

A stylized, high-contrast graphic of a face, possibly a mask or a caricature, rendered in black, white, and yellow. The face has large, dark eyes, a prominent red nose, and a wide, toothy grin. The background is a mix of orange and red, with a large red shape on the right side.

# *Literary* THE Hatchet

**CUTTING EDGE  
WORKS BY  
AUTHORS AND  
ARTISTS  
WORLDWIDE**

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## ISSUE #20

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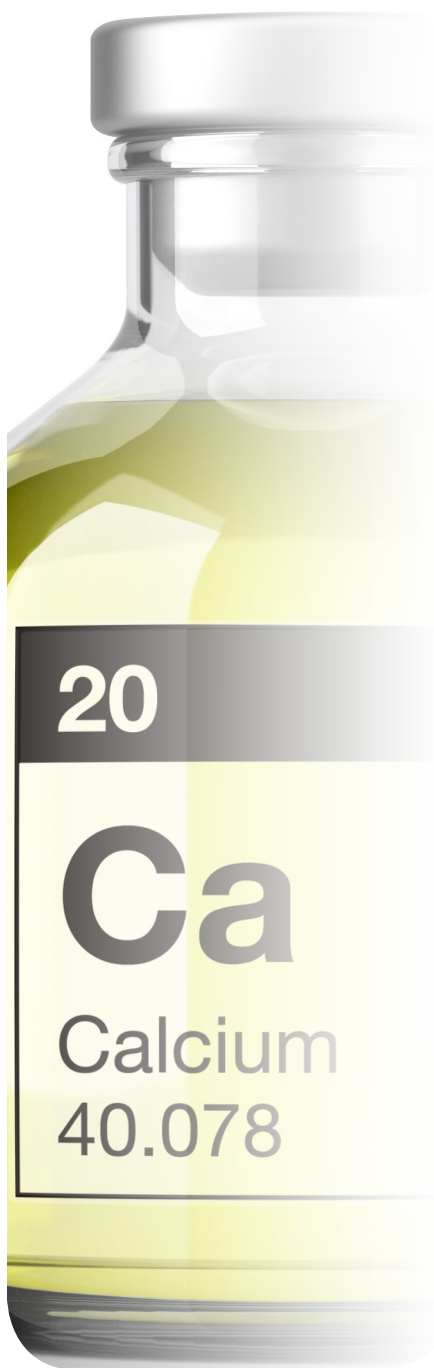
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We really would love to read your work.

Stefani Koorey  
Editor and Publisher

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—"gravity rapids of universe ladder" by denny marshall





# A Primer for the Damned

by lawrence buentello

A curious impulse motivated me to drive out to the seashore and feel the sand beneath my shoes and inhale the scent of brackish water. The drive along the coast provided an opportunity for a quiet meditation on my life. But it didn't matter whether I was satisfied with my personal history. Right now all that mattered was that I had found the sea and the white sand serving as a barrier between firm footing and unimaginable depths.

I walked for a while, squinting in the sun, the warm sea breeze slipping through my clothes. Then I saw him sitting at a table on the sand.

I rarely noticed incongruous scenes, but as I turned to study one side of the shoreline and then the other, I was startled by the absence of people. The man's presence in a chair at a small table in the middle of the beach seemed bizarre.

As I walked closer I observed his straw-colored linen blouse and pants, both fluttering against his thin frame. Rope sandals adorned his pale feet. He wore no hat, and considering that the sun hovered in a clear sky, I thought his skin should have been reddened. But he was pallid—even unnaturally so. He sat writing in a large bound book with what appeared to be a stick of charcoal.

Curiosity overcame my reticence. I walked slowly to the table and said, "I'm sorry to interrupt you—but, what are you doing?"

The man gazed up at me. He had small black eyes and thin lips. I sensed no concern in his face. Wisps of brown hair fluttered on his pale scalp. He said, "I am writing, of course."

I laughed, upbraided by the obvious. "Yes, I see that you're writing. But why here, in this great expanse of beach?"

"Where else should I be writing?" His voice seemed small, without timber, perhaps effeminate.

I stared at the sea for a minute, watching the pinioning motions of distant gulls. I had come for solace, hadn't I? I should have walked on. But the man was a mystery—

I glanced down at his book; the facing leaf was covered in hazy lettering. "May I ask what you are writing?"

"I'm writing the world," he replied.

"I don't understand."

He stared at me for a long time, his eyes without emotion. "I have been sitting at this table for a very, very long time, writing. And everything I write becomes the world."

I laughed again, although uncertain why I should laugh. "Are you saying that the world exists because of what you write about it?"

"That's precisely what I mean. If I don't write about it, it doesn't come to pass."

"That's ridiculous. I'm here, aren't I? I'm only here because I *decided* to come."

"No, you didn't. I wrote about you coming to the sea, and here you are."

"No," I said, disturbed by his delusion. "I decided to come on my own."

His thin lips pressed into a smile before he said, "Would you like to see what I've written in my book?"

I nodded, anxious to dispel his lunacy.

He turned the book on the table, his finger pointing to a place in the text. I leaned forward to read the passage.

*He walked for a while, squinting in the sun, the warm sea breeze slipping through his clothes. Then he saw him sitting at a table on the sand.*

*He rarely noticed incongruous scenes, but as he turned to study one side of the shoreline—*

I straightened reflexively, having read enough.

He turned the book back and began writing on the leaf with his stick of charcoal.

"How long have you been here?" I asked.

He paused and looked at me. "I told you. A very, very long time. So long I can't remember."

"But where were you before you sat down to write?"

"You know, I really can't remember that, either."

I swallowed, wondering if what I was experiencing was truly possible. He resumed writing, and now the act seemed less innocuous and more disquieting. Was this really happening?

"Yes, it's happening," he said, as if reading my mind—or perhaps he only knew what the words in his book reported.

I turned away from him to look at the dunes, the breakers; the world was not the world any longer. "Why did you bring me here, then? What purpose could it serve?"

As I turned back toward the table, he said, "Why not?"

I looked in his eyes and was suddenly afraid, "What are you going to write about now?"

He smiled again, and I couldn't decide whether it was a smile of caring or disdain. "I don't know yet. What do *you* think I should write?"

I considered the question. Then I said, "Something with a pleasant ending."

He glanced down at his book. "*Something with a pleasant ending, he said,*" the man read, then stared at me again.

Now he laughed, gently at first, and then with a raucous, recoiling energy that shook throughout his body, the stick of charcoal trembling in his hand, his small eyes closing against the absurdity of creation.

I looked away from the man and studied the sea. The waves broke easily on the glowing white sand, foam releasing and forming where it washed ashore. The breakers were easy, too, the tide a soft, caressing hand moving over the earth with a maternal touch. Suddenly I wanted nothing more than a long, cool swim. I lost all sense of the man at the table and began walking toward the water, not even bothering to remove my shoes.



*He continued walking into the water, delighted by the cool sensation of the waves, until he was almost completely submerged. Only his chin remained above the waterline, his eyes staring seaward, before he felt his body being taken by the inexorable gravity of the sea—*



## RAINY FUNERAL

They were all dressed in black, standing  
in silence, in the rain. That sad and gloomy

afternoon was quite melancholic and plain.  
Coffin was pretty and a bit fancy, but

nothing too much at all. Ordinary funeral for  
close relatives; city cemetery, late in the Fall.

No one cried during ceremony, out of respect  
for the poor boy. He died young, illness was

swift; *He's with God now*, they said in joy.  
After the burial, they silently left, I stayed

behind, to make a plea. But it was too late for  
forgiveness, because that poor boy was me.

—haris čolić

## FOUR CUPS OF TEA

Four tea cups lay unattended since *Mittag*  
—On the black, bedraggled table in the canteen.

You and I—drinking each other in—  
Slow, dainty sips. Each

tea cup is empty and ready to be refilled  
But you don't.  
Instead, you play with it.  
Your fingers hold them with dexterity – unforgiving,  
Entangling,  
Timorously masking the quarks and leptons of emotions  
camouflaged—  
Within the empty tea cup.

You endeavor to drown me—your eyes—  
carry Lake Guatavita and I,  
a trifling wanderer questing El Dorado.

The afternoon passes by—  
Ophelia, drowning

You don't finish your tea. Still.  
Until—  
I drown, with each sip,  
In Lake Guatavita.

—irtika kazi



First Printed in *The Metaworker*, 2018.



[poetry]

# off leash

Paw prints loop through a set of footsteps heading to the water. Alone on the beach, Buster barks at the ocean erasing the marks. Light from a waning moon unspools toward the horizon.

rhythm of the tide  
soundtrack to  
a mystery

—pat tompkins

# The Devouring One

Unable to avert my gaze, I watch the killing—  
ice glassine the grapevines which are budding.

Death, a message, sent to spring and I, unresigned,  
mesmerized, rebirth is not of Boreas' design.  
Wary daffodils bow, each sun-struck head enshrined.

The dogwood's peach petals blacken, dripping teardrops,  
bloom denied, their glory but a draught for night's chill sleet  
hyacinth, blue blooms this morn unfurl their scent, corpses  
now make Persephone's promise of spring incomplete.

Charmed like Narcissus in frozen reflection scrying,  
I watch as winter wraps spring in chill confines  
marveling at the beauty of love-aligned,  
observe as rime melts at noon's touch upon treetops  
and as hoar frost leaves the pansies with springs heat.

—deborah guzzi

First Printed in *Eternal Haunted Summer*, 2016.

[short story]

# DEAF AND DUMB

by kelly piner



Nine-year-old Kat Hollingsworth and her mother, Joyce, prepared for their annual retreat, which Joyce referred to as “going to the shore,” located three hours from their small inland town. The shore consisted of a small sandy strip with a dock and rocks where Kat liked to wade in the sound and play with crabs, while her mother basked in the sun. Joyce packed a picnic lunch of tuna sandwiches, pop, and chocolate cupcakes. They would spend the night, as they always did, at a small motel down the road from the water.

Joyce wheeled up to Circus Grocery in her 1965 Volkswagen Beetle and handed Kat a dollar bill. Kat tucked the bill into her patent leather kitty cat purse and felt all grown up as she raced into the store alone to buy a bag of potato chips for the picnic. Times were simple, and Joyce had little cause to worry about losing sight of her daughter. She regularly entrusted Kat with errands, especially since her husband’s death. Kat had even started helping Joyce mow the lawn.

Kat had been in the store the year before, but it had been remodeled, and she marched up and down three aisles without finding the chips. She had just started down the fourth when an older boy with scraggly hair and rumpled clothes appeared, as if out of nowhere. He made weird motions with his hands and leaned in close to Kat’s face to utter primitive, animal sounds.

Kat stood perfectly still, unsure what to do, unable to speak.

The young man whipped out a card and shoved it in her face. *My name is Eddie. I am deaf and dumb. Please help me.*

Kat scanned the aisle for an adult to help, but she and the deaf boy were alone. She didn’t know what the card meant, but she understood that the boy couldn’t hear from the way he moved his fingers. She had seen deaf people on TV, but had never heard the term “deaf and dumb.” Uncertain what to do, she shook her head and hoped the boy would understand that she did not know how to talk with her hands and could not help.

The boy threw his hands up in the air and disappeared down another aisle.

Kat felt shaky and had a cold feeling in her stomach. She left the store without buying anything and rushed to the safety of her own car and mother. She told her mom that she couldn’t find the chips, but said nothing about Eddie. She wasn’t sure why.

Joyce sighed and told Kat to wait in the car, she’d be right back.

Joyce came out a few minutes later with the chips. She pointed the VW east and commented that it was already noon and in the upper eighties. Ten minutes later, Joyce pulled off the paved road onto the grass.

The salty smell permeated the air as sea gulls circled and cried overhead. The waves made a splashing sound as they hugged the shoreline.

Kat remained quiet. Her icy insides had warmed, but now she felt hot and sticky, and not quite right. She couldn't wait to get into the cool, salty water.

Joyce unpacked the car. She handed Kat the picnic basket and grabbed the cooler. She took it to the beach and then came back for the bag holding the blanket and beach towels.

Kat and Joyce rarely saw anyone else on this sandy strip where they had vacationed for years. Kat liked it that way—as if they had their own private beach, a special hideaway for mother and daughter.

Joyce spread the blanket, removed paper plates and napkins from the picnic basket, and handed Kat a tuna sandwich and a bottle of Orange Crush. She poured a generous portion of chips on each plate.

Kat, having not eaten since breakfast, dug into the sandwich and savored each bite. For some reason, the tuna sandwiches always tasted better at the shore. She soaked in the warm rays and listened to the waves that washed up to her feet and touched the edge of the blanket.

As Kat and Joyce sat in silence enjoying their picnic, Kat caught a glimpse of someone lurking behind the dock. She couldn't be sure, but thought it looked like Eddie from the grocery store. Joyce had her back to the dock, which made her oblivious to the intruder, and Kat didn't say anything. She kept eating. The next time she looked, the boy was gone.

When they had eaten the sandwiches and chips, Joyce handed Kat the best part, a chocolate cupcake with icing piled an inch high. Kat ate the cake part first and saved the icing for last. By the time they finished the picnic lunch, she had almost forgotten about Eddie. More than anything, she wanted to play in the sound.

Joyce dumped the plates into a garbage sack, and then removed her shorts and top to reveal a faded blue two-piece suit that she had worn for three summers. She had wanted a new suit for herself, but with only money for one, she had bought Kat a tiger print bathing suit from the Sears catalog instead. She slathered on suntan oil and watched Kat wade in the water.

Kat busied herself looking for crabs while Joyce dozed. A light breeze cooled her as she explored, hunting for seashells in the quiet afternoon. At least an hour had passed before she looked up and saw two figures walking toward them—Eddie with an older man.

The older man had hair past his shoulder and wore a hat. He and Eddie walked straight toward Joyce who still dozed in the sun.

As she had in the store, Kat went still, unable to move or call out. She watched as the older man walked up and stood over Joyce. He just stood there saying nothing until Joyce opened her eyes.

She sat straight up, and grabbed her shirt, which she held over her bathing suit top.

The older man introduced himself as Bruce and Eddie as his nephew. Bruce asked if Joyce knew the area, as he was on vacation and wanted to take in all the sites.



Joyce said that she really didn't know the area well, being on vacation herself. Bruce asked if she minded if he and Eddie joined her.

Kat watched from a distance as the fear she felt earlier intensified. The water turned icy, as she worried about not telling her mom about Eddie. She looked up and down the beach for another adult, but she and her mother were all alone with the intruders.

Joyce told Bruce that she and Kat were just about to leave, so they could stay as long as they liked. She grabbed the blanket and towels and motioned to Kat who left her seashells and ran to the car. Joyce threw the VW in reverse, turned around, and drove away saying nothing to Kat.

Kat needed a bathroom, but she didn't dare say so. She rarely saw her mother scared, but she knew that she was. She didn't say anything about the grocery store, the bathroom, or the time. The clock in the car showed it was only two in the afternoon, and she and her mother had always stayed at the shore until at least five.

In silence Joyce drove straight to the twelve-room Driftwood Motel three miles away, where they had stayed the previous four years. Joyce paid the twelve dollars for the night at the small counter inside, and came out with the key. She scanned the parking lot for any sign of the two men, and then she and Kat hauled their small suitcases inside.

The room had a musty smell from being shut up, and the worn bedspread felt damp from the humid air. The old air conditioner hummed and struggled as it fought for its last breath. Joyce unpacked the suitcase and flipped on the television.

Kat still felt odd, even after she used the bathroom. She wished her mother would speak. The last time her mother went so quiet was right after Kat's father died, when she didn't say anything for a very long time.

The two sat on the motel bed and watched a quiz show. Kat periodically glanced at her mother. She looked as if in a trance.

A couple hours later, Joyce broke her silence to suggest that they go for a drive and then on to Kitty's Diner where they always went for fried fish sandwiches and lemon meringue pie. Joyce relaxed during the drive as they took in the scenery. She even stopped by the roadside and took a couple pictures of Kat. She asked Kat what she would like to do the next day, and Kat wanted to go back to the shore since she didn't get to find any crabs and she wanted to find her shells. Joyce told Kat that she would think about it, that it might be fun to try something else for a change.

Once again, Kat sensed her mother's fear. She didn't know if her mother was afraid of the older strange man or of Eddie. Kat would definitely not tell her mother about the grocery store now. She had waited too long. Maybe everything was somehow her fault for not saying anything earlier.

Joyce and Kat pulled into the dirt parking lot at Kitty's Diner around 5:30 and lingered longer than usual. Kat knew her mother dreaded going back to the room because she kept ordering refills of coffee as she stared out the window. Finally,

at 7:15, they headed back to The Driftwood. Although neither one said anything, they both knew their vacation had been ruined.

Only two other cars were parked in the motel lot. Joyce locked the door behind them, and although the evening was still hot and muggy, and the sky not yet dark, she kept the windows closed and pulled the curtains. She smiled at Kat and pulled out a pack of fresh cards. "Let's lighten up," she said.

They got lost in the card games until nearly 10:00. Kat could hear crickets outside the window, and except for that, nothing but silence. Her mother looked more relaxed by bedtime, as she and Kat changed into matching pink summer nightgowns.

They would have a good night's sleep, Joyce said, and they would not let an isolated incident ruin their last day at the shore, the only vacation she and Kat would have for an entire year. Kat fell asleep anticipating the next day's events. She dreamt of seashells and salt water.

In the middle of the night, Kat woke to sounds and saw Eddie standing near the bed. The older man had his hand over her mother's mouth. He held a long knife to her throat. Kat didn't understand what was happening or how they entered the room. The bedside lamp was turned on, and Kat saw tears streaming down her mother's cheeks, her eyes clenched shut. Eddie stood nearby with a wild look in his eyes. Kat wondered if they wanted her mother's purse. She had seen holdups in movies where people got robbed with knives.

In a deep, threatening voice, Bruce told Joyce to keep her mouth shut and no one would get hurt. Joyce's eyes shifted to Kat, and then Eddie tugged at Kat's arm to force her off the bed. He motioned her to follow him outside as he talked with his hands. Kat didn't want to leave her mother, but Eddie tugged some more and led her out into the dark parking lot, where he pushed her into the front seat of a rusted pickup. The old truck was filthy with cigarette butts overflowing the ashtray and beer cans covering the damp floor. Kat choked back her tears as she sat alone with Eddie. She had to believe her mother would come out and get her any minute.

After an eternity, Bruce came running out of the room and hopped into the driver's seat all sweaty and reeking of a sickly smell. Kat saw the glint of the knife as he threw it on the floor, and she worried that he had cut her mother. She kept watching the motel room waiting for Joyce to run out and get her. Kat was stuck in the middle of the two men wearing her pink nightgown and no shoes.

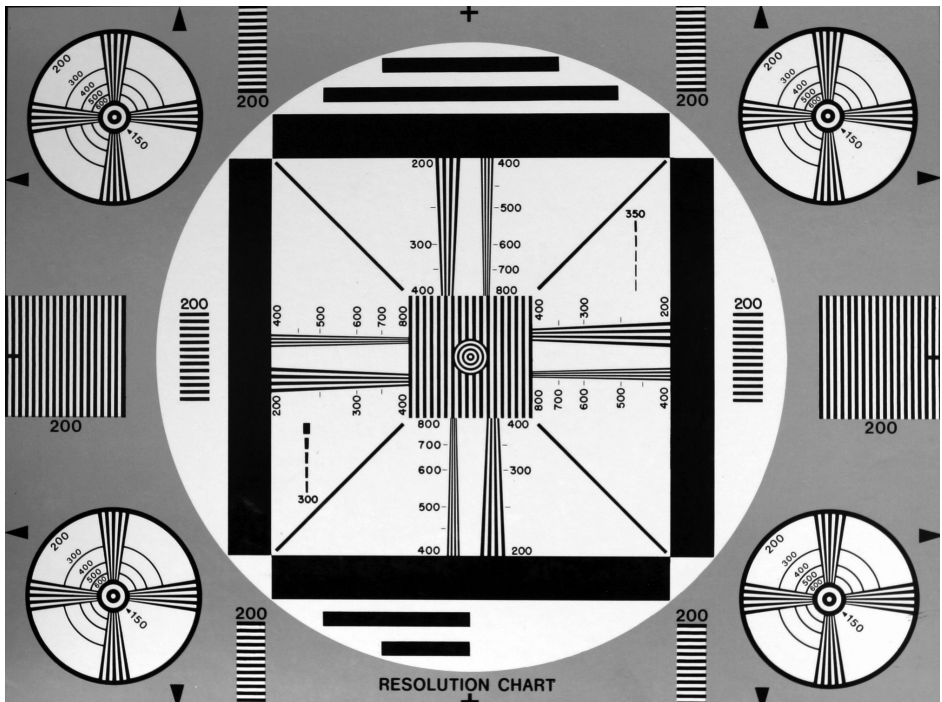
Bruce cranked up the old truck and squeezed her arm tight. "Open your mouth, and you'll get what your mother got," he threatened. He told her that if she kept her mouth shut and didn't say anything, her mother would come and get her in a few days. It was all up to her. Bruce drove west as Kat stifled her tears. Beside her in the dark, Eddie continued talking away with his hands.

Winter set in and Kat now lived in some faraway state where it snowed all the time. It almost never snowed back where she had lived with her mother. The shore and picnic lunches were only a distant memory. It had been months since she had

seen her mother. She had kept her mouth shut like Bruce said, but her mother had still not come for her. Kat couldn't remember the last time she had spoken, but Eddie had taught her to talk with her hands. Her tenth birthday had been a week earlier, and she had hoped her mother would show up and surprise her with a cake, but she didn't come. She worried that her mother blamed her for Eddie and Bruce coming into the room that night, and she prayed every day for her mother to take her home.

Bruce wheeled into the grocery store lot and sent Kat inside to buy him a carton of cigarettes. The run-down store had a single row of green Christmas lights outside with a cardboard snowman Scotch-taped to the glass. Looking at them made Kat's throat clench and hurt. Inside, looking at all the brands of cigarettes, she couldn't see the right ones. Now she felt tight all over because when Bruce got mad, bad things happened. She approached an old lady standing nearby and started talking with her hands. The old lady, confused by the hand language, leaned close to Kat, and Kat handed her a card.

*My name is Kat. I am deaf and dumb. Please help me.*





[poetry]

## INSIDE OUT

There is a glamour to spotted things, transformed by sunlight.  
The colored coats of man and pinto ponies reformed in sunlight.

In a chattering dome of bone, there scatter patches, parsed, serene,  
random scintillating sparks of perfect clarity to inform—sunlight.

The minuet haiku—upon a page of recalled prose—does ignite,  
and adorn with emotional objectivity the norm acts, as sunlight.

The muddled waters of anxiety eat away the moments of bliss,  
leaving unsoothed synaptic edges, space which deform—sunlight.

Holes, oblong, true-formed, edge-worn, oft invite the morn  
or noon, or a dusky dappled afternoon to swarm in sunlight.

—deborah guzzi

# AN UNFINISHED MAN

Yawns the grave  
a collusion of failed ideas  
brings forth an unfinished man

A fistful of worms  
to keep him council  
he retches onward

Arms flung savagely  
he howls a beggared wisdom  
as a dismissive sun sets

“Death was not the making of me  
too broke was I  
by *this*”

He gestures obscenely  
as his ragged shadow  
crosses itself

Those sainted worms  
command him *go*  
and baptise the night in blood

A beckoning dark  
leads him to retrace his life  
dim step by step

And put an end  
where he can  
to all that made him so

—barry charman

[poetry]

## an everlasting photo

An old picture appears  
on the screen. Students  
stare at the raw reality.  
The professor praises  
the photographer's  
precision and perfection.  
But Kevin is criticized  
at the end as usual.

Kevin creates eternity,  
startles the humanity.  
But he forgets to save  
the black girl, blinded  
by a journalistic passion.  
Now he smokes, sobs,  
repents for the little girl.  
He bleeds from blades.

The African girl hangs  
on his heart's ridgepole.  
He isn't a predator, for  
he commits suicide. 'The  
vulture and the little girl'  
was, is, and will be a  
reminder of the life lost.

\*Kevin Carter is the Pulitzer Prize winning photo journalist, who committed suicide.

—fabiyas mv



## a painter's pine

The void calls through gossamer veils and widow's peak;  
shifty-eyed now of necessity, I lie; bone-wrapped  
in rosaries, black as my rheumy eyes, death speaks.  
Uncomforted by silk laid down or velvet, role trapped,  
corseted, board stiff with age, I lie. Calfskin vellum  
like paper peeled, bloodless gutted by the knife of man.  
The scene is set. I shall not whimper as do some,  
call to God or blame the fates of those whose clans  
remain earth-bound; when I have left this mortal glade.  
Pigment on canvass, linseed loosed, stretched taut, displayed;  
all of this, I've had aplenty and been royally paid.  
My life was art. It was art that fanned my life's flame.  
So, stretch me on pine boards and lay my edges down,  
monochromed in umber, drenched in shades of brown.

—deborah guzzi

After: "The Portrait of Sofonisba Anguissola" painted by Anthony Van Dyck

# Angelique

Angelique, Angelique,  
name like wine on the lips.  
You gave her a heart,  
but your throat she sips.

Angelique, Angelique,  
coffin-bred for the night.  
Black lips hide a kiss,  
concealing her bite.

Angelique, Angelique,  
whom age shall not wither.  
Uncourted by Death,  
who duly forgives her.

Angelique, Angelique,  
with bones so fair.  
Eyes gorging on pain,  
spiders in her hair.

Angelique, Angelique,  
morbid virtue she'll take.  
Devouring true hearts,  
making love a mistake.

Angelique, Angelique,  
the moon calls you home.  
Enough broken lives,  
through which you roam.

Angelique, Angelique,  
light feet in the tomb.  
She settles to rest,  
and the grave makes room.

—barry charman





—"anguila dreams" by denny marshall

# GREY IS THE SOUND IN OUR HEADS

by edward turner

The sidewalk is cracked, a bit more than usual. I stare at it and wonder when the last time was that they replaced it. Do they replace sidewalks? For the life of me I can't remember ever seeing a sidewalk replaced. I have seen them at the beginning, when they are laid down, but to say I have seen them replaced, I don't think I ever have.

A little girl runs between the cracks, "Step on a crack and break your mother's back." She yells as she makes her way. This little girl is me. She runs up and down the crack as though she actually wants her mother's back broken.

I am quite sure this is a dream. When I says she is running through the cracks, I mean that she is small enough to fit into those cracks. She looks up at me, "Aren't you going to join me mommy?"

I squat down a bit, "Little girl, I am not your mother."

She stares at me as though I have offended her and she returns to her running.

I hear a voice then, a deep solemn voice coming from behind me. I turn to find a large man in an old baseball cap. "That is fine ma'am, if you do not claim her, I will."

I step forward a bit, "No, you don't have to claim her."

He smiles, easily a foot and a half taller than me, and wide enough that I could not get my arms around him if I wanted to. "Do not worry, I will take care of the little girl." He grunts as he gives me a faint smile and he steps right past me.

The little girl screams, "Mommy, mommy, he is coming for me, save me mommy. Mommy!" She screams as he takes just two bounds and catches up with her.

Oh no.

I walk over and he holds the tiny girl between his fat, sausage fingers. I say, "Give her to me."

He laughs, "I will not, I have claimed this little one, she is mine."

"She is mine! Surely you can see that she looks just like me."

"So?" He closes his hand around her, tightly enough that her scream is muffled in his hair-covered hand. "Don't worry, I am not going to eat her or anything."

He starts to walk away and I scream again, "Give her back to me, now!"

He turns back and opens his hand, "All right my dear, I will toss her, if you can reach her before me, then you can have her."

"No, no, don't throw her, what the hell are you doing?"

I look around, there doesn't seem to be anyone around, if just one person would help, if just one person would see and decide to truly help us this would all end.

His smile reveals a few missing teeth. He says, "Ready-set-go." He speaks so quickly that I barely understand him. He throws the little girl out into the grass. I leap forward to get her, but he holds me back. He picks me up and says, "You are a little girl too, so I think I am going to toss you in the other direction."

"No, please."

He does, and I land on the hard concrete of the street. I land on my face. I am sure that my left wrist is broken, my jaw hurts and I am sure it is out of place. I look up at him, no longer sure that this is a dream.

I get up and run for him, but he picks her up before I can even get near them. He turns to me and says, "I won my dear, now how about you go on your way and leave me to my lunch."

I scream, "You said you weren't going to eat her!"

"Oops," he pops her into his mouth and I leap the last few feet and ram him as hard as I can in his stomach. He doubles over and spits the little version of me out. I grab her and run with her.

She says, "Eww, I am so sticky, but thank you so much."

I am crying as I run, I run faster than I ever have before. She asks me, "If you are not mommy, why does mommy not help?"

This makes my tears fall, nearly doubles me over in a sob, "I don't know honey, but I am here now."

I run with her in my hand, she is crying too. I look back, he is gaining on us and I say, "What can I do to stop him?"

"I don't know, nothing ever seems to stop him."

"If just one person will stand up for us, that will be enough to stop him. If just one person sees that he is a monster."

I keep running, the street will stop him, the world will stop him. I run into the

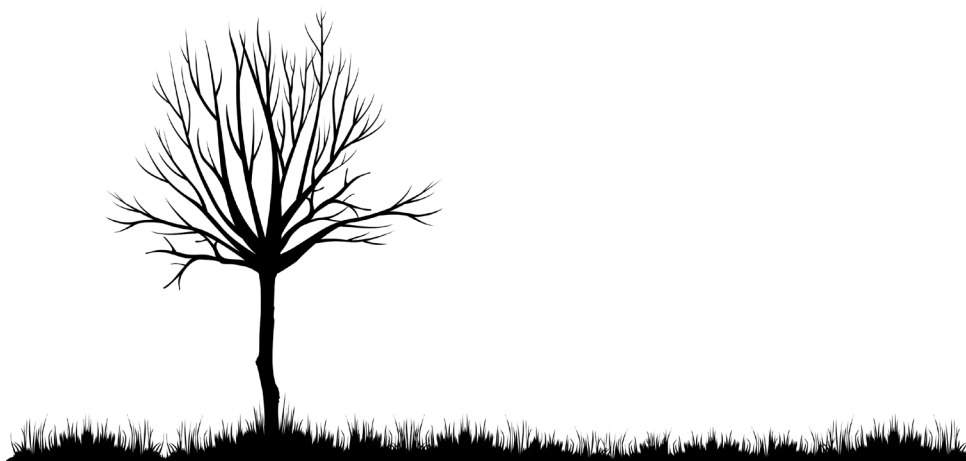
street and scream as people are going about their day to day lives. I point to him, "This monster is trying to hurt us! Stop him! Help us!"

People stop, a few get out of their cars. A man mowing his lawn stops and walks towards the street. I stare at them, they see the menace of the man chasing us and they hear the desperation in my voice. A few people are as determined as he, but for us.

My tiny friend smiles up at me as he turns and runs off. She smiles and says, "Thank you so much." She hugs my hand and I hold her close to me.

I stand there in the street until finally the people go back to their business and we are alone once again. I blink and say, "I will always be here to save you from father."

I blink again and I am back in my room, a scratching coming down the hall and I blink my young eyes as I look to the window and the lights on in the other homes. If just one of them will help me... If just one of them will stand up for me...



# A BESEIGED MIND

A crack in the wall lets in the light from the stars.  
Music echoes through orbs in the weeping willows.  
Dust in tears leave tracks in the fresh fallen snow.

Please Igor, can you give me just a little more light?

Darkness holds my candle hostage at twilight's crescendo.  
Contemptuous dreaming through an incessant screaming,  
I can't feel my body with these hands of sanded mounds.

Quickly Igor, turn up the bass and let the walls crumble.

The insolent soulless itinerant grasps a shard of burning  
sky tossing the planets into the blender creating a black  
hole of unequivocal despair and treacherous malignancy.

Igor, just hit the red button, watch me rise into a nebula!

While jellied stars with glimmering diamonds danced into  
the night, yellowed creamy desert moons stomped shells  
of glowing peanuts long into the harvest on whiskey road.

Igor, head to the dungeon, the bell, book and candle await!

Remove a black top hat from the parlor rack, white gloves  
aside, all these days of triumph and red transfixed illusions.  
Waving the black obsidian wand, a magical fantasy exists.

Damn it Igor, I said the top hat, this conjures only rabbits!

—ken allan dronsfield





[poetry]

## Beware the Night

(a Quatern\*)

Beware the night when full moon shines,  
For then the werewolf roams the land  
Who once was man, but now has changed  
Through ways we do not understand.

Each month when moon is at the full—  
Beware the night when full moon shines!—  
Those bitten, cursed, will change into  
A wolf. And you shall know by signs:

The bite wound heals much, much too soon.  
On flesh, the pentagram—a rune.  
Beware the night when full moon shines!  
Cursed are the nights of fullest moon.

Any who dare to roam the night  
Will likely find what “Terror” defines  
And meet a fate much worse than Fright!  
Beware the night when full moon shines!

\*The quatern is written in syllabics: each line employs eight syllables but otherwise there are no strict metrics with which to conform. As you might guess from the name, a quatern contains four stanzas of four lines each. The refrain may be conceived of as walking down steps: the first line of Stanza 1 repeats as the second line of S2, the third of S3, and the final line of S4.

