Literary THE HATCHET



CUTTING EDGE WORKS BY AUTHORS AND ARTISTS WORLDWIDE



MASTHEAD

publisher/executive editor stefani koorey

short story editor eugene hosey

poetry editor michael brimbau

contributing editor sherry chapman

photography adobe stock photos

publisher PearTree Press

GoFundMe Contributors

Sue Abbotson Roger Pierce Mary Donaldson-Evans Jill Dalton John Hofstra

the literary hatchet (issn 1547-5957) is published three times a year, by peartree press, p.o. box 9585, fall river, massachusetts, 02720. we are a literary magazine with a focus on the dark, mysterious, and curious. we publish short stories, poems, articles, and reviews. contents may not be reproduced without written permission of copyright holder. the opinions expressed are of the artists and writers themselves and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of peartree press. copyright © 2018 peartree press. all rights reserved. literaryhatchet.com.

ISSUE #21

contributing writers

jay caselberg joao cerqueira yuan changming sherry chapman peter dichellis ashley dioses michael dittman milton ehrlich iohn flvnn stephen greco david greske tamara burross grisanti deborah guzzi yasmin hemmat mckinley henson eugene hosey marc jampole anne e. johnson john koch allen kopp aurora lewis fabivas mv denny marshall maureen mcelroy rick mcauiston alan mevrowitz kristina r. mosley james nicola douglas j. ogurek kyle opperman marshall pipkin kent rosenberger allan rozinski wavne scheer ronald schulte michael seeger cathryn shea henry simpson sindhu verma michael whelan



The Literary Hatchet is a free online literary zine. It is free for a reason—and not because we couldn't make money if we had a price tag attached to the digital copy. It is free because we philosophically believe that the work of these artists and writers deserves to be read by the widest possible audience. We want the PDF to be shared and passed from inbox to inbox. We want to be as accessible to the greatest number of people, not just those who can afford to fork over some bucks to read great writing. We do not charge for any digital issue.

We are asking for funding through GoFundMe. If you like what you read here, and wish to read more for free, please consider donating to the cause to keep The Literary Hatchet free forever for everyone and to pay authors and artists what they are worth. The website for donations is: gofundme.com/ literaryhatchet

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

You are reading issue #21, by the way. So if you haven't caught up on the other TWENTY issues, you can do so at literaryhatchet.com.

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

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

peartreepress.submittable.com/submit.

We really would love to read your work.

Stefani Koorey Editor and Publisher

TABLE OF CONTENTS

SHORT STORIES

- the sound down by the shore 8 douglas j. ogurek
 - providence 16 henry simpsonr
 - a bump in the road 26 stephen greco
 - revelations 40 kristina r. mosley
 - a start 50 john flynn
 - somebody somewhere 54 allen kopp
 - the bad book 62 alan meyrowitz
 - barbarian soiree 68 douglas j. ogurek
 - the apparition 78 tamara burross grisanti
- by appointment or by chance 84 allen kopp
 - the crazies out there 98 stephen greco
 - cyst 102 david greske

AUG/SEPT 2018

- 110 the head chairman john koch
- 116 the last word wayne scheer
- 120 where are you now, charming billy? wayne scheer
- 130 disaster adjustor peter dichellis
- 140 the bluffs michael dittman
- 150 i can see clearly now sherry chapman
- 158 incontestable proof kent rosenberger
- 168 it's not my fault she wasn't dead allen kopp
- 178 joey ronald schulte
- 188 justice joao cerqueira
- 200 most people rick mcquiston
- 206 nobody knows anything eugene hosey

TABLE OF CONTENTS

AUG/SEPT 2018

- "rabbit feet" 7 denny marshall
- polarity 13 jay caselberg
- ophelia wanted none 14 jay caselberg
- the celebration of dreams 15 ashley dioses
 - on the bus 24 milton p. ehrlich
- waiting for the shoots from 25 the shroud fabiyas mv
 - inside the threshold 38 deborah guzzi
 - voyeur 39 allan rozinski
 - the last man on earth 45 milton p. ehrlich
 - the thief 46 faviyas mv
 - look away dixiland 47 deborah guzzi
 - getting into heaven 48 milton p. ehrlich
 - "cocoon feeders" 49 denny marshall
 - contact 52 allan rozinski
 - nothing but silence 53 yasmin hemmat
 - end sindhu verma

59

POETRY & ART

- 60 breaking bad allan rozinski
- 61 chuckling marshall pipkin
- 65 gift sindhu verma
- 66 the moon fabiyas mv
- 67 icicle sindhu verma
- 76 the parable of the devil and the mule marshall pipkin
- 77 "counter clockwise" denny marshall
- 82 dark star of my desire kyle opperman
- 83 out with baccus james nicola
- 96 a reminder mckinley henson
- 97 under the sink marshall pipkin
- 100 religion 2: not to say james nicola
- 101 the broiler chicken fabiyas mv
- 106 love sindhu verma
- 107 love again james nicola
- 108 atoms marshall pipkin

TABLE OF CONTENTS

AUG/SEPT 2018

- ascension 109 mckinley henson
- my love's a bottle 113 james nicola
 - the bug poem 114 maureen mcelroy
 - the beginning 115 fabiyas mv
 - retribution 118 aurora lewis
 - night flight 119 michael seeger
 - nocturn 125 michael seeger
 - worcestershire 126 anne e. johnson
 - inertia 128 marc jampole
- a gift from england 136 michael seeger
 - candlelight 137 mckinley henson
 - you're losing me 138 maureen mcelroy
- "teardrops from above" 139 denny marshall
- the end of the rainbow 147 michael seeger
 - mansourasaurus 148 fabiyas mv

POETRY & ART

- 149 the man i fired marc jampole
- 155 millville cathryn shea
- 156 not to heal sidhu verma
- 157 darling maureen mcelroy
- 164 when snowbirds pack to fly to florida michael whelan
- 165 whatevuh michael whelan
- 166 glenville avenue on halloween maureen mcelroy
- 167 "thief's friend" denny marshall
- 176 from one flash of anger marc jampole
- 177 education fabiyas mv
- 198 a nip of salt, a red chili, and some mustard fabiyas mv
- 199 he plans—god laughs milton p. ehrlich
- 204 hail mary cathryn shea
- 220 avihs I I vushu yuan changming
- 221 turing test yuan changming



—"rabbit feet" by denny marshall

[short story]

THE SOUND DOWN BY THE SHORE

by douglas j. ogurek

"... yet we hear them speaking in our own tongues of the mighty acts of God." —Acts 2:11

A man stood at the brink of a cliff five hundred feet above the sea. His hair swept back and his gown fluttered. The foot-wide disk that extended from his third finger rippled and released a rumble that carried for ten miles.

