lizzie Borden Poems

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.

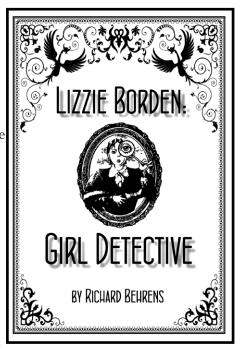
Many years before her infamous arrest and trial for the murders of her father and stepmother, Lizzie Borden pursued a career as a private consulting detective and wrestled unflinchingly with a crooked spiritualist, a corrupt and murderous textile tycoon, a secret society of anarchist assassins, rowdy 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

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.

Shawn Chang is a sixteen-yearold writer. His writing has appeared in *Under the Bed, The Literary Hatchet, Shot Glass Journal,* and *The Australia Times Poetry Magazine.*

Ken Allan Dronsfield is a published poet from New Hampshire, living in Oklahoma. He loves thunderstorms! His published work can be found in reviews, journals, magazines and anthologies throughout the web and in print venues. His poetry has been nominated for two Pushcart Prize Awards and the Best of the Net for 2016.

Sherry Chapman writes humor & historical articles. She was the resident humorist for *The Lizzie Borden Quarterly* and *The Hatchet*. She is the author of *Lizzie Borden:Resurrections* c. 2014, published by PearTree Press. Sherry is also the consulting editor for *The Literary Hatchet*.

Selena Martens is a writer who resides in Ontario, Canada.

Daginne Aignend is the pen name of Inge Wesdijk. She lives in the Netherlands.

Richard Schnap is a writer who resides in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Paul Ilechko was born in England but has lived most of his life in the USA. He currently lives in Lambertville, NJ with his girlfriend and a cat. Paul has had poetry published by Elderly Magazine, Ibis Head Review, the Peacock Journal and Scarlet Leaf Review, and short fiction works by Grab-a-Nickel and Xelas magazines.

Mehdi Deilami is an Iranian scholar who received his B.A in English Literature at Shiraz University and is currently studying his M.A at the same university. His talent for poetry lies in his deep understanding of life.

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.

Michelle DeLoatch lives in Georgia with her son and husband. She has been writing poetry since her early teens. Her influences have been Edgar Allan Poe, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Frost.

Stephanie Smith has had work published in such publications as PIF MAGAZINE, STRONG VERSE, THE HORROR ZINE, BETE NOIRE, and ILLUMEN. Ingi House is an archivist. She has published poetry in RMB Journal, Dual Coast and NOUS. Originally from the Midwest, she is trying out both coasts to see which one is best. She loves words and hope they love her back. Contact her on Twitter @ IngiHouse.

Bill Livingston is originally from Altoona, PA. Bill is a poet, humorist, screenwriter and advertising copywriter who has been published in Danse Macabre, Saturday Afternoon Journal, TreeHouse, Flipside, New Verse News, and Radius: Poetry From the Center to the Edge. He is a supporting member of The Poetry Project and an original member of Brooklyn Poets and Bowery Arts + Science. He lives in Brooklyn, NY, with his wife and twin daughters.

Bruce Memblatt is a native New Yorker, and a member of the Horror Writers Association. He is on the staff of *The Horror* Zine as Kindle Coordinator. His story "Dikon's Light" is a recipient of the Bewildering Stories 2012 Mariner Awards. His works have been published several times in anthology books, magazines, and zines such as Aphelion, Nameless Magazine (Cycatrix Press), The Literary Hatchet, Suspense Magazine, Post Mortem Press, Dark Moon Books, Sam's Dot Publishing, The Horror Zine, Midwest Literary Magazine. Danse Macabre, Parsec Ink. The Feathertale Review. Yellow Mama and many more.

Michael Fantina has had dozens of poems published in North America. the UK and in Australia, including The Literary Hatchet. He has four chapbooks of verse available from Rainfall Books in the UK

Bob Eager's work appears in *Stray* Branch, Leaves of ink, Camel Saloon, Rusty Truck, Vision With Voices, among others. He also appears in Infinity's Kitchen and Avatar Review and very randomly on a video channel called Charisma Corner.