—frank coffman

# CIRCE

An umbrage hangs above, insanity I found  
To be my food of life, to be my bale unbound.  
Awaiting for the fools at loom within the wood,  
To feed the guests of greed; with sorcery I could  
Dissolve the minds of men, transform them into swine,  
Upon my envy act with poisons laced in wine.  
A predator who feasts on lust, on death, on vice,  
I take a pure delight in hearing beastly cries.

—shawn chang

[poetry]

## Refugee Boat

Hatred bursts.  
Village submerges in blood.  
A boat floats on fear.  
Voice is one among the precious possessions they lost.  
Groan from the old engine continues.  
A lanky lady stares at the wake through the mist.  
Her memory lane is moist.

Their boat capsizes a few meters away from the new shore.  
They bob on rough waves like wooden splinters of a society.  
Some sink.  
Others swim to life.

Within a wreath of strange eyes, she rocks her breathless baby gently in her arms.  
Who's insane?  
That's the question.

Merchants of massacre lurk.  
Another boat with merchandise of misery will come soon.

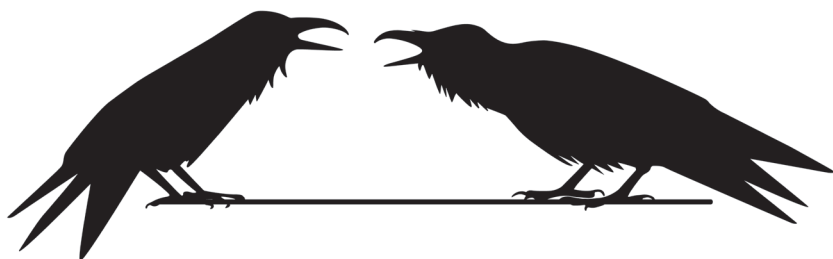
—fabiyas mv



## Consorting with Ravens

They alight  
where there is fallen  
spring grass  
daffodils  
a tourist's upturned hand  
and so --  
in the first blush  
of widowhood,  
I come here,  
I have landed,  
we all cloister  
In the sun's shadow.

—meg smith



# God-Man

A bearded holy man in saffron dhoti chants wedding mantras. Pranoy has been installed like a puppet on the dais. An artificial smile hides his shyness. His bride has put on a cream sari with a matching blouse. A thick blush spreads on her face. The ritualistic ululation and drum beats begin. Quite unexpectedly, she takes off the wedding garland of jasmine blooms from her neck, tears it to pieces, and then gets down from the dais. Everybody is flummoxed.

“O God! What happened to you, Rupa?”

“I’m sorry, Ma. I don’t want this marriage.”

“Are you insulting us, idiot?” Rupa’s uncle loses his temper.

“Forgive me, Uncle. I can’t marry him.” Rupa’s voice shivers. She goes to her bedroom and locks its door from inside.

Pranoy’s plastic smile vanishes. He regrets his ill-mannered gestures and expressions on the dais, created by his diffidence. A dark shade covers his countenance. Guests leave Rupa’s house, pouring buckets of coarse words on her. Her mother with a heavy head sits on the floor, leaning against a grey pillar in front of the house. She longs for her husband’s presence, the solace of his words, though in vain. Rupa’s uncle, lost in gloom, paces up and down in the yard, smoking a beedi.

Pain fades, exposed to time. Pranoy has been transferred. He comes to the office of the new school with the transfer order. Signing the attendance, he asks a strange funny question to the headmaster.

“Sir, can I go home now?”

“No, you can’t. Our school time is from 10 am to 3:30 pm.”

The headmaster, who is an austere person, senses something strange in the new teacher’s behavior. He mutters as Pranoy leaves the room, “This man will certainly be a hairy caterpillar, causing itch always.”

by fabiyas mv

Though intelligent, Pranoy often behaves like a crackpot. This may be his trick to escape teaching. He loiters in an empty nook at break, never goes to the staffroom.

Rain starts again after a fortnight. The school yard looks like a garden of umbrellas in various hues. Some students and teachers are partly wet, for their raincoats and umbrellas cannot resist heavy showers. Pranoy, bundled up in a black raincoat, pushes open the school gate. Without removing the raincoat, he enters, wetting the office floor. Taking a blue biro from his shirt's pocket, he signs in the attendance register kept on the headmaster's table.

"Why are you late?" The headmaster stares at his watch.

"Heavy rain, Sir."

Pranoy musters his courage to ask an odd question.

"Since I came late, can I go home early, sir?"

Seeing the headmaster's eyes bulging behind the thick glasses of his spectacles, Pranoy scoots from the office.

On the way to class, he comes across the music teacher, a lanky brown lady. He talks to her as if to an old acquaintance.

"I don't like to teach the school children."

His words startle her.

"My ambition was to become a college lecturer."

"Did you try for that?"

"Yeah. I did. I approached the manager of Gurukulam College at Kothanadu, who advised me to take an M.Phil degree, in addition to my MA in English literature."

"Sir, I think M.phil degree is a desirable qualification."

"Yeah. After taking M.Phil from the University of Calicut, I went to meet

the manager again. He greeted me warmly, offered me a chair in his office. He ordered milk tea for me. Then he explained slowly the change in policy to appoint a lecturer in his college. I must do research in literature, hold a Ph.D.”

“Alas! You dropped your dream, didn’t you?”

“No, ma’am, I decided to do research.”

“Good!” The music teacher appreciates him.

“I approached the manager once again. He congratulated me on my academic excellence, while going through the certificates. Soon his face faded. He told me politely that I crossed the prescribed age limit for appointment.”

Pity begins to grow in her mind.

Pranoy’s life has been a mash-up of learning and laziness. The funniest thing about him is that he enjoys his own idiocy. He is certainly a man with vast learning, yet sometimes he behaves oddly. He often asks his colleagues, “Do you think I am a misfit?”

Last bell rings. He flees to his rented room, two hundred feet away from his school. On entering his abode, he flings his bag to a corner, takes his official dress off, and then puts a lungi and a tea shirt on. Lighting his kerosene stove with a matchstick, he parches rice and pounds it into a small granite mortar. He puts the rice powder into a big cup of steaming black tea, adds some jaggery powder, and stirs it with a steel spoon, making a brown cream. Now that a familiar crow peers at the cup from a fence of thatched coconut leaves, he takes a teaspoonful of the rice cream and throws it out. The crow lands on the yard to peck at the thick cream. This black bird is his one and only visitor.

Left alone, memories haunt him from a decade-old past. Fragments of Rupa’s figure still remain in his soul. Why did she refuse to marry him on the wedding day? No doubt, her lover, a notorious sorcerer of the village, applied some sorcery. Pranoy firmly believes that the sole valid reason for his mental turbulence is the black magic that Rupa’s lover applies.

Gradually Pranoy gets accustomed to the ways of the new school. He is captivated by the charm of a physics teacher, wife of an immigrant. As she always wears sari that her husband sends from Muscat, she is called “foreign sari” among her colleagues. Pranoy’s introverted traits disappear before her presence; he becomes eloquent. It seems that repressed love is emerging from him.

Pranoy returns to his abode earlier than usual. He has decided to celebrate his 45th birthday, cutting the cake he bought from a bakery in the town. He throws out a piece of the cake to the crow. It crows as if wishing him a happy birthday and lands on the ground to feed on the piece of cake. Nobody knows that he is the first man who celebrates his birthday with a crow.

Pranoy’s laziness grows with the day. He behaves like an insane man, creates a kind of baffling situation in the class room. He begins to sing a song that can in no way be connected with the topic he teaches. Some naughty boys encourage him, clapping. After a wild dance, he even ventures to perform circus and falls down with a thud. Has he consumed alcohol or smoked a cannabis beedi? Obviously the thought-producing machine in his brain malfunctions. A studious girl records

complete pandemonium stealthily, using her mobile phone camera. The last period on Friday ends thus with the long bell.

The girl's video clip goes viral.

"Dismiss him from the school!"

Parents raise a storm of protest. They can't put up with Pranoy's anarchic behavior in the class room, which is likely to ruin the reputation of the school. The headmaster telephones the Deputy Director of Education.

Pranoy is suspended from the service. He makes up his mind to move away. The crow perches on the fence as usual. Pranoy comes out with a large leather bag, holding it with both hands, and dawdles to the tarred road. Sweat drops appear on his forehead. The crow flutters its wings and flies away.

One more day drowns in darkness. Pranoy alights from the bus at Mavu and walks to his parents' house. As he opens the gate with a clang, his dad, a shriveled old man, gets up from the arm chair nap on the veranda. He is alone at home after his wife's death a couple of months ago. A maid regularly comes in the morning to cook food and wash clothes for him. He is tickled pink by his son's unexpected arrival. Pranoy drops his bag down and hugs his dad, hiding his secret sorrows.

He is compelled to share his dad's porridge for supper. After a quarter-hour, smell of burning paper spreads in the air from the kitchen. Flames chew Pranoy's certificates. He is in utter dismay.

"What's the smell, Pranoy?"

"Don't worry, dad. That's waste paper burning."

Pranoy's dad feels a slight pain in his chest and soon falls asleep in the arm chair, exposed to the night wind that gives transient relief from the summer heat.

Hearing the usual devotional song from a nearby temple, he wakes up, rubbing his eyes. Morning is not morning yet.

"Where're you to, my son?"

"To see a friend. I'll return soon, Dad."

Pranoy hastens through the dew drops. Admittedly, too much learning has turned him lazy and eccentric. He is chagrined; he reaches a woody valley before noon.

He wants to lead a life free from frets like a carefree forest man in the past. Wandering in the forest, he enjoys each line from nature's anthology. Suddenly he is petrified at the sight of an orange striped snake creeping among the dried leaves in front of him. He changes his path, increasing the pace. His legs are beginning to tire. Seeing a human shape emerge from the green thicket at his right side, he stops. The stranger comes near to question him, pointing a gun.

The stranger is impressed with Pranoy's polite ways. He takes Pranoy to the deep wood, offering him food and shelter. They enter a temporary shed, put up with blue tarpaulin. A tall lady, wearing a silver nose ring, cooks sweet potatoes in an aluminum vessel. She has kept a gun near the bamboo pole that buttresses the roof of the tent.

"What happened to my son?" Pranoy's dad is perturbed. Now he seems to see



his son's head with black hair, close to the gate. He looks, rubbing his eyes. But that is a crow preening itself, perched on the gate. He reclines on the chair again, expecting that his son will come back soon.

One month passes by leaps and bounds. Revolutionaries in the forest are silent most of the time. Being fed up with their teachings, Pranoy has made up his mind to escape from the confinement. They discuss attacking a government office. Pranoy doesn't like weapons and violence. He cannot sleep; he twists and turns in a coir mat, while the revolutionaries are fast asleep. Getting up, he flees through the midnight forest. Even the rustling of leaves produces waves of fear.

It is dawn. Pranoy falls down under a peepal tree on the side of a dirt road. There is nothing in his pocket. His empty stomach begins to burn. Blindly he stretches his hand before a lady with the skin color of black tea. Bristles have developed as a black beard on his chin and cheeks, giving him a God-man's look. His face that is august with lustrous eyes enchants her. She stands before him with her hands folded and then puts a ten-rupee coin on his palm. Pranoy is delighted. He says softly, lifting his right hand, "God bless you!" She smiles and strolls along the dirt road. Fortunately he has reached one of the most superstitious villages in the country. The shade of a peepal tree is his new shelter.

Next morning, another woman comes, saying, "Baba, bless me too!" She puts a cloth bag containing rice, an ash-guard, a pumpkin, and a pack of banana chips at Pranoy's feet.

The title, "Baba" excites him. It is a word of respect and divinity.

"My sister-in-law's son has been trying for a visa to work in Qatar for a couple of months. He got it yesterday by your grace," the strange woman goes on.

A new door opens in the mist of life. News about new Baba spreads like dengue. More people come, seeking his blessings. False belief is also a source of relief. It dawns on Pranoy that the village needs a God-man to fall back on. He can flourish in the shade of a peepal tree, exploiting the ignorance of the inhabitants. Books he had read start working in his mind. His face is plastered with thick mystery.

"I killed that idle idiot called Pranoy," the God-man mumbles under his breath. People come in large numbers seeking his grace, and he grows with their grace.



## The Border Woods

You always looked for the light,  
through the bones of trees,  
the peering of eyes.  
And these visitors,  
that you loved,  
have made their home.  
These visitors, you knew,  
come from this and that planet,  
that renegade moon,  
for you all,  
the place was home.  
I will always build that home,  
for you.  
This is not gone.  
I build that home.

—meg smith



—"bodiless alien zombie" by denny marshall

# Fatherhood

I hypnotized the dream doll  
it came yesterday

The soft pickle hands, the big eyes  
I could touch its dreaming

Its hands gnarled  
In a vacant hothouse  
strewn with metal orchids.

It came with a dream catheter miles long,  
uncouth

It was there I began to worship  
I could hear it breathe  
I came to be the templar

A vanguard for hollowness  
It was a matter of looking after—  
I was there the night the eyes opened

glowing as a marquee rotten with light  
The pink lids grew swollen  
I felt the vegetable heads bloom.

Such are the processes  
With the poetic peony of birth  
Where a star sits fed by fruit flies

Where its dream unfolds as a membrane  
to feel the point the shade has

its horrible center  
In our embrace

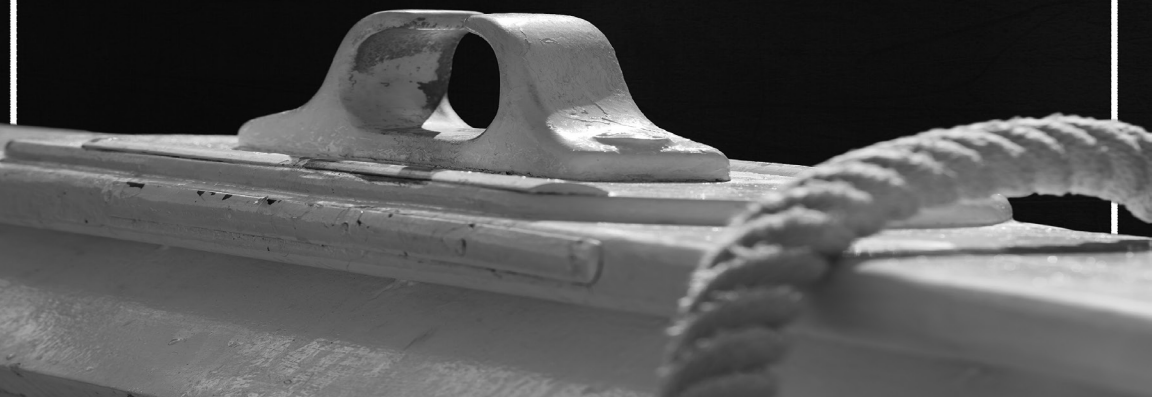
in the full hothouse growth  
of my vegetable head

—john allen

[short story]

# THE DELIVERANCE OF WALTER GRACE

by stephen greco





"So, where would you like to go, Walter?" asked Captain Gabe, as he untied the last mooring from the dock and then stepped down into the stern next to his passenger.

"Oh, just out there," Walter said. He pointed to the horizon where the shimmering deep blue of the endless sea met the lighter, more billowy blue of the morning sky. "Way, way out there." Walter was in his late fifties, thin, bald, and without much of a chin. About every minute or so he gave his thick, heavy eyeglasses a push back up his nose.

A cheery smile crossed the Captain's face as he chatted up Walter, who was one of only two guests onboard his charter boat today, the forty-four foot sport fisher that he'd lovingly named *The Sweet Life*. Captain Gabe was a jovial old salt, sixty-five years of age. He carried a surplus twenty-five pounds around his waist, and he had a bulbous red nose from hitting the bottle too often in the past decade or so. His grey hair was tucked under a well-worn Greek fisherman's cap.

The Captain said politely, "Well, you need to be a little more specific. What I meant was, I can go to different fishing spots, for instance right over the reef, just beyond it, out to deeper water, whatever. It depends on what you'd really like to go for—there's snapper, grouper, sharks, dolphin, sailfish, marlin—and I know the best places for each of them. Are you a beginner at fishing, Walter?"

"Yes. In fact I've never fished on a boat before. The only fishing I ever did was in ponds, as a kid."

"Well, then you've signed on with the right boat!" the Captain said with enthusiasm. "There's only two of you today, so I can give you a lot of personal attention." Captain Gabe pointed to the other passenger who was up in the bow, out of earshot and talking on his phone. "Adam over there is a regular, so he doesn't need any instruction at all. Thank goodness I have a few regulars because business can be slow this time of year. Adam's my attorney; he's handled all my business affairs since a friend referred me to him ten years ago. Believe it or not, my other regulars are my accountant, my car mechanic, and my dentist. I'll take credit for doing a good job of selling them on the pleasures of fishing when I'm getting my teeth fixed, my car fixed, my taxes done, or whatever." He smiled at his own resourcefulness.

Walter looked over at Adam, who cut an imposing figure. He was forty-eight, tall and well built, handsome with a strong jaw and a thick, well-groomed head of salt-and-pepper hair. He wore Italian leather deck shoes with non-slip soles, khaki shorts, a tailored shirt made of off-white linen, and a stylish pair of retro

sunglasses. Tossed on the chair next to him was a multi-pocketed, waterproof nautical windbreaker and a pair of leather fishing gloves.

Walter looked down with embarrassment at his own well-worn cotton jacket, long black polyester slacks, and cheap sneakers. His insecurity was apparent when he said to the Captain, "It certainly looks like he's got the right outfit for a day out on the water. Stylish and functional. When we start fishing, he'll probably put me to shame."

The Captain waved his hand and said, "Ah, don't worry about how you're dressed, because the most important gear is the fishing tackle, and I supply that. With help from me, you'll do great."

Walter gave the Captain a tepid smile. "Well, if you say so. But when you explain how to use the fishing gear, just assume I know nothing at all. And by the way, thank you for letting the two of us split the charter fee, Captain."

"No problem. We do a lot of splits. A good percentage of our customers this time of year are singles like you who come down to enjoy the Keys."

Walter looked over with scorn at Adam again, and asked, "So why does that guy come to fish if he spends all his time on the phone?"

"Oh, he never gets completely away from his job, I suppose. He usually spends the first thirty minutes of the trip on his satellite phone. He'll put it away and throw a line in after we get to the fishing grounds."

"I see," said Walter in a monotone.

Walter continued his expressionless stare at Adam until the Captain finally broke the spell by asking, "So, what would you like to try and catch today, Walter?"

"Huh? Oh... what do you recommend?"

"Well, yesterday one of my customers caught a decent sized sailfish, about five feet. Fastest fish in the world. When you have one hooked, you can expect some amazing runs. Nothing beats it for excitement."

"You mentioned sharks, right? I've always had a fascination with sharks since I was a boy. Do you think we could try that? Go after a shark?" Walter asked timidly.

The Captain beamed and said, "Sure can, great choice, Walter!" The Captain gave Walter a pat on the back, as if he'd already caught a huge one. "For an exciting battle, they're right up there with sailfish."

"Is it ...safe?" Walter fretted. "I mean, to try and catch a shark?"

"On *my* boat it is, because I have a lot of experience with shark fishing. We'll start by putting some chum in the water to attract them, and then I'll set you up with a heavy rod. Depending on the species and size, we may have to catch and release, but even if we do, we'll get some great pictures of you with your shark. I have a hand-held camera, but also ten small cameras mounted all over the boat. I hit a button and they start snapping pictures, even video if you want. Some large bull sharks were spotted feeding in deeper water off Key Largo yesterday. They can give you a battle up to an hour long. So we'll head there first. You're in for an exciting day, Walter." The captain's eyes widened at the prospect of giving his customer a thrilling experience.

"Sounds fine. This is a beautiful boat you have, Captain. How long have you owned it?"

"Ten years. Bought it when I started my charter business, and it's the first and only boat I've had. I left a desk job at an advertising firm in Miami, moved to the Keys to do this, and now I'm living the dream. There's nothing better than being out on the water as your job. It just frees you. Hard to put it in words. I don't make nearly as much money as I did when I had a nine to five, but my needs are simple."

Walter nodded. "I'm still stuck in a nine to five in Ft. Lauderdale, unfortunately. But I've escaped for a vacation this week."

The Captain beamed and said, "Well, we're gonna make it an *exciting* vacation, I guarantee it. I have to get us underway now, so we can get the fun started."

"Mind if I watch you pilot the boat?"

"Not at all. Since you're new to boating I'll give you a little lesson and a tour. You can toss your backpack over there in the corner. That's a nice one. Watertight, huh?" The Captain gave Walter a reassuring grin. "Don't you worry a bit Walter, we're not gonna sink. I always get my passengers back safely!"

Captain Gabe stepped up into the cockpit and Walter followed. The Captain pushed two buttons and the twin engines started. His hands danced skillfully over the shifters and throttles, working them like a concert musician playing a piano, and the big boat eased out of its slip and moved as gracefully as a creeping panther through what seemed to Walter impossibly tight passages. Once clear of the marina, Captain Gabe slammed the twin throttles forward and the engines roared like tigers as the sleek craft surged toward open water. Through the window Walter saw Adam instinctively grab the side rail without interrupting his phone conversation. As the breeze kicked up, the man pulled on his jacket, switching the phone from one hand to the other so that he never had to remove it from his ear.

Walter looked nervous as the boat expelled a powerful wake, but the Captain distracted him by starting to explain the controls. Walter asked some basic questions about speed control, depth sounding, and navigation. The Captain patiently answered everything.

When Walter stopped asking questions, Captain Gabe started talking about all the maintenance that had to be done regularly to keep the *The Sweet Life* in top shape for his charter business. Walter sustained his look of interest for a few minutes, but then started taking glances out the window at the bow of the boat and at the open ocean, where the small whitecaps glistened like a blanket of pearls beneath the azure sky. The glances gradually turned into longer and longer stares, until the Captain was fairly certain that Walter was no longer listening at all.

The Captain stopped talking for a few minutes to see if Walter might fill the silence by asking more questions, but he only continued his expressionless gaze out the window. Finally, the Captain said, "You look like you might have something on your mind, Walter."

"I suppose I do," Walter answered in a monotone.

"More questions? Fire away."

"Uh, no. I'm just... thinking about something I have to do...and I really don't want to do it."

Captain Gabe gave a nod of understanding. "Oh, I see. Well, would you like to talk about it?"

Walter looked slightly surprised and asked, "You really want to hear *my* problems?"

"Hey, I'm a good listener, kind of like a bartender, but better. Part sea captain, part psychologist. I don't mean to pry, but sometimes talking about stuff to someone you don't know too well is the best thing. Strangers don't have any preconceived notions about you, so they can make an unbiased judgement about what's troubling you...*if* that's what you're looking for."

Walter stared down at the floor. He sighed deeply and said in a halting voice, "I'm thinking ...this whole thing was a mistake."

"A mistake? Coming out here on the open ocean, on a beautiful day like today? Hey, that's *never* a mistake."

Walter bowed his head, and repeated, "I shouldn't have come. Because I'm actually... well...not interested in fishing."

Captain Gabe looked completely puzzled, and said, "Not interested? I don't get it, Walter. You hired my boat and me for half a day, and a few minutes ago you seemed ready to fish for sharks. What changed? Are you seasick? If so, nothing to be worried about. I can give you some medication and you can relax out on deck until it takes effect."

"No it's not that." He was stuttering now. "It's...I can't...you see, my wife... she's no longer my wife because we got divorced..... she cheated on me...and I can't seem to get over it. *That's* the real reason I'm down here." Tears welled up in both of Walter's eyes.

A sympathetic look came over Captain Gabe's face. He shook his head and said, "Oh, geez Walter, that's rough, I'm sorry to hear that. And so... I guess you're out here to escape that pain, huh?"

"Not exactly. More like...to confront it."

Captain Gabe looked puzzled. He took his eyes off the ocean view through the front window, turned his head and looked at Walter. "Confront it? How's that?"

There was another long pause on Walter's part, while he thought over his answer, and then he sighed and said in a resigned tone: "That guy in the bow, Adam. He's the one who was sleeping with my wife."

Captain Gabe was stunned. "What? Are you serious?"

"Yes."

"Have you two... met before?"

"Never. I didn't even say a word to him today, since he was already on the boat and on his phone when I approached you to say I was the other passenger you were expecting."

"But how did you...?"

"When I was married, I knew that something was going on. I confronted my

wife; she admitted the affair, and even though it was over, she said that she wasn't happy and she wanted a divorce. I told her I would forgive her but she'd made up her mind. Apparently she preferred...younger men.

"It was a bitter divorce. She hired a sharp lawyer and she cleaned me out, despite her infidelity. I've been to a therapist, who said that I need to confront her lover for purposes of closure. My wife wouldn't tell me his name, but I was able to track him down. I decided to do it, to tell him how what he'd done had affected my life. Make him understand how much pain the affair had caused me. If he gives me an apology, that's fine. If he offers me some explanation about why it happened, that's fine too. My wife said...she never really loved him, it was just the... sex, apparently." Walter hung his head, in a gesture of both disgust and humiliation. "*If* I could have brought myself to talk to him, it would have been a personal deliverance of sorts... to face him, to make him listen to what I have to say, even if he says nothing in response. But now, in the last few minutes... I realized that I just can't do it."

The Captain shook his head in sympathy. "Gosh, Walter, I'm really sorry to hear about your divorce. I know what *that's* like. I've been there, twice divorced, and *both* of them cheated on me. Can't say I blame them though, because I cheated on them, too. But no matter what the reason, divorce is rough if you've been with someone a long time. But... why did you want to confront him *here*, Walter?"

"I wanted a place where he couldn't just turn his back on me and walk away before I said what I had to say... but more importantly, where *I* couldn't run away if he turned angry, or just laughed at me. I have problems, Captain...with anxiety...with my nerves. All my life I've tried to avoid personal confrontation. And now, seeing him standing there...I can't do it. I'm not ready yet. This was a mistake to try and do it now. I can't go through with it."

Captain Gabe was sorry he'd ever asked Walter to talk about his problems. This had become extremely awkward. He spoke cautiously: "Well, I wasn't going to say anything, but I've seen you hanging around the docks for the past week. Guess I figured maybe you were trying to get up the courage just to take a boat ride. Some people have a fear of the water."

"I knew he was one of your regular customers, I assumed he'd charter your boat again. I just waited."

"Uhh, Walter...I have to ask...you weren't planning to punch him or anything like that, were you?"

"Punch him?" Walter hung his head and almost laughed at the suggestion. "No way. Look at me, and look at him. He's younger, bigger and in much better shape. Even if I connected with one initial sucker punch, he could beat the tar out of me. No, it would have just been a conversation. But now...it will be a big nothing. I can't do it. I'm pathetic. I'm going back down to sit in the stern, Captain. I won't be fishing, so go wherever you want. Or wherever he wants." Walter walked toward the ladder.

Captain Gabe hesitated for a few seconds before he said, "Hey, Walter, wait.



Look, I just want you to know that I have no problem with you confronting Adam about this. I never considered him a friend.”

Walter stopped and turned, and the Captain continued, “I never liked him on a personal level. I always thought he was kind of a snooty guy, a jerk. I don’t look forward to trips where he’s the only one on board with me, because I don’t enjoy talking to him. That’s why I was really glad when I saw the text from my scheduler just before we were about to cast off that we had someone who wanted to join the trip. Adam would’ve paid for the whole charter, he’s done it before. But he never minds if I take an extra person or two on board. As for me, I’m really happy to have you on board today. You’re a lot easier to talk to than him. Why hell, you just really opened yourself up to me. And as for you arranging to have your talk with him on a fishing boat—well, that was clever and resourceful. There’s no denying it’s a great choice if you want to have an uninterrupted face-to-face with him. In fact, I can’t think of anything better, except maybe getting him in an elevator, and then you hit the stop button.

“So look, why don’t you just get it over with? Go down now and talk to him. If that’s what you need for closure, then I say, you gotta do it.”

Captain Gabe could see Walter’s hands shaking slightly. His feet looked frozen in place. “I...I... can’t. I’m not strong enough.”

“Walter, I’ve been scared, too. The biggest thing in my life that scared me was leaving the security of my advertising job with a big firm, and coming here to the Keys to start my own business. I was scared to death that it wouldn’t work out, that I’d go bankrupt. But I *forced* myself to do it. I knew it was the only way I’d live a long and happy life. I would’ve had a stroke if I’d stayed in that job for another year, so I *had* to face my fears and try something new. People don’t realize what they’re capable of, what they’re able to overcome, until they try. So I say, you gotta face this fear. You agree?”

Walter sat down on a small bench. He hung his head, thought for half a minute, and then spoke softly: “What if he starts screaming at me...or worse, laughing at me? What if he makes a scene?”

“A scene? With just the three of us? How much of a scene would it be with just three people?” The Captain glanced out the window at Adam. “He’s off the phone. Go ahead, go talk to him.” He gave Walter an encouraging nod.

After another minute of silent pondering with his eyes on the floor, Walter raised his head and said, “You’re a wise man, Captain.”

“Some of that comes from experience, I think. Hey, I’ll even come down with you. I’ll just stand nearby, not too close ...for support. In the unlikely event that he gets nasty about it, I’ll be able to keep him calm. We’ve reached the area where the bull sharks are feeding, so I’m going to cut the engines. And we’ve got good conditions, Walter. Light chop, seas less than two feet, no chance of rain. You picked a good day for fishing, even if that’s not why you came out here. So after you do this, I’ll bet I can get you interested in fishing for one of those sharks that fascinated you as a boy, right?”

Walter rose from the bench, gave the Captain a weak but brave half smile,

took a few deep breaths, and then went down the ladder to the stern. The Captain followed. Once out of the cabin's sheltered space, the sea breeze caught Walter immediately. He turned his collar up, put his hands in his jacket pockets, and then started to walk toward the bow.

Walter stopped five feet short of Adam, and Captain Gabe stood a discreet ten feet behind Walter. Adam was facing out to sea with his back to them.

Walter cleared his throat and then said in an artificially deep tone which was as commanding as he could make it: "Adam Stone. I'm Walter Grace."

Adam turned when he heard the voice and raised an eyebrow at the smaller man standing very close to him. He had his phone in his hand. He remarked with some annoyance: "You say something? I was about to make another call."

"I'm Walter Grace," Walter said again.

"So? Am I supposed to know you?"

"Forget it."

Captain Gabe heard two sharp cracks in quick succession as Walter pulled the trigger of the small Ruger LC9 handgun that was in his pocket. The bullets ripped through the flimsy material of Walter's jacket and slammed into Adam's chest, one hitting him directly in the heart. Adam spun wildly, more with surprise than from the force of the bullets. His body crumpled onto the deck.

Walter quickly turned to face Captain Gabe, whose eyes were wide with shock, his mouth open. But there was no point in screaming. No one was around to hear.

The Captain stammered, "Walter...Jesus Christ...you...you..."

Walter seemed strangely calm. He spoke evenly. "Well, that actually wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. Captain, I honestly wasn't going to go through with this. Your advice gave me the boost in courage that I needed. Thank you."

Captain Gabe was frozen in place. Walter's hands remained in his jacket pockets. A tiny curl of smoke wafted up from the hole in the material. The Captain couldn't tell whether the gun was now pointed at him or not, but he had to assume that Walter had brought more than just the two bullets that were now in Adam's chest.

The Captain's voice quavered with fear as he begged, "Walter... please...I won't tell anyone, I swear to God. Don't shoot me, PLEASE don't shoot me. He had it coming. It was your right to do this. When one man takes another man's wife, revenge is a right. Don't kill me, please..."

Walter looked appalled and said, "Oh, I would never kill someone for being an innocent witness. How could you even suggest that I'd do such a thing? I'm not a monster. But I can't go back to the States after this. I have to take your boat. I'm going to Cuba. You and Adam won't be coming. Both of you will have to stay here."

The Captain thought, *Oh my God... he's going to throw Adam's body overboard, and then make me jump overboard and swim for it. The blood from the body will draw those bulls in for sure...*

The Captain's mind raced to think of a way out...

Walter continued: "When I get to Cuba I'm going to anchor off the coast, and then after dark I'll open the seacocks, let the boat sink and then make my way to shore. After that, who knows? It will be a little like when you left your job in the city and went to the Keys, to face an unknown future. Except, mine will be even more unknown. But this is what I have to do. Cuba doesn't have an extradition treaty with the United States."

A tumultuous jumble of thoughts about survival continued to churn through the Captain's mind: *He'll need a raft, unless he's a good swimmer and thinks that he can make it all the way in just wearing a life vest. I've got two small Zodiac inflatable rafts stowed below. If he uses one, it'll increase his chances of getting safely to shore in Cuba. And maybe he'll let me use the other. I can easily make it back to Key Largo in the Zodiac, unless one of the bull sharks bites and deflates it. But if I don't have the raft...and with Adam's blood in the water...I'll never survive long enough for a boat to happen by and pick me up. The sharks will take me...and it'll be a horrible death. I've got to mention the Zodiacs to him. No other way.*

The Captain caught some fleeting movement in the water at the corner of his field of vision. *Was that a fin?*

The Captain pleaded, "Walter, listen ... there are two inflatable rafts below. I keep them in case of emergencies. I'll show you how to blow one up and operate it. They have small engines on them, or you can row them if you want to move silently. How about you take one and I take one? The tides around Cuba are strong. You'll need it when you get there. Please, Walter," he implored.