The sound and the fluttering stopped. The disk retracted into his finger.

The bushes behind him rustled. He faced them, and his pointing finger swelled into a larger disk. A short man stumbled out of the bushes. Colorful shoe prints covered his clothing. "Wait, wait, a-chay. A-glaych, this screw in my head. I'm a Huekee, way-mee."

Wind returned, and the disk grew.

The Huekee's glasses slanted so that the one cracked lens sat above his left eye. He pointed at the clusters of red hair pulled over his bald scalp, then rang a shoe bell. "The Huekees? Look-ay look-ay we're the Huekees?"

"Fool. How came you here?"

"Douggie Westeastee sent me. I'm not complaining, but this is a rather cold reception."

"Whhhhhhy..." The wind intensified.

"Mr . . . sir great wizard musician tribe member? I'm . . . a-glaych this screw in my head."

"I am Tuuli, and I am a member of me. How ... came ... you ... here?"

"Douggie Westeastee. Through a door at Douggie Westeastee's Crayon Factory? Taupe is my color. Do you know taupe?"

"I know this island. I know me." The disk began to ripple. "Why are you here?" "A-hay, to find a singing squad to join. And to sing taupely, Tuuli. Taupe is my

color, see?" He pointed at a part of his costume not covered by a shoe print.

The wind died, and the disk receded into the finger. "You will come with me." "Yay-hay, you will take me to where I can sing taupely?"

Tuuli, extending a deep hum, began walking. The Huekee followed.

Tuuli and the Huekee walked beneath slanting stone slabs, some of which were capped by small pyramids.

The Huekee's shoes tinkled with each step. "How do you make that sound with your fingers? Is that music? It sounds like thunder and monsters."

"Nooooo. It does not sound like anything that you have seen, or heard, or felt."

"A-chay." The Huekee stepped into a patch of sunlight. He shielded his good lens and looked up. "What are those up there? Ears?"

Tuuli took in a deep breath then, eyes closed, exhaled. "Listen." From

somewhere within the gathering dusk came a quiet whistle.

"Way-hay. What could that be? It sounds so fiery and admirey."

Tuuli yanked the bells off the Huekee's shoes. "Stop interpreting."

"My voice sounds like taupe. Not yellow or blue or green, but taupe, a-hay. Every Huekee has a color, way-mee, and my color's taupe." The Huekee climbed one of the smaller slabs. "Taupe is grayish-brown, or brownish-gray."

"Mud."

"Mud. But many things are taupe. These are taupe." The Huekee approached one of the triangles.

"Fool, stay away from that."

"A-chay. Is it dangerous?"

"Dangerous for the creature that lives in it, if you touch it. My island is the last refuge of the windstoke, and that is a windstoke's nest."

"Where are they?"

"They leave their nests and gather once every fifty days, and today is one of those days."

The Huekee hopped. "And is this creature taupe?"

Tuuli, emitting a protracted hum, resumed walking.

The Huekee came to the edge of the slab, then called after Tuuli. "Taupe goes with anything, but the other Huekees don't want to sing with me. Yellow and blue and red and green? They have high high voices. But taupe ... here, listen, yay-hay." The Huekee bowed his head, and the clusters of red hair rose and rippled. He leaned back and roared, "Towwwwww ..." The ground shook, and birds burst

from the canopies lower on the mountain. Tuuli widened his eves, and waved his arms. He hurled the

Tuuli widened his eyes, and waved his arms. He hurled the shoe bells at the Huekee. The Huekee stopped, and his roar echoed.

"Fool. Silence. Others may hear you."

"Taupe, taupe, a-hay. Doesn't that sound like taupe?"

Tuuli released a lengthy exhalation toward the sky, and again the whistle reached them.

"Now there's a rather strange screw in my head, a-glaych, but I thought you said you're the only one here."

"And I spoke the truth. There are warriors, and merchants, and fools like you. They all pass through, but only I live here."

The forest was twenty degrees warmer, and the sporadic whistle had grown louder.

The Huekee wiggled his fingers down at the sea. "Yay-hay. Sounds like a damp log burning."

"The sound is wind."

"Now there is a screw in my head, a-glaych, but I hear no wind. And I feel no wind. Where are you taking me?"

Tuuli looked at his fingers.

"I'm not complaining, but you don't always answer questions sufficiently." The Huekee charged at Tuuli and shouted, "Stop . . . stop."

Tuuli froze.

The Huekee crouched. He held his good lens and investigated the earth before Tuuli. "A-chay. I didn't want you to step on this." An orange butterfly took flight.

Tuuli took in a deep breath, then exhaled lingeringly. The whistle sounded again. "I will send you to Noget Blice."

"Way-mee! Are there many singing squads there? And musicians? What kind of music?"

Tuuli shook his head. His fingertips sprouted one-inch-wide disks. His gown and hair flapped. The fingers played notes. Fast notes. They raced up and down scales. The fingers blurred.

"Way-hay-hay. You just moved the screw in my head."

"All the Noget Blicen sound-winders play like that. They want it to sound *like*. *Like* their palaces and *like* their silks. *Like* their jewels. While the peasants inland suffer."

The Huekee grabbed his good lens. "Blay-ways. You are a sound-winder from Noget Blice?"

"Tuuli. I . . . am . . . Tuuli." He closed his eyes and trembled. "Noget Blice sounds perfect for your crane flactree place."

"Crayon factory, way-mee. Why won't you let me do my taupe grugling? You did your thunder monster sound on the cliff."

"It is not thunder, or monsters. Visitors do not know what it is. There is a feeling it gives. A feeling that will make them want to leave, and never return."

The Huekee wiggled his foot. "I didn't want to leave when I heard it."

The whistle wound through the flame-shaped rock formations that bridged the mountain's base and the sea.

A breeze flicked the Huekee's hair clusters. He imitated the fast finger movements.

Tuuli studied the vegetation at the mountain's base. "There is no use in playing for anybody."