Robert Beveridge makes noise (xterminal.bandcamp.com) and writes poetry just outside Cleveland, OH. Recent/upcoming appearances in Wildflower Muse, Noble/Gas Qtrly, and The Ibis Head Review, among others.

George Kelly is a young (31) British writer, unpublished but previously signed to the Eve White literary agency. He has worked on numerous film scripts with UK feature film director Regan Hall (Fast Girls) and worked as Head Writer for Treite Labs where he helped develop an animation series aimed at combating knife crime in London.

Rick Blum has been writing humorous essays and poetry for more than 25 years during stints as a nightclub owner, high-tech manager, market research mogul and, most recently, alter kaker. His writings have appeared in *Humor* Times, Boston Literary Magazine, and Bohemia Journal, among others. He received first place in the 2014 Carlisle Poetry contest. and honorable mention in the 2015 Boston Globe Magazine Deflategate poetry challenge.

Mehnaz Sahibzada was born in Pakistan and raised in Los Angeles. She holds an M.A. in Religious Studies from UC Santa Barbara, and she is a 2009 PEN USA Emerging Voices Fellow in Poetry. Her short story, "The Alphabet Workbook", appeared in the August 2010 issue of *Ellery Queen Mystery* Magazine. Her chapbooks, Tongue-Tied: A Memoir in Poems (2012), and Summer Forgets to Wear a Petticoat (2016), were published by Finishing Line Press. Her work has appeared in Wide Awake. The Rattling Wall, and Pedestal Magazine. A high school English teacher, she lives in southern California, atmehnazsahibzada.com/

Sean Nixon has been writing off and on for about 20 years. His first story published was in 1992 and he has had five pieces published in total, the latest in "Inner Sins," an online magazine. Sean has been married for 25 years and has two grown children and two grandsons.

Tracy Blake is a 42-year-old mother of one. Currently attending Full Sail University for her bachelor's in creative writing in fine arts and entertainment. Her published works include: "Four Glance," in *Down in the Dirt Magazine* and "A Single Shot," in *The Literary Hatchet*. She is also a freelance journalist for *Guardian Liberty Voice* & *The Public Slate*.

Johnny Longfellow is the editor of the online poetry site Midnight Lane Boutique, along with the multi-media arts site, BAD ACID LABORATORIES, INC. His own poetry has appeared in The Barefoot Muse. The Five-Two. Horror Sleaze Trash. Stepping Stones Magazine. The Rotary Dial, and other journals. He has also served for nearly twenty years as a mentor to Newburyport, MA high school students through their Poetry Soup reading program and annual print journal.

McKinley Henson is a twentyyear-old with too many thoughts and inspirations. He admires poetry for its limitless styles and formatting. McKinley is best described as an indecisive paradox. No. Perhaps 'a ghost' would be a more fitting term. Just like any amateur poet, he hopes he can create many beautiful works in the future.

Jenny Santellano is a mother and poet from Chicago, Illinois who enjoys musing about the darker side of human nature. Her poems have been published in various e-zines, journals, and anthologies, including The Literary Hatchet (Volumes 13,14), and most recently in The Bones of Nirvana (Svensk Apache Press).

James B. Nicola's poems have recently appeared in *Literary Hatchet* (21 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.

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.

Darin Z. Krogh lives on a cliff overlooking the settling ponds of the Spokane SewageTreatment 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.

Mindy Watson is a DC-based writer who holds an MA in Nonfiction Writing from The Johns Hopkins University. Her nonfiction has appeared/ is forthcoming in Adelaide Literary Magazine, Ars Medica, Corvus Review, and Thread Literary Journal; her poetry has appeared/is forthcoming in Autumn Sky Poetry, Cemetery Moon Magazine, The Ekphrastic Review, Midnight Lane Boutique, and The Quarterday Review.

Bruce Harris is the author of SHERLOCK HOLMES AND DOCTOR WATSON: ABOUT TYPE.