Walter gave the Captain a half smile, and said, "Oh, you won't need a raft, Captain."

"But... I'm not that good a swimmer...and... the sharks..."

"You know, I'm not sure if you assumed my divorce was recent; it was actually ten years ago."

A confused look came over the Captain's face.

"Everything I told you was true, except for a few details. Adam wasn't my wife's lover. He was her divorce lawyer. The one that cleaned me out."

The Captain whispered, "Her...lawyer?"

"And that so-called friend who you said referred you to Adam. That was Helen. My wife."

Captain Gabe turned ashen. *Helen. Helen? Oh, dear God...*

"Okay, so I lied about one more thing. She didn't prefer younger men. She went for older ones. Like you. And I actually *did* go to a therapist like I said, but I decided to take his advice about confronting the situation for closure a step further than he envisioned. So I waited for the opportunity to get just the three of us together on your boat. I also had to learn your refueling habits, to make sure you'd have a full tank."

The Captain whimpered, "Walter...please...I...I..."

Walter took the gun out of his pocket. He aimed carefully and fired one bullet into the center of the Captain's forehead. Walter knew he wouldn't need a second.

He rolled the bodies right up to the railing, and managed to heft them both

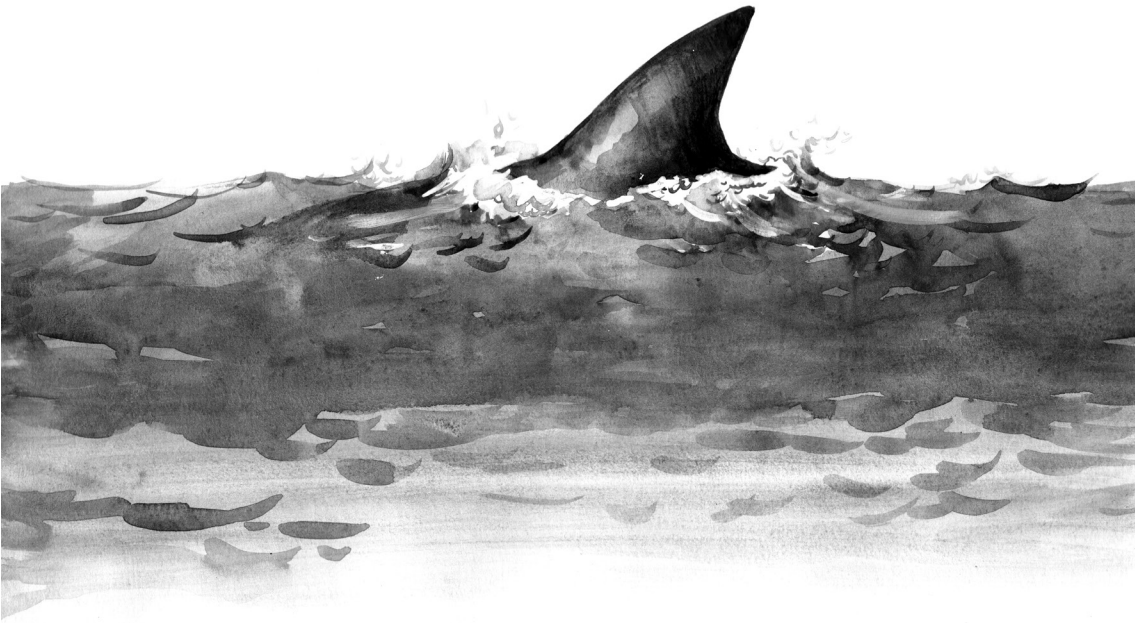
over the side. There were two very satisfying splashes for his effort.

Walter went up to the cabin. He started the engines as he'd seen Captain Gabe do, and checked the compass and the boat's GPS position on the navigation screen. He pushed the throttles forward and heard the satisfying growl. He was new at this, but Cuba was big. He wouldn't miss it. And he'd figure out how to use the raft, too. If he was careful about where he sunk the boat, it would be a long time before it was discovered. And of course, he was confident that no parts of those bodies would be found.

Confidence. He felt a rush of it surge through him. An unfamiliar but very pleasant feeling.

As the boat picked up speed, Walter couldn't resist taking a look behind him.

The bull sharks had already come in for their feast. The boat's wake was rapidly turning red.





[poetry]

# WAR

Walking down the promenades of my girlhood,  
A war-torn republic  
I reconnoiter and examine  
Ways to –  
hammer nails back into scotched parapets,  
walling my religiosity;  
broken jaws, severed heads,  
shamefaced cobwebs,  
moth-eaten breads

*All that needs to be cleansed.*

Someone needs to wash away  
streets that once flattered my vanity,  
Now,  
pocked with doubt

Parklands that only felt the touch of falling petals,  
Now,  
Refuse  
to be touched.

The sinews of my nation, burning.

—irtika kazi

# majhi

His village  
is  
a plantation  
of privations,  
where  
a variety of  
sorrows grow.

Love  
like corn  
lives  
within  
a pale cover.

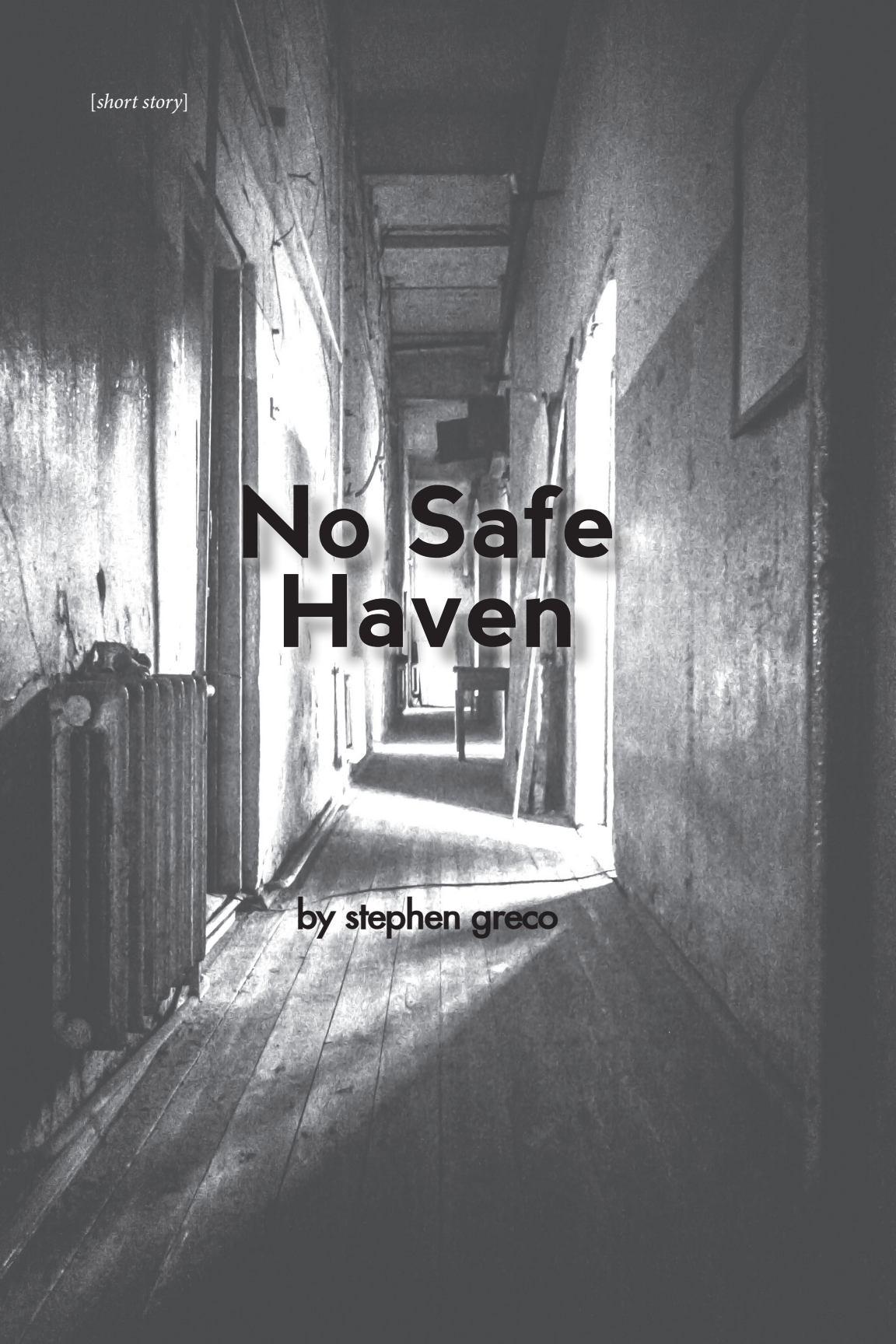
Pain  
is buried  
in the furrow  
of misery.

Moneyless Majhi  
plods miles  
with  
his stiff spouse  
on his shoulder.

Here  
to live  
is to burn  
like dried cow dung.

—fabiyas mv





[short story]

# No Safe Haven

by stephen greco

Officer Martin Beck took the call five minutes before his shift was over. He cursed his bad luck when he heard the dispatcher's voice on the radio. Domestic disputes were completely unpredictable, and he had no wish to be playing marriage counselor at this late hour, when he should be getting ready to go and pick up his five-year-old daughter Natalie from after-school day care. But he had no choice. If he didn't respond, he'd have to eventually explain why he was out of radio contact. He acknowledged the call and noted with annoyance that the address was of course in the worst part of town. The department called it the combat zone and normally they wouldn't send a cop working solo into that area, but there were probably no other units available.

When Beck reached the apartment building, it stood in the waning summer light like a dull gray shoebox. The building's depressing design was bereft of even a trace of imagination or charm. The structure's monotonous facade was interrupted only by lurid graffiti scarring its base. He parked the patrol car out front and radio'd the dispatcher that he was about to enter the building.

Beck put his fingers on the door handle but then pulled his hand away in a moment of panic as images and sounds suddenly flooded his mind. The panic wasn't out of fear of the neighborhood, for he knew what it was like and he was never afraid of things familiar to him. It was apprehension about something that he didn't understand that haunted him.

Beck was recalling the dream he'd had last night. The same dream he'd had two times before, within the past week. Annie, his wife who had died about two years ago in a car accident, had come to him again in his sleep.

Beck had been crushed by the tragic loss of Annie. The initial pangs of overwhelming grief had been mixed with feelings of rage at the unfairness of it all. His beloved wife had been stolen from him—Natalie's mother cruelly snatched away. There was no one to vent his rage upon because the other driver had been killed as well; he was left to silently scream at God or at some other arbitrarily cruel cosmic force. But it was a hollow and unsatisfying effort. Eventually the anger had mercifully faded, and then he'd started to frequently dream about Annie.

Those were pleasant dreams back then, of their happy times together, so enjoyable that he looked forward to going to sleep every night to see her. But those dreams had stopped roughly a year ago. Now they were replaced by a different kind of dream in which Annie spoke to him, warning him of something. This dream was a jumbled mix of Annie's words and some fleeting images.

And it was disturbing.

Beck closed his eyes, took a few deep breaths and tried to push the dream out of his mind, to shake it off. It must have been at least the twentieth time today that memories of the dream had shaken him. But he needed to concentrate now,

needed to do his job well, because his daughter depended on him totally. Annie was gone but at least he had little Natalie, and she had him.

Beck got out of the car and noticed the six teenage boys standing on the sidewalk about half a block down. They were hardened beyond their years by the neighborhood in which they lived. They were staring at him, obviously sizing him up. But teenagers normally didn't bother Beck. At thirty years of age, he was at his physical prime, an alpha male by any standard. The facial grimace he always wore evoked toughness and authority, and his frame was large and imposing. But it was more the attitude of self-confidence with which he carried himself that seemed to deter them. He barely gave them a glance, as if to drive home the assertion that they were mere insects, not even bothersome enough to warrant a swat. Even so, he pulled his night stick out of its sling. It was thin and relatively light, but it made a savage weapon, fully capable of caving in a skull as easily as crushing an overripe melon. It was as deadly in Beck's one hand as a baseball bat wielded by the average man in both. The weapon had the desired effect, as the boys immediately recoiled at the sight of the intimidating cudgel. They feared it more than Beck's gun because they knew that, unlike the gun, he would probably not hesitate to use it.

As Beck walked toward the apartment building, he caught sight of a middle-aged junkie writhing on the stained sidewalk against the foundation. The junkie's bearded face turned toward him and Beck realized with disgust that he knew the man. Everyone called him Gizmo. His gaunt cheeks and sunken eyes evoked absolutely nothing other than the plague of his all-consuming addiction. Gizmo's emaciated body was horribly abused and traumatized. The reason for Beck's disgust was that he had personally brought this man back from the brink three times over the past year. He'd injected him with the heroin overdose antidote that all city cops now carried, and Beck had probably saved the guy's life each time. After Gizmo had gotten the injection the third time and was pulling out of it but was still wildly delusional, he'd unbelievably tried to slash Beck with a broken bottle that he'd produced seemingly out of nowhere.

After each episode Beck had hauled him down to the station house to be processed and then promptly released after he spouted some empty promises about getting into the city's free rehab program. And here he was, OD'd once again. The whole cycle was frustrating and senseless. Beck couldn't remember Gizmo's real name, but vaguely recalled that he'd been a teacher of some kind who'd snapped when his young daughter had died from—of all things—a drug overdose. And now he used heroin to quell the emotional pain of his loss. The only thing that Beck could envision this miserable loser teaching anyone was how to shoot up.

Beck approached him. Gizmo's eyes were open and his ghostly stare was directed straight at Beck's face. His mouth was also open as if he wanted to speak, but he made no sound other than a slight grunt which coincided with each leg spasm. Beck pulled the sealed syringe out of the pouch in his belt but then hesitated.

*An utterly worthless human being, thought Beck. Better to let him die right here on the sidewalk. All he does is suck the city's resources.*

But Beck couldn't bring himself to turn away. He bent down and administered the injection right through the man's flannel shirt, not wanting to deal with his grimy clothing. Beck stood as the junkie's spasms continued. Maybe he'd die this time despite the injection. Perhaps his shriveled body had just endured too much to be resurrected one more time. Beck decided not to call an ambulance. He would leave it up to fate now.

He trudged up the stark concrete steps to the front door and saw that the keypad and intercom mounted on the wall were broken, the damage probably done long ago. He turned the knob and pushed at the door gently with his foot. It swung inward with a rusty, phantom-like screech and he walked into the tomblike interior. He glanced to the left and right, an initial scan for threats, but visibility was horrible. The hallway was a dimly lit catacomb. Half of the fluorescent lights on the ceiling were completely burned out, and all of the others were flickering, pumping out purplish pops of ghostly illumination. Tiny clicking sounds emitted as the lights turned off and on.

And then Beck remembered something.

*Purplish light.*

There were only a few details he could recall from the dream other than Annie's face and her voice, but purplish light was one of them. Was the purplish light in this hallway somehow connected to the dream? Beck had no way of knowing. The other image he vaguely recalled was a red snake. And as far as the sounds in the dream—they were muddled, except for Annie's voice. But he thought he might've heard swarming locusts in the background, when Annie was saying: *"You'll be tested very soon, Marty, like you've never been tested before. And if you pass the test, we'll both be rewarded..."*

And then she said a few more words toward the end of the dream, but they were barely intelligible because by then Beck was always thrashing, on the verge of waking up. It sounded maybe like the words: *Safe Haven*.

Safe Haven? So what the hell did *that* mean? Did that refer to a reward if he passed the test? Or was he supposed to somehow *find* a safe haven for himself and Natalie? If so, what did they need to be saved from?

It was a confusing mess. Maybe he would be facing a test soon. The purplish light was here, but that was all. Was he going to be attacked by a red snake? And locusts? All in some crappy hallway in a city apartment building?

And how could Annie be rewarded when she was dead?

The whole thing was absurd. More likely these were simply the mental ravings of a man who missed his wife terribly.

He stopped, shook his head, and whispered to himself, "Focus, Marty. Natalie's counting on you."

Test or no test, Beck knew that focus was an important part of his job; losing concentration was an easy way to end up dead.



He needed more light. Beck sheathed the nightstick and removed the flashlight from his belt. He began sweeping the potent beam up and down the hallway as he walked. It revealed grayish walls that were rumpled and bubbled from the dozens of coats of paint that had been applied over the years to cover the scratches, graffiti, handprints, and all the other assorted sins of past tenants and intruders. There were no pictures, no sconces, nothing to interrupt the miserable grey monotony other than an assortment of rusty brown water stains. The greasy carpet held a macabre pattern of green, red, and black swirls, no doubt chosen for camouflaging food spills and bloodstains. Even Beck's nose was assaulted. He could pick out at least four distinct odors—cigarette smoke, cooking grease, mold, and urine. He wondered if anyone living in this hellhole could ever come to feel even some small measure of the security and serenity that a home should evoke.

Beck reached the right apartment and listened carefully with his head close to the door. He heard absolutely nothing inside.

An old man with snow white hair, wearing a long bathrobe and slippers, suddenly peered out of the next doorway, opening it only halfway. He was obviously relieved to see a police officer. His face was deeply creased, his skin like wrinkled brown wrapping paper. He whispered a few worried words to Beck in a raspy voice: "I'm the one who called. Arguing from there. Shouting. A married couple." The man was clearly afraid.

Beck gave a curt response: "I'll take care of it; go back inside, please."

Had it not been the end of his shift, Beck might have questioned the man about his neighbors, but at this point he just wanted to get this call over with.

The old man's expression turned to one of gratitude. He gave Beck a barely audible, "Thank you," and softly closed his door. Some people in this neighborhood were glad to have the police around.

Beck wondered if the man lived in fear all the time.

Beck listened again for any sounds from inside the apartment, but there were none that he could hear above the persistent popping and clicking of the hallway lights. Standing to the side of the door, he knocked hard four times, loosening a few green paint chips that fluttered in the air and floated down to the tattered carpet. Beck then identified himself as a police officer with a voice that was surely loud enough to be heard by anyone inside. After a few seconds, he heard someone speak.

"Come in." It was a woman's voice, spoken in a monotone. Still standing to the side, he turned the knob and pushed the door open gently. It didn't seem right to Beck, because he couldn't imagine anyone in this part of town leaving their door unlocked, especially when the lock on the front door of the building was broken. He instinctively placed his right hand on his service weapon. There was no cause to unholster it yet, but the feel of the cold, smooth metal was always reassuring. Leaning his head forward, he cautiously peered inside the apartment. The hallway area just inside the door was lit from above by one dim, naked light bulb in a cheap ceramic fixture that hung from two wires. He focused his gaze beyond the

bulb and saw a woman of medium height, perhaps around thirty years old. She looked harmless as she stood about fifteen feet away from him next to a doorway which appeared to be the entrance to the kitchen. She wore a white T-shirt and pink shorts. Her hair was disheveled and she had deep, dark bags under her eyes. Beck read her blank look as one of hopelessness or despair. He stepped inside the apartment.

Pop, pop, pop...

The defective hallway lights made their eerie music behind him, and Beck suddenly realized that when the popping sounds came in very quick succession it reminded him of swarming locusts.

*Focus, Marty, focus...*

Beck opened his mouth to ask the woman about the reported disturbance, but before a word emerged he was startled to see her entire body suddenly pushed several feet to the right by something powerful which poked at her midsection. Looking down, he saw that it was a metal rod, and then a microsecond later more of it appeared, and it registered to Beck as the barrel of a huge handgun, probably a .44 magnum. The man attached to the end of it next appeared through the door frame; he had an angry, crazed look—a bad combination. Beck's hand moved to his weapon but before he could draw it, the man grabbed the woman like a rag doll and stood behind her, the barrel of the gun pressing against her neck. And then he waited, facing Beck, apparently unsure of what to do next.

The woman's eyes were closed. The gun barrel was now pressed so tightly against the woman's lower jaw that she couldn't open her mouth to scream even if she'd wanted to.

It was the first hostage situation Beck had ever faced.

*This is it, thought Beck. This is the test. Three people, two guns. I need to figure out how to somehow get all three of us out of this situation alive...*

Beck had his gun out now, pointed at the two figures. The man was stooping, trying to use the woman's body as cover. Because of their height difference, Beck had a possible head shot, but with only a few inches of clearance. If he pulled the trigger, he might miss and blow off the top of woman's skull, killing her instantly. If he didn't shoot, the man might shoot her at any moment, or fire at Beck, who was an open target. Even though he was wearing his Kevlar vest, Beck didn't know if it would stop a bullet from the huge magnum.

"Drop it, now!" Beck ordered. "Let me see your hands!"

"I'll drop it, I'll drop it," muttered the man. He lowered his gun hand until the weapon disappeared behind the woman's torso.

"I want to see both those hands up right now, or I'll shoot!"

Beck heard a clunk as something hit the floor.

"I dropped it," the man said in a fluster. His hand was around the woman's torso. The other hand Beck couldn't see. Their legs obscured whatever had been dropped. And then...

*BOOM.*



An ear-shattering explosion in the confined space, as the powerful handgun erupted like a cannon. The man had fired right through the woman, the big slug tunneling its way between her ribs and slamming into Beck's thigh, knocking him back into the hallway and onto his stomach.

As he raised his head, Beck noticed the surreal but somehow pleasingly artistic pattern of his own blood drops spattered onto the dirty hallway wall. It made a serpentine pattern with a bulge at one end...

The red snake.

And as he realized that he'd been shot for the first time in his life, he wondered why he didn't feel any pain. Wasn't that supposed to be a bad sign? An indication that your soul was crossing over?

But half a second later the searing, fiery bolts of torment slammed into him, screaming their message that he was still alive, at least for now. The horrible pain consumed him, but even in his agony, Beck was lucid enough to realize that he had to act quickly before he completely succumbed to shock. He was unable to stand or even crawl. His fingers scratched desperately at the carpet toward the gun. It was on the floor close to him but before he could reach the weapon, a teenager suddenly entered the hallway from a stairwell door, and saw that Beck was a wounded, completely vulnerable animal. With his work boot the teenager delivered a crushing blow to Beck's chin. His head snapped back, and he immediately tasted blood and felt on his tongue the grit from shattered teeth. Stunned and disoriented, Beck shook his head to battle the dizziness, and fought to push the agony of his injuries aside for the moment, so that he could do something—anything to try and save himself. He felt the teenager's foot pin his right hand to the floor. The teenager scooped up Beck's gun and removed the radio that was clipped to his shirt, and then without a word he darted back to the same stairwell, carrying his prizes away.

Beck fought to claw through the fog that threatened to drown his senses and used all his willpower to stay conscious. He reached down at the wound, and tried as best he could to push the material of his pant leg into the bullet hole to slow the flow of blood.

Beck heard footsteps now. He managed to raise his head enough to see the man step over the unconscious woman and walk toward him. With both hands, the man slowly brought the pistol up to aim at his defeated opponent's skull. Beck looked frantically for anything he could use as a defensive weapon. He might have thrown the flashlight, but it was on the floor, and well out of his reach. His nightstick was securely pinned under his wounded leg, and he no longer had the strength to move himself enough to pull it out of the sling. Never in his life had he felt as impotent as he now did. It didn't matter anyway. He'd be dead in a few seconds.

*I failed my test miserably. I didn't save the woman. Instead of a reward for passing the test, I'm about to get my punishment for flunking. This is it...*

The man stood directly above Beck now and aimed the magnum at a spot right between his victim's eyes, ready to complete his task here, which was to spray this

cop's brains all over the wall and floor. Beck saw the look of stern concentration on his executioner's face; the man closed his left eye and sighted the target with his right. It was the same look that Beck was used to seeing on his fellow cops at the shooting range. To this man, Beck's forehead might as well have been a lifeless paper target. There wasn't a trace of recognition in the man's face that he was about to end a human life.

Beck instinctively raised his hand and forearm in front of his forehead, even though he knew that the pitiful gesture could not stop a bullet.

The hammer went back.

Beck shut his eyes and waited to die. The man pulled the trigger.

*Click.*

Beck opened one eye at the sound. *No bullet in the chamber?*

*Click.*

*Sweet Jesus, this is torture. Please, please get it over with.*

*Click, Click, Click.*

Beck cautiously opened the other eye. Astonished to still be alive, he stared at the crazed man, who was in turn staring at the useless pistol with disappointment.

So that was it. There had been only one bullet in the gun, the bullet that was now embedded in Beck's leg. Maybe the bullets from the other five chambers had been used to end five other lives.

The man lowered his hand, let the empty pistol drop to the floor, and then he simply walked down the hall, seemingly in a daze, and left the building. As the wound bled profusely and Beck's life oozed out onto the squalid carpet, he was almost surprised that he felt no fear, only regret that he would likely bleed to death in a shit hole like this, as a result of answering a stupid domestic dispute call. Not foiling a robbery or a murder attempt, nothing noble that would warrant a posthumous medal. His colleagues would simply conclude that he'd been stupid and sloppy, and they'd be glad that Beck's fuck-up hadn't cost the lives of any other cops.

Beck's thoughts turned to his daughter. If he could reach his wallet and take her picture out of it, he could clutch it in his hand and it would be there when they finally found his body. Surely they would record the death scene carefully. And then maybe someone would eventually tell her when she grew up that his very last thoughts had been of her.

But it was impossible. His limbs were now four traitors who would no longer obey their master's commands. He couldn't reach his wallet, or his cellphone—no more than he could reach out and touch his daughter's soft cheek.

Beck's field of vision narrowed until he could see only one single pinpoint of the purplish hallway light. It stared at him as if it were the eye of a deity looking down on a miserable, doomed life about to die alone. The God's eye blinked twice, and then closed. The locusts' voices grew faint as they flew away and their hungry chatter stopped. Beck was about to surrender and peacefully slip beneath the smooth surface of a coal black sea of unconsciousness.

But not one of death. Not yet.  
Beck felt something. Pressure on his leg.  
Someone was pushing down on his wound. And now a voice...a calm, soothing voice...from some peaceful place.  
Annie's voice?  
No. He knew this wasn't a dream.

Hours later Beck woke in a hospital.  
His eyelids fluttered then opened. He saw light—strong, white, and sterile. And then tangles of tubes and wires.

A man towering above looked down at Beck. A grey, grizzled, stocky man. It was Frank, his Patrol Sergeant. Smiling.

"Marty, you are one lucky son of a bitch, you know that? You nearly bled out in that hallway. Do you know how close that was? You would have died if it wasn't for that good citizen over there who slowed the bleeding and called 911. He wanted to come down here to see you when you woke up." The Sergeant nodded his head toward the corner of the room behind Beck's bed.

Beck remembered the grateful old man who had spoken to him from his doorway.

He struggled to form words. "Wh . . . where's Natalie?" he whispered.

"Nothing to worry about there. She's at the station house, with half a dozen cops fussing over her. You'll see her soon. I called your sister; she's on her way, coming to help out."

"The woman... who got shot...is she...?"

The Sergeant leaned in toward Beck, shook his head, and said, "She didn't make it, Marty. We picked up the guy, her husband, and he confessed. Don't even think about that now. Just get better. I'm going outside to make a few calls, tell the Captain and everybody else you're okay. Get some rest, I'll come back." He left the room.

Beck was lying on his back and wasn't able to turn his head to get a look at the old man, so he simply waited. He expected the old man to say something now that the Sergeant was gone, and to walk over so that Beck could see him. Instead, a younger face framed by an unkempt beard slowly moved into Beck's field of vision and stayed there.

Gizmo.

Beck whispered, "Wh...Why...did you help me?"

"I saw you when I was lying on that sidewalk outside. But I couldn't speak. I saw you struggle, trying to make a decision. And in the end you decided to give me the injection. You could have let me die. Instead, you showed compassion."

Gizmo tilted his head upward, closed his eyes, and in a deep and unfaltering voice he said, "Be compassionate, for everyone you meet is fighting a harder battle." He paused, and then looking down at Beck again, said, "That's a quote from Plato. I used to teach philosophy at a university before my...decline. I'm going to come

back here tomorrow and bring you a book of the teachings of Plato. I'd like you to read some of it as you recover, and then we'll talk about it. I think it will do you good. Learning philosophy tends to clear and focus the mind. And I know it will do *me* good, because I'd like to start teaching again. Will you do that for me?"

Beck managed a weak nod.

Gizmo sighed and said, "And...there's something else I wanted to say. About the woman in the apartment building who died. I wanted to remind you that you can't save everybody. It's enough that you saved one person today."

*Save?*

Gizmo walked to the door, but then stopped and turned when he heard Beck say something.

"What was that, Officer Beck?" Gizmo asked.

Beck said in as loud a voice as he could manage, "Your name is Aiden. I remember now."

"That's right," Aiden said.

Beck recalled last night's dream. *Not SAFE HAVEN. Annie had said "SAVE AIDEN."*

*So I PASSED the test.*

*I showed compassion and saved this man. And the reward... for BOTH Annie and me... is that Natalie won't grow up without a father.*

Aiden left. Beck drifted off to sleep, knowing that pleasant dreams of both Annie and Natalie would come soon.



## *Born to Trouble*

*Yet man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward.*  
~ Job 5:7, New International Version

Laws prevail though we wish differently.  
A plug pops, one old *Newsweek* catches fire,  
fire which spreads to *Rolling Stone*, runs free  
to dressers and to books we love, then higher,  
curtains catching heat and turning black  
and dancing madly, flailing, decent, in-,  
the window bursts, the fury that would crack  
the sky mushrooms toward it, ebon grin,  
obscene, both lights the heavens and obscures,  
and all within is briefly orange then ash,  
the irreplaceable, the jewels and pictures  
crisp and twist and curl no less than cash,  
as new stars rise as to their home,  
their rightful residence: the laws of flame.

—marshall pipkin

# I Dream in Soundless

mouths that map the world.  
Their teeth tear into my skin.  
I cannot scream, or decipher just  
how far I have fallen.  
This darkness is deeper  
than anyone could remember.  
I know it swallowed my name.  
I can see  
the shadows of my own passing,  
hanging like scars  
on an invisible wall.  
I long to become a nail,  
embed myself in imaginary  
surfaces, but I am dull  
and my eyes are determined  
to face another hundred suns.

—a.j. huffman



[poetry]

## *My Darkest Valentine*

The Heavens high above are mirrored in your eyes  
As our fifth winter passes, strengthening our ties.  
Our hearts, bewitched by the enchantment that is love,  
Have blossomed like the nightshade 'neath the moon above.  
Your love enshrouds me like the dark embrace of night,  
And yet it is your warmth that sets my soul alight!  
O come away with me and place your hand in mine,  
For you, my darling, are my darkest Valentine.

—ashley dioses

For K. A. O.



# Nasik Dhol

Sound bursts from the Nasik Dhol.  
Son calls it, 'Exciting!'  
Dad finds it mad.

Teens are receptive to the trends of time.  
Frenetic dance in the dry sand,  
kindled by the cannabis and its cousins.  
Dust rises from the present.  
Chenda loses its human fence.

New drum shatters the eardrums.  
But don't cry it's violent or wild.  
To be modern,  
one must hear music even in dynamite exploding,  
and see beauty in a rock scattering.



*Nasik Dhol* – a big drum, producing thunderous sound, recently introduced in the festivals in Kerala.

*Chenda* – a traditional cylindrical percussion instrument used in the state.

—fabiyas mv

[short story]

# THE MAN UNDER THE BED

by sharon gay

It's midnight when she glides across the floor and hops into bed. I hear the springs groan, her soft sighs, as she wrestles with the pillow, and gets comfortable for the night. Sometimes she reads for a while or talks on the phone. Tonight, though, she must be sleepy, because I hear her light breathing and tiny snorts that tell me she is dreaming. "Close your eyes" my mother used to say "and go to Lily White's party." I whisper this to Rachel, so quietly the words barely brush past my lips.

It's not comfortable under here, yet it has become a home away from home. If I lift my head, my nose brushes the slats and springs. I cannot roll over, or sleep on my side, as my shoulders might catch under the mattress and wake her. So I lay here, regulating my breath to hers, hand clutching the knife, like I have night after night, and wonder why I have not yet slid out from under here, grabbed her by the hair and slit her throat, spraying blood across the room and on her lavender walls.

It started innocently enough if you call premeditated murder innocent. I noticed Rachel one day in the drugstore down the block, a mile from my apartment. I was outside, standing by the bus stop, when I saw her swing through the doors, leaving a waft of cloying sweet scent, beckoning me to follow. Because they always beckon, you know? These girls in their tight skirts and open blouses with their bra straps showing and their fake tans, begging to end up in a ditch somewhere. "See me, want me, but you can't have me" should be tattooed on their round little asses as they sashay by. They never notice me. I'm the overweight, balding guy who stands alone at bus stops. Your basic, anonymous woman killer. That's me. How do you like THAT Mom, and your ridiculous Lily White parties?