"There's no use in playing for nobody, I say." The orange sky covered the sea. The Huekee hopped over a pool, then swung around one of the curving rocks. "At the crayon factory, we danced and sang and the children loved it. Well, when I grugled, some children cried. Aych."

Tuuli's lips thinned, and his cheeks swelled.

"Now I'm not complaining, but they said I sound like a dinosaur."

"You speak strange words."

The whistle sounded as the Huekee spoke. "The other Huekees brought me to the color mixing area and stepped in their colors and stepped on me. Douggie Westeastee said he liked the way I sang. Then he sent me to that room, a-chay, and I walked toward that door. And here I am." Tuuli held up his hand, inhaled deeply. "Smoke."

"Taupe?"

"No, smoke. The smell."

"Blay-ways. How will I get to Noget Blice?"

"You will take my boat."

"How will I navigate?"

Tuuli wiped sweat. "I am a . . . I am Tuuli, and I make wind. You will know you've arrived when you see the colors and the glimmering, and you hear the sound-winders zipping. And all will ignore the cries of the poor."

The whistle sounded louder. Laughter followed.

Tuuli stepped into the vegetation. The Huekee waddled after him.

The whistle came from behind a cluster of tall bushes. They approached the bushes, and the smoke smell grew stronger. Each whistle brought forth the laughter of men.

They reached the bush. On the other side of it, a dozen men dressed in armor stood near a fire. One hurled a rock into a tree, where a bird struggled to break free from a rope. Then the bird revealed itself as the source of the whistle.

Tuuli whispered, "The windstoke. That sound. I did not know. Those fools."

"A-glaych. It's afraid. We must stop them."

One of the men picked up a rock. "How much?" The others shouted their bets.

Tuuli stepped behind a dense bush. The tip of his pointing finger swelled, and the wind began. The bird shrieked again as Tuuli's disk grew to one, then two feet wide. Some of the soldiers' equipment skidded across the ground. Staying behind the bush, Tuuli directed the disk at the soldiers. The sound came forth.

The warriors dropped their stones and clutched their ears. The disk receded. A larger one grew out of his middle finger, then produced a deeper rumble. Each disk, at least three feet wide, swelled, unleashed its sound, then gave way to another disk.

The Huekee, hiding behind another bush, heard the darkness and the power and the beauty in Tuuli's sound. He whispered, "I am Huŏyàn." His hair clusters rose, and he removed his crooked glasses. Then, he leaned back and roared.

The sky's orange filled the gaps between the flapping leaves, and in the combination of his strange companion's voice and his own sound, Tuuli heard the fury of a thousand dragons.

The warriors collected their weapons, then retreated.

POLARITY

Lying like a sailboat Tossed on stormy seas A goal beyond the outstretched hand Obscured by waverise

Gimlet eye analysis Thrusts daggers against that image Tearing Shredding The vision of what I am

Pondering your judgment Not yours but mine Creating That shape of what I am

Yet still you fail The simple things Unknowing Appearance still deceives

—jay caselberg

OPHELIA WANTED NONE

Touched whilst burning flesh warm Gentle familiar caress Sweet faced despair frozen and petaled in the lust For the chastity of us Untainted Sweating "that was then" Slickened with salt A memory folded rose like stirs yet Bruising the pastels of our song As I hum vibrant at your lips

Kiss me and stare bare faced Dread tears mirrored and forgotten Though not here Long for the rich betrayal To seek it unforgotten Though not here Dare we shed this skin of tragedy perused In hollow cunning A grim makeup giving color under lights It's only cruel of a kind he said Gentle in fierceness His attempt to be brave

To glimmer in the firedance of your eye In whispered darkness Strips bare the harsh boned countenance The one act play upon my brow For an audience alone 'Tis but a hedgerow which encircles dreams Sanctify the beaded liquor For an edifice made flesh

Touch now the darkened cloak Down cast atop the pool Rippling to your finger touch Your palm a breath Crumbling as you draw patterns For a lifetime in its dust Before you standing Hamlet Brittle costumed nakedness A tragedy No more

—jay caselberg

The Celebration of Dreams

This summer night we drink of sweetest nectars From chalices of silver, under beams Of pallid moonlight, Luna, our sole specter This night, the celebration of our dreams. Of all the visions that my Sight bestowed, My vision of you cannot be compared. My love had slowly started to erode, Until by true love was my heart repaired. One year has passed and still our love stays strong. Our interlacing ardors merge, create A sorcerous bond, whereby we each belong Unto the other and our life awaits....

-ashley dioses

for K.A.O.

providence

short story

2. 1

1

10(1:

by henry simpson

Saturday night I was driving along East Beach when I noticed the red and blue flashing lights of a motorcycle cop in my rearview mirror. I checked my speedo, which put me well within legal limits, slowed, and pulled to the curb. I watched in the mirror as the cop made a radio call. Moments later, the cop jerked to alert, swung a leg over the Kawasaki, and took to the ground like a landing paratrooper. The cop came slowly closer, in what seemed a cautious and alert manner, stopping by the Porsche's left rear quarter. As the seconds passed, I wondered if my taillights were out or I was guilty of some other vehicle code infraction.

The cop eventually came to my window and looked down at me. She had a fair and fine complexion, blue eyes, and lips a natural pink. Somewhat later, I noticed her nametag, which said, "Haynes."

"Have you consumed any alcohol this evening, sir?" she said, her voice firm but polite.

Truth was, more than my usual, in an evening fraught with discontent. I had been driving around for more than an hour to work off the bad feelings.

"I had a glass of wine at the Biltmore," I said. "A couple of hours ago."

She leaned slightly closer to check my breath. Apparently satisfied, she pulled back.

"Any other drinks?"

"No, ma'am."

She regarded me suspiciously, and did a quick visual search of the interior of my car. Not to worry. The car was clean. Looked it, anyway.

"License and registration, please."

I extracted the driver's license from my wallet and handed it to her.

She examined it. "Joseph Paul Costa?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Registration?"

"It's in the glove box."

She eyed me, waiting.

I waited too, for divine intervention; it seemed unlikely.

"Is there some problem?" she said.

"Yes," I said. "The glove box."

"You already said that."

"No, I mean the problem is in my glove box."

Her eyes narrowed, and she gave me that long, hard look cops give when they know something is amiss.

"Step out of the car," she said. "Keep your hands where I can see them."