Arthur Davis is a management consultant specializing in corporate planning and reorganization and has been quoted in The New York Times, Crain's New York Business and interviewed on New York TV News Channel 1. He has taught at The New School University, advised Senator John McCain's investigating committee on boxing reform, appeared as an expert witness on best practices in 1999 before State Senator Roy Goodman's New York State Commission on Corruption in Boxing and advised the Department of Homeland Security, National Protection and Programs Directorate. Since 2012 over 60 stories have been published in 40 magazines including "Conversation in Black," which was nominated for the 2015 Pushcart Prize.

John Reinhart is an arsonist by trade, and lives on a farmlette in Colorado with his wife and children. He is a Frequent Contributor at the Songs of Eretz and was recently awarded the 2016 Horror Writers Association Dark Poetry Scholarship. His chapbook, "encircled," is available from Prolific Press. More of his work is available at patreon.com/johnreinhart

Douglas J. Ogurek's fiction, though banned on Mars, appears in over 40 Earth publications, including The Literary Hatchet. Ogurek founded the literary subgenre known as unsplatterpunk, which uses splatterpunk conventions (e.g., extreme violence, gore, taboo subject matter) to deliver a Christian message. He lives on Earth with the woman whose husband he is. They are owned by a pit bull named Phlegmpus Bilesnot. Ogurek also reviews films at Theaker's Quarterly Fiction. douglasjogurek.weebly.com. Emma-Johanna Henriksson is a Swedish poetess who prefers plants and literature over people. Her recent poetry has appeared in *Flyg fula fågel* and *The Bones of Nirvana*, published by Svensk Apache.

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. He lives in Nacogdoches, the oldest town in Texas.

Peter Emmett Naughton first fell into fiction penning stories to amuse his grammar-school classmates, which helped him overcome his shyness, but resulted in very few completed homework assignments. He was raised and currently resides in the Chicagoland suburbs with his wife and cats and his writing has appeared in *The* Delinguent, Candlelight, Black Words On White Paper, Spook City, Apiary, Crack The Spine, Chicago Literati, Cemetery Moon, Pavor Nocturnus, Sanitarium, 1000words, 1:1000, Cacti Fur, Graze, and the Dark Lane Anthology.

Jay Caselbert is a published author living in Frankfurt, Germany. caselberg.net

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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

Aurora Lewis is a graduate of UCLA Extension Program, receiving her certificate at age 60. Many of her poems and short stories have been published, including with *The Hatchet*.

Craig Moorhead is a film and television editor living in Maryland and his fiction has appeared nowhere as yet.

Ada Jill Schneider is the author of This Once-Only World, Behind the Pictures I Hang, The Museum of Mv 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. She started writing poetry at the age of fifty-three, when she thought she was old.

C.K. Black resides in the town of Sherman, CT. His work has appeared in *The Rusty Nail Magazine, Tales of the Zombie War, Page* and *Spine* magazine, *Saturday Night Reader, Gravel Magazine* and 50 Word Stories. When he's not working his day job, he can be found writing. He can also be found on twitter @ CKBlack21.

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.

Noa Assael is a writer who currently studies Creative Writing in Orlando Florida. She speaks English and Hebrew. A vear after her release from the Israeli Air Force she moved from Israel to Florida. Follow her on Twitter @Noa Assael

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

David Greene is a published author living in Fall River, MA. Natalie Crick, from Newcastle in the UK, has found delight in writing all of her life and first began writing when she was a very young girl. Her poetry is influenced by melancholic confessional Women's poetry. Her poetry has been published in a range of journals and magazines including Cannons Mouth, Cyphers, Ariadne's Thread, Carillon and National Poetry Anthology 2013.

Jeff Haas is a professionally published poet and short story writer who also teaches creative writing at Emory University.

David Greske is a member of HWA, and his stories have been published in several magazines and anthologies. Most recently his tale, 'Square Plate People,' appears in issue 14 of THE LITERARY HATCHET. He is also the author of five novels. He co-wrote the screenplay to BLOOD RIVER, his fourth novel, which was produced and directed by Christopher Forbes of Forbesfilm.

He lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota with his partner of 30 years and their cat, Scooter. Visit the author at davidgreske.com

Fabiyas MV is a writer from Orumanayur village in Kerala, India. He is the author of 'Kanoli Kaleidoscope', published by Punkswritepoemspress, 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, UK). 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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