Ah, but I digress. Back to Rachel. Rachel with the raven hair that is shot with burgundy in the sunlight. The strong Mediterranean nose, the legs that go on forever, legs that will spread for me in death like angel wings. She wandered down the feminine products aisle, and I felt a stirring. This one was special. When I looked at Rachel, I thought of weddings and honeymoons, kids and a house with a picket fence. I surprised myself with these thoughts, but concentrated on the task at hand. Stalking. She stepped around me as I stood in the middle of the aisle and smiled as she whispered, "Excuse me." I couldn't help but smile back. What a girl. What a nice, fucking, all-American girl. I couldn't wait to follow her home.

Much to my delight, home was right across the street. I was following too closely, but it paid off when the doorman said, "Hey there, Rachel, how are you?" I was giddy with the information. It was a small building, about 50 units. With my sharpened skills, it would be easy to find out which apartment was Rachel's.

It was.

She turned to the doorman. “Charles, I have an issue with the kitchen sink and called a plumber. He’ll be stopping by sometime tomorrow. Please let him inside the apartment.”

“Sure thing, Rach,” Charles said, and I felt a surge of anger.

“Getting chummy with her, are you?” I thought. I wondered if Rachel understood that this guy was dying to get in her pants. Women can be so stupid.

I nearly skipped home, plans ruminating in my head. In the closet were several uniforms—UPS, car mechanic, plumber and painter outfits, even a police uniform that has given back tenfold. Women will follow a cop anywhere. I pulled out a white jumpsuit with the fake name Peter Cochrane on it above a small crest that said Uptown Plumbing. Now to finesse old Charles into believing that I was a guy coming to give a second opinion.

I spent the entire next day sitting on the bus bench across the street, straining my eyes to see if the damned plumber ever showed. “What a fucking slacker,” I thought. “Just show up, asshole. Let’s get this thing moving.” It wasn’t until 3:00 that a guy in a blue uniform climbed out of a van that said, “Down the Drain Plumbers.” I snorted. What a stupid name. Mine at least had class. I watched him as he entered the building, timed him, and saw him leave. It was getting late in the day. Tomorrow will be my turn.

I’ll spare you the details, because I don’t want to give away secrets to just anyone. I will only say I was brilliant and organized enough to talk Charles into letting me in the very next day. In Rachel’s apartment, I fiddled with the joints under the kitchen sink, adjusting this and that, until boredom overtook Charles and he went back downstairs, saying he would check back in a few minutes. Standard practice and classic mistake, this laziness and lack of responsibility. I counted on it. Scurrying to the window that goes to the fire escape, I broke the latch in such a way that it looked locked, but would never lock again. I prayed that Rachel didn’t double check every little thing at night. It was as though Rachel was Natalie Wood in *West Side Story* and I was Tony, meeting on the fire escape. I’d tell her how much I cared. Not really. I will break and enter, then slit her throat. I hummed “Tonight” under my breath as I ambled down the stairs instead of taking the elevator, checking every floor. This will be a cinch.

It was. Just two nights later, I tip-toed up the fire escape, two floors above ground, and crouched in the darkness. The apartment was black as pitch. Rachel was out late or sound asleep. Inching the window open, I held my breath, listening. I froze when I heard her voice mumbling lightly in the next room, her bedroom. I longed to step through the window, but I am not a slave to disaster. One needs to be careful. Her voice grew louder, laughing; then she said, “Night, Amy,” and there was the scuffling sound of a phone being put back in its holder. Ah, so she is alone, I thought, and just like that, I let myself in. I stood alongside the window and counted my heart beats. Held my breath, strained my eyes and ears and nose to gather all senses. This was the best part. The part that makes me cream myself



sometimes, because it's when I am most vulnerable, getting ready to pounce. Anything could happen and often did. Sometimes it was a clean stroke, an easy kill. Other times it got messy, but they always went down as I flipped their switch and cut them into ribbons, watching their life blood flow out and puddle on floors and sidewalks, or streets, and sometimes the back of my old white van.

The city cast a meager light through the bedroom window. Rachel looked like a princess lying there, hair tossed about her face, sleeping in a Mickey Mouse tee shirt. I drew the knife from the sheath on the belt slung low on my hip. It gleamed in the slanted light.

I gasped when something bumped the back of my legs. Looking down, I saw a huge cat, a Siamese, staring up at me, purring. I shifted my weight, and the cat twined around my feet, rubbing against my shins. If I killed the cat, Rachel might wake up screaming and I couldn't afford loud noises in an apartment building. Rachel stirred.

"Truffles," she murmured. The cat left my side and leapt on the pillow near her head. I dropped to my knees and froze. She tossed about, waking up now, and swung a leg over the side of the bed, just missing my shoulder. As quietly as I could I squirmed under the bed, blade ready. Then it was silent. I held my breath. I could tell she was holding hers.

Rachel's fingers pressed the buttons on her cell phone. There was a pause, then she whispered, "Amy, sorry to wake you but I'm scared. I think somebody's in the apartment."

I softly exhaled, my heart slowing. She didn't call 911.

"No, Amy, I don't want to call the police. I'm just, you know, a little scared."

I heard the murmur of a voice on the other end of the phone, and then Rachel answered. "No, it creeps me out. I don't want to look around. Okay, okay, hold on."

Rachel got out of bed and headed across the room. She closed and locked the bedroom door, then hurried back to the phone.

"Am, I heard no more noises, and I locked the door. I think I'm safe now. It must have been Truffles. Sorry to bother you."

After a few more words, she hung up. I nearly laughed out loud. She had just cut off her only means of escape. This was going better than planned.

I laid there for hours, trying to will myself to slide out from under the mattress and get the party started. Truffles crept under the bed next to my head, bumping it with his, purring and kneading the carpet next to me. I reached out a finger and stroked his sleek neck. He settled in, and we both regulated our breathing to the sound of Rachel's above us—a trio of souls.

The next thing I knew, her alarm was going off and it was morning. I was still under her bed. I watched her feet and ankles as she walked lightly across the carpet and into the bathroom. Rachel left the door open as she stepped into the shower, turned on the water, and pulled the curtain closed around her. I smelled the soap and shampoo, heard the hiss of water, but still I could not seem to move.



It was best to stay until she left for work. The prudent thing to do. This was getting far too complicated for my liking. Her pink painted toenails came back into the room, gliding over the floor while she dressed, humming a light tune. My eyes followed her feet out past the door. I heard the everyday sounds of coffee perking, the opening and closing of the microwave. Rachel took an endless time but at last she bustled around, grabbed her purse, her coat, a small briefcase, and headed out the door, taking care to double lock it with the dead bolt. In the distance the elevator chimed, then only silence except Truffles cleaning himself on the carpet by the bed in a shaft of sunlight.

I slithered out from under the mattress and stepped lightly around her apartment. In the light of day, I saw she was not particularly tidy. There were newspapers spread around the sofa, a dish or two on the table near the television, at least three pair of shoes shucked on the living room floor. Thank God I didn't trip over those. I chained the door as an extra precaution and continued to poke around the place.

Going back into the bedroom, I lay down on the bed, smelling her perfume, rubbing my face on her pillow like the cat, stroking the sheets, kneading the mattress with my fist. Looking in her night stand, my blood rose when I found a long snaking pack of condoms. "Well, well, Rachel, what have we here?" I leered. I ripped one off and stuffed it in my pants pocket. Her top drawer overflowed with panties and bras, nylons and socks. Nice stuff, I thought, as I stroked the lace and peered at the bras. 36B. I couldn't wait. Her medicine cabinet had skin care products, make up and deodorant, a few pills and cough syrup.

Feeling comfortable, I wandered back to the living room and looked through the drawers in an old desk that sat in front of a window. There were letters and post cards, stamps, and several photo albums jumbled together. I plopped myself down on the couch and looked through them. There was Rachel as a baby, a young girl, a cheerleader, then standing tall in a cap and gown with a college diploma. Sometimes there was a young man in the photos, a blond beach boy type in tight blue jeans. My eyes narrowed. He looked like a privileged asshole. I was happy when he dropped out of the albums, right about the time Rachel graduated.

Hungry, I grabbed a yogurt from her fridge and turned on the television, muting the sound, gazing at the news. Truffles sat on the couch with me and I idly stroked him. The entire day was spent rummaging through Rachel's life, taking care to put everything back the same way I found it, priding myself on how stealthy I was. I even spread out the containers of yogurt on the refrigerator shelf, so she wouldn't notice the missing one, rinsed off the spoon and put it away. Just for fun, I took one pair of shoes and put them neatly in her closet, chuckling.

I needed to get the hell out of here. But how? The damned fire escape flanked a busy street. Going down the stairs and out the front door was out of the question. Charles would recognize me as the plumber. Feeling stuck, I convinced myself to wait until nightfall, kill Rachel, and then leave. I read the newspaper, took a leak and did a few stretches when, by early evening, I entered her bedroom and slid under the mattress, Truffles right by my side. I liked this cat. Might even let it live.

After all, it couldn't pick me out of a line up. I snorted in mirth then laughed out loud. Finally, we settled in and took a little nap.

It wasn't long before I heard the door open, and the light steps I already knew by heart. Truffles ran out from under the bed when she walked in, snaking about her ankles, begging for dinner and Rachel obliged. She came into the bedroom, stepping out of her clothes along the way. My pulse sped up as her panties hit the floor, and she rustled around getting into sweats and that stupid tee shirt again. I pictured Mickey Mouse splattered in blood. I would cut right up the seam of those sweat pants and find the delights behind them. This was going to be a wonderful night. I lay there like a statue, listening to the sounds of her life surround me until things slowed and she headed for bed.

I wrestled with myself for hours under that mattress. I didn't want to kill her just yet. Maybe not kill her at all. I was drawn to her and her little story, her brown cat, the messy apartment, the Mickey Mouse tee shirt. It was confusing, exciting, and sad.

Just before dawn, I slid out from under the bed and eased through the window and down the fire escape, stepping as lightly as a ghost. When I hit the alley, I walked briskly out and around the corner, then on to my flat, where I showered, ate breakfast and thought about Rachel. I was getting dressed when my hand froze at my waist. I had left the knife under her bed. My knife, filled with fingerprints and DNA and all the microscopic things that can wedge themselves into the bone handle and read like a damned novel to the fucking cops. Now I had to go back. A shrink would say I left it there on purpose as an excuse to return. Shit, I don't know. I do know, though, that I got a tremendous hard-on just thinking about slipping back under that bed.

I headed out that night around 2:00 am. It was dark again at Rachel's apartment. Just like before, I eased in through the window and stood still, eyes adjusting to the lack of light. Truffles strutted over to see me. I reached down and chucked him lightly under the chin. Together we headed for the bedroom. Rachel was snoring, which I found adorable, like little noises from a puppy, as she lay tangled in her sheets, one silky leg exposed. Oh, how I wanted to touch her, but instead I quietly slid back under the bed, my new home. Truffles joined me. I groped in the darkness, finding my knife.

Some people might say I was going crazy. Maybe I already am. I have killed women and tortured them, sipped the last drop of life from them as I licked their breasts and eyelids and watched them let out that last profound sigh of release. This is different. I am content to lay here and share the night with Rachel, then curl up on her couch all day, waiting for her to come home, just like Truffles. I am content to hear her talk aloud to herself and the cat, or on the phone with her friends and family, gleaned every little nuance of her life.

I painted my nails with her polish so we'd match, groomed my thinning hair with her brush, my strands married into hers. I took a pair of her panties to keep me company during the long night. Then I brushed my cheeks with her blush, kissed her lipstick in a wide, angry slash across my mouth, wound her scarf about

my neck, wrapped her sweater round my shoulders while Truffles and I watched CNN. God, what is wrong with the world today? I think. So much violence all over the planet. It's disgusting.

It was a Friday night. I had been hanging out at Rachel's for two nights now. I unchained the door and slid under the bed at my usual time, around six, waiting for her footsteps. But tonight they didn't come. I waited like a faithful dog. Jesus, can't she come home and feed Truffles? He's hungry, for Christ sake. This wasn't like Rachel at all and I worried about her. I began to sweat and toss around under the bed.

Much later I heard the elevator ding, followed by footsteps heading toward the apartment door. It opened, and she burst over the threshold, flicking on the light and laughing, the sound of glass tinkling.

"Come on in," she said softly, and I saw the feet and lower torso of somebody behind her. A guy. What the hell. He immediately was grabbing at her ass, and she was grabbing back. I felt a white hot rage build behind my eyes. My hand tightened around the knife until I thought it might break. They were moaning now, and she was walking him to the bedroom.

That bitch. How could she betray me like this? How could she get into bed with another man when I was right here for her? They landed on the bed and the springs smacked me hard in the nose. I started to rise up and out from under the mattress in a fury. I would kill them both, watch their blood mingle on the sheets and have a good time doing it. But then I froze because I have never fought a man before. There were two people instead of one, and the guy might be stronger than me. I could wait until they were asleep and then kill them, but what if this guy had a knife or a gun? I didn't know what to do. For now, I had to endure what was going on whether I liked it or not.

I will spare you the awful details of the groping and thrusting and fluids exchanging right above my head. The moans and yelps of pleasure. The growl he made when he came and the whimpers she made when she did, the breathing and the words and the bullshit. All the while I was aching and angry and violently aroused at the same time. As a final insult, he said to Rachel, "Will you get this cat off the bed?" and poor Truffles was dumped on to the floor, shaking his fur indignantly. He got under the bed with me and I held him with one arm. A single tear dripped down my cheek and wet his soft fur.

I needed a plan, but wasn't sure what it was. I have a very healthy survivor gene. A man didn't get this far, for as long as I have, by doing something foolish. I pride myself on my brilliance, stealth, and caution. The entire long night was an exercise in controlling the blinding rage that seethed through my pores and the need for release.

They woke up in a froth and did it all over again, then stumbled together to the shower, these two sluts, laughing as they soaped each other up behind the curtain. I sprang to life. Came out from under the bed as quickly as I could, walked right over to the window and down the fire escape, paying no heed to the sky pinking with dawn. If somebody saw me, I'd thrust my knife in their belly and watch

them writhe. I wanted somebody to see me, to witness my pain, my anguish, my betrayal.

I don't even remember how I got home. All I know is that I entered my apartment and began to destroy everything in sight. I threw the lamp across the room, slashed my sofa to ribbons, and crushed things in my hands. Pulled food out of the refrigerator and smeared it in my hair, on my face, through my fingers. In anguish I broke a wine bottle, then ran it across my leg and watched as the blood rose and spilled down my thigh as though it were crying. When the pain set in, I fell on to the bed and gave in to huge wails, thrashing from side to side like a toddler having a tantrum.

Hours later, hands still shaking, I finally got hold of myself. This was ridiculous. Rachel had to go. It had to end. I either had to stay away from her forever, or finish her.

I was going back. Tonight.

I was wearing a police uniform. Nobody bothered me as I climbed the fire escape that evening and entered through her window, sliding into the room. Truffles trotted out to greet me and I reached down and stroked his arched back. I was looking in his bowl to see if he'd been fed when I heard the elevator ding. Sprinting to the bedroom, I hustled under the bed just as the door opened and Rachel stepped through.

As soon as she closed the door, she began to cry. Throwing her shoes against the wall, she crumpled on to the sofa and sobbed. She picked up the phone and dialed.

"Amy, it's me," Rachel hiccupped. "I couldn't face him at work today. Just couldn't. I had no idea he was married, I swear to you, Amy. He's new there and never once mentioned a wife and two kids. When I heard about it at the meeting, I almost threw up. I thought he was the one." She began to cry again. "Here I am, 38 years old and never married. My life is ruined. Nobody will love me. Ever. Ever, Amy, do you hear me?" Her voice rose an octave, then came back down, filled with grief.

I tuned out the rest of the conversation, but it was spiked with sobs, anger and confusion.

"Now you know what it's like to be betrayed, Rachel," I thought to myself. I was upset. What kind of guy does that to a nice girl like Rachel? What a jerk. I would never cheat on my wife or trick a woman like that. I'm a gentleman. I felt oddly protective of Rachel, like a father might feel. And then, in a split second, I longed to stab her foolish heart and end this nonsense once and for all. I felt dangerous and protective at the same time, as though my mind was split and I was looking into one of those cracked fun house mirrors. Surely I was losing my grip.

Rachel hung up, got some kibble for Truffles, and swore as she dropped several pieces on the floor. One of them rolled toward me and I knew that if she got down on her knees to pick up the cat food, she would see me. I held my breath and gripped the knife harder. Truffles scampered across the floor and ate it. I sent him a silent salute.

Rachel entered the bedroom. I heard the sounds of her getting ready for the night. The dresser drawer opening, the rustling of clothes, her suit falling to the floor and kicked out of the way, her bra floating to the ground like a leaf. She slid under the covers, turned off the light, moved around, getting comfortable. She began to cry again, her body wracking the mattress springs above my nose.

Finally it got very quiet. She turned on the light by the nightstand and opened a drawer. I heard a tearing sound, then the soft click of the drawer close.

In a quavering voice, filled with defeat, Rachel said, "You can come out now."



# Clytemnestra's Conceits

Devour the moths and moans from myth, and drink  
The gory brewery I shall; a crime  
Distilled in malice, toxins, venom sink  
Beyond the scum and plankton green with grime.

With scorpion tail, with plaguing vizard vile,  
An odium blossoms, vertigos explode  
In chronic chaos, into silence guile  
Dissolves in manic cyclones; sands erode

This curve of virtue, as a hallow star  
Combusts within a supernova slain.  
False gods disintegrate and die, as tar  
Boils over edge of cauldron and, like rain,

Consumes the blood of *sane*, of all reprieves,  
Of refuge in these silver linings' sieves.

—shawn chang





[poetry]

## The Dell of the Accursed Dogwood

I stand alone on a mountain dell  
Where the woodbine blooms and grows  
I wake as though from a dream of Hell  
I quake as the north wind blows.

I wonder how I met this place  
How can I return home  
I feel my soul flown without trace  
Far in the world to roam.

I sit on a stone, ponder my fate  
Whether reward or doom  
For now I see pain is my state  
Nothing for me but gloom.

Long ages pass as I remain  
In the Dell of the Dogwood Tree  
My lowered face these red tears stain  
While its white blossoms fall on me.

—jessica amanda salmonson

# Sarcophagus

To sleep, the breath a January river  
frozen, even the microscopic bronchioles  
unfluttered in ice.

To sleep – so as not to slide, swell,  
every organ abeyant, clawed thumb  
unable to scratch its neighbor, thighs

settled, moored in torpidity. To sleep –  
the grey curls of hair along the breast  
unshivered by exhalation,

eyelids mausoleum still.  
To sleep this sleep – fangs  
peeking like bars

from beneath lip, and the asylum, the body,  
silent, waiting for the next inmate  
to awake in her bed.

—joshua gage

[poetry]

# COMMUNICATION

A death-white scream rose from her skull  
as we fed the dreams of children  
long since rotted  
desiccated and shadowless

I filled the wet flower of her trust  
with poison white stain  
and screamed into the sky  
My seed took to root inside her  
to strangle her once again

And we danced with violence  
And we praised its holy name  
Prostrate before the pulse of god  
Far below the dripping sun

And we knew what it was to be alone

—bo shaw



—"smoking" by bill thomas

[poetry]

# Spider Darkness

Shadows in your eyes  
And still beneath  
Becoming and crying a sadder song now  
The stone weight here  
Carried by none but you  
My love  
Reaching always for the blade  
Blunted yet  
To cut this dream away  
Gray gossamer and sweet  
Woven out of spiders  
Poisonous stare  
Licking their indulgences  
And anticipating yours  
I stand restless in your hallways  
Waiting for eight legs  
To become two

—jay caselberg

## *The Vesper Muse*

Let the vesper muse descend tonight  
and slip these shadows in an emerald mist  
that caligraphs the waning candlelight  
and brings me to attention with its kiss.

Let her take me by the wrist to coax  
me to my writing desk and have me sit  
there, staring at the page. Then let her stroke  
my hand and guide it through the demon script.

What torments will attend my summoning  
with sulfurious breath, circumvolved horns,  
and sanguine eyes to dance about my feet?

What chorus will their croaking voices sing  
in raw cacophony till I am torn  
from sanity, my nightmare now complete?

—joshua gage



[poetry]

# SUPERSTITIOUS MIND

I keep looking for a sign  
Consulting my horoscope online  
I even tried the tarot  
I need something to let me know

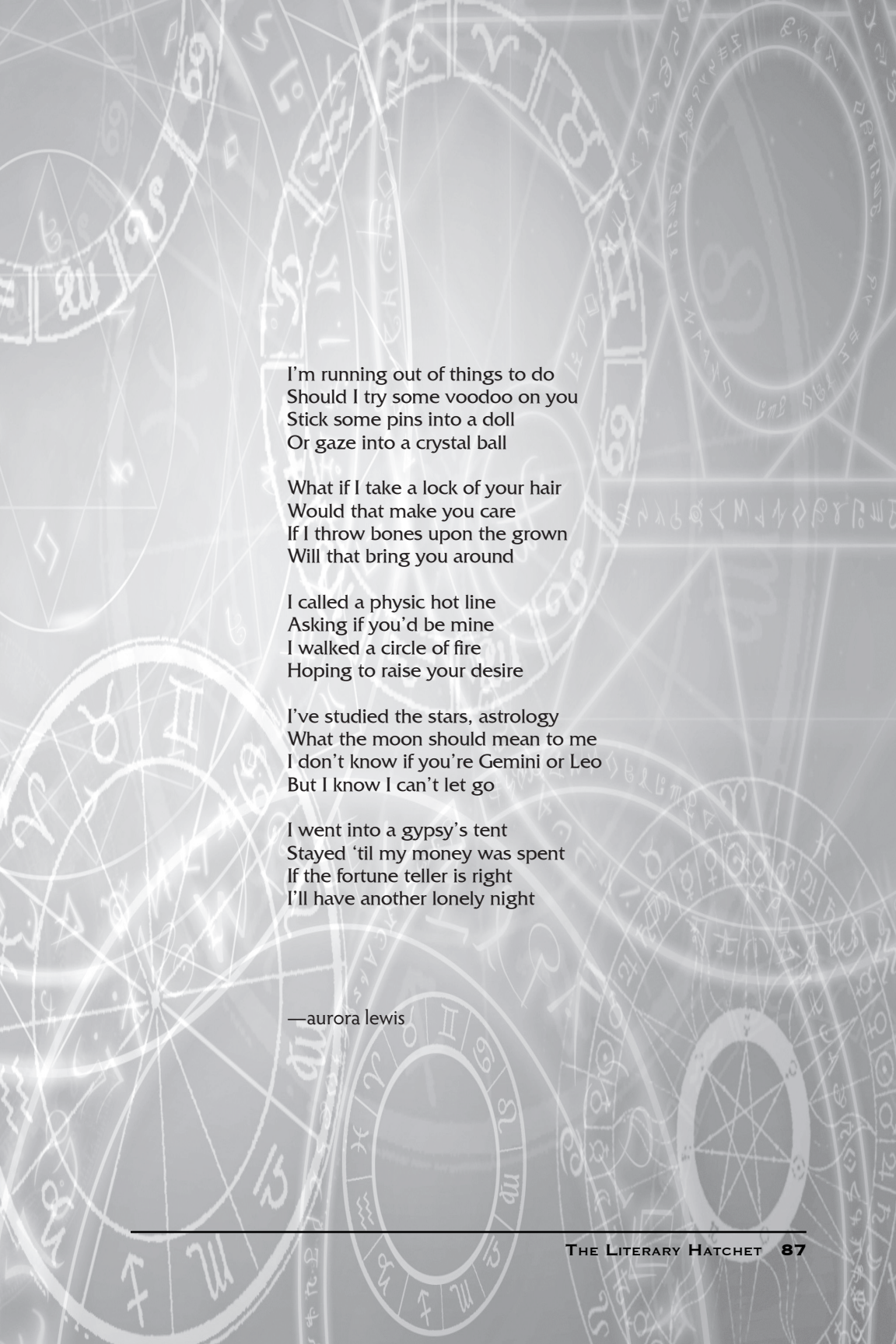
Does it say in the palm of my hand  
that once again you'll be my man  
I'm trying to figure out what to do  
Maybe I'll work some roots on you

There are twelve signs in the zodiac  
Does your sign say you're coming back  
Is my fate written in the stars  
If Jupiter's aligned with Mars

If there is a solar eclipse  
Will you want to kiss my lips  
I don't understand numerology  
Will it bring you back to me

I tossed a coin in a wishing well  
I closed my eyes as it fell  
I made a wish that you would see  
That it is here you should be

I need to figure out this thing  
I think I'll try I-Chiang  
I decorated in Feng-Shui  
Hoping you'd come this way



I'm running out of things to do  
Should I try some voodoo on you  
Stick some pins into a doll  
Or gaze into a crystal ball

What if I take a lock of your hair  
Would that make you care  
If I throw bones upon the grown  
Will that bring you around

I called a physic hot line  
Asking if you'd be mine  
I walked a circle of fire  
Hoping to raise your desire


I've studied the stars, astrology  
What the moon should mean to me  
I don't know if you're Gemini or Leo  
But I know I can't let go

I went into a gypsy's tent  
Stayed 'til my money was spent  
If the fortune teller is right  
I'll have another lonely night

—aurora lewis



# The Hairdresser



Into the night she practices styles  
always learning the latest trends  
that's why her customers drive for miles  
even to get rid of split ends

She knows how hair on each head will perform  
and is up with every technique  
whether her client wants something in the norm  
or something elegant and chic

She can do an up do you have to climb  
do two bridal parties by noon  
fix a color mistake or get out grime  
or sculpture a cute raccoon

Her customers ask how she got so good  
"Lots of practice" is her reply  
what her clients don't know and never should  
is where she gets her supply

Most hairdresser's practice on plastic heads  
but that isn't enough for Joan  
she practices hair on heads of the dead  
after she kills them in her home

An invitation for a special cut  
printed on beautiful card  
beckons client to her delightful house  
with perfectly manicured yard

Joan answers the door, white apron and smile  
invites her welcome guest inside  
and goes to a file and picks out a style  
or new product to be applied

At times the client will notice a smell  
like bleach and sour eggs they say  
Joan tells them it's perm solution that fell  
and assures them it's all okay

She sits the client in a kitchen chair  
then stabs a knife straight through their heart  
picks up her scissors begins to cut hair  
creates another work of art

She snaps a picture of her new success  
only five tries to get this style  
she washes the floor and cleans up her guest  
then adds guest to her basement pile

There's a special on this style the next day  
clients find out and stand in line  
always more to replace those gone away  
because Joan's skills are so divine

Clients ask again how she got so good  
"With lots of practice" she replies  
hands an invitation to Mrs. Wood  
a glint of evil in her eyes

—pamela larson

[short story]

# THE INK OF INIQUITY

by shawn chang



## I.

He had fallen asleep at his desk in the study again.

Marten Pine, the author of *The Crooked Cadavers*, opened his eyes with a jolt and glanced at the clock with heavy eyelids. He had to look twice before realization sunk in with dread.

Almost noon.

He cursed.

In a hurried attempt to rise, Marten knocked over with an ungainly hand the inkwell sitting before him. The vessel fell to the floor and the man watched as the black contents spilled out grotesquely in an inexorable splash.

Marten swore profusely as he went over to inspect the tragedy. Fuming at himself, he gave the container a vicious kick. *For good measure*, he thought.

The book-signing event—*his* book-signing event, to be held in the courtyard in the middle of the village—was set to begin in an hour. And the set-up was to commence before that; Marten had to be there very soon or tongues were bound to wag.

Marten stormed to the wardrobe and shouted for his valet. The boy appeared almost at once. Without looking at him, Marten, always belligerent, commanded the boy to pick up the inkwell, fill it up, and bring it back to him along with some quills. The boy took the inkwell and disappeared to complete the task.

Without further ado, Marten hastily began grooming and upon the slightest hint of satisfaction he made for the door.

The valet reappeared with the requested utensils just as Marten's hand landed on the knob. Marten snatched the newly-filled, tightly shut inkwell and the quills without looking at the valet. Then he hurried off in the direction of the courtyard, feeling a peculiar coolness in his palm.

## II.

The preparations went surprisingly well despite some delay. Marten, along with his fellow coordinators, finished just as his devoted readers began to appear.

First came the ancient creature Cindy Stewart, brandishing her copy of *The Crooked Cadavers*.

She sat her spindly body upon the chair provided for the guest and announced her utter appreciation for the book. "A most interesting look at the undead. How very dramatic!" The old lady was nearing the verge of hyperventilating.



Marten smiled as he flamboyantly flipped over the front cover, dipped a quill in ink, and signed a tiny autograph on the page.

The contented lady limped off as the queue grew.

Next came the garrulous and voluptuous lady of esteem, Martha Babbitt. A torrent of approbation flowed out of her mouth, viscous with sweetness.

“How I enjoyed it so—oh, my!—the woman waking as though nothing had happened when certainly something *must* have happened since corpses do not simply wake up and begin going about visiting dance rooms of all the places and most of all—”

They had to drag her out; she refused to cease her chatter long after her book was duly signed.

The monotonous act of keeping that plastered, unwavering smile, dipping quill in ink, signing book after book, and listening with a deaf ear to his readers’ moans of praise rather made Marten look forward to the end of the event.

It was well into late afternoon that the occasion came to a finish. The last person looking for an autograph was Jacob Morens, a small boy. He spoke shyly after the book was signed and given back to him. “This book has truly captured my imagination; I would love to become an author when I grow up.”

Marten Pine gently waved him away. He had barely spoken a word in his event; he disliked discourse.

And that marked the end.

### III.

It was early evening when Cindy Stewart returned home.

She limped into the house, smiling to herself and humming a gentle tune. She shut the door gently and set her signed book on the nightstand with before going to the bathroom to clean herself up.

After she finished, Cindy climbed into bed, turned on the lamp—the only light source presently — and seized her book with renewed passion. She opened it with anticipation.

*The signature was gone.*

And then she heard a series of strange noises. Cindy squinted by the faint light. Something unnaturally black was scuttling toward her on the floor, stinger raised. The old woman’s eyes widened and before she could make a sound she felt a sharp sensation in her leg. She gave a hoarse gasp and convulsed.

### IV.

A few minutes after the death of Cindy Stewart, Martha Babbitt faced hers.

She was facing the mirror when the spider appeared by the glass. If there was one characteristic that was truly salient of her nature apart from her volubility, it was her ruthlessness.

With a deft hand she grabbed the object closest to her, which was the signed copy of *The Crooked Cadavers*. She proceeded to smash the life out of the arachnid with all the force she could muster. To her utter amazement, she missed and the

mirror cracked. She had never missed anything before. Undeterred, she raised her hand again to deliver another blow.

And then her mouth fell agape.

The blackest spider imaginable, unfazed by the lady's failed attempt, let loose a sable thread, which shot through the air and coiled around Martha's neck.

She gagged as the thread tightened. She lost hold of the book, which landed on the floor with a dull sound and flipped open. Martha's eyes bulged as the spider neared her and she gave a silent scream when it bit into her flesh before it melted into an unidentifiable black liquid that seeped into the dying woman's skin.

Had Martha been looking down she would have seen that the autograph was absent.

## V.

Meanwhile, Jacob Morens sat at his desk and stared at the exact spot on the page where his beloved author had signed the book. What had happened to the signature?

The boy sighed and made up his mind to ask the man tomorrow. He lived nearby and would probably deign to see his most faithful reader. Perhaps Jacob could become the man's disciple. Jacob smiled in spite of himself.

Jacob's thoughts were interrupted when his bare right foot felt something scaly on the floor. He glanced down.

Coiling malevolently around both of his ankles was a snake black as ink.

The ophidian mouth opened wide and the snake sank its fangs into the boy's foot, filling it full of venom with palpable ease.

As Jacob watched, dying, the creature melted into a black liquid that flowed into him.

His eyes shut, and he soundlessly collapsed.

## VI.

Marten Pine arrived back home very late.

His valet greeted him at the door. The boy asked, "Where are the quills, sir? I could not find them anywhere this morning and I was in a desperate need to write a letter."

Marten glowered at him and replied briskly as he went into his study. "You were the one who gave them to me this morning."

A genuine look of confusion swept over the valet's face. He babbled, "I—what? I did not see you at all earlier today, sir. You never summoned me."

Marten turned around and regarded him.

"What's that? But you gave me those quills. And the inkwell. What do you mean you did not see me?"

"I swear that I did not, sir." The boy looked absolutely candid. "Who was it that you took those things from, sir? It certainly was not me, sir."

Marten Pine scowled and shrugged. He muttered a faint dismissal as he put the utensils back on the desk. The quills were placed meticulously in their "nest,"

as Marten called them; the inkwell was set nearby.  
The author sighed. Who was it indeed?

## VII.

He was woken up in the dead of night by the muffled sound of a crash coming from his study. Something must have fallen.

Marten Pine rubbed his eyes wearily and groaned.

By the moonlight he caught a glimpse of it on the floor.

A slithering mass of unspeakable darkness, black as midnight, was making its way toward him silently, moving below and picking up speed.

Marten scrambled on the bed and tried to escape but his efforts were proven futile.

The black mass was not to be questioned. It rose like an incoming flood and in a flash had the shivering man by the neck; it went round and round. Marten choked. This was the writer's last thought: *Something smells sweet.*

## VIII.

In the morning, over fifty corpses were found in their respective homes.

They appeared to have died from peculiar causes—mostly suffocation and poison. The inspectors of the case were uncertain. However, one thing was apparent to them. There was a faint smell of ink hanging about every single one of the corpses.