It must have been the tone of my voice, or my facial expression, or some involuntary tic that made her angry. She drew her automatic and pointed it directly at my face.

She had my full attention. "Yes, ma'am." I raised my hands to keep them visible, opened the door, and stepped out on the street. As I did so, I noticed a

police cruiser with flashing lights pull over to the curb behind us. A moment later, a second cruiser passed by and parked in front. Several cops exited the cruisers and surrounded my car, watching us. Guns were drawn, all pointed at me. It was like a scene in one of those real life TV shows about cops and dumb criminals— me the halfwit.

An eager cop with corporal's stripes left the others and approached Haynes and me. His nametag said, "Wood."

"What's the problem, Haynes?" he said in a gruff voice that seemed too deep for a man of his modest size.

Haynes handed him my driver's license.

He checked it, looked me up and down, and shook his head. "Uh-huh."

Haynes leaned close to him and spoke softly.

Wood appeared annoyed, perhaps because speaking softly was not normal behavior for a cop. He grimaced, motioned two cops closer, and issued orders.

I soon found myself in cuffs, surrounded by fit young men in blue, all ready to lay it on the line for God and Country or, in this case, a pigheaded corporal with a Napoleon complex.

Wood leaned close and gave me a hard look. "Gabriel Colon," he said in a voice ripe with sarcasm. "Your friends must call you Gabe."

"No, sir," I said. "They usually call me Joe. Close friends, Joseph. No one has ever called me Gabe."

"I know who you are."

I hesitated before responding, unsure how unscrewed Wood was. "Obviously not. Check my ID."

He smiled knowingly. "We have a bulletin out on this vehicle. We also have an arrest warrant for its owner, one Gabriel Colon, a known cocaine distributor."

"You've got the wrong car and the wrong person, sir. Verify the vehicle ID number. My name is Joseph Costa."

Wood sneered. "We're going to search the car, Gabe."

"Not without my permission. Or a warrant."

"Fuck that. We've got probable cause." Ignoring Haynes, he nodded at the cops and they had at it. I felt sorry for her, the only female on the scene, excluded from the action, however misguided.

A cop inside my car soon opened the glove box and found my pistol. He announced his discovery with a lively shout that brought joy to Wood's stony face. He carried his prize to Wood and surrendered it unto him like a Labrador with shot game.

As soon as the cop left him, Wood turned it over and examined it. "Nice piece," he said to me. "Old school snub thirty-eight. Where'd you steal it?"

"It was a gift from my father last Christmas," I said. "I have a permit. Would this be a good time to show it to you?"

"Nice try." Wood laughed. "It's illegal to carry a loaded firearm in your car, Gabe. I'm placing you under arrest." Wood gave Haynes a withering look. "Mirandize this perp and deposit him in the back of my cruiser."

The degrading way Wood treated Haynes suggested he did not respect her as a cop, disliked women, or resented her height.

Haynes walked me to the designated location and read me my Miranda rights. She waited at the cruiser, watching over me to prevent my escape.

I watched the carnival scene around my car: flashing lights, milling cops, crawling traffic as passers-by glimpsed excited cops at work, and the evildoer, cuffed and humbled, in the back seat of a cruiser.

"They're having a good time over there," I said. "Shut up," Haynes said softly. "I bet you'd like to join that party." She shone a bright flashlight beam into my eyes. I blinked and shut them. She turned the beam away. Ah, stars.

By eleven-thirty, I was in a holding cell at the city jail with several other Saturday evening guests, most of them sullen and closemouthed. The cell was open on three sides, brightly lit, with a concrete floor and wooden benches for comfort. It reeked of disinfectant and human fumes.

A bloated drunk kept wandering around like an unmoored dinghy in a storm, begging for a cigarette. When he got to me, I caught a whiff of his noxious breath and pointed at the guard, sitting outside at a desk reading a newspaper. "He'll bust your chops if you light up, chum. It's no smoking in here."

"Fuck you," said the drunk. He tottered off and away, good riddance.

I looked around for familiar faces, possibly former clients. The only face I recognized was an old black man in dark suit and tie, with a tiny fedora perched on top. I had seen him strolling around town in that outfit, dignified as a judge. He was sitting beside a downcast middle-aged man who brought to mind a college professor just denied tenure. The two were conversing quietly, and sober.

The drunk uttered a further string of epithets at potential benefactors. Eventually, he worked his way to the fedora. The judge looked at the drunk, smiled politely, and shook his head.

The drunk reeled in the general direction of the professor. "How about you, pop. Got a cigarette?"

The professor tried to ignore him.

The drunk, unsteady on his feet, slapped the man on the ear. "You deaf?" The professor shrank like a whipped dog. Without knowing his story, I pitied him. I looked around the cell. No one else was able or willing to come to the poor man's aid.

I got up, walked to the drunk, and tapped his shoulder. "Leave him alone. You're giving everyone in here a headache." A couple of people in the cell clapped, and someone whistled.

The drunk turned and tried to focus on me. His mouth hung open, drooling. He rocked back and forth, struggling to balance. "Fuck you," he said like a man in a dream.

I grabbed his flabby arm and pulled him away from the professor. I pointed at an open bench. "You need sleep, partner. Let's mosey over there so you can lie down and take a rest. "

"I need a cig . . ."

"No smoking in here, compadre. You know, you need sleep. Sleep it off. You'll feel better."

The drunk shook his head and nodded. "Okay." Just like that. It must have been my magic touch, gentle voice, or courtly manners.

I steered him to the open bench and steadied him as he settled. "Lay back, my friend. Relax." I laid him down, and lifted his massive legs up onto the bench. I stood over him for a while, watching. Soon his eyes closed and he began breathing heavily, no longer a menace to polite society, such as it was.

I returned to my spot and resumed my vigil. Eventually, the powers that be would discover and correct their error. Didn't they always?

The answer was not reassuring, even in my limited experience, the life legal.

Was I truly destined to serve time for Gabriel Colon's crimes? If so, it would be fascinating when I got to the penitentiary. The Mexicans would slit my throat when they learned that, despite my surname, I was not Mexican. If I slipped by, they would recruit me into the Mexican Mafia and slit it later.

Enough daydreaming.

I shut my eyes and tried to sleep, unsuccessfully. I did not feel safe and could not get comfortable in the unfamiliar surroundings, distracting noises, and conversations of prisoners coming and going.