# Molasses Web

In the night we glide  
through the sheets,  
two spiders tangled  
in a molasses web.

Ravenous, I hunt you  
in viscous silence,  
as my limbs strike  
the membrane strings.

The chord I hum  
plays thick and determined,  
but the tune you hear  
triggers your recoil.

I am weak beside you,  
my Widow Queen,  
your crimson hourglass  
filling with my blood.

As the night thickens,  
my beating strums  
churn your heat  
and stir you venom drops.

Molasses molts to magma  
as fluids overflow;  
at last you give in,  
and thus, I am devoured.

—wesley d. gray

[poetry]

# Wild Elephants

—fabiyas mv

Elephant caparisons none,  
their enormous bodies cast black shadows.

Trunks stretch out  
to pulling and plucking pleasures.

A grizzled tusker thrusts  
its tusks into the mud wall of a rural shrine;

devotees drop  
vacuous chants, vamoose.

People are in panic,  
dash along dissimilar byways.

A young terrorist is trapped  
in the tangle of mammoth legs, and trampled;

not brain, but some cruel seeds  
with Afghan patent lie scattered around his skull.

An old  
bulwark is bulldozed.

A coconut leaf  
is flung at electric wires; fear sparks.

The herd of havoc  
uproot a banana farmer's dream's corms.

They  
forage in the toxic farms.

A rusted pesticide sprayer  
is flattened under the gigantic foot.

Trumpet  
splinters sleep.

\*Kumkis and crackers  
drive the elephants away.

They will come back,  
for villages grow into woods.

Inhabitants rise  
as they lose habitats.

\*Kumki – an elephant used to train or drive away wild elephants.

# OOZE

Gurgling through the ground like tepid grease,  
a consciousness that knows not how to cease.  
Seepage from a grave; the songs of grass  
obscured by memories like shards of glass.

And jokes, bad jokes—the Buddha and the hot-  
dog vendor. Drooling virulent like snot,  
through grubs and worms in utter friendlessness,  
a mere continuation of its former mess.

And in amongst the nightmare shades, pastels!  
the broken pledges of averted hells,  
some blossom on the blasted heath blown brief,  
or on the blackened tree the random leaf.

It sulks and sickens, susurrates and sinks,  
lightless fantasies of blues and pinks.

—marshall pipkin



## ZEBRA CROSSING

Sweet feminine syrup oozes out.

Soon he returns to the same pale valley.  
The locomotive rhythm lulls him to snooze  
near the kaleidoscope-window.

He's been reinstalled on the border,  
where the roar of terror never ceases,  
like a statue of contradiction  
with a rifle in hand  
and love in heart.

Reunion is a recurring rapture.  
She crosses the highway to pick him up.  
What a pity!  
A drunk-driver is a silhouette of death.

Lifting the latch of sleep,  
he often slips out to the zebra crossing,  
where she walks across with a bunch of dreams.

—fabiyas mv



—"little limb monster" by denny marshall

# The Best Revenge

Mary placed her coffee and toasted bagel on the table and sat down across from Angela. The small coffeehouse was warm and inviting, the air filled with the buzz of friendly conversation. The speakers pumped out the smooth sounds of a female jazz crooner.

“So, did you decide?” asked Mary.

Angela replied, “I’d really like to help you because I’m your friend, but this just sounds too weird.”

Mary took a bite of her bagel and then brushed some crumbs from the front of her rumpled hoody sweatshirt, which was a staple of her extremely casual style. She wore baggy jeans and a pair of bulky work boots that were spattered with mud. Her brown hair was tied back in a messy pony tail. Angela, on the other hand, was sharply dressed as usual, in tailored corduroy slacks, a white blouse, and a tweed blazer accented with a plaid scarf. Her smartly styled blonde hair cascaded over her shoulders. And as she sat there, Angela wondered if Mary had completely stopped caring about her personal appearance.

Mary responded, “Oh, c’mon, it’s just some harmless fun. With a purpose, of course.”

Angela cocked her head, one of her signals of disapproval. “Fun? This is your idea of fun? Toying with a person’s emotions?” she admonished.

“Look, I just want to use a picture of you. Well, *several* pictures.”

Mary resumed her munching as she waited for Angela’s response. Angela frowned and removed a small compact from her purse, set it on the table, and flipped it open. She took out a tube of lipstick and looked in the small mirror to do a touch-up. As she worked, Angela said, “Tell me again why this is so important to you.”

Mary shifted in her seat and looked uncomfortable as the subject of her emotional pain was raised. “Like I said on the phone, this guy jilted me in college. I’m sure you remember, the last semester of senior year, the last month, in fact. I would come into our dorm room and just plop on the bed.”

## by stephen greco

“Yes, I remember. I was surprised because up to then your nose was always in a book and I didn’t even think you were interested in guys, to be honest. That’s why I never talked to you back then about the guys I dated, you seemed bored or offended by it. And then all of a sudden you sunk into some kind of depression, and you nearly flunked several exams and ruined your semester. All you told me back then was that it was about a guy who cheated on you. You wouldn’t give me any details, wouldn’t even tell me his name. But that was seven years ago. Haven’t you gotten over it by now?”

Mary dropped her eyes to the table and shook her head. “Let’s just say that I have some emotional bruises from that experience that are still with me. And I haven’t been able to have a successful relationship since then. I’m not saying that one was successful. Very far from it. Anyway, this is a way of getting back at him.”

“Revenge then, is that it?” Angela shook her head and grimaced to show her disapproval again.

“Well, you can call it that, but I prefer to think that the real purpose is to teach him a lesson. I mean, so he doesn’t treat other women like this, from now on.”

“And how did you come up with this...rather *sick* scheme.”

“I came across his picture on the same internet dating site I use. Seven years since I’ve seen him, but no question, it’s definitely him. Their algorithm picked him as one of my matches, can you imagine?” She gave Angela an ironic grin.

“So now you want to start a fake profile, and use my picture to...lure him?”

“Yes, but don’t worry, I’ll be using the stealth mode, so the profile is only visible to men that I choose, and it will be visible to just *one*: him.”

“I see. So, what’s his name?”

Mary hesitated before she muttered, with a visible measure of disgust: “It’s Rip.”

“Rip? Seriously? Sounds like a forties movie star.”

“Yeah, well, can’t blame him for that. It’s his real name, so his parents are responsible.”

“So why can’t you use a picture of some random beautiful woman—a model, for instance. Or just take a picture from the internet of a beautiful nobody. I’m married, for goodness sakes, and for just six months. If I let you do this I don’t want to tell Alan. It’s just too...underhanded.” She gave Mary another little scowl of distaste. “I mean, I understand why you have this need to get back at Rip, but Alan is just a little too...well, let’s say he doesn’t have the breadth of relationship experiences that I’ve had. So he wouldn’t understand the motivation behind doing something like this. He would simply be appalled at my involvement.”

“He doesn’t really know what a party girl you were in college. Does he?”

Angela stiffened. “Let’s not go there, okay?” she chided.

Mary waved a conciliatory hand, and said, “Oh, I didn’t mean anything by that. It’s just that I know you must have had a lot of boyfriends back then even though you didn’t talk about them, and compared to you, I was pathetic. But look, you’re just doing this to help out a friend. And you’re right, you can’t tell Alan about it. Alan’s a great guy but—no offense—he’s too much of a goody two-shoes. He’ll just order you not to let me use the pictures.”

“No one orders me to do or not do anything,” Angela said defensively.

Mary tried to hide a slight smile, knowing that she’d hit a nerve.

Angela continued, “I won’t tell Alan. But if he finds out that I have a profile on a dating site, my God, it will look...”

Mary raised both hands to hold off Angela’s misgivings and cut her off, saying, “No one will know it’s you because the only person other than me who will see the pictures on that dating site is Rip. And the chance that he’ll be able to identify you by the pictures is infinitesimal. You don’t use social media, and you’re not a member of any business or professional organization that posts pictures. I’ll make sure there’s nothing in the picture backgrounds that could identify where they were taken. And the profile won’t list your real home town, or anything that will even remotely give a clue to your identity.”

Mary lowered her eyes and sheepishly added: “And also, I can’t use a stranger’s pictures because after some initial back and forth communication using the messaging feature in the dating app, which I’ll handle of course... I may need you to... have a video phone call with him.”

Angela sat upright with alarm. “What? You didn’t say anything about that before. You never said that I’d have to actually participate in this scam, other than letting you use my pictures. A video call would make me very... uncomfortable. I’d have to lie right to his face.”

“To his face on a computer screen, actually.”

“Same thing, as far as I’m concerned. But look, I’m your friend, and I can see that you’re not in a good way. I guess if this is what you need for emotional closure, then okay, you can use my pictures. But I’ll have to think about the video call. I’d have to do some acting, obviously. I’m not sure I can even pull it off.”

“Sure you can.” Mary encouraged her with a wicked grin.

“If there is a video call, what would come after that?”

Mary shrugged. "I need to think about it. Maybe arrange to meet him somewhere, and I'll show up instead of you. I expect he'll be horny, ready to pounce on you, and I'll throw ice water on his crotch. Metaphorically speaking, of course. I'll show him that *I* can screw with *his* emotions, too."

"And when he eventually learns that he was tricked...he wouldn't be... dangerous in any way...would he?" Angela asked, with unease in her voice.

"Rip? Oh, no, of course not. No chance of that. Trust me."

Two weeks later, Mary and Angela sat down in the same coffeehouse, at the same table, and Angela silently noted with concern that her friend was wearing the same frayed hoodie for every one of their meetings.

Mary started the conversation with a smile: "Hey, Angela, thanks so much for coming, and I'm just so grateful that you made the video call for me last week. You were great, phenomenal in fact! Perfectly charming. Amazingly engaging and flirty. In fact, I don't know why you had any doubts about your acting ability. And you didn't even flinch when he called you Beverly a few times. Very smooth. What did you think of him, by the way? You didn't tell me last week, you sort of left quickly after the call."

Angela spread her hands and said, "Well, you were there, on the other side of the computer screen. You heard it all."

"Saw everything too, because I recorded it and watched it later. But I want to know what you thought of him. Just curious."

Angela thought for a moment, and then said, "Well, to be honest, he was... quite charming. And undeniably handsome, and well built. I understand why you fell for him. What happened seven years ago, exactly?"

Mary hung her head and sighed. "Oh, just the oldest story in the world. He cheated on me." She raised her eyes to look directly into Angela's, and with renewed determination, she declared: "So now we're going to give *him* a taste of rejection. And we'll be able to do it because he's very taken with you, from that video call. You did exactly what I asked you to do at the end of the call—gave him a little *let me think about the next step* teaser. It didn't take long after the call for him to send a note on the dating app, suggesting that you two meet for dinner. I didn't answer that one. Thought I'd let him wonder about it for a while. And then he sent two follow-up notes that were even more imploring."

"Really?" asked Angela, perking up at the thought of her apparent irresistibility.

"He thinks you're lovely, witty, smart...the complete package."

"And so...did you eventually arrange a date? And you showed up in my place and confronted him?"

Mary leaned in closer to Angela. "No. I haven't answered any of those three notes yet. Because I need *you* to meet him. In person, face-to-face. It will make his eventual fall much sweeter, right? A real crash and burn." She gave Angela a conspiratorial grin.

Angela sat bolt upright, and exclaimed: "What? Me? You know I don't want to do that. Look, it was never supposed to go this far."



"But you did a video call already. Lying to him on a computer screen or face-to-face is the same thing, you said so yourself."

"Well, I was wrong, it's different. If a dinner date with him gets uncomfortable, I can't just hit a button on a keyboard and end it. And *you* won't be there either, sitting across from me. *He* will."

"That's true. You can't just hit a button and end it. But you *can* just get up and walk away if things go wrong for any reason. And I'll be listening in. Here's what we'll do. You'll wear a blazer with a breast pocket. You call me before it starts, and then you put the phone in your pocket, and we'll leave the call open. We'll pick a public place, lots of people around so you'll feel safe. And of course I'll be close by if you need me for any reason. We'll protect your identity, too. Don't take any credit cards out of your purse, obviously, and in fact don't even open your purse in sight of him; he might get a glance of some personal things. You can offer to split the bill if you want, and I'll give you cash that you can tuck in a pocket. And you'll take a ride service to and from the restaurant so there's no chance of him seeing your car."

"Mary, a restaurant with lots of people means that I might get spotted by someone who knows me. If my husband got word..."

"He won't, don't worry," Mary interrupted emphatically. "You'll accept Rip's invitation for a date, but *you'll* pick the place. We'll find a restaurant that's a good long drive from your home, one that you've never been to. It'll take a few hours of your time to do this, but you can tell Alan you're doing a long session at the gym, an aerobics class or something. Angela, I *need* you to do this for me. I'm going to pop this man's ego like stepping on a balloon. Please?"

Four days later, Mary tapped the coffeehouse table with her fingers, in time to the Latin jazz which filled the room. She took a sip of her espresso and looked up to see Angela walk in. Angela had a concerned, all business look on her face. She went straight to Mary's table and sat down.

Mary pulled her chair in a bit, put both elbows on the table, and asked eagerly, "Angela...so, how'd the dinner date go last night?"

"Not well at all," answered Angela in an apprehensive tone.

"What do you mean? Sounded like you were having a great time, at least until your phone cut out about an hour and a half into it. I was sitting in a diner about a block away from you."

"My battery died, sorry. The part that you heard went okay, even though I was thinking the whole time about what a rotten thing I was doing to this man. I just kept reminding myself that he'd done a rotten thing to you. There were lots of laughs, witty banter, and you heard me give him some of the fake personal details that you and I cooked up. But you didn't hear what happened toward the end. It was very...upsetting."

Mary's smile disappeared, replaced instantly by a serious stare, and she muttered, "What? Tell me."

"I was non-committal about whether we'd have another date, just like you and

I discussed. He became insistent. I had to tell him four times that I wasn't sure, that I had to think about it. And after the last time he ...well, he banged both hands on the table, in anger. Our glasses jumped and it was loud enough so that everybody in the restaurant turned and looked at us. He was mad that I wouldn't give him a definite yes. Then he apologized almost immediately for his behavior, but I just walked out at that point. Luckily there was a cab outside. I got in and left, went straight home."

Angela paused, gave Mary a stern look, and said, "Mary, he has a temper. You told me there was no way he could be dangerous."

Mary stammered, "I...well, when I knew him seven years ago, I never saw signs of a temper, I'm sure of it. He's changed, I guess. Even so, having a temper doesn't necessarily mean he would...actually *do* something."

Angela replied firmly, "True, but we can't take that chance. You need to just drop this immediately, this silly revenge game. It could spiral out of control and things could get serious. I want you to delete that dating account. Never try to make contact with him again, okay? You promise me?"

Mary nodded silently, her eyes filled with contrition, and she said in a near whisper, "I'm sorry I got you into this, Angela. Really, I am."

"And it would be good if we don't see each other for a while. I'm worried about him seeing me by accident somewhere. But if he happens to see the two of us together, and he recognizes you...who knows what he'll think, or what he might do. Let's give it a month at least."

Mary gave Angela a weak nod and repeated, "I'm really sorry."

Four weeks later, Angela sat in the coffeehouse with an untouched coffee in front of her. She was simply staring, deep in thought, not even registering the raucous sound of the bean grinder working behind the counter when Mary walked in and sat down. Neither of them bothered with a greeting.

Angela shifted in her chair and asked, "Mary, so what is it you needed to tell me in person about Rip...something you discovered... about his past, you said?"

Mary sighed and answered, "Yes. I found out that he was once arrested for aggravated assault in North Carolina and served sixty days in jail."

"Oh my God. Assault?" Angela blurted.

"Some kind of domestic dispute with a woman he was living with at the time. She needed stitches. So...no need to speculate about whether he's dangerous. I should have looked into this sooner. I'm really sorry. You haven't run into him since that dinner date, have you?"

"No," she said simply.

"Are you sure? You didn't see him two nights ago? At the Blue Metro Hotel?"

Angela went pale. She stared at Mary, in shock, her mouth agape. Mary stared back, stone faced, saying nothing for fifteen seconds. Then Mary calmly reached into her pocket, took out a stack of pictures, and started laying them out on the table, as if she were playing solitaire.

Angela looked down in horror at the one closest to her. It was a picture of her

and Rip making love. Angela was on the bottom, lying on her back. Her hands were up above her head, clutching the metal headrail of the bed, as if holding on for a wild ride. Rip was on top of her and sitting upright, his knees forward, facing her, riding her. Angela's mouth was open as if she was about to scream, but from the expression on her face it would clearly be a scream of pleasure. His hands were clamped onto her hips, ensuring that the two naked bodies were locked together. The flowery bedspread and white sheets had been kicked onto the floor, leaving nothing to cover the lovers.

The second picture that Angela looked at was every bit as graphic as the first, but this time she was on top and Rip was clutching her shoulders, the dark, hairy skin of his forearms standing out against her fair skin.

Angela looked up at Mary. She didn't need to see any more.

"Put them away, please," Angela said in a dazed monotone.

"Oh, you can have them. I have lots more, stored on my computer and in the cloud. And with a few keystrokes I can have them up on social media, too." Mary paused, and then said, as if scolding a naughty child, "Angela, you're doing something really dumb. You're seeing Rip."

Angela started to sob.

"I...I'm so sorry, Mary. I'm a weak person. And he's so kind and attentive, handsome and witty. I...couldn't resist."

"You thought you were so smart, telling me that your phone ran out of charge on that dinner date."

"I went to the ladies room and turned it off," Angela whimpered. "I'd decided by that time that I had to see him again, and I didn't want you to hear us setting up another date. I had to make up that thing about him banging the table so you would drop the whole revenge scheme and stay away."

"You're such a bad girl," Mary lectured.

"But how did you... get these pictures?"

"Well, that was easy. Rip took them. With two tiny cameras he set up while you were in the bathroom."

"Rip...took them...?" Angela gasped.

"Actually, his name's John. Not nearly as colorful a name as Rip, huh? He's an actor I hired. And he works for an escort service, too. So I sincerely hope you made him wear a condom."

Mary leaned in and stared at Angela.

"Seven years ago, Angela...I *knew* it was you. I followed Doug, and I saw him rendezvous with *you*."

"Doug? Who's...Doug?" Angela stuttered in confusion.

"You don't even remember him, do you? You had so many guys back in college, you don't even remember his name. And I don't think you'd even recall his face if you saw him again. You probably screwed him in his dorm room for a total of two weeks. And then you went on to the next guy. You had so many. I had one. And you had to take him."

"But I didn't know...I didn't know he was dating *you*. I wouldn't have...if I had known..."

"It doesn't really matter, does it? You took Doug from me. And then you tossed him aside when you got bored with him."

Angela shook her head in disbelief. "My God, you waited...seven years... to get your revenge? Pretended to be my friend all this time? Came to parties at my place?"

"Well, I wanted to wait until I could wreck your marriage, of course. And you just got married."

Angela shook her head. "But...how did you know...that Rip and I would..."

"I didn't. I hired the most seductive actor I could find, but if you hadn't decided to have an affair with him, I would have just sent Alan pictures of you having dinner with Rip on the night you told Alan you were at the gym. Certainly not as shocking as *these* pictures, but it would have caused some major marital problems. Maybe that would have been *better*, you know? Sent the marriage into a very slow and lingering death spiral?"

The corners of Mary's mouth slowly turned up. She stared at Angela with a malicious smile.

"You're sick," Angela said with revulsion. "If I hadn't slept with Doug, it would have been some other girl at school. But you blamed *me*? And not Doug?"

"Who said I didn't blame Doug, too?"

"And what have you done to *him*?" Angela shot back.

"Nothing. *Yet*. He's engaged now. Not getting married until next year. I can wait. I'm a patient enemy."



## SONAM SNOW-SLIDE

A glacier gobbles Sonam,  
the highest military post,  
with its nine soldiers in  
Arctic sleeping bags.  
Lance Naik Thappa lies  
in an air bubble as a fetus.  
Sense becomes a wretched  
thing. Bravery freezes.

After the sunrise, a radio  
set at another post cracks  
to life with his voice,  
awakening the recovery  
team. He resists the chill  
with his will. Image of a  
forlorn family frightens him.

Dozens of corpses are dug  
out of blue ice boulders.  
Thappa's body is recovered  
on the fifth day, with clutches  
of death and a rare spark in his  
eyes. Press corps move their  
cameras, musing how to make  
it more sensitive. A pair of  
dry lips whispers holy words  
before the door of ICU, while  
death packs her soldier's soul.

Pyre burns with flames of  
pain. Ash of pride remains.

—fabiyas mv

# The Universe is Curling Up on the Sofa and Becoming a Couch Potato

Watching reruns of its former glory,  
    *Star Trek* episodes from season one,  
the future as it used to be, a *story*,  
    *conflict* to be faced and overcome!

Historic battles mix and match onscreen,  
    disparate lovers kiss as music swells,  
ads for gadgets hawked from days bygone  
    when physics had encouraged gadget sales.

It dozes. "Where the hell's 'e damn remote?"  
    The cosmos seems a ghost yet belches as  
it shuffles off to fetch a lukewarm Coke,  
    a fume of week-old unwashed junk and ass.

Too tired to get up and kill the light.  
Old pornos fading into endless night...

—marshall pipkin

The title is borrowed from Joe Liske, qtd. in Ian Sample, "Universe Slowly Dying as Old Stars Fade Faster Than New Ones Are Born," *The Guardian*, 10 Aug. 2015.



# IF A GHOST COMES KNOCKING

In the middle of the night, Chloe's piercing cry awakened her mother.

Jennifer tossed aside her covers and flipped on the bedside stand lamp and sat up on the edge of the bed.

"What is it?" Luke mumbled, with his eyes still closed and not moving from his curled position on his side of the bed.

"Can't you hear her?" Jennifer said. "Chloe has had another bad dream."

"They're called nightmares," he said.

"Whatever they're called, she's had another one," Jennifer said as she stood up and brushed her long brown hair back from her face. Leaving the bedroom she walked into the hallway that was lit only by a nightlight plugged into an outlet just above the baseboard. It flickered as she passed it, then went out as she entered Chloe's bedroom.

The glow of a low voltage bulb in a lamp with a shade decorated with dancing lambs was cast over the bed. Jennifer went to the bed and pulled down the blanket that Chloe had pulled over her head.

She was curled in a fetal position and crying.

"Mommy's here," Jennifer said as she gently placed her hand on the girl's back. "Did you have another bad dream?"

"No, Mommy," Chloe said, her voice quivering. "It was at the window again."

"The shining man was at the window?" Jennifer said. She put her hand in Chloe's golden blonde hair.

Chloe rolled onto her back. Tears streaked her pink cheeks. "Yes, Mommy. He kept tapping on it."

Jennifer glanced at the window. The curtains were spread and the night sky was freckled with stars. She wiped away the girl's tears with the tips of her fingers, then bent down and kissed her on the forehead. "He's gone now, sweetheart," she

by steven carr

said. "I'll close the curtains so that he knows to stay away."

"Okay, Mommy," Chloe said.

Jennifer went to the window and looked down at the park across the street from their high-rise. Lampposts shone their light on the path nearest the street. The trees in the park were lost in blackness. She was about to pull the curtains when she noticed a hand print on the other side of the glass. Her heart began to beat hard. She quickly closed the curtains and returned to Chloe's bed. "You can sleep now and forget all about the man," she said.

Chloe yawned. "I don't like him, Mommy."

"I don't blame you, sweetie," Jennifer said. "Go back to sleep and dream about kittens. You like those."

Chloe shut her bright blue eyes. "I like kittens," she said as she began to drift off to sleep.

Jennifer kissed her on the cheek. She went back to the door; she turned before leaving. She looked at the window and felt a chill go up her spine.

Bright morning sunlight streamed through the kitchen window as Jennifer stood at the sink with her hands immersed in soapy water, using a sponge to wash the pan she had used to fix breakfast. Chloe was sitting behind her at the kitchen table trying to feed her doll, Frieda, a spoonful of raspberry jam.

Luke came into the kitchen wearing his bright blue Gatsby cap. He kissed Chloe on top of the head then leaned against the sink watching Jennifer. "Russ Vyberg is a big client and he wanted to discuss his account."

Jennifer turned on the faucet and ran the pan under hot water. "Why am I just now hearing about this and when am I going to meet this important client of yours?"

"Russ is the all-business type, and you wouldn't like him very much even if he consented to meeting you socially, which he never would," he stammered. "About the money, I simply forgot to tell you."

He put his hand on her shoulder.

She shrugged his hand off and put the pan in the dish drainer. "You seem to be forgetting to tell me a lot of things recently, like where you got the money to make that large deposit in our account."

Luke pushed the cap back on head. "It was a return on an investment," he said.

"What investment?" she said, eying him suspiciously.

He looked at the gold watch on his tanned wrist and said, "We can discuss it later, but I need to go. Russ Vyberg is a stickler about punctuality." He hurriedly kissed her on the cheek before leaving the kitchen.

A few moments later Jennifer heard the front door open and close. She turned and leaned back against the sink and watched Chloe with Frieda. Red juice from the jam was running down the doll's chin and onto the doll's pale green gingham dress. That the jam resembled a little too closely that of blood made her uncomfortable. "What would you like to do today, Chloe?" she said.

"Go to the park," Chloe said enthusiastically.

"Then the park it is," Jennifer said. She wiped Frieda's face with the sponge and placed the doll in a sitting position in a chair and took her daughter's hand and walked with her out of the kitchen.

In Chloe's bedroom Jennifer helped her change into play clothes and lace up her sneakers. She repeatedly glanced at the closed curtains until she decided she was being foolish, and leaving Chloe sitting in front of the girl's vanity dresser, she went to the window and slowly opened the curtains. On the outside of the glass the words, "you owe me," were scrawled by a fingertip across the pane.

Jennifer let out a short gasp and quickly pulled the curtains closed.

"What's wrong, Mommy?" Chloe said.

"Nothing, sweetheart," Jennifer said, taking the girl's hand and leading her out of the bedroom. As she opened the front door, on the outside hallway floor Frieda was lying on her back with a fork stuck in the middle of her forehead.

In the shade of a large maple tree, Jennifer sat on a bench at the edge of the park's small playground while Chloe played in the sandbox with two other children. Chloe was holding Frieda in one hand while she built a castle using a plastic drinking cup with the other. The Band Aid placed across the doll's forehead had calmed the girl's distress at having seen the fork stuck in it. It also brought an end to the questions Jennifer couldn't answer: *How did Frieda get in the hallway? Who stuck a fork in her head?*

Afraid to take her eyes off her daughter, Jennifer shut out the sounds and movements of the parents and children nearby. When her cellphone buzzed it momentarily startled her. She took it out of her jeans pocket and looked at the text.

"In your window," it said. The number it was being sent from was her business

cellphone that she had left in their apartment. She looked up at a window on the twelfth story of her building. Though she could not discern details of what she was seeing, there was clearly a man standing in her bedroom window.

She received another text. "Pay your debt," it said. Then the phone disconnected.

Jennifer jammed her phone into her pocket.

"Chloe!" she shrieked.

"What, Mommy?" Chloe said as she tugged on her mother's back pocket.

Jennifer whirled around nearly knocking her daughter down, and scooped her into her arms and ran out of the park and across the street and into the apartment building. Eddie, the concierge, was sitting at the lobby desk reading a newspaper.

"Someone got into our apartment," she said as the elevator arrived and the door opened.

Eddie scratched his head. "You were outside. How would you know?" he said dubiously.

She ran into the elevator and hit the button to the twelfth floor. As the door closed she put Chloe down and leaned against a wall, trying to catch her breath.

Six floors up the elevator suddenly stopped and the light went out making it pitch black.

"Mommy," Chloe screamed.

Jennifer reached out and felt her daughter's hair, then grabbed her arm. "I'm right here, sweetheart."

"Frieda. It took Frieda," Chloe squealed.

The light came back on and the elevator shook then began to move again. Jennifer looked around the elevator. The doll was gone. Jennifer hugged her daughter to her until they reached their floor. When the door opened, Jennifer pulled Chloe along as she ran to their apartment and put the key in the door and opened it. It was quiet. She ran down the hallway to her bedroom. It had been ransacked.

"Why just our bedroom?" Jennifer said to Luke who was hanging his suits back on their hangers.

"I have no idea," he said. "At least nothing is missing."

"I have some expensive jewelry. Why wasn't any of it taken?" she said. "I would feel better if something had been taken." She righted the last overturned bottle of perfume that sat on her vanity dresser. "The police didn't even believe me when I told them I had seen someone in our window and about the text I received."

"I guess it would be hard to believe since you couldn't show the text," he said as he sat on the edge of the bed.

"I got that text, goddammit," she said. "I can't explain why it has disappeared from the phones, but I got it."

He raised his hands as if surrendering. "I believe you."

"That's twice that whoever is doing this that they have said something about something being paid back," she said as she sat on the stool in front of the dresser.

"Twice?" he said.

She told him about the scrawling on Chloe's bedroom window.

"I'm glad you didn't tell the police about that," he said. "They would have hauled you off to the looney bin." He plopped onto his back. "You just need to be sure to lock the front door when you go out."

Through clenched teeth, Jennifer said, "The front door was locked."

Chloe appeared in the doorway with her arms full of stuffed animals and dolls. "They're scared and they want to hide," she said.

Jennifer got up and started toward Chloe when a glowing apparition of a man appeared behind her daughter in the hallway. Its mouth curved into a malevolent grin. Its dull yellow eyes fixed on hers for a moment then it darted off down the hall.

"Luke!" Jennifer screamed. "It's in here with us." She grabbed Chloe and quickly pulled her into the bedroom.

Luke sat up. "What's in here?"

"That man . . . ghost. It ran down the hall toward the kitchen," Jennifer said, her voice shaking.

Chloe began to cry.

Luke got off the bed. "I'll go take a look." He walked out of the bedroom into the hallway and turned toward the kitchen.

He returned a few minutes later. "I went all through the apartment. There's no one here but us."

"He, it, was here, standing right behind Chloe," she said. "It was hideous."

Luke picked Chloe up and hugged her to him. "Hideous how?"

"Its smile was grotesque. I've never seen such malice in a face," she said. "I think it means us harm."

Luke stared at her for a moment then burst out laughing. "You're kidding, right?" he said. "How can a ghost hurt us?"

Jennifer stared at him, dumbfounded. "With what has been going on how can you even ask that?" she said, then stormed out of the bedroom.

While Chloe slept, Jennifer sat in a chair at the window in her daughter's bedroom staring at the city's skyline, the night sky and the park. She pulled her hand-knitted shawl around her shoulders and tried to still the rapid beating of her heart. On one hand she wanted the apparition to appear at the window so that she could prove to herself that she hadn't lost her mind; on the other hand the idea of seeing it frightened her. A sudden movement on the path in the park suddenly drew her attention.

The ghost was floating a few feet off the ground and juggling a couple of objects she couldn't make out. It suddenly stretched out its hand and pointed at the window—at her. Then it suddenly vanished.

There was a knock on the front door of the apartment.

Jennifer got up and cautiously walked into the hallway. She stood still for a minute, listening. She turned on the hallway light and went to the door. "Who's there?" she said.

Getting no reply she peeked through the peephole and saw no one. Putting her hand on the doorknob she hesitated before opening the door.

On the floor lay Luke's cap and Frieda without her head. She picked them up and shut and locked the door and ran down the hallway to her bedroom. She flipped on the light.

Luke rolled onto his back and mumbled drowsily, "What's going on?"

"That's what I'd like to know," Jennifer said as she flung his cap on the bed.

He picked up the cap and turned it over several times. "Where did you get this?"

"It was left at the door by the ghost," she said.

Luke nervously twisted the cap in his hands. "It's a sign that the ghost wants the money back I stole from him when he was alive," he said. "It was money that was supposed to go to his family, but no one knew about it but me and him. I've tried to reason with him."

"You've known about this ghost and you've tried to reason with it?" she said shrilly.

"The ghost is . . ."

"I don't care who it is," she screamed at him. "You must give the money back."

"I'm not going to do that," he said. "No one knows about the money except you and me."

"And the ghost," she said.

Chloe's scream was loud and short; then there was silence.

Jennifer ran to Chloe's bedroom. The child's bed was empty.

The words "repaid in full" were scribbled on the window.



[poetry]

# HONEY FROM THE GRAVE

I cannot name the plants that bloom  
their velvet petals among the tombs  
and yet their perfume summons me  
to stand enshrouded in the gloom.

Within the fragrance on the breeze  
swarm persistent honeybees.  
The only sound's their eldritch drone  
between the headstones and the trees.

Far this infestation roams  
to gather nectar for their home.  
What apiarist's hands would save  
the ichor seeping from their combs?

Its sweetness, rumors swear, enslaves  
the minds of men to a frothing craze.  
My soul is wrenched, yet my tongue craves  
this taste of honey from the grave.

—joshua gage





## Inauspicious Days

Bad omens in the tea leaves, heavens, bird  
livers no matter how we spin them, but  
what is news, truth, fact now when opinion,  
rumors, lies are validated by technology,  
messages, and images traveling at light speed  
globally? No alchemy will save us from ourselves;  
no GPS will guide our way. Gravity never takes vacations.

—pat tompkins

[short story]



by laroo jack

In my dreams, I imagine the perfect man. He's good looking, but not in a movie star way. He has nice eyes and a good body. He gives a shit about my problems. He's caring. When he jacks off there are only thoughts of me running through his mind.

I haven't had any luck finding him. I'm only thirty-five, but I know I'm past my prime. I've put on weight, and my boobs are starting to sag a little bit. No hunk is going to take me home, not sober anyway.

You might have guessed the rest. I don't have many friends and the ones I do have are married. I don't go to church. My job is a joke. I'm lonely.

Don't judge me—your time is coming.

My cousin is in prison, doing light time for a little shoplifting problem. She tells me that she's posted an ad on a site called "Pen Pal Prisoners," and now there are dozens of guys sending her mail, telling her they can't wait to do her on the outside. You can practically see the jizz on the paper, she said. She tells me there are some hot guys on the site and that I should check it out, just for fun. So I do.

It's a funny thing, this site—just like any old dating site. You can write in an age range, say what kind of race and religion you're looking for. You can even search by astrological sign. I guess even felons were born under some kind of stars. If you see a guy you like, you can click on his profile. They write up a little bio—who they are and how they're sorry for whatever it is that they did. Some of them even post artwork—mostly tattoo designs. The only thing the profile doesn't mention is what they're in for, but it's easy to find if you click on the link to the federal database.

At the bottom of the screen are a bunch of little check boxes. Looking for a lifer? Check the box. Looking for someone getting out in the next year? Check the box. Looking for someone on death row? That one got my attention. I like my men a little rough—rough but safe. What could be safer than a cage with an expiration date? I check the box, and that's when I find Derek: athletic build, inked, a former maintenance worker, cute as all get-out. And scheduled to die sometime in the next ten years. In his profile Derek says that he respects women and that he's looking for an old-fashioned courtship. That he wants to promise himself to someone. I write him a letter.

October 5, 2010

To: Derek Janson — # 90068-1819

South Carolina State Correctional Facility

Dear Derek,

I seen your profile on "Pen Pal Prisoners," and I feel real bad for you. It must be hard being locked up for the rest of your life. Here's a picture of what I look like. If you're really interested in a lady friend, write me back.

Cheryl Anne Holt

1607 Warbuck Road

Bentonville, Arkansas 71712

Yours truly,  
Cheryl Anne Holt

October 10, 2010

Dear Cheryl Anne—or do you like to be just Cheryl? Don't matter to me, just let me know.

I got your letter and your picture, and I think you're a real pretty girl. It would do me great honor to write to you.

As you know, I'm set to die in 2016, but I got one more appeal coming and I pray every day that something good will happen. You writing to me gives me hope, like you're some kind of angel come to comfort me. Bless you.

Why don't you write back and tell me something about yourself.

Your true friend,  
Derek

October 17, 2010

Dear Derek,

I was real happy that you wrote me back. Thank you for saying all of those nice things.

My life is pretty quiet. I live by myself and work as a secretary at an insurance agency. I'm studying to take my insurance test, so that I can do a little better for myself and do more than just answer phones.

I don't have any kids. I almost got married once, but it fell through.

What else? My astrology sign is Pisces, but I don't put much stock into that kind of thing.

Let me know what else you want to know. And let me know about you.

Yours truly,  
Cheryl Anne

October 25, 2010

Dear Cheryl Anne,

I'm sorry it took me so long to write back, but I've been busy working with my lawyer on the appeal. It's coming up in three months. Bentonville is only two hours from Aiken, which is where my appeal hearing is going to be heard. Maybe you can come see me?

I guess since you're writing me, you already know what I've done to get myself in here. I should tell you that I did beat that guy up. I also robbed all those places, like they said. But I never killed nobody. The other guys did that. I was a good thirty feet away when it happened. They're real strict, though, in South Carolina. You just got to be at the scene of the crime to be guilty, but I don't think that's fair and my lawyer don't either. Still, I take responsibility for my bad doings and I don't blame nobody for what's happened to me. If I could go back, I'd do it all different. Everything. And then I might have a little house in the country and be settled in with a nice gal like you. No use crying over spilt milk, I guess.

My folks are dead, but they was never anything to write home about. On the outside, I liked to fix things for people, like their roofs and their pipelines. I guess you could call me handy.

I've never been married, but I have a little girl by an ex-girlfriend. Sometimes, she writes to me—my little girl—her name is Eileen, and she's twelve now.

I'm studying for my GED. My sign is Virgo. I don't believe in astrology, even though I read my horoscope. Please write soon.

Your true friend,

Derek

***Twenty letters later:***

December 2, 2010

Dear Derek,

My cousin, Cindy, is on the inside. She's also on "Pen Pal Prisoners," and she tells me that I can send money to your account, so you can buy extras like candy and magazines. I know you didn't ask me to, but I wanted to, so you probably have fifty dollars in your account to do what you want with.

I'm real proud of you for passing your GED exam. Maybe now you can do a correspondence course. What would you study? You should try computer science, since you like to fix things. Like I said, my computer never works.

I took a walk in the woods yesterday, and I thought of you. I feel bad that you can't go outside, except in that little cement yard you told me about. When I'm walking I imagine you out there with me, holding my hand. Maybe someday some luck will find us both.

Keep your spirits up.

Truly yours,

Cheryl Anne

December 9, 2010

Dear Cheryl Anne,

I wish you could come and visit me. I wouldn't let my little girl see me in here—not that her mother would bring her here anyway. I'd let you see me. And then I'd miss you when you left.

They don't let me keep your letters. They let me read them, but then they take them away. What do they think I'm going to do with them? Set them on fire?

I guess I'm feeling kind of low today. My lawyer tells me not to get my hopes up.

Cheryl Anne, won't you come and see me? I ain't gonna bite. They won't let me—just kidding.

XO Derek

PS: Thank you for the money. They don't give the death row guys much to choose from when they come 'round to the cells, so I used it to buy paper and stamps to write you with.

December 14, 2010

Dear Derek,

Don't be down, especially with your appeal right around the corner. I worry about you being lonely. I know you can't be social with the others on death row—that they keep you so you can't even see them.

I called up the prison to see if I could visit you. They said that death row inmates get two visits a month, but that I'd have to see you through some kind of partition. Still, I'm going to make it a point to come and see you before Christmas. I wish I could bring you a present, but they told me that death row folks can't get anything from the outside. It sure seems cruel and unusual to me. I guess I'll just put the money into your account.

I'll be thinking good thoughts until I can make it over to see you.

XXOO Cheryl Anne

On December 18, 2010, Cheryl Anne went to visit Derek at the South Carolina State Correctional Facility. They touched hands through the glass partition and talked into telephone receivers for over an hour. Driving back to Bentonville, Cheryl Anne got two tickets, one for speeding and one for running a traffic light. That night she wrote a letter:

December 18, 2010

Dear Derek,

Oh baby, I couldn't believe that you were just a couple of feet away today. I was so nervous about the visit, but as soon as I saw you I knew everything would be OK.

It's so unfair that we can't even hold hands. No wonder they have so many problems in prisons—folks are frustrated. I know I was.

As I told you, I'm coming to your appeal hearing in two weeks. I'm glad you got a good lawyer through that Death Row advocacy group. Anything is better than a public defender—at least that's what everybody tells me.

You were so cute and sweet. I feel real lucky to have you in my life.

Love,

Cheryl Anne

December 23, 2010

Oh Cheryl Anne, I sure wish you could come every week to see me. When I saw your pretty face and smile, I knew that I had finally found someone I could love.

I wish they'd let me keep a picture of you in my cell. I felt kind of sexy after we talked and I would have done anything to have a photo of you taped to the wall beside my bed. It's a lucky thing that I have a good memory, so I can keep you in my thoughts even when you're away.

You're my one and only.

Love always,  
Derek

Two weeks later, Cheryl Anne attended Derek's appeal hearing. His attorney was a sharp young man in a tailored suit, and he kept his hand rested on Derek's arm. Cheryl Anne found that creepy, even though she assumed it was an act of solidarity or a reminder to keep his mouth shut.

Still, even the lawyer looked surprised when the judge found that there had been something called "Abuse of Discretion" at Derek's original trial. Derek's sentence was converted to life in prison without the possibility of parole. Cheryl Anne supposed that was a good thing—at least for Derek.

January 15, 2011

You'll never believe what they told me, Cheryl Anne! Now that I'm not on death row, I can have trailer visits four times a year with my wife.

Oh sweetie, I know this isn't the most romantic way to ask for your hand in marriage, but will you, baby? Will you marry me, so that we can be together once a month? The Assistant Warden says we can get married right here in the prison in the Visitor's Room. I already got the Chaplain to give me a wedding packet, which has all the forms we got to fill out.

What do you say!!! I love you so much ...

XXX Derek

This letter gave Cheryl Anne a moment of pause. It wasn't what she had signed up for. She had imagined a fervent love affair followed by a tragic execution, not a converted sentence and conjugal visits.

She slept on the matter and woke up convinced that things weren't all that different. She and Derek could get married. He'd still be locked up. Even though she'd be sleeping with him, he wouldn't have the time or space to get mean. It might be kind of romantic. They'd be thrown together for two hours and then torn apart, leaving each other to pine through the mail until the next visit. It's not like there was a line out the door with men aching to marry her, and she didn't want to go to her grave as an old maid.

She wrote "Yes!!!" on a sheet of paper and mailed it to Derek. A week later she received an envelope full of forms, along with a bill for \$370. She'd also have to buy the rings.

It took the prison board a few weeks to approve the ceremony. Cheryl Anne had a private meeting with the Assistant Warden.

"You haven't been pressured into this, have you, miss?"

"No, sir."

"Has Mr. Janson apprised you of his crimes?"

"Yes, sir."

"And has he also informed you of the length of his sentence?"



"Yes, sir. Life in prison."

"If approved, you'll be eligible for private visits once every three months ..."

At this, Cheryl Anne smiled.

"...We have a couple of trailers on the south side of the facility, designated for that purpose."

Cheryl Anne nodded. He looked at her and shook his head:

"Do you have any questions for me?"

"Can we get married now?"

The ceremony was held in the visitor's room. It looked like the rec room at a shabby YMCA, with vending machines lined up against a wall, families clustered around industrial picnic tables and a wild group of children playing tag. Cheryl Anne and Derek took their vows in a corner, the prison chaplain shouting to be heard over the din and hubbub. Whenever there was a pause, Derek or Cheryl Anne would say, "I do," hoping that it would be a timely response. The chaplain seemed satisfied and told them that they were married. Cheryl Anne bought two colas from a vending machine, and she and Derek held hands and toasted the nuptials. It wouldn't be legal in South Carolina until they had consummated the marriage, and that would likely be several weeks coming. It was all well and good for Cheryl Anne, who was perfectly happy knowing that her caged husband had nothing better to do every night than think of her.

Six weeks later, she received a phone call from the prison activities coordinator, offering her a choice of weekends for her trailer visit. When she arrived at the prison, she was given a towel, a tube of lubricant, a box of condoms and two hours. Derek was everything she thought he would be, for better or worse.

March 31, 2011

My darling Cheryl Anne,

I think about you all day, every day. You light up my life. I know that's from a song and all, but I mean it. Poetry ain't my thing, so sometimes I have to borrow a little. You don't mind, do you?

Those panties you wore were awfully sexy, Cheryl Anne, but not half as sexy as you. I knew you'd be a firecracker, but Geez Louise ... I might just have to put my pen down and come back to this in half an hour. I can't believe we have to wait for a whole ten weeks to be together again. Might be time for a jailbreak, LOL.

A guy on my floor saw you in the rec room, and he's told all the other guys what a lucky man I am. So now I'm some kind of stud or something. I don't mind if they look at you, baby, 'cause I'm the only one touching, right?

All my love and then some,  
Derek

Cheryl Anne kept that letter in the drawer of her nightstand, right next to her vibrator. On the wall of the kitchen was a calendar, counting down the days until their next private visit.

April 15, 2011

Cheryl Anne !

I'm so excited I can hardly write this. Remember that lawyer who got me out of the death penalty? Well, he found a bunch more problems with my case, and now the state has to let me out! Seems I served enough time to make up for the robberies and all. I'm coming home, baby! I ain't never been to Arkansas, but I'm sure it's going to be my favorite state now! Just think – we can be together all day, every day for the rest of our lives! Oh, baby ... it's a miracle from God.

Your loving husband,

Derek

Cheryl Anne dropped the letter to the floor. Her heart felt like it was bursting. He was coming *home*? To *her* home? *Here*? She found herself hunched over the toilet throwing up.

"I should have used a post office box," she thought.

"I should have kept it just at letters," she thought.

"I never should have married him ..."

"Or slept with him ..."

"Oh."

"Shit."

This was not what she had signed up for. If she'd wanted someone in her house, she would have just gone to a bar or a church picnic. And they were married. She was in a real pickle.

May 1, 2011

My very own Cheryl Anne –

Look outside your window.

Love, Derek

Sure enough, standing by the apartment building parking lot, was Derek holding a bouquet of slightly wilted flowers. He wouldn't have known when—or if—she had opened the letter, so she had time to think things over.

*I could just pack a bag and leave.*

*He's standing by my car. I'd have to leave my car.*

*I could just tell him that it was all a big misunderstanding, that I wasn't ready for this level of commitment.*

*He would probably think I was kidding, and then he'd probably hit me.*

*I could ask one of my friends to come over and tell him that I'd died.*

*He'd want to see my body or at least my gravesite, and I don't have enough time to get one.*

*Besides, as her lawfully wedded husband, he'd come into my apartment and take all of my stuff, my being fake dead and all.*

*Fuck it. It's easier to let him in.*

For the next ten days, they stayed at home and ordered pizza and Chinese food, watching TV, and making love. She didn't ask him if he planned on getting a job. She didn't nag him about leaving his stuff everywhere or for smoking in her kitchen. He was happy as a clam. She wasn't taking any chances. God willing, he'd get sick of her and leave. But he didn't, and Cheryl Anne didn't want some freeloading jailbird sitting on the sofa for the rest of her life.

May 16, 2011

Derek Baby,

Don't be sore. I thought it might be a good idea to put this in a letter, since all our important talks have been written down

I think you're real great, Derek, and you will always have a special place in my heart. I just don't think we should be married anymore.

I'm real sorry. I should have thought things through more, but I didn't, and here we are. In the long run, I don't think you and me are compatible.

So, I'd really appreciate it if you could leave in the next couple of days.

Thanks for understanding.

Cheryl Anne

Cheryl Anne heard Derek unlocking the front door and decided that it might be a good idea to lock herself in the bathroom while he read it. After fifteen minutes had gone by, she pressed her ear against the door. It was very quiet. She opened it:

"Baby," she called. "You still around?" Then she saw that he'd written a letter in return.

May 16, 2011

My sweet and lovely Cheryl Anne,

You're breaking my heart. But if that's the way you want it, then that's how it's going to be.

It hurts too much to say goodbye. Maybe you could go out to the mall or something, so I can gather up my things.

You will always be my one and only,

Derek

Cheryl Anne sat down and read the letter again. He was being so nice and reasonable about the whole thing that she almost felt tempted to take the whole thing back and let him stay.

Would it really be so bad, even if he did turn out to be a couch potato? She closed her eyes and imagined him five years older, ten years older, twenty years older...She stopped there. The thought was just too awful. It was a good thing she kicked him to the curb.

She sighed and picked up her purse and her keys and walked out to her car. He must be watching me from somewhere, she thought. She thought she saw

something move behind the neighbor's pickup truck. As a final show of good will, she blew a kiss.

Five minutes later, her car careened off a steep ravine and rolled seventeen times before landing in a bog. It took her a moment, her face immersed in the fetid water, to realize that her head had separated from her body. By the time she was found by the highway patrol, most of her body had been eaten by the wild dogs that roamed the neighborhood. Her head was found fifty feet away, carried off like a bowling ball by some kind of animal. Not much was left—just the skull haloed in a nest of blond, frosted hair.

The police knew all about Derek, so they did a full investigation to rule out any foul play. Cheryl Anne's body was so cut up at the end of the autopsy, they gave up trying to reassemble everything and sent it to the funeral parlor in a plastic bag. They were disappointed to learn from the coroner that there wasn't so much as an aspirin in her system at the time of death.

The car was given the same treatment, ripped apart from the taillights to the spark plugs. After all was said and done, and with Derek's alibi rock solid, it was decided that a disconnected tie rod had done her in. The investigating officer noted that the parts in the car were so worn that it was only a matter of time before something gave out. It should have been heading to the junkyard, not the shopping mall.

They didn't know just how handy Derek was.

When they broke the news to him, he sobbed like a baby. After they left, it took him a little over an hour to get Cheryl Anne's computer up-and-running.

May 21, 2011

Maylene Simpson — #90027-6323

Georgia State Correctional Facility

Dear Maylene,

I saw your picture up on the "Pen Pal Prisoners" website. It's a crying shame to have a pretty girl like you locked up for no reason! Just looking at your picture, I can tell you're innocent.

My wife died, and I'm feeling kind of lonely. Maybe you're lonely, too.

I'm putting in a picture, so you'll know who you're writing to. I sure hope to hear from you soon.

Your true friend,

Derek Janson

1617 Warbuck Road

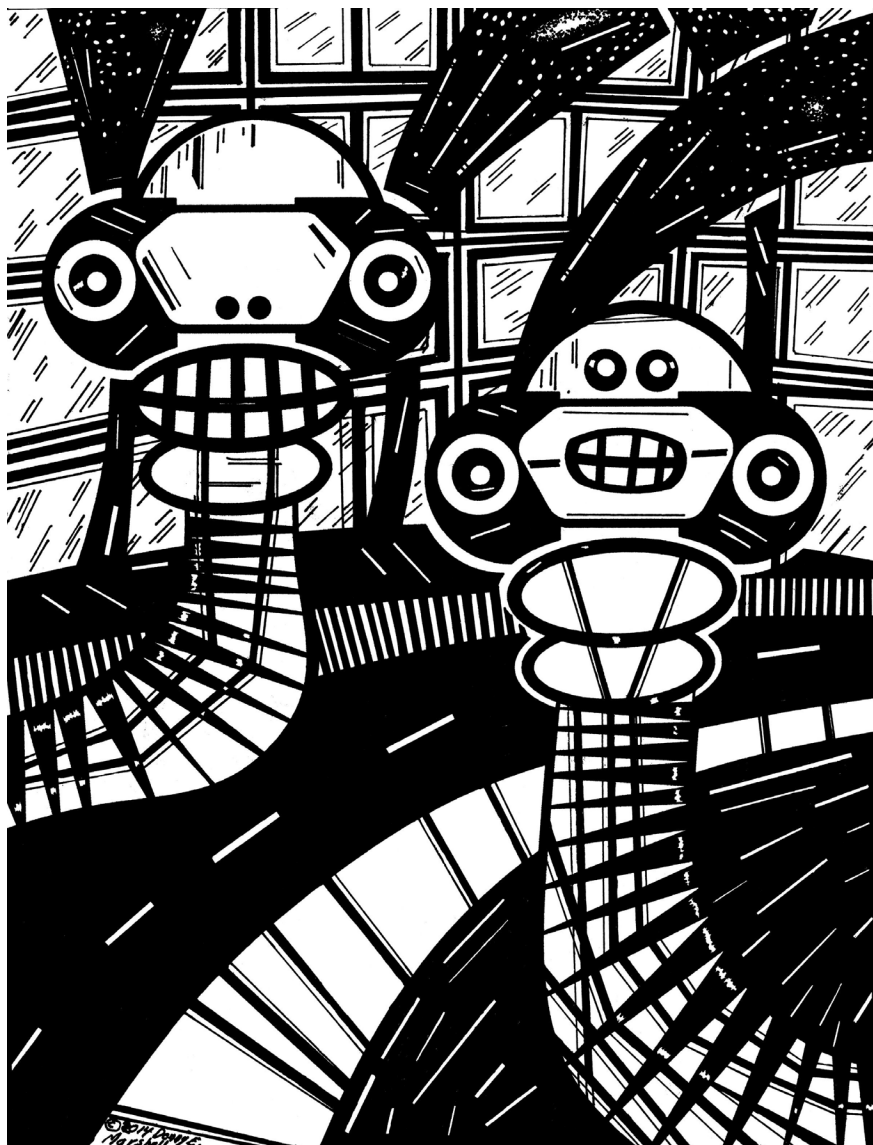
Bentonville, Arkansas 71712



## The Genetic Line

There are three of them, spinners of threads  
attached to pumping ventricles and spaces in the mind  
Stepping across time, carrying drops of dew from  
ancient beings to our end, a walk across moonbeams  
that light the eastern skies, golden spokes within  
the wheel of the chariot we ride, racing through  
the eternal sky, a wink at the sun, a passed  
on smile from those who started the line  
weaving itself, carriers of what we were  
will become, these three children of  
the child of mine.

—aurora lewis



—"window worms of the funnel dimension by denny marshall

# A Turn for the Worst

by jenna faccenda

Mary stared out the window as the cool autumn breeze tousled the brown strands from her curled ponytail.

"Why do you seem so quiet today?" Charles asked, gripping his fingers on the steering wheel.

"No reason," an unconvincing sigh left Mary's lips. Charles always hated when Mary got like this and lately it had been more often.

"Come on, Mary, what's really been bothering you lately?"

This time Mary's sigh grew louder. She met Charles' blue eyes with a glare. "Why is Robert saying that Abigail was with you the other night?" The question hit Charles like a curveball, straight out of the park.

"Now that's nonsense, Mary, and you know it."

"Not exactly. I don't seem to know much of anything these days." Mary's gaze shifted back to the blurred pavement. Resting her hand on her stomach, she sucked in a deep breath. If only Charles really knew what was wrong with her.

"My brother is never up to any good, Mary; he lies just for fun."

"If you say so." A silent tear fell down her cheek, as the entire baby blue Volkswagen was filled with absolute silence. The only sound that could be heard was of the tires hitting the road.

Charles reached out to turn on the radio, and Ben E. King blared through it. *And darling, darling, stand by me.* Mary peeked at Charles from the corner of her eye. He sat there with a stern look on his face. His bushy eyebrows were furrowed and his jaw was slightly clenched. Mary knew this look. It was the same look he would make right when he was coming up with a pitch during one of his baseball games. It was his concentrated look.

"You believe me don't you, Mary?" His deep voice startled Mary.

"I want to." Mary didn't want to throw away their relationship. The past two years had been nothing short of amazing, but she couldn't get rid of this nagging feeling in her gut.

Charles shot her a quick look and said, "I would never do that to you. I gave you that pin for a reason."



Mary touched her knitted blouse, placing her hand on the sterling silver pin that was embroidered with their school's forest green symbol. The tiny pin was supposed to symbolize their relationship. She remembered the day he gave it to her like it was yesterday. They were in the park near her parents' house. Charles had packed a nice picnic lunch full of Mary's favorites. She remembered the look on his face while she was smiling over the cream cheese stuffed celery sticks. She asked him why he kept staring at her and he told her it was because she looked so cute getting excited over the food. Mary still remembered how red her cheeks were. Charles didn't hesitate to get to the point of the picnic when he pulled out the forest green pin. "I want you to be my girl forever," he said, while he attempted to put the pin on her blouse. Mary was sure he was going to prick her with it by the way his hands were shaking. That day was so important to Mary because it was the day that Charles told her he loved her. It was the day that Mary decided she wanted to spend the rest of her life with him. She always wanted to be referred to as "his girl."

"I have to tell you something, Charles." Mary could feel her heart pounding in her chest.

"What is it?" Charles turned his head away from the road for just a moment.

Mary's screams soon pierced the car. "Charles, watch out!"

Before they knew it, a shiny red and silver tour bus with a giant portrait of Buddy Holly was coming straight toward them. Charles watched as the headlights grew closer and the bus crossed over the double yellow lines. Its loud horn shook the tiny blue vehicle, radiating the doors and the dashboard. Mary covered her face. She imagined the glass shattering. Charles could feel his stomach in his throat as he cut the wheel as fast as he could just slightly missing the truck and jumping the side rail, sending them right down the side of a hill. Mary screamed as the car bounced along the grassy path which caused both their bodies to jostle around. Mary could have sworn both of their lives were over as she saw the blurred images of trees whiz by. Charles' hands gripped the steering wheel. He was maneuvering on instinct while he prayed the car would make it in one piece. It felt like forever until the car finally reached a complete stop on a patch of grass.

Mary's hands were trembling as she reached down to cover her stomach. She was afraid to look, but she looked down anyway. There was no sight of blood. A sigh of relief left her lips.

Looking over at Mary, Charles' eyes widened, "I am so sorry, Mary; are you okay?"

She nodded her head, unable to find the words to speak. She watched as Charles got out of the car to assess the damage.

"Fuck!" Charles yelled. He walked back and forth staring at the bent metal in front of him. So many thoughts were racing through his head. How was he going to fix this without his dad noticing?

Mary watched as Charles grabbed his hair in frustration. He always did that when he was stressed out. Slowly, Mary gripped the silver handle, pushing the door open as it made a loud squeak. From what she could see they were in the

middle of the woods and the sun was setting. There was no sign of road for miles. This scared Mary.

"What are we going to do?" Mary asked. She knew Charles wouldn't have a clue but it left her mouth almost involuntarily.

Charles shot her a look and said, "I don't know." The sound of annoyance was imminent in his voice.

Mary dropped the subject.

Charles sighed, shrugging off his letterman jacket; he slung it over her quivering shoulders. "Here, take this. I'm going to see what I have in the trunk."

Mary nodded while staring off in the distance. She took in the fields of tall colorful trees. They seemed to go on for miles without a single road in sight. Mary shook her head. Now was probably not the time to tell him. He had enough to worry about. The sound of crunching leaves startled her. She looked around but didn't see anything. Maybe it was just a squirrel or something, but it was enough to make her not want to sit alone. She made her way over to Charles who was rummaging through the trunk like a madman. "Any luck?" Mary asked.

"Not yet." Charles's voice was muffled and short.

Mary curiously peeked over his shoulder at the cluttered mess. Charles had almost everything he owned piled in there: a football, tee shirts, textbooks, even what looked to be a bright pink sweater. "Charles, what is that?" Mary pointed at the frilly object.

"What are you talking about?" Charles shrugged his shoulders, quickly dismissing the subject. Mary ignored him and picked up the sweater between her fingers.

"Mary, wait," Charles pleaded.

"Whose is this?" Mary's voice rose with anger. She didn't wait for him to answer before pulling on the tag to read the lettering, "Abigail." She clenched the sweater between her hands before hurling it at Charles. "I knew it!" she screamed before she took off toward the woods.

"Mary, please wait! Let me explain!" Mary could hear Charles' footsteps behind her but she still didn't stop. Her mind was running too fast for her to stop. She focused on the trees as she passed each one; they seemed ominous, but she didn't care. She had been trying to avoid the idea that Charles would cheat on her for months, yet when Robert told her about Abigail her whole world came crashing down. Now finding the sweater was proof that what Robert told her was true.

"Mary!" Charles' pleas swarmed her ears. She could feel the rage bubbling in her stomach. Stopping suddenly, she pivoted on her heels until she was face-to-face with him.

"What could you possibly say to make this better?" she screamed, attempting to hold back the tears from spilling down her face. She felt her knees buckle before she slumped to the ground with Charles' arms wrapped around her.

"I love you, Mary." The words spilled off Charles's tongue so easily that it surprised him. He had never told Mary he loved her before and it was enough to

send her into a fit of tears. Charles was frozen. He didn't know what to do but just hold tight to Mary's frail shaking body. Abigail was a mistake. Charles didn't love her or want to be with her. He wanted Mary.

Guilt filled Mary's stomach. "I have to tell you something," she said in between sobs. Her heart was racing by this point.

"What is it, Mary?"

"I'm pregnant." Mary felt herself catch her breath as she waited for Charles to respond.

"How?" This was all Charles could mutter before releasing his arms from Mary and getting back on his feet. He stared down at her; she was still slumped on the ground. "We've never had sex before, Mary." Charles's voice rose to the point where even he didn't recognize himself.

"I know," Mary spoke softly, looking down at her stomach.

"Whose is it?" This time Charles took a step toward her.

"I'm afraid to tell you," Mary cried.

"Mary," Charles clenched his jaw, "whose baby is it?"

She looked away, afraid to make eye contact with him. She had never wanted it to come to this. She loved Charles very much. "It's—" Mary stuttered. "It's Robert's." Now she looked at him and watched as his eyes widened, his expression sending a pang to her heart.

"How could you?" he screamed. "When did you sleep with my brother?"

"Charles, please," Mary cried as she watched him start to pace back and forth.

"I can't believe this." He started to smile. "You have to be joking." The laugh that left his lips scared both Charles and Mary. He was losing his mind. "Please, tell me you are joking!"

"I am so sorry. Robert told me you were with Abigail and I was just so mad," Mary cried out. "It didn't mean anything to me. He doesn't mean anything to me, I swear! It was a mistake!"

Charles stood there for a moment trying to get his brain to slow down but all he could see was red. This was all too much for him to process—the car and now this. Mary promised him they would go off to college together. They were supposed to start a family. Looking at Mary he didn't see the girl he loved; all he saw was pain. "I don't believe you," Charles said. He pushed her to the ground and watched her fall face first. She cried out in pain, her shrill voice filling the forest. Charles immediately regretted it as he backed away from her and sobbed. "I'm so sorry."

Mary cried as she held her stomach. She watched in disbelief as blood slowly poured from between her legs.

"Get away from me!" Mary cradled herself on the ground as Charles quickly backed away, leaving her alone. Mary rocked back and forth. Her hands were completely covered in blood as she reached up and grasped the sterling silver pin embroidered with their school's forest green symbol.



[poetry]

## THE DIAMOND LIGHT

It was all that we saw  
in the fading sun in  
Fall River,  
and all we returned.  
Lying in the gray dark,  
talking through what was  
this day:  
over the mantel piece,  
with the Waterhouse mermaid.  
You knew, because  
breath blushed along your face.

You knew, because  
glancing cats tread  
where you lie.  
And if she followed us, in  
this her deep haze,  
you know, and take with you,  
as you took with you  
into that best and longest night.

—meg smith



## Mythos of the Cthulhu Monster

An oak branch danced to a serenaded minuet ...  
neither wind nor music could be heard as  
throbbing hearts were beating like a drums roll.  
The Cthulhu monster inhales and shadows bend  
all along the high mossy wall of the great castle.

The keep wipes cascading sweat from his brow;  
a murder of crows sent 'meet and greets' as the  
the monster of the mythos looks toward the sky  
black tea steeps and cream drips slowly from a  
silver spoon bequeathed upon his year of birth.

An oak branch danced to a serenaded minuet ...  
the Cthulhu monster exhales once again, and  
dark shadows bend whilst long wailing screams  
drift and echo repentant as twilight fades and joins  
this black starry night whence a monster walked.

In the light of a flurry of torches, his octopus like  
head swung left then right, feelers test the winds,  
scales on his manatee looking body reflect colors,  
prominent claws on his hind and fore feet dig in  
and his long narrow wings fluttering like a fairy.

An oak branch danced to a serenaded minuet ...  
those in the castle quake and quiver in repose.  
The Cthulhu Monster is awake once more.

(Inspired by the writings of H.P. Lovecraft)

—ken allan dronsfield

[short story]



# The Magic Moving Box

by nathaniel tower

"That should be the last of it," Mark said to his wife Erica when the movers brought the last box of china into their new five-bedroom house.

"Nope, one more box," one of the sweaty movers grunted.

Mark shrugged. "There's more? I thought that was it. Are you sure?" He looked around the house, wondering how there could possibly be more stuff and where in the world they would put it. He thought they had done a decent job of purging before the move, but apparently he was wrong.

"Yup, one more box. Big one. We'll have it in a jiffy."

The pair of movers took their time as they dragged their dirty shoes on Mark and Erica's clean living room carpet. A few minutes later, they returned with a rectangular wooden box. Unfinished pine, a little over six feet long.

"That's not ours," Mark said immediately.

"It was on the truck, it's yours. Where do you want it?"

Mark shook his head, one-hundred percent confident it wasn't theirs. They may have had a lot of junk, but they definitely never had a large rectangular wooden box big enough for him to go inside. "I want it back on the truck. That isn't ours."

"Okay, just set it down here," the head mover told his partner.

"You can't set it down in the middle of the hallway. It's in the way," Mark complained.

The mover shrugged as he and his partner dropped the box on the newly installed bamboo floor that transitioned the open-concept floor plan from one room to the next. "Guess you should've told us where to put it then. Truck's empty, we're off."

Mark took an aggressive step at the mover, but Erica grabbed his arm. "Honey, don't. Let's just enjoy our new place. We can worry about that box later."

Later came almost as soon as the movers pulled the empty truck away.

"Should we see what's in the box?" Mark asked, his anger already faded into curiosity.

The couple stood looking at the box, wondering what treasure they had possibly stumbled upon. Was this some strange housewarming gift to ease the stress of their cross-country move?



"What do you think it is?" Erica asked.

"Beats me. A dead body? It looks like a damn coffin."

Erica slapped Mark's arm.

"Okay, maybe not a coffin, but you certainly could put a dead body in there if you wanted."

Erica slapped him again. "There better not be a dead body in there."