I checked the professor. He looked very much out of place in a jail holding cell. His eyes appeared intelligent behind designer spectacles and were staring into space. We made brief eye contact before he looked away. He was well dressed, but his clothes were wrinkled as if he had been wearing them for days and slept in them.

The judge was now beside another Saturday night loser, conversing as before. What was his game? I watched him for a while longer as he moved on to yet another detainee, and another.

Eventually, he worked his way to me. I realized then how tall and well groomed he was, though his ensemble was worn.

"My name is Raymond Day," he said, extending his hand. "What's your name, son?"

I looked up at him, way up. He lacked an athlete's musculature, but owned the height of a basketball pro.

I reached out and took his hand. His grip was firm and his hand had the leathery feel of a workman's. He was well past sixty, his close-cropped hair steely gray. His face belonged to a younger man. His skin and left eye were mahogany, his right eye sapphire blue. That blue eye—something rare—really caught my attention. What were the odds?

"My name depends on who you ask," I said.

"How's that?" he said. "Been using aliases?"

"Not exactly."

"Who do you think you are?"

"Joe Costa."

"Well, I'm pleased to meet you, Joseph. I want to thank you for what you done, helping Marvin out. He labors all week, gets drunk every Saturday, and winds up in here every Saturday night. Next morning, he don't remember."

"Is he a friend of yours?"

"When he recognizes me, yes. Generally speaking."

"I see."

"Since you're in this place, you've had trepidations recently."

"Are you clairvoyant?"

"Wish I was. I'm just a lay preacher, got me a little congregation over on the north side. My wife runs the church day care center. I make my rounds, outreach to the needy. I'm done here for now. Got to go visit a member of my flock. She's not feeling very good, asked me to drop by and cheer her up."

"So you're just going to walk out of here?"

He smiled, stuck his head close to the bars, and whistled.

Seconds later, the cell door opened, he stepped outside, and the door shut behind him.

I stood up and turned to see if he was still there. I had the strange feeling he might perform the miracle of disappearing.

He was standing outside the cell, looking directly at me. "I ain't clairvoyant, Joseph, but I do predict you'll get out of here, sooner or later."

"That's most reassuring, Raymond. Thank you."

He hesitated, and continued, "You're a peacemaker, Joseph."

I tried not to laugh. "Some would disagree."

He frowned. "I know what I know. Now you know it too." He kept looking at me. I found myself absolutely entranced by that one blue eye of his, which clarified light like a flawless gemstone. "Do something for me, Joseph, while you're in this place. Look after William."

"William?"

"I was counseling him when Marvin barged in. He's got real serious trouble." The professor, he meant. "Sure."

He kept looking at me, as if he had read my mind and knew I had no intention of doing as I had agreed. I do not normally go out of my way to help strangers. I had intervened with Marvin because I have an almost obsessive aversion to bullies. However, I knew I would keep my promise to Raymond. I do not know exactly why; perhaps it was the way he looked at me. After Raymond left, I went over to William and sat beside him. He chanced one furtive glance at me, avoiding my eyes.

"Raymond said you could use a friend. He asked me to look after you."

"I'll be okay," William said.

"Very good." I sat back and tried to relax. I had done my duty to Raymond. Unlike him, I do not do outreach. As long as nothing further threatened William's welfare, I would leave him alone. The holding cell was noisy, but we did not exchange words for several minutes.

"Why are you in here?" William said, breaking our silence.

"Mistaken identity."

"Really?" He sounded doubtful.

"They think I'm a fugitive drug dealer."

"And you're not?"

You, too, I thought, and almost laughed. "No, and if I were, I wouldn't admit it to a stranger, especially not in here."

"You're right. It's not logical. What a stupid question."

He had made the error and quickly admitted it. What kind of people so readily confessed their failings to a stranger? Not lawyers. Not businessmen. Not even physicians. Scientists, possibly, at least those who conduct research and know they could be proved wrong in the future.

"What's your name?" he said.

"Joe."

He glanced my way, but did not offer his hand. He was a shy man, or reticent, or scared out of his wits.

"Soon they'll realize their error and release me," I said.

"You sound confident about that."

"I am."

A long silence settled on us.

"The coroner called me Tuesday," he said. "He called to inform me my mother had died."

I turned toward him. "I'm sorry to hear that, William. My condolences."

"It is my belief she died through intentional neglect."

"Neglect, by whom?"

"Her caretakers."

"Where were you when this happened?"

"At sea. I'm an oceanographer. I work for a laboratory near Boston. I typically spend six months of the year at sea. The rest of the time, I do analyses and write reports. I haven't lived here in almost twenty years."

"You're saying you lost touch with your mother?"

He nodded, but remained silent. I got the impression guilt was eating at him. "Are you all right?" I said.

"No, I'm not."

"Why are you in here?"

"The police say they have evidence . . . that I killed someone."

"Have you called your lawyer?"

"Yes, of course. I called him right after I was arrested."

"What did he tell you, about arranging bail and so forth?"

"I didn't talk to him. I left a message on his machine."

"A bit slow, isn't he?"

"I haven't talked to him in quite a while. Nine years plus. I think he's still in Boston, but something may have happened. He handled my divorce. Actually, he's my wife's lawyer."

"Are you sure he's the right man to help you? Considering the circumstances, you might need a criminal defense person. I can give you some names, pros I know and genuinely trust. Call one of them, they'll be down here in fifteen minutes, on your case full bore."

"Why don't you call someone for yourself?"

"I'm testing Providence."

"I don't get it. What do you mean?"

"I want to see how long it takes the cops to realize they made a mistake and set me free. It's research, sort of like what you do."

The answer was complete nonsense, but better than telling William my reason was none of his business, or that hiring one of my own to get me out of jail would lead to embarrassment among my peers in the legal community.

"What you're suggesting is not even remotely like what I do," he said. "Do you always talk like that? Make up things, you know, stories, fabrications . . . like a con artist?"

"Frequently."

"Costa!" I heard a man bellow from outside the cell.

I looked to where the voice originated, and saw a guard standing outside. "Joe Costa," he yelled.

"Yo," I shouted back.

He beckoned me to the cell door, opened it, and motioned me outside.

"You are to be released, Mr. Costa. Lt. Dorsey has the watch tonight. He wants to speak to you before you leave."

They were the first polite words I had heard from police authority in a while. I found them refreshing and more than a little exhilarating.

"Joe," I heard William call from behind. "Wait a minute."

I turned.

He was standing just inside the cell. "What's happening?" he said.

"Providence," I said. "It never fails me."

"Business card?"

I fished one out and laid it on his palm.



ON The Bus With one way tickets on a simonized black bus, there's standing-room only for faces of strangers with a zincish-hue.

Like unknown soldiers in the terracotta-tomb they stand silently as the bus rides along on ribbons of light, fast as a hydrofoil two feet off the ground.

The motor thrums softly like a fat purring cat as it moves toward a haze in a world of the Bitter Name.

The sun glints off an emblem on the driver's white coat, an award he obtained for driving un-maimed on over one trillion trips.

All of the passengers will have work to do when the bus arrives at the cast-iron gate of the Baron De Hirsch.

They'll clean up the ivy and right all the headstones vandals turned over.

Keeping barbarians at bay, they'll carefully provide comfort and bliss for all the descendants lined up and waiting to board the next bus

-milton p. ehrlich

Waiting for the Shoots from the Shroud

She also dies to be reborn in hallucination.

Her spouse's corpse is wrapped in a white dhoti.

She makes everything safe within the walls, slamming

the windows and doors. Bacteria perform the post-funeral rites

before the burial. A smoldering Frankincense gulps down

the fetid smell. She's one among the multitude who

can't see *Mangalyaan landing on the lap of Mars.

No one can alter the earth's flat shape in her mind.

Her peace feeds on the scraps that a pretentious priest drops.

Her lips rain mantras, yet shoots of life don't sprout from the shroud.

She waits within a circle of illusion.

There's a meaning in meaningless waiting.

—fabiyas mv

*Mangalyaan - India's first Mars mission

A BUMP IN THE ROAD

by stephen greco

26, THE LITERARY HATCHET

Myra was dozing when she felt the bump. Her eyes snapped open like camera shutters. She sprang to an upright position in the passenger seat and turned toward Pete with obvious alarm, asking him in a hushed and apprehensive tone: "What was that?"

"Nothing," he assured his wife. "Nothing. Just a bump in the road." Pete was expressionless, and he maintained his usual firm grip on the steering wheel, with hands at ten and two o'clock. He continued to look straight ahead into the cone of ghostly illumination produced by the headlights, not willing to acknowledge that anything of importance had disturbed their evening journey. But hadn't Myra detected just the tiniest trace of worry in Pete's usually confident tone? And he had said the word *nothing* twice. It was unusual for him to repeat himself.

"No, it wasn't *nothing*," she insisted. "We *hit* something. She turned around and looked through the rear window of their SUV, but the chance of seeing anything back there was zero. It was nine o'clock on a moonless night, and they were traveling on a narrow two-lane highway snaking through the woods. No buildings around, no streetlights, and they hadn't even seen another car for at least five minutes. Just trees and more trees. The woods were so thick and so eager to reclaim the road that it was like traveling through an endless tunnel. She saw only inky blackness behind them.

Myra turned back toward her husband and said, "C'mon Pete, you felt that. It wasn't a pothole either. We ran over something."

"Okay, so we probably hit a branch that was lying in the road," he conceded.

"It didn't feel like a branch. It was more like a muffled sound. A *thumping* sound."

He gave her a half smile and said, "Don't worry about it, Myra. It was probably a skunk. They're nocturnal, they wander around at night. But there are plenty of 'em to go around, the world won't miss that one."

"It wasn't a skunk," replied Myra, getting annoyed now. "I'd have smelled a skunk." She waited for a response, even though her last sentence hadn't been a question. But Pete gave her nothing. He sat in silence, waiting and hoping to see if she would just drop the subject.

Myra looked at Pete's profile. He was handsome with his blue eyes and thick sandy hair, no doubt about it. She hated to admit to herself that maybe his looks were the main reason she'd agreed to marry him five years ago. But her initial enthusiasm at the prospect of a lifetime of marital bliss had started to turn to regret shortly after the honeymoon. Having great sex with a good looking, well-built guy quickly lost its appeal when the other things started to go sour. They married in their early twenties—maybe too young to make a marriage work? The sweet Pete had started to recede not long after the honeymoon, gradually being replaced by the combative Pete, and that's when the arguments had started. He wanted her to quit her job right away in marketing and start having babies, even though they had never discussed the prospect of her being a long-term stayat-home mom when they were engaged. Myra was always thinking that she'd take a maternity leave of a few months, and then go back to her career, perhaps with her mother providing day care. But Pete was having none of that. When she disagreed with him, he treated her like a misguided child. He would inevitably imply that she was immature, and that there was something mentally or emotionally wrong with her—something that should be fixed.

Myra continued to glance sidewise now and then as he drove. He seemed to be making a special effort now to appear calm and confident, which was his usual way of trying to deal with his wife's anxieties. He considered Myra fragile, wondering if she were emotionally unstable. He'd often talk to her slowly, like a therapist, trying to make her concede that she was flawed in some way. She in fact knew she had little anxieties or neuroses—*was the door locked, the oven off, the iron unplugged*? But didn't everyone, to at least some extent, have worries like these? Pete seemed to make a big thing of them, and he would press her that she needed some sort of treatment such as medication.

They both knew their marriage was a troubled one. But this weekend they were taking a little vacation, a three day getaway to a cabin in the woods near a lake. She didn't want to go at first, but Pete pressed her, and he got his way, as he usually did. In the end she'd agreed to the trip, probably just to get him to stop asking. But on some level she hoped that something good would come from it.

They drove on, not speaking. It would take about an hour more before they'd reach the cabin. They'd left their place in Connecticut after getting home from work, but it had taken Myra longer than expected to get ready, or at least longer than *Pete* had expected. As if to drive home the point that he'd been ready long before his wife, he'd stood by the door, watching her and silently stewing as she moved from room to room, throwing things in a suitcase, searching for her laptop charger, her sandals, and half a dozen other things. It was definitely not a good way to start their vacation weekend.

The SUV's interior was silent except for the low, persistent hum of the engine. This stretch of road was straight and level, so the vehicle was working at an even clip, which made the sound annoyingly constant and monotonous. Other than the hum, there was only the tension between them. It hung in the air like a stifling, suffocating fog. Myra bit her fingernails, as she usually did when she was anxious about something.