Without giving it another thought, Mark grabbed the makeshift lid and tried to throw it open, but it didn't budge at all.

"That's weird," Mark said, looking over the box. "It's not like there's a lock on it."

The couple investigated every inch of the exterior. Indeed there was no lock. No hinges either. But there was most certainly a lid.

"Is it nailed on?" Erica asked.

Mark inspected the surface and found no evidence of nail holes or screws.

"Maybe it's glued," Mark suggested.

"So how are we going to open it?"

"Crowbar," Mark suggested.

"And where is your crowbar?" Erica glanced around at a house full of boxes.

Mark laughed. "We don't actually have one. I think there's a hardware store a few blocks away though. We could get some lunch and grab a crowbar on the way home."

"I'm not hungry," Erica said. "Do you have an axe?"

"I'm not using an axe. I don't want to damage whatever is inside. What if it's fragile?"

"If there's anything inside. Could just be a big empty box. What about a saw?"

"We'd have to be very careful."

"Of course. Do you know where the saw is?" Mark had never seen his wife so eager to do anything. Finding out what was inside the box had suddenly become the most important thing in the world.

"Probably in a box in the garage. If the movers put things in the right place, of course. I'll go look for it."

Mark hurried out of the room, suddenly every bit as eager as his wife. While Mark ran off to the garage, Erica sat down on the box and waited. She looked around the beautiful new house and sighed at all the challenges ahead of them.

Before Erica could devise a plan for organizing their new lives, Mark returned with a circular saw and an orange extension cord. Erica stood as Mark plugged in the saw and began carefully cutting into the box's edges.

"Shouldn't you wear safety goggles?" Erica asked.

"No time to find them," he shouted over the buzzing. Erica watched as sawdust and woodchips flew up around Mark's face. Although the debris miraculously missed his face, his curly black hair was quickly decorated with the dusty remnants of his careful cuts.

After cutting along all four sides, Mark pulled off the top piece with ease

and looked baffled at the contents. There was nothing inside but air and a little sawdust. He shook his head, sending a blizzard of wood particles into the box.

Erica was the first to break the silence. "Why would someone put an empty box on our moving truck?"

"Maybe it's some weird joke from one of our weird friends," Mark suggested.

"Perhaps," Erica said. She smiled.

"What are you smiling about?"

Erica put a hand on Mark's belt. "Maybe it's a magic sex box. Wanna test it?"

"What's a magic sex box?" Mark asked.

"I'll show you."

Without another word, Erica's lips engulfed Mark's. They tore each other's clothes off and Erica pressed Mark into the wooden box. It was a tight fit, but they managed to get both their bodies inside. Erica thrust on top of Mark, her hips occasionally scraping the sides of the box. Mark was so turned on by Erica's aggressiveness that he didn't care about the tiny splinters digging into his butt cheeks.

After a pair of orgasms and a short nap, Erica and Mark climbed out of the box. "If those movers could see us now," Mark said with a laugh.

"Yes, thank goodness for the magic sex box. And to think, you didn't even want it," Erica chuckled as she ran her fingers along his naked torso.

"Silly me. It's the best part of the new house."

They pulled on their clothes, admiring the box as they did so. Then the couple left the box where it was and spent the next several hours unpacking. By nine pm, they were far too tired to do anything more with the house. They hardly noticed the giant wooden box taking up most of the hallway as they headed for the stairs to call it a night.

In the morning, Mark was the first to venture downstairs. He wanted to find the coffeepot that he wished he'd unpacked the night before. It might be a Starbucks morning. But before he made it to the kitchen to begin the great coffeepot hunt, the box caught his eye.

"What the hell?" Mark yelled.

Erica was downstairs in a flash, her robe half-untied around her waist.

"What is it?"

Mark pointed. "The box. It's sealed."

Erica stared at the sealed box in disbelief, her robe opening completely and her breasts spilling out.

"Are you sure you didn't put the lid on before we went to bed?" she asked as she pulled the robe shut and re-tied it.

Mark grabbed the lid and tried to pull it off.

"I sure as hell didn't seal it back up," he said, grunting as he tried to get enough leverage with his fingers to open the lid. It couldn't possibly be sealed again.

"Okay, this has to be a prank. What kind of sick game are those movers playing on us?"

Before Mark could answer, a soft cry seeped through the wood.

"Did you hear that?" Erica asked.

Mark nodded. "Hand me the saw."

"Be careful," she said.

Mark did exactly what he had done the day before, following approximately the same cutting lines until the lid once again lifted off with ease. Inside the box was a tiny human baby, sitting up and staring silently at the couple with big brown eyes.

Mark and Erica had been married for five years, and they had never once discussed the prospect of having kids. The very topic terrified Mark, mostly because he was sure he didn't want any and also quite sure that she did. He always figured it would just happen one day, and he would accept it when it did. But this wasn't quite what he had expected.

Erica reached into the box and picked up the baby. As soon as the baby was outside the box, it began screaming hysterically. Erica rocked and shushed the baby, but its screams grew louder at Erica's comforting attempts.

"Maybe it's hungry," Mark suggested.

"She's a girl," Erica replied, cradling the tiny baby to her un-lactating bosom.

The baby continued to scream. Flustered, Erica handed her off to Mark. The screaming grew even louder, and the child began thrashing about, her tiny hands slapping at Mark's face and shoulders. Having no clue what else to do, Mark set the baby back in the box.

"What are you doing?" Erica asked. But before she could say anything else, the crying ceased.

"I think she likes the box," Mark said.

"Well, we can't very well keep her in there," Erica replied.

"You're right. We need to call the police."

"Why?"

"Someone's missing a baby. We can't keep her."

"What if she's ours?" Erica said.

"You know that makes no sense."

"And neither does a box that seals itself overnight."

Mark sighed. "Okay, so what do you suggest we do?"

"We give her a home."

Mark pointed at the box. "She has a home. She seems quite happy there."

The tiny girl smiled at the couple.

"She's adorable," Erica said. She reached down to grab the child, but her outstretched arms were greeted with terrified screams.

Erica backed off, her body slouched in rejection.

"Are we really going to keep her?" Mark asked.

Erica began crying. "I don't know what to do. I've always wanted a baby, but not this one. Not like this. I want one of my own."

Mark wrapped his arms around her and rubbed her back. "Honey, it's okay."

We'll have a baby on our own terms someday. But now we just need to figure out what's going on."

"Call the movers," Erica said between sobs.

"The movers?"

"Yeah. It's their fault. They'll know what to do."

Mark uncoiled his arms to release Erica. He went to the kitchen to grab his phone and the card from the movers. He dialed the number with shaking hands on his way back to Erica and the box.

"Hello, U.S. Moving Co.," answered a friendly woman on the other end.

"Your movers left something that doesn't belong to us," Mark said.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry. We'll send someone out as soon as we can. First I'll need to ask a few questions though."

The woman went through a list of questions that Mark answered as best he could, avoiding any mention of the living being inside the box—or their sexual adventure. He knew how crazy it all sounded, and he wasn't about to have them decide against coming out to retrieve the box on account of his crazy story.

"Okay, we'll pick it up within the next 24 hours," the woman said.

"Can you do it sooner?" Mark replied. "This box is a huge inconvenience. We need it out as soon as possible."

"Hold please," the woman said. Mark tapped his foot impatiently and stared at the box while he waited.

"Are you still there, sir?"

"Yes. And so is the box."

"I'm very sorry about the inconvenience. It looks like we have a truck in the area. They will pick it up by early afternoon."

"That's perfect. The sooner the better. Thank you."

When he got off the phone, he noticed Erica crouching in the corner.

"They'll be here in a few hours," he said. "What are you doing?"

"She hates me," Erica said. "I've never felt so rejected."

"She's just scared," Mark replied. "Wouldn't you be scared if you were in her shoes? I mean her diapers." He smiled. When Erica didn't, he continued, "This box is her home. Let's just put the lid back on so the movers can get this thing out of here."

Erica looked appalled. "We can't do that. She'll suffocate."

"She spent the whole night trapped in the box. She'll be fine. Besides, you don't even like her."

"I do like her. I *love* her. She's the one who doesn't like me. But that doesn't mean I want to *kill* her," Erica cried.

Mark picked up the lid and set it on top of the box. "She's not going to die. If she's even real. You and I both know how impossible this is. Let's go back upstairs and sleep this off. It's probably a hallucination from being so damn worn out from the move."

Mark helped Erica off the floor. The two walked up the stairs, looking back at

the box and listening for any muffled noises from within. There wasn't even the slightest sound. The entire house had fallen silent.

Mark and Erica climbed back into bed and cuddled under the sheets while they waited for the movers to arrive. Neither fell into a real sleep, but there was some occasional drifting. Certainly enough sleep to undo a horrible dream.

When the doorbell roused them from their semi-sleep, Mark leaped out of bed and wondered if this was a coincidence or if there were really movers at his door there to take away an unwanted box and baby.

"You just stay in bed, honey," Mark encouraged her.

He hurried downstairs. The box appeared undisturbed as he edged his way past it, afraid if he touched it the child inside would start screaming. He inspected it quickly for any cut lines, but the thing looked intact.

He pulled the door open and saw the same two movers from the day before.

"We've come for the box," they said in unison.

"I told you this wasn't our box," Mark said.

"Then you shouldn't have accepted it," the lead mover said.

Mark didn't argue. They walked into the house and hoisted the box above their heads. As they marched out of the house, Mark thought he heard the faint sound of a funeral knell coming from within the box.

"Wait!" Mark shouted when they were halfway through the doorway.

"Sorry, we need to get this back on the truck. There's no time for waiting."

"But what if we changed our minds? What if the box really is ours?"

"Then you wouldn't have called," the second mover said before disappearing through the doorway, propping the box up with just one hand as he pulled the door shut behind him.

Mark sprang for the handle and pulled the door open, but the moving truck had already driven away.

Mark watched for a moment, trying to hear the sound of a moving truck or a bell or a screaming baby, but all he heard was a slight breeze and Erica calling from inside. He closed the door and headed to her voice, stepping over a small trail of sawdust on his way upstairs.





—"fishermen lineup" by bill thomas

## *Therapy for Aye*

Ups and downs and therapy for aye,  
until I croak at you-may-fill-the-blank,  
leaf-fall, fog, the broiling summer sky,  
the peeping newborn green, and crank, crank, crank.

Then death! the world rolls; me in hell or heaven:  
ups and downs and therapy for aye.  
Ups and downs if I am in the oven,  
therapy with wings and cherry pie.

Therapy for sins my mom committed,  
therapy for gifts her dad omitted,  
therapy for sins his mom permitted,  
back to archetypal Eve beshitted,

and beyond, upon the couch for God,  
for all the Gods behind him, rod, rod, rod, rod, rod...

—marshall pipkin



## the mirror bled

as if her reflection was a knife  
carving lines of pain into frame.  
Inside the glass, smoke glistened—  
the charred aftermath of self-  
satisfied smile. Shivering  
in the chill of her wake, the room waited  
for mythic toll of midnight to break her  
spell, but in the emptiness that followed  
an unprecedented thirteenth chime.  
It knew a very different kind of magic  
was underfoot.

—a.j. huffman

# DOING THE RIGHT THING

by wayne scheer

James hated his job at the post office about as much as he hated admitting he had lived his whole life in Joplin, Missouri. As a young man he had thought of life as an adventure, imagining himself joining the navy and seeing the world or at least going to college and living in other parts of the country. He even fancied himself an artist, having won First Place at his high school art fair for his portrait of John F. Kennedy. Instead, he married his high school sweetheart, raised a daughter, spent twenty years working at a metal fabrication plant in Joplin and, when the plant closed, another twenty at the post office.

His wife, Evelyn, was a good woman and together they raised a fine daughter, so he knew he had no right complaining. His life might not have turned out the way he had planned, but things worked out. Maybe not always for the best, or the way it was meant to be, like people say, but he learned to make the best of what life threw his way. Or, at least, accept it.

As he neared sixty, James wondered how much a man had to accept.

He looked up at the clock across from his station where he fed mail into the automatic mail sorter and saw that it was time for his forty-five minute lunch break. Evvie had packed him a sandwich from last night's meatloaf, but he was more restless than hungry. He decided to walk over to his daughter's art gallery. Maybe she'd want to have lunch at Shiffendecker Park?

He used to meet Helen McLean at the park most sunny afternoons when she worked nearby. They'd share a bench and talk about their day. He'd tell her how he still dreamed of leaving Joplin, if only he could talk Evvie into it. But with Evelyn's elderly mother living just down the street from them, he knew she

wouldn't leave. Besides, once her mom passed, she'd feel responsible for her nieces and nephews. Helen would laugh when he said that no one in the Hogelin family ever left Joplin.

Helen had been a free spirit back in high school. In fact, she was the first girl James had ever kissed. But she gravitated toward the football players. He and Evvie met at a church dance. James always wondered how his life might have been different had he and Helen been more than friends.

But now she had her own problems, although she had married the school's star athlete. Sometimes she'd get so personal he would blush and stammer like he was back in high school, especially when she'd tell him how she needed sex more than Mike. When he got home, he'd tell Evelyn about their talks. After all, Helen and Evelyn had been friends since grade school. But when Helen began sharing sexual details, he kept them to himself.

One day, Helen said she was leaving Mike. Her sister in St. Louis could help her find work. "Don't go," James wanted to say. He didn't know if he could make it without their conversations. "Take me with you," he finally blurted out.

Helen thought he was joking and kissed him on the cheek, thanking him for his friendship.

"I'll miss you and Ev," she said. "But I need to move on with my life. There's nothing here for me."

His daughter's gallery was on Eighth Street, a short walk from the post office, still far enough to feel the heat and humidity of a Joplin summer. Picnicking in the park had already lost its appeal. He had always wanted to live some place cool, like Michigan. But once Ginny came along, he did the right thing. He put aside his dreams and settled in.

The door chimed when he entered the gallery; he felt the first delightful blast of air conditioning. The walls were filled with brightly colored paintings, mostly abstracts. Some he liked, and others he thought looked like the finger paintings Ginny did as a child. When Ginny first opened the shop, she displayed his portrait of President Kennedy over the cash register with a sign that read "James Linnbaker, Artist. Not for Sale." But the picture had long been replaced.

"Daddy," Ginny called out to him. "Is everything all right?" Like her mother, she worried, always assuming the worst.

"Of course it is." He held out his arms for a hug. "I just thought I'd say hello to my girl. Maybe we'd eat lunch together."

"I just had my salad, but Jason's in the back. I have a phone call I need to make. I'll join you in a minute."

James entered the back room. It was filled with paintings covered in brown paper and frames. A sculpture of a nude woman lassoing a bull with a man's head sat on the table where Jason slumped over a half-eaten salad.

Jason didn't quite smile, but he managed to say, "Hey, Grandpa," which James accepted as communication from the teenager. He promised himself not to say anything about the boy's earring.

Sitting down across from his grandson, he took out the sandwich Evvie had packed him from last night's supper. "You want some real food?" He pulled apart the two slices of bread and showed him the meat loaf, slathered with mustard and ketchup and topped with slices of pickle.

Jason came close to smiling. "Thanks."

Placing half the sandwich on the tin foil wrapping, he pushed it toward the boy. James took a bite out of the other half. "Mmm. Meatloaf always tastes better the next day."

Jason got two bottles of water from the small refrigerator next to the table. "Only water. Mom's on a new diet."

"Heaven help us," James said, rolling his eyes.

"This time, she's eating only live food. Vegetables and fruit. Even seaweed. She won't cook anything. At least, she lets me eat what I want as long as I make it and clean up afterward."

"Clean up afterwards? The nerve."

That drew a smile. James felt accomplished.

"What are you two conspiring about?" Ginny asked, standing at the door. Before either of them could answer, she requested they throw away the remains of their sandwiches in the outside dumpster, so she wouldn't have to smell the meat.

Grandfather and grandson laughed like two children in the back of a church.

"I'm glad you boys are enjoying yourselves." She wagged her index finger at them. James knew she could take a joke. Give it, too. She was a strong woman and he was proud of her.

Before she could speak, the front door chimed. "I'll get back to you two."

They ate their sandwiches in silence. Jason looked up at his grandfather a couple of times as if to speak. James nodded his head and smiled, knowing better than to force conversation with a teenager. Through the years, Jason had stayed with James and Evelyn a great deal while Ginny traveled, buying art. He knew the boy would talk when he was good and ready.

A few sighs later, Jason finished his sandwich and squeezed the tinfoil in his fist. He tightened his grip until his face turned red. "Katie's pregnant."

James shut his eyes and reared back, as if punched in the face. He took a deep breath. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah. We went to the clinic."

"How far along?"

"About six weeks."

"Have you told your mother?"

Jason shook his head. "She keeps saying how proud she is of me. How I'll be the first man in the family to go to college."

"You can still go."

"How? I have to do the right thing by Katie, don't I?" He paused. "She wants to get married."

"What do you want?"

Jason lowered his head. He could see the boy's bottom lip twitch. "I love her, but...a baby? I'm not sure."

"Has she told her folks?"

"No." Jason continued squeezing the ball of tinfoil.

James extended his open hand. "First of all, give me the danged foil before you cut yourself."

Jason handed the foil to his grandfather.

"I gotta get back to work, but you have to tell your mother, and Katie has to tell her folks. Tonight, we'll all talk. You and Katie are just kids. We'll work out something."

Jason's hands were still clenched into fists. "We have to work out something. Katie and me. Not you. Not Mom. Not her folks." James could see tears in his grandson's eyes. "Weren't you my age when you and grandma got married?"

"Times were different then."

"Were they?"

Back at work, James couldn't keep his mind on his job. Jason had just turned seventeen. Katie probably wasn't that old. The boy wanted to do the right thing. He was a good kid, but... Shit! He slammed his open hand against the wall.

James had done the right thing. He wanted more for his grandson.

He remembered when Evvie told him she was having a baby. It was the summer before their senior year in high school. They talked about an abortion, but it was illegal in those days and they had heard horrible stories. Their parents were furious. Evvie's father whipped her and then went after him. His own father had knocked Mr. Hogelin to the ground, protecting his son. Then he made James do the right thing and marry Evvie. James and Evvie and his parents lived together until James finished high school. The school officials made her quit as soon as she started to show. His father got him a job at the plant where he worked, and he and Evvie and the baby moved to a little apartment of their own.

James knew Ginny could find work for Jason at the gallery or he could take the civil service exam and maybe get on at the post office. The thought made him sick. He went to the bathroom and threw up. He told his supervisor the meat loaf must have gone bad and he had to leave.

He got into his car, planning on driving home. Instead, he sat in the parking lot, unable to move. Between Katie's family and his, the baby would be taken care of. If they decided to have the baby, that is. He watched his hands shake. He realized his main concern was for Jason—not the baby, not Katie, not for doing the right thing. The boy had to finish school and go on to college. If he loved Katie, they could marry after he graduated. He was too young to be trapped.

He reached into his glove box and pulled out the cell phone Evvie made him keep for emergencies. He called Jason's phone. When Jason answered he said he had just told his mother.

"How'd she take the news?"

There was silence. “She has my life all planned out for me. She never asked what Katie and I want to do.”

James thought this wasn’t the best time to tell him what he had decided. “We all want what’s best for you.”

Jason said nothing. After a long silence, they agreed to talk later.

James reached for his wallet. In a compartment filled with reminders of doctors’ appointments, he found a folded slip of paper with a phone number on it. When the new St. Louis phone books came out, he had looked up Helen McLean. He felt a thrill just seeing her name. He had copied the number, telling himself he might talk Evvie into taking a drive and visiting their old friend.

He thought how good it would be to talk to Helen. After three rings, an answering machine clicked on. He tried hanging up but held on to hear Helen’s familiar voice. Finally, his own voice cracking, he heard himself ask, “Why didn’t you take me with you?”

He sat in silence until the machine shut off.

James imagined himself going to Jason, grabbing him by the shoulders and shouting, “Run, boy, run! Get the hell out and don’t look back!”

But, of course, he wouldn’t do that. He’d stay calm, take care of his wife and daughter, and help Jason and Katie work out a responsible plan. He and Evvie could take care of the baby while Jason and Katie finished school. Or Katie’s folks might volunteer. He’d even stop by the clinic and pick up information about adoption. And abortion. They should consider all their options.

He’d sort through the mess, just like at the post office.

This will work out, he told himself. But in his mind, he was in his car halfway to St. Louis.



## THE CORNER OF THE EYE

I'm not sure I should tell you the stark truth.  
I'm sure it will not give you any peace,  
But there may be some solace in release  
Of doubt about those things you've feared since youth.

Those things are real: the subtle movements seen,  
Caught in the eye's dim corner like a dream  
Drifting there just beyond your conscious view.  
Those things are there: the slight small sounds that seem  
So real—they are! Voices that can't have been.  
The feeling that you're being watched—that's true!

I will not name them, though I know their names—  
Not even in the brilliant light of day.  
But I, alas, have seen them ghastly clear.  
Alas, and I have heard their horrid tongue,  
But now I feel they're coming much too near.  
Though most doubt them, THEY know that WE are here.  
I'm not sure I should tell you, but THEY say  
I must! Those awful faces, hideous frames!

Oh! never look full at them as I did  
When still quite young and doubting that they were—  
THEY ARE! Avoid their eyes! Do as I bid!  
Oh! do not listen to their laugh! They're here!

—frank coffman



## FIRE OF DEAD THINGS

Bury me before the midnight toll  
before the fire dies in that dell  
home of faceless evil witches  
who gave their souls to hell.

I stole their book of spells once  
to cure my mother of her disease  
for a while the sun returned  
then witches stirred in the trees.

Their blue fire took my home  
their claws my mother's heart  
so for spite I buried that book  
after tearing its fleshy hide apart.

So bury me before midnights toll  
hour of witches that come to dance  
to gloat over my dead body  
I'll kill to give their revenge no chance.

—matthew wilson

# Grove of the Sycamore

Not only neath the grove of sycamore,  
But also there below the mistletoe;  
A loving vow was made, yet still it bore,  
A hollow deep for me to reap and sow.

Unmooring from my bleeding love you left,  
With countenance of knight and craft of knave,  
In half my haunted heart's been carv'd and cleft,  
Along with that which I would ever crave.

In want of nothing but your company,  
How I have laid down all that I have known,  
In ev'ry breath to hear and blush to see,  
The Rose of Romance for to hold and own.

My home sweet home hath long been lost, alas,  
To memories in shards of shatter'd glass.

—shawn chang

[short story]

# Skittles

by shawn chang



I.

"I'm tired of trying to see the good in people," cried Flossie as she glared with wrath at the culpable packet of Skittles stuck on the missing poster she made.

II.

The Day Before.

*Thirteen postings should be enough.*

Flossie Irvine, the renowned robotics engineer and a prominent figure in her field, wiped her clammy forehead with a sun-baked hand. It was peculiarly hot this autumn. An atmosphere of suffocating heat floated around the community.

*Please come back to your worried creator, Skits*, she thought, panting a trifle. With this silent command burning tears sprung from her bloodshot eyes for the nineteenth time since dawn. Her seventy-nine years were wearing her out; she reached exhaustion at a quicker pace each day.

*Where could a rainbow-colored robot dingo be anyway?* Flossie drew a worn-out handkerchief from her grimy pocket and dried her sallow cheeks.

*Anywhere.*

She read her posting once more:

Missing: Have you seen this robot?

Skittles — Pet Robot Dingo, with distinct rainbow fur

Lost since July 2nd, 2017

If you have any information or have seen this robot, please contact Dr. Flossie Irvine. Her phone number can be found beneath this picture.

With a fond gesture the spinster reached over and stroked the little face in the picture she had just taped to the telephone pole.

*Skittles.*

The little robot creature was named after the candy, for she sported a vivid rainbow coat, displaying what every child knew by heart as ROY G. BIV. Skittles was mainly built from a myriad of axles and cranks, bolts and screws, levers and gears, circuits and wires—all the usual bits and pieces of a scientific handiwork. But the most significant component of the robot dingo was the Motherboard of Modern Existence, which Flossie had concocted after years of diligent research and assiduous trials. However, shortly after the conception of Skittles, Flossie

had accidentally dropped her notebook on the procedure of constructing the motherboard in a pool of corrosive materials with which she was experimenting, thereby destroying the breakthrough instructions on the ins and outs of building a powerful robot, one with the mind and intelligence capacity of formidable degrees. The notes were beyond recovery, and Flossie's attempts to rebuild her notebook from scratch proved to be futile. Age did not help matters, for soon dementia kicked in and merely the thought of trying to remember something gave her debilitating headaches.

The conception of Skittles was five years ago; Skittles was one of the only technological advancements of which Flossie was proud. The rainbow fur which Flossie had created resembled the coat of a real dingo; the synthetic materials and the mechanism behind the fur took Flossie two months to create and upgrade. Skittles was, in Flossie's opinion, the only vestige of the obliterated notebook and years of hard work—and also a pet.

Now Flossie's faithful companion of half a decade had vanished, seemingly into thin air.

Ten days ago, Skittles did something she had never done before since her creation. When Flossie went to the Dingohouse to take Skittles on her customary morning walk, she was shocked to find the little cubbyhole vacant. Flossie presently possessed little over a third of the energy she once bobbled with; to conduct a search for the robot dingo posed a daunting task to the spinster. Yet she still went through with the hunt for the robot.

She went about the laboratory, looking in every crevice and crack, checking every inch of her work area, meandering the halls, all the while tearfully crying her beloved robot's name. She continued her search for three days, executing her measures of looking in the Dingohouse and roaming about calling for Skittles. Flossie was certain that the robot had to be in the laboratory, as the door had been locked from the outside and no one could have entered without Flossie knowing. Her surveillance device set up across the hall outside the door had not been triggered. And there was no reason, as far as Flossie saw, for Skittles to leave her Dingohouse.

But Skittles was nowhere to be found. Fortunately Skittles had enough power to last her at least a good forty days. Flossie always recharged the robot dingo on the fifteenth of every other month.

Presently Flossie sighed, wringing her hands with a dejected expression, her eyes shut, slightly trembling. She was too fatigued to tape another picture of Skittles. No one had offered to help her, she realized, but as a gentle soul always trying to see the best in everyone, she justified the paucity of aid. *They are busy with their own lives*, she thought. *Plus, it is my fault that I lost my pet.*

So she went back to the laboratory to transcribe her old notes, taking her mind off her lost robot dingo. It was too painful for the old lady.

III.

“How dare they!” Flossie shouted, her face an ugly purple.



It was the day after. No one had called her yet. Undeterred, Flossie was walking about the tightly knit community taping more posters when she caught a glimpse of something stuck to one of Skittles's pictures.

Here she stood before the telephone pole where she had placed her thirteenth picture. And on the posting someone had stuck a bright red candy wrapper directly on the robot dingo's face.

In a frenzy of loathing, Flossie snatched off the wrapper and looked at it more closely.

What she held in agitated fingers was an empty Skittles packet, which had been tacked onto the picture with a dried wad of chewing gum. Flossie turned it in a trembling hand and saw a large smiley face drawn in black ink on the back of the packet.

Feeling sick to the heart, Flossie leaned against the telephone pole and began sobbing, tears falling upon the pavement where they disappeared in the scorching heat, evaporating in the way that ephemeral happiness does.

*Rotten kids. I wish something terrible befalls the culprit. Oh yes, something frightening.* Flossie shook her fist at the candy packet, crushed it under an infuriated foot, ground it into the pavement, and left, her stack of postings to be distributed still in her hands.

"I'm tired of trying to see the good in people," she fumed, leaving hatred dancing in her wake.

#### IV.

Flossie felt a tickling sensation on the tip of her wrinkled nose near five the next morning. She grimaced.

Heavy eyelids were conspiring against her. Groaning from a dearth of good rest, Flossie forced herself to sit up, rubbing her eyes, still half-asleep. Her body felt as though it were being weighted down. Flossie's eyes slowly opened as if for the first time.

And there, perched on her midsection, was Skittles.

"Lord love a duck—Is it really you, Skits?" Flossie's jaw unhinged all the way, revealing her artificial teeth, which she invented herself, in addition to her utter disbelief at the miraculous return of her beloved robot dingo.

Skittles gave Flossie the widest grin Flossie had ever witnessed, brandishing rows of gleaming silver. The robot held up a paw and gave Flossie an affectionate pat on the nose.

By now Flossie's eyes had flooded with a fairy-tale rapture, brimming with more water than all the fountains of Rome. She seized her pet robot dingo by the torso and wrapped her feeble arms around her. Skittles gave a pleased whine and rubbed her tiny face against Flossie.

"Where did you run off to, anyway? What a smart dingo, coming back here. You knew where to go, didn't you, Skittlet! Why didn't you return sooner? Don't ever go off like that again, Skits! I was worried beyond sick!" Flossie cried, stroking

the dingo's soft rainbow fur, unwilling to ever let go. Now that Skittles was back, healthy and unharmed, Flossie did not pursue the matter further. Why Skittles had left, where she had wandered off to, why she had returned—these questions would all remain unsolved; the only thing important to Flossie was that Skittles was with her.

Skittles, who could understand human speech, crooned a low whine, and nodded assent.

"Now that's my good dingo," said Flossie, feeling more alive than ever. "Later today we will go out together and take down all those postings."

Flossie was so overjoyed at the reappearance of Skittles that she did not realize something was amiss.

Skittles's teeth faintly showed traces of blood.

V.

The entire morning and afternoon Flossie doted on Skittles, showering the robot dingo with more pats and caresses Skittles usually received in three months combined. At dinner, Flossie had devoured her meal with Skittles in her lap, and had chewed with renewed fervor. The days of the dingo's absence had stolen Flossie's appetite and replaced it with a stomach full of anxiety. But now that Skittles had returned, so had Flossie's voracity.

Now it was eight in the evening.

Flossie had removed the thirteenth posting when Skittles latched onto her left leg and began steering her in an inverse direction.

"Oh, Skittlet, don't pull so hard, you might tear fabric," Flossie chuckled, patting the robot on the head with care. They were both running now. "Yes, yes, I'm following you."

A few minutes flew by. Presently the pair reached a deserted alley.

"Why are we here, Skits?" Flossie felt an unnerving chill slide down her spine. She gasped for breath. Running and Flossie never did go hand-in-hand.

The robot dingo tugged harder and Flossie had no choice but to venture into the dark recesses of the alley.

Halfway to the dead-end, Skittles halted.

Flossie's eyes fought to adjust to the dark. And when they did, she screamed.

Lying prostrate in a pool of glistening crimson a few steps before Flossie and Skittles was a young girl—her neck severed. It was evident that the blood flowed out of the person from the large wound, which seemed to be the result of a vicious bite. Flossie took a step sideways, feeling ill. She clutched her head and told herself to breathe. Only later, much later, would Flossie learn that the dead girl was the one who had vandalized her thirteenth posting. The one Flossie had cursed avidly. The one to whom Flossie wished something terrible would befall.

Presently Flossie's left shoe met something. She gave a kick. They felt like pebbles. Flossie looked down.

They were Skittles candies, round, rainbow, smooth. Innocent in the moonlight.



Flossie glanced at her pet robot, who looked...*proud*? Skittles was nudging something over to her creator. It was an empty packet, damaged and torn as though someone had trod over it multiple times out of hatred.

And on the side facing upwards beamed what looked like a smiley face, reflecting a sinister glow.

Flossie's hands flew to her mouth and the last thing before her eyes rolled back in her head was the ghost of a gratified smile on Skittles's rainbow lips. Indeed, in her own mysterious way, Skittles had done her master justice, albeit a malevolent murder.



## ACCOUNTIN' FOR DEBT

"It's Lambkin was a mason good  
As ever built wi' stane:  
He built Lord Wearie's castle,  
But payment gat he nane."  
Old Ballad

Ah now please, there's no need to be dreary,  
Or to act in the slightest bit leery,  
For in spite o' those dealin's  
That'd stirred up our feelin's,  
It's my hope you'll forgive me, Lord Weary.

Ohhh, the devil was in me that night  
I aroused in your eldest such fright  
As I tickled 'is skin  
Wi' the tip o' my pin . . .  
Though 'is screams were indeed a delight!

Wi' the maid, I'd no need to mistreat 'er,  
But I figured, "Ah, frig' it!" an' beat 'er,  
Since it seemed such a pity  
That a lass oh so pretty  
Couldn't do me a little bit sweeter.

As for Betsy, there was no replacin'  
All 'er blood that so tarnished your basin,  
Though I swear, Sir, I wasted  
Not a drop that I tasted,  
For I'd long been a thrifty, ol' mason.

Oh, at worst it was cruel what I did  
When I foun' where your lady 'd hid,  
    For to tidy them walls  
    'N' floors of your halls  
Must've soaked ya' for more than a quid.

Now of course, you're aware I was driven  
By the need to just eke out o' livin'  
    So my wife 'n' my daughter  
    Could have bread wi' their water . . .  
But for that, My Lord, *you* are forgiven!

Wi' that said, it's my hope we'll be friends,  
An' in time, you might make your amends,  
    For there is no debatin'  
    Here in Hell wi' Lord Satan  
We are equals, an' share the same ends . . .

To those ends, might I add how until  
We 'ave met once again, that I will  
    Be accountin' for debt  
    Not received as of yet,  
So you'll please not be *shocked* by the bill.