When Myra could tolerate it no longer, she spoke: "Pete, we have to go back and see what we hit."

"What?" he protested, trying his best to sound flabbergasted at the outrageous suggestion. "You're kidding, right? We're already about five miles past that skunk." "Stop saying it was a skunk, and no, I'm not kidding. What if it was a person?"

"A person?" he scoffed. "Myra, c'mon, I would've seen something as big as a person. I wasn't asleep at the wheel."

"I mean a *small* person, a child, a toddler. There's a campground somewhere back there. What if a child wandered off? What if...?" Her voice trailed off as she considered the horrible possibilities.

"You know, it's coming back to me," Pete said. "I think I *did* see a small animal. Yeah, I'm pretty sure it was a small dog, now that I've had a chance to think about it."

"Don't lie to me!" she snapped. "You just told me you saw *nothing*! And now you say that you're sure it was a dog?"

"Okay, I'm not really sure about it being a dog. All I know is that it was a small animal. So you don't need to worry about it being a person."

"Don't patronize me, I'm not a child!"

Pete let out a long sigh and said, "Look, Myra. You can't be serious about us going all the way back there. You have a problem. You're an obsessive neurotic."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"You heard me, Myra. You have all these anxieties that make you...*do* things weird things like wanting to turn around and go back there. You *know* you have a problem. I went to talk to someone about it."

She turned to him with an accusing look. "Someone? What does *that* mean? You talked to someone about *me*?"

"Yes. A psychologist."

"You went to talk to some stranger about me? About our marriage? Without even consulting me?" she asked, aghast at his disregard for her privacy.

"Not a stranger. A doctor. I went to talk to this doctor about what to do, because I knew you wouldn't agree to go. But you need help."

Myra's expression turned stone cold. She moved away from Pete, positioning her body as close to the door as the seat belt would allow her.

"We'll talk about this later," she said in a hostile tone. "But now, you have to turn around. Immediately."

Pete said nothing. He stared straight ahead, hoping that Myra would lose her resolve and give up.

"Turn around, Pete. Right now!"

"Myra, please!"

Myra was occasionally able to break Pete's combative determination by threatening to do something desperate or outrageous. She decided it was time.

"Turn around or I will get out and walk back there. I'm serious. I'll take the flashlight in the glove compartment and walk." She opened it and rummaged around, pushing her hand behind the disorganized mess of papers. She felt the cold steel of Pete's handgun and shook her head in disbelief that he hadn't gotten rid of it as she'd insisted weeks ago. At some level she wasn't surprised, but this was not the time to argue about that. Her fingers finally found the smooth cylinder of the small flashlight. She withdrew it and snapped it on and then off to check that it was functional, and made sure that Pete saw her do it. It worked, but the beam appeared far too feeble to cope with the coal black darkness outside.

"Stop the car," she ordered. "I'm getting out and going back."

"Myra, please...you can't be serious..."

"If you don't stop the car I'll open the door."

"Now you're talking crazy!"

Pete fumbled for the child lock button on his left armrest but it was too late. Myra pulled at the door latch, opening the door just a crack. She didn't have to tell Pete it was open. He knew it instantly because the cabin noise increased tenfold.

"All right, all right, close the door," he said in a panicky tone. "Geez, you have a real problem, Myra. You just won't admit it. A normal person wouldn't do that. A normal person..."

"Just turn us around," she said.

Pete gave a shrug of resignation. He touched the brake pedal and when Myra felt the car slowing she closed the door.

There were no other headlights visible in either direction on the straight stretch of roadway, so Pete had no problem making a U turn, and in seconds they were heading in the direction they'd come from.

Pete sat rigidly and fumed. He was silent but his body language blared out his annoyance at Myra.

She was focused on what they might discover back where she'd felt the bump. A dog? She wasn't surprised at all that the idea of going back, even if they'd only hit someone's dog, was preposterous to her husband. She remembered the time that she asked Pete to do something about the large rabbit that was eating the lettuce in her garden, thinking that he'd somehow trap it and then release it into the wild. She was sickened by the sight of him coming back into the house holding the baseball bat with a bloody smear on its end... and blood droplets on his chin. Pleased with himself and still clutching the bat, he'd sauntered right over to the fridge and grabbed a beer.

If not a dog, then?...The possibilities raced through Myra's head. She silently prayed that they'd find nothing at all. But then...if that happened, Pete would never let up on her for making him go back. He would never forget this incident, *never* let it drop. He'd torture her with it.

They passed only one vehicle on the way back.

After a few minutes, Pete said in a flustered tone, "I don't even know where it was exactly. I mean, every stretch of this road looks the same. Just trees."

"Slow down," said Myra, as she peered through the windshield. "Are your brights on?"

"Yes, yes, they're on," he snapped.

"Well, it's got to be just up ahead, just past that speed limit sign, because as soon as I opened my eyes after the bump, I remember seeing that sign."

Pete slowed the car until they were crawling along at only five miles an hour.

And then the headlights revealed something in the opposite lane—a dark stain on the asphalt. It was about the size of a football.

"Is that...blood?" asked Myra, visibly shaken.

"I don't think so...but...well, I can't really tell. The colors get distorted under the headlights."

Pete parked on the shoulder and left the engine running and the lights on, pointed at the stain. They got out of the car, and Myra was the first to reach it.

She bent down and touched the stain. It was fresh, wet, sticky.

Myra's eyes were wide with fear. "It's definitely blood," she stammered.

"Okay, so we hit a dog or something. That's what I already told you."

"A dog doesn't wear sneakers," Myra said, as she pointed toward the shoulder of the road, about ten feet away from where they stood. Lying on its side was a tiny blue sneaker, a toddler's size.

They both walked over to it. Pete spoke first, and even though the sight of the sneaker had unnerved him, as it had Myra, he tried to sound confident. "Look, Myra, don't jump to all kinds of crazy conclusions. There's no blood on this sneaker. Some kid probably just tossed it out of an open car window."

"Right near this blood stain? That's quite a coincidence," she insisted.

Myra was shaking. She closed her eyes for a few seconds, willing herself to stay calm. When she opened them, she walked back to the bloodstain and noticed that leading away from the stain to the shoulder of the road there was a spotty trail of blood.