On that note, I'll jus' bid you adieu  
With my trust you'll be faithful 'n' true,  
    For you know how I feel  
    That a deal is a deal,  
An' I wouldn't want trouble for you . . .

—johnny longfellow

# Any Time

He slides a piece of gum out of the package and holds it out for her. She hesitates but takes it.

“Thank you,” she says. She chews.

“Any time,” he says. Not, “You’re welcome.” Not, “No problem.” Not, “Don’t worry about it.” He says, “Any time.”

That night he rolls over and tries to find a section of bed cool enough to lull him to sleep.

He thinks he’s found it when she casts her shadow over the bed. She holds out her hand expectantly.

It takes him a moment to recognize her. She’s paler, nearly shimmering in the darkness.

There’s a greenish hue around her eyes and mouth. He thinks it’s a nightmare.

“Gum,” she intones.

“I don’t have any,” he says.

“You said any time,” she says.

“That’s insane,” he says. But the pact has been sealed, the covenant made. She does not leave until he has gone to the convenience store and gotten her gum.

She visits him at work the next day—three times. At home he locks the doors and nails the windows shut, but she still finds her way in.

His boss calls him into a meeting room. He thinks he has earned a promotion, and maybe he did. But a desk drawer opens, emitting a green light. Her slender white arm stretches out; her damp, knotted hair follows. And then she is there.

“Any time,” she says.

He gives her the gum and tries to shoo her.

“This is highly irregular,” his boss says. The opportunity has passed.

He goes to a club and dances with a beautiful woman. They kiss and he feels a tinge, an intuition that he may marry this woman. He hands her his phone to get her number. Neither can stop grinning. Between them the floor tears asunder. A green light illuminates the once-dark club. The people around them stop dancing. Through the chasm, she emerges.

“Any time.”

The woman hands him back his phone. When he calls, he discovers the woman

by ryan c. bradley

who could have been his wife gave him the number of the rejection hotline rather than her own.

He tries to escape. He moves from the East Coast to the West Coast and then to Ohio. He makes brief stops in Pulaski, Tennessee—even Algiers. But wherever he goes she is there, demanding her promised gum.

His sister advises him to turn lemons into lemonade, and he starts running a pool, collecting bets on when she will next need a slice of gum. He records his every waking moment with a Web cam so the gamblers know he isn't lying. Masturbation and showering become awkward, but the new business settles him and allows him to finally date. When the gum woman shows up now, his dates are amazed rather than frightened. They have all heard, but no one ever really believes it until they witness it. They do everything under the sheets so the camera can't see them.

He gets married and has kids. She is in some family photos, waiting for her gum. His children imitate her and his wife laughs off suggestions that the agreement is anything more than a business he'd been hoodwinked into when he was young. His kids grow up and move out. He and his wife have a good marriage. It is not free of strife or infidelity, but they make it through the long haul and ultimately are happy they did.

On his deathbed, he hands the woman a slice of gum.

"Thank you," she says. She has aged as he has aged but she has weathered the years better than he. At the very least, she's always had wonderfully fresh breath.

"You're welcome," he says. She laughs at how one poorly chosen phrase has had such an impact on his life.

She leaves.

He dies.

He's floating toward the light. It's unbearably beautiful. It feels like a hot shower after a long day or a cold beer on a summer afternoon. Actually it feels like everything he's ever wanted and couldn't have.

Then he hears scratching. He's back on earth—underground. His coffin is wrenched open.

She holds her hand out.

"Any time."



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# 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.

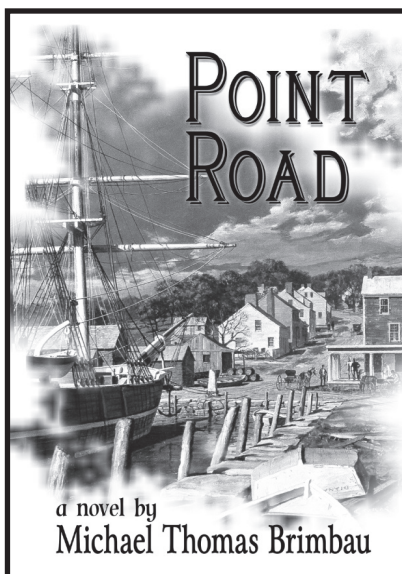
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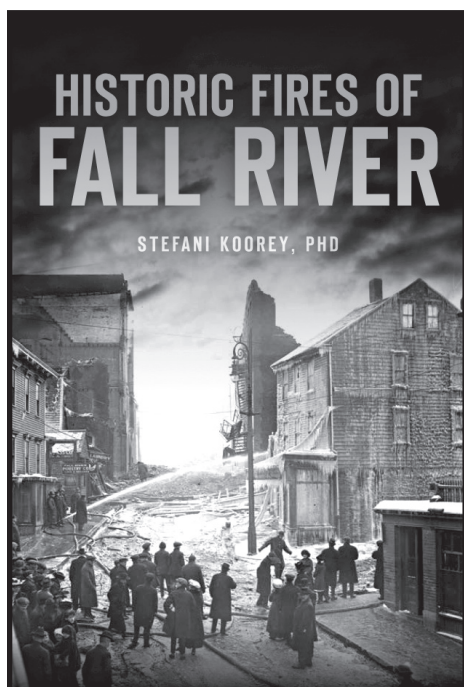
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# Historic Fires of Fall River

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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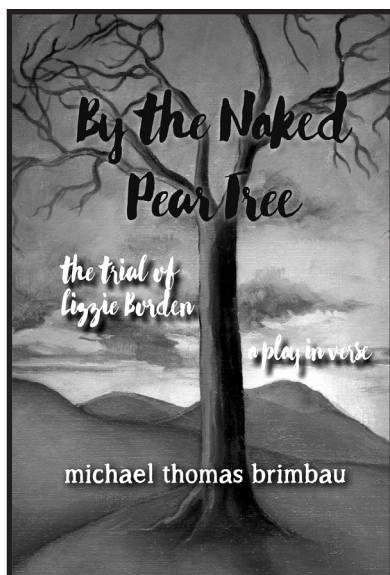


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# By the Naked Pear Tree

The trial of  
Lizzie Borden in verse

by Michael Thomas Brimbau  
\$12.00



*By the Naked Pear Tree*, a play in verse, was written in the spirit of Steve Allen's unconventional television program, *Meeting of the Minds*.

Our satirical performance begins outside a New Bedford, Massachusetts, court house. The year is 1893 and the trial of Lizzie Borden is about to begin. Dispatching his oration, the tragedian, Euripides, stands in the street preaching the merits of womanhood and relating the concerns he has for the outcome of the trial, and how it may corrupt the honor of the fabled heroines he has written about. Not long after we are introduced to Clarence Darrow—progressive attorney and respected member of the American Civil Liberties Union.

Hired by Euripides to allusively defend Lizzie Borden, Darrow invites his colleague and adversary, William Jennings Bryan, to a challenge, giving the dubious Bryan a chance to play prosecutor—to change the course of history, and help convict Lizzie Borden of the murder of her parents. In doing so, the two men agree to a friendly game of poker. Winner of the ensuing card game gets to decide the fate of the accused. But the outcome is not what one would expect, and those who tamper with history are left to reap the consequences.

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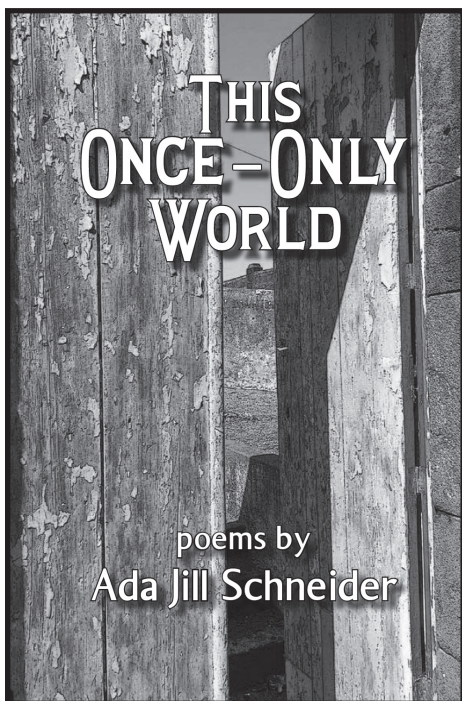
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# This Once-Only World

poems by Ada Jill Schneider



This *Once-Only World* is a collection of personal, yet universal, poems that dance on every page with gratitude and poignancy: poems that celebrate long love and reflect on family; poems that appreciate the world and plead for justice; poems that know what lies ahead for someone turning eighty but who insists, like Edna St. Vincent Millay, "I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned."

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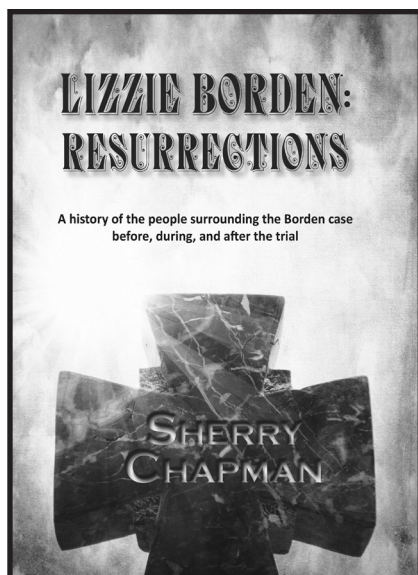
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# Lizzie Borden: Resurrections

A history of the people  
surrounding the  
Borden case before,  
during, and after the  
trial

by Sherry Chapman

\$21.95



Whatever happened to Lizzie Borden after the trial that accused her of bludgeoning her father and stepmother with a hatchet in 1892 Fall River, Massachusetts? It's all in here, and it doesn't stop with Lizzie. A plethora of persons were involved around her in some way. From her friends to her foes, from the doctors to the policemen; from her Manse to The Nance, at last comes the first book of its kind that tells what caused Officer Philip Harrington (who greatly disliked Lizzie) to die suddenly in 1893. What happened to neighbor and friend Dr. Bowen after the crime and trial? Why doesn't Edwin Porter, who covered the trial then wrote the first contemporary book on the murders, *The Fall River Tragedy*, have a gravestone – and who is buried with him? Not by him. Actually with him.

From original source documents, photos of the graves, obituaries and death certificates each on whom records could be found has their story told in details unknown until now. What were they doing before anyone much had heard of Lizzie Borden? What was their role in the case? When did they die and how?

Some of the results may surprise you, whether you read this book for pleasure or research. There are no legends here, but a factual telling of the stories of these persons who are today all gone but need not be forgotten. And with this book they may be hard to forget.

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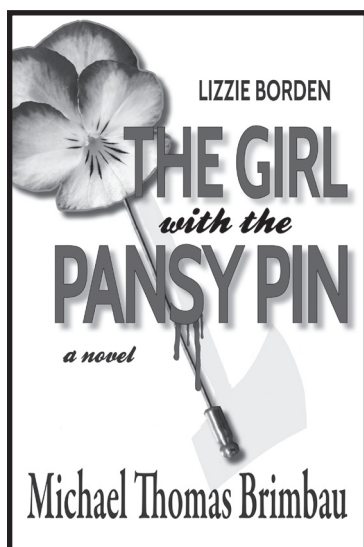
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# Lizzie Borden: The Girl with the Pansy Pin

a novel by Michael Thomas Brimbau



Lizzie Borden and her sister Emma lived a life of privilege and entitlement, with wealth and social status far greater than their neighbors. But it was not enough. In time, Lizzie and Emma grew restless, aching for a more opulent life—to reside on the Hill in a big house amongst their peers and Fall River's finest families.

But Father's riches were window dressing, dangling just beyond their reach—quarantined by a frugal patriarch who was unable or unwilling to change his scrimping ways. Andrew Jackson Borden had no intention of moving to the Hill and abandoning the home he had purchased for his second wife, or spending the money he had worked so hard for all his life. Now he

was planning to give it all away—to his wife, their stepmother.

In time, discord in the family began to ferment and fester—and there were signs that things were not as they should be.

On a sultry August morning, in the naked light of day, someone entered 92 Second Street and brutally hacked and murdered Andrew and Abby Borden. Soon the finger of guilt pointed to Lizzie. But she loved her father. He meant everything to her. The gold ring she had lovingly given him and that he always wore said as much. She would never have harmed him. Or would she?

*The Girl with the Pansy Pin* tells the gripping story of a desirable and vivacious young Victorian woman desperately longing for adventure and a lavish life. Instead, she was condemned to waste away in a stale, modest existence, in a father's foregone reality, with little chance of ever discovering love, happiness, or fulfillment. Now they have charged poor Lizzie with double murder.

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# Fall River Revisited

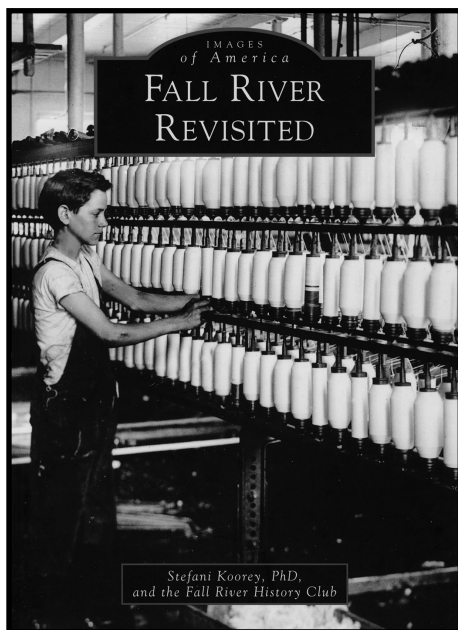
by Stefani Koorey and the  
Fall River History Club

Founded in 1803, Fall River changed its name the following year to Troy, after a resident visiting Troy, New York, enjoyed the city. In 1834, the name was officially changed back to Fall River.

The city's motto, "We'll Try," originates from the determination of its residents to rebuild the city following a devastating fire in 1843. The fire resulted in 20 acres in the center of the village being destroyed, including 196 buildings, and 1,334 people were displaced from their homes.

Once the capital of cotton textile manufacturing in the United States, by 1910, Fall River boasted 43 corporations, 222 mills, and 3.8 million spindles, producing two miles of cloth every minute of every working day in the year. The workforce was comprised of immigrants from Ireland, England, Scotland, Canada, the Azores, and, to a lesser extent, Poland, Italy, Greece, Russia, and Lebanon.

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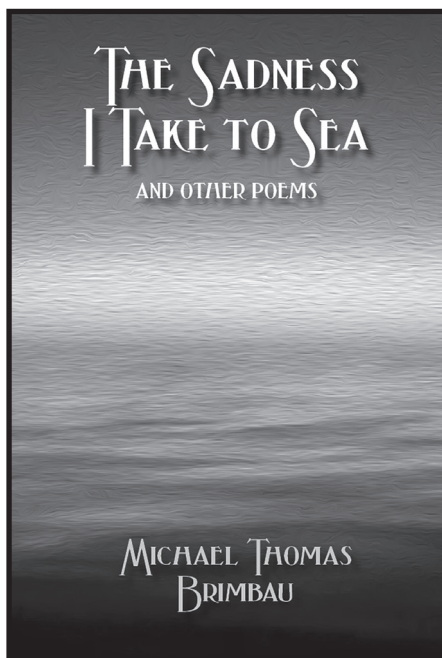


# The Sadness I Take to Sea and Other Poems

by Michael Thomas  
Brimbau

Putting pen to paper and allowing its ball tip to bleed and spill out is a good thing, and helps with the venting as well as needed healing. After all is said and done, following all the missteps and failings, to move on and search for lost love all over again is not only essential but the absolute specimen of a yearning and healthy soul—and the fundamental spirit conveyed in *The Sadness I Take to Sea*.

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# Do Come In and Other Lizzie Borden Poems

by Larry W. Allen

with a new Lizzie Borden  
sketch cover by Rick Geary,  
famed author and illustrator of  
*The Borden Tragedy*.

Lizzie Borden. For some, the name conjures an innocent young woman who bravely faced her trial with strength and fortitude. To others, she has become the icon of all things gruesome because of the bloody nature of the crimes for which she was charged. And yet others see Lizzie Borden as a woman who got away with murder.

These 50 poems trace the life of this enigmatic woman—from the 19th through the 20th century. We meet her as a young adult and watch her develop into an old woman living alone on “the Hill.”

*Do Come In* is a remarkable collection of poems entirely devoted to the Lizzie Borden story.

So *Do Come In*, and meet Lizzie Borden and other characters as diverse as Jack the Ripper, Bob and Charlie Ford, and Rachael Ray, in poems that range from humorous to horrific.

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# Lizzie Borden: Girl Detective

by Richard Behrens

Introducing Miss Lizzie Borden of Fall River, Massachusetts, a most excellent girl detective and the most remarkable young woman ever to take on the criminal underworld in late 19th century New England.

Many years before her infamous arrest and trial for the murders of her father and stepmother, Lizzie Borden pursued a career as a private consulting detective and wrestled unflinchingly with a crooked spiritualist, a corrupt and murderous textile tycoon, a secret society of anarchist assassins, rowdy and deadly sporting boys, a crazed and vengeful mutineer, an industrial saboteur, and a dangerously unhinged math professor—none of whom are exactly what they seem to be.

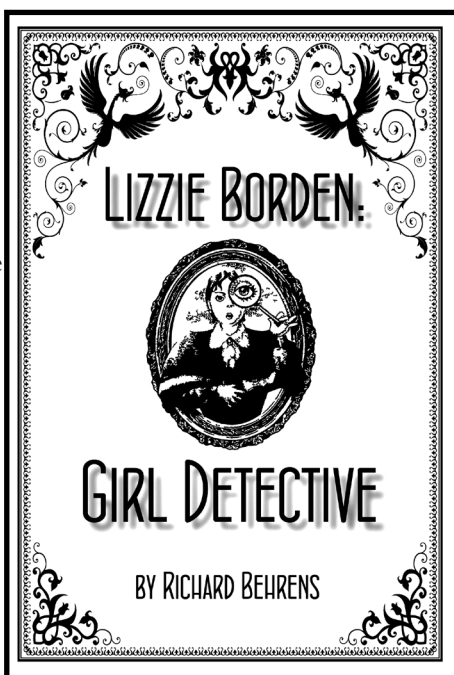
In these five early tales of mystery and adventure, Lizzie Borden is joined by her stubborn and stingy father Andrew; her jealous and weak-chinned sister Emma; her trusted companion Homer Thesinger the Boy Inventor; and the melancholy French scion Andre De Camp. Together, they explore Fall River's dark side through a landscape that is industrial, Victorian, and distinctly American.

You have met Lizzie Borden before—but never like this!

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# Contributors

**John Thomas Allen** is from upstate New York, though he travels to the city often. He has edited three different anthologies, all three of which included writers of speculative poetry and also writers one would term mainstream. His first book was titled *Nouveau's Midnight Sun: Transcriptions From Golgonooza and Beyond*. In 2014, he formed a group of diverse poets (everyone from David Lehman to poet John Olson) and formulated a surrealist/ Neosurrealist vision for the anthology. The poems "Camphor Body" and "The Sleeper InTransit" are from an upcoming book entitled *Fake Shemp*, about a deranged extra. He has poems emerging in *HelloHorror*, *Ghostlight*, and two other places.

**Ryan Bradley** has previously published in *The Missouri Review*, *The Rumpus*, *Dark Moon Digest*, and others. "Anytime" is autobiographical. If you offer Ryan gum, he may haunt you too.

**Jay Caselberg** is a writer living in Germany.

**Shawn Chang** is a seventeen-year-old sonneteer based in Canada.

**Barry Charman** is a writer living in North London. He has been published in various magazines, including *Ambit*, *Firewords Quarterly*, *Mothership Zeta*, and *Popshot*. He has had poems published online and in print, most recently in *Bewildering Stories* and *The Linnet's Wings*. He has a blog at [barrycharman.blogspot.co.uk/](http://barrycharman.blogspot.co.uk/)

**Lawrence Buentello** has published over 100 short stories and innumerable poems in journals, magazines, and anthologies, many of which can be found in several volumes of collected fiction and poetry. Buentello lives in his hometown of San Antonio, Texas.

**Steven Carr**, who lives in Richmond, VA., began his writing career as a military journalist and has had over a 120 short stories published internationally in print and online magazines, literary journals and anthologies. He was a 2017 Pushcart Prize nominee. He is on Facebook and Twitter @carrsteven960.

**Frank Coffman** is Professor of English, Journalism, and Creative Writing at Rock Valley College in Rockford, Illinois. He has published weird, horrific, supernatural, and speculative poetry in a number of journals and magazines. He is the founder and moderator of the Weird Poets Society Facebook group. He also selected, edited, introduced, and did commentary for *Robert E. Howard: Selected Poems*.

**Deborah Guzzi** is a healing facilitator using energetic touch and the written word to assist in fostering wellbeing. She has written three books. *The Hurricane*, 2015, is available through Prolific Press, Amazon, and other venues. Her poetry appears in University Journals & Literary Reviews in the UK, France, Spain, Canada, Australia, China, Singapore, New Zealand, Greece, India, and the USA.

**Sharon Fame Gay** has been internationally published in anthologies and literary magazines, including *Thrice Fiction*, *Lowestoft Chronicle*, *Fiction on the Web*, *Gravel*, *Crannog*, *Literary Orphans*, and many others. She has won awards at The Writing District, Women on Writing, and Owl Hollow Press. She is a Pushcart Prize nominee.

**Haris Čolić**, born in Bosnia and Herzegovina, writes in English and Bosnian language. His writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Literary Hatchet*, *The Coil*, *Sentinel Literary Quarterly*, *The Scene & Heard*, *The Paragon Journal*, *The Cape Rock*, and elsewhere. His work in Bosnian has appeared in various anthologies. He was a nominee for The Luminaire Award for Best Poetry in 2018.

**Marshall Pipkin** was born and raised in a small raisin-producing town in California's Central Valley. There he watched countless horror movies in black and white and inhaled horror stories borrowed from the local library. He is married, has three daughters, and earned a BA in English and an MA in Literature from CSU Fresno.

**Wesley D. Gray** is a writer of things mostly strange. He is an active member of the HWA, an author of fiction, and a poet. His first two books include *Come Fly with Death: Poems Inspired by the Artwork of Zdzislaw Beksiniski*, and the horror novel, *Feeding Lazarus* (written as Rafe Grayson). He resides in Florida with his wife and two children. Discover more at [WesDGray.com](http://WesDGray.com).

**Stephen Greco** is a scientist, engineer, artist, and writer living in Connecticut. His fiction has appeared recently in *Suspense Magazine*.

**Aurora M. Lewis** worked in the banking financial industry for 40 years and retired early in 2009. That same year she received a Certificate in Creative Writing-General Studies from UCLA, with honors. Her poems, short stories, and nonfiction have been accepted by *The Literary Hatchet*, *Gemini Magazine*, *Persimmon Tree*, and *Tinderbox Poetry Journal*, to name a few. Suffering from bi-polar depression and anxiety she stopped writing for several years, due to medications. However, after being removed from the medications, she resumed her passion of writing.

**Ken Allan Dronsfield** is a disabled veteran and poet who is a three-time Pushcart Prize and twice for Best of the Net for 2016-2017. His work has been published world-wide in various publication venues. Ken loves writing, thunderstorms, walking in the woods at night and spending time relaxing.

**Jenna Faccenda** is a twenty-something single mother who finds joy in creating alternate universes that she can escape to. Ok, so it may just be her scribbling on paper while her overly fat black cat stares at her but that's what writers do, right? Jenna is a Philadelphia native and publishing wanna-be. You can find out more information about her at [writelyme.com](http://writelyme.com).

**Ashley Diones** was previously published by Hippocampus Press, Centipede Press, Wildside Press, Martian Migraine Press, Burial Day Books, and others. Her debut poetry collection, *Diary of a Sorceress*, was published by Hippocampus Press in late 2017. She also appeared on Ellen Datlow's full recommended list for Year's Best Horror Vol. 7 for her poem "Carathis." She is also an active member of the HWA and a member of the SFPA.

**Laroo Jack's** recent fiction can be found in *Dark Moon Digest*, *Ghostlight*, and *Cease Cows*. She'd like to give a shout out to all the lovelorn prisoners out there. #emoji-bleeding-heart.

**A.J. Huffman** has published thirteen full-length poetry collections, fourteen solo poetry chapbooks and one joint poetry chapbook through various small presses. Her most recent releases, *The Pyre On Which Tomorrow Burns* (Scars Publications), *Degeneration* (Pink Girl Ink), *A Bizarre Burning of Bees* (Transcendent Zero Press), and *Familiar Illusions* (Flutter Press) are now available from their respective publishers. She is a five-time Pushcart Prize nominee, a two-time Best of Net nominee, and has published over 2600 poems in various national and international journals, including *Labletter*, *The James Dickey Review*, *The Bookends Review*, *Bone Orchard*, *Corvus Review*, *EgoPHobia*, and *Kritya*. She is the founding editor of Kind of a Hurricane Press. You can find more of her personal work here: [ajhuffmanpoetryspot.blogspot.com/](http://ajhuffmanpoetryspot.blogspot.com/)

**Irtika Kazi** is an Indian and writes poems and performs them in open mic nights and slams. Many poems have been published in journals and literary websites, like *Brown Girl Magazine*, *YuGen Literary Magazine*, *Spillwords Press*. She has also been a part of an anthology, *Fragrance of Asia*. Her poems were exhibited in the Museum of Goa and also featured on Duane Vorhees's blog.

**Denny E. Marshall** has had art, poetry, and fiction published. One recent credit is interior art in *Star\*line 41.1* Winter 2018 See more at [dennymarshall.com](http://dennymarshall.com)

**Meg Smith** is a poet, journalist, dancer, and events producer living in Lowell, Mass. Her poetry has appeared or has been accepted to *The Cafe Review*, *Star\*Line*, *Illumen*, *Pudding*, *Dreams & Nightmares*, and more. She has recently published a second poetry book, *Dear Deepest Ghost*, available through Amazon.

**Bill Thomas** and his brother are the founders of Thomastoons, which has produced cartoons for most publications including *Reader's Digest* and *Saturday Evening Post*. He loves to learn about new things and is very passionate about cartooning.

**Pamela Larson** has been published in the *East on Central Journal*, *bottle rockets haiku journal*, the *Journal of Modern Poetry*, both online and in anthologies by Dagda Publishing in the UK and on PoetrySuperHighway.com as well as in other anthologies and blogs.

**Jessica Amanda Salmonson** is a recipient of the World Fantasy Award, Lambda Award, and ReaderCon Award. She has contributed poems and tales to scores of magazines and anthologies. Her books include novels such as the three volumes of the *Tomoe Gozen Saga* (Ace Books; Pacific Warriors; Open Road Media), short story collections such as *A Silver Thread of Madness* (Ace), and poetry volumes including *Pets Given in Evidence of Old English Witchcraft and Other Bewitched Beings*, from the Sidcar Preservation Society in Minneapolis. Forthcoming of Hippocampus Press is a big poetry collection, *The Ghost Garden and Further Spirits*.

**Fabiyas MV** is a writer from Orumanayur village in Kerala, India. He is the author of *Kanoli Kaleidoscope* (PunksWritePoemsPress,US), *Eternal Fragments* (erbacce press,UK), and *Moonlight And Solitude* (Raspberry Books, India). His fiction and poetry have appeared in several anthologies, magazines and journals. His publishers include Western Australian University, British Council, University of Hawaii, Rosemont College, Forward Poetry, Off the Coast, Silver Blade, Pear Tree Press, Zimbell House Publishing LLC, Shooter, Nous, Structo, Encircle Publications, and Anima Poetry. He has won many international accolades including Merseyside at War Poetry Award from Liverpool University; Poetry Soup International Award; 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) in Vienna. His poems have been broadcast on All India Radio. He has an M.A. in English literature from University of Calicut, and a B.Ed. from Mahatma Gandhi University.

**Johnny Longfellow** is the editor of the online poetry site, *Midnight Lane Boutique*. His own poetry has appeared in *The Barefoot Muse*, *The Five-Two*, *Ppiggenn*, *The Road Not Taken*, *The Rotary Dial*, and elsewhere. He has also served for over twenty years as a mentor to Newburyport, MA, high school students through the Poetry Soup reading program and annual print journal.

**Wayne Scheer** has been nominated for four Pushcart Prizes and a Best of the Net. He's published numerous stories, poems and essays in print and online, including *Revealing Moments*, [www.pearlnoir.com/pearlnoir/docs/revealing\\_moments](http://www.pearlnoir.com/pearlnoir/docs/revealing_moments) a collection of flash stories. His short story, "Zen and the Art of House Painting" has been made into a short film. [vimeo.com/18491827](http://vimeo.com/18491827)

**Pat Tompkins** is an editor in the San Francisco Bay Area. Her poems have appeared in *Grievous Angel*, *Thema*, *Haibun Today*, and other publications.

**Kelly Piner** is a practicing clinical psychologist and has had two scholarly publications in peer reviewed journals, as well as four published book chapters. He has also had an interview published in *Mademoiselle* entitled "Drawn to a Stranger," as well as a published interview in *Psychology Today* entitled "Instant Intimacy."

**Matthew Wilson** is a writer who currently lives in the United Kingdom.

**Bo Shaw** is an author of poetry and fiction that invokes the unnatural or macabre. He owes a creative debt to many, including authors like Stephen King, H.P. Lovecraft, Harlan Ellison, and Arthur Machen, and to his steady diet of schlocky B horror flicks. He has recently fled Wisconsin and is writing from an undisclosed location in the Pacific Northwest.

**Joshua Gage** is a poet living in Ohio.

**Edward Turner** is a writer who lives in Kentucky.

**Nathaniel Tower** is a former English teacher who now spends his days as a content writer and brand strategist at a web design company. When not at work, he writes fiction and goes for long runs while juggling. He served as the managing editor of *Bartleby Snopes* literary magazine for eight years before closing the publication to focus on other literary pursuits. He is the author of *Nagging Wives*, *Foolish Husbands*, a collection of surreal tales about married life published by Martian Lit. Visit him at [nathanieltower.com/](http://nathanieltower.com/)

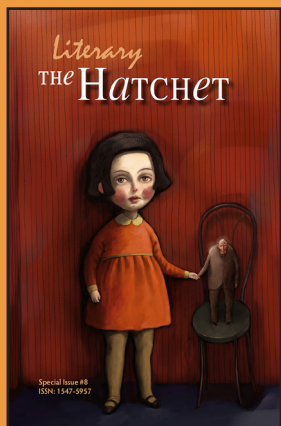
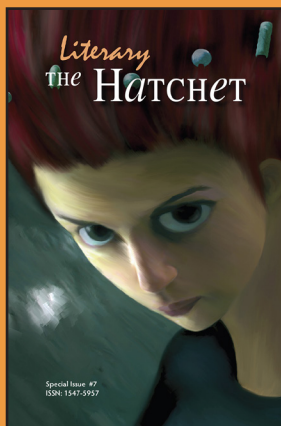
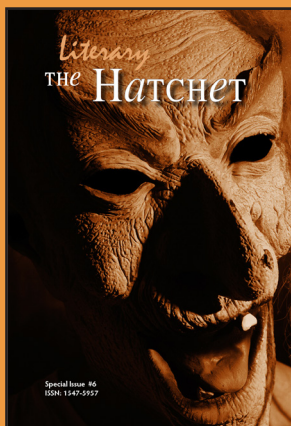
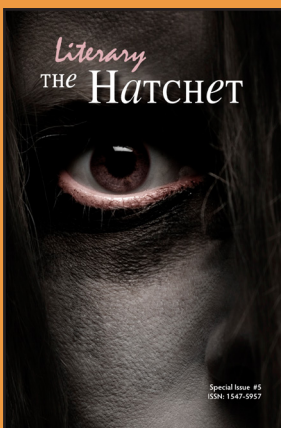
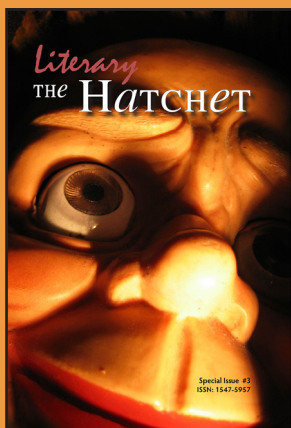
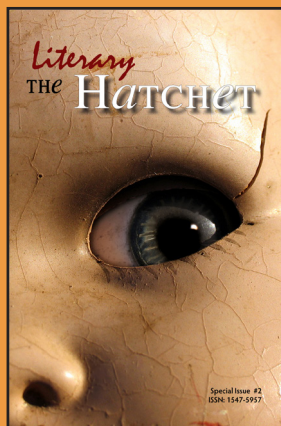
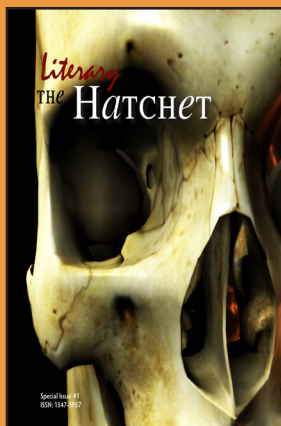






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