"Look at this trail," she said to Pete. "Maybe he crawled...or was dragged or carried, to the side of the road." They went to the shoulder and saw that the trail led onto the grass and then stopped. Next to the stopping point there were tire tracks. The grass was very obviously pressed down by a heavy vehicle, and one tire had gone through a mud puddle, which held a tire impression.

"It's a big, off-road vehicle with enormous tires," said Pete. "Judging by the distance between the two front tires, maybe a Hummer." He pulled out his cell phone and took several pictures of the tire track in the mud.

Myra said, "Someone stopped here, picked up the toddler, put him in their vehicle, then drove him away. Probably to the nearest hospital, which I think is in the next town, Beldon. It should be less than twenty minutes away, in the direction we were originally headed."

"Geez, Myra, will you stop saying toddler? We don't know that it was a toddler. It could have been a dog. Someone could have spotted it, and decided to take it to a vet. But...I was doing about thirty five through here. If we hit a small dog with the front bumper of the car, it would be...well, dead."

Myra shook her head, unwilling yet to confront that possibility. "Maybe the child was lying down in the road. Maybe we just hit him with the undercarriage. Our SUV is high off the ground. There's a chance..."

Her voice trailed off and then after a few seconds she spoke again, this time decisively. "We have to find out. We're going to that hospital."

Myra didn't wait for Pete to raise an objection. She scooped up the little blue sneaker from the road and went back to their vehicle. Pete followed, and with Myra's back to him, he quickly bent down at the rear of the SUV and shined the flashlight at the undercarriage. He saw blood spatter on the bottom of the rear bumper. Myra hadn't noticed his hasty inspection, and he decided not to tell her about it.

They drove in silence, both consumed by their worries, gestating their fears. There was nothing to say until they had more information. Myra cradled the tiny sneaker in her hand.

It was easy to find the hospital in Beldon since it was the most prominent building on Main Street. As they approached it they could see a lighted sign pointing to the emergency room. Pete parked near the ER entrance, exited the vehicle quickly and ran around to Myra's side. As she opened her door, he grabbed it and stopped her from getting out.

"Myra, wait. We can't just go in there and say that we think we hit some kid. Think of the ... well, look, please, I'll just go in and see if I can find out what's going on without saying anything about our...possible involvement. Let me handle it. I'll find out if any accident victims were brought in, and then I'll come right back here and tell you."

Pete's mind was racing. If Myra agreed to let him go in alone, he wondered if he could get away with just walking in and then walking right out, and telling Myra that there were no accident victims tonight. Would she buy it? Did she trust him now? And could he live without finding out himself, and just drive away? But he didn't have to decide because Myra said simply in a monotone: "I'm going in." She pushed the door open, skirted around Pete and walked toward the entrance.

"Myra, please," he pleaded.

She ignored him and continued at a steady pace toward the door. Pete considered restraining her, but he didn't know what he'd do if she started screaming, and she just *might* in her current state. And then someone would hear, and probably come out, and maybe the whole situation would spiral out of his control.

Pete caught up to Myra and they entered the building together. The interior was all sterile white walls, depressingly devoid of any pictures or decorations. The stagnant air was tinged with the scents of lemon cleaner and antiseptic. As they approached the admitting desk, Pete sped up and reached the duty nurse first. She was a friendly middle aged woman with a pleasant smile.

Pete began his ruse: "Uh, hi, I got a call a little while ago saying that my mother-in-law was having some chest pains and went to the ER. I thought it was this one...but maybe it was a different hospital." Pete looked to the side of the ER waiting room, where two cops were talking to one of the staff, a bearded man in his twenties wearing green scrubs.

The nurse answered, "We haven't had anyone here with chest pains this evening, sir. But if you'll give me her name, I'll check our system anyway in case they bypassed the ER and admitted her." "Name? Uh, Carol Jenkins," answered Pete.

The nurse went to the terminal and began typing.

"Say, why are the police here?" asked Pete, trying to sound politely conversational. "Did somebody get shot or stabbed or something? I wouldn't expect those things to happen in a friendly town like this."

Her smile instantly disappeared and her expression turned to one of grief. She shook her head gravely: "Hit and run, sir. A little boy who ran away and apparently wandered onto the road. Very sad, he didn't make it. And they don't know who did it. The parents aren't here yet."

Pete nodded sympathetically, hoping that the nurse didn't catch any signs of shock in his eyes and doubly hoping that Myra wouldn't let out a scream. When he turned around to check on her, he saw that her eyes were wide with anguish. He expected that the scream might erupt from her lips momentarily, unless she fainted first, but instead she grabbed his arm and pulled him back away from the desk, out of the nurse's earshot.

Myra opened her mouth, but Pete cut her off and spoke first, in a careful whisper with his back to the nurse.

"Myra, listen to me, just listen. There is just no point in telling the cops. No good will come of it because we can't bring the boy back Myra, we can't. I wish we could, but it's not possible. And if we tell the cops, it could ruin us. It's a hit and run, we left the scene, so that's a felony. We didn't mean to leave, but we did. The little boy's life is over, yes, but now you've got to think of us, of our lives, of our future kids."

She shook her head slowly. "No, Pete, no. We *have* to tell them what happened."

His mind raced. He glanced over at the two cops on the far side of the room. There was no way he was going to jail for this, no way. If Myra insisted on telling the cops, then what were his choices?

He continued: "Myra, I'm as torn up about this as you are, and I'll think about this every day for the rest of my life. But I'm telling you, no good will come from telling the cops."

He thought, *There is no way in hell I'm ever going to tell them. And if Myra is determined to tell...*

There was the gun in the glove compartment. And he always had his bare hands.

He thought, Please, Myra, just say you won't tell. Make me believe that you'll never tell. Please don't make me do it, because I am NOT going to jail.

Please don't make me do it Myra. Please don't make me do it.

"Pete. What's happened to you? What kind of person have you become?" she asked him in a pleading tone, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"I'm just thinking about this logically, Myra. I want what's best for us. For *you*."

"Sir?" the nurse called to Pete. He turned toward her. "Our system is having problems, sir." The frustration was evident in her voice. Her gaze moved back and

forth between Pete and her computer screen. "Can you wait for....Oh, looks like it's coming back online now." She began typing again.

Pete turned back toward Myra, but she was gone. His first panicky glance was to his left, toward the cops, but she wasn't there. Then toward the right...and he saw her walking toward the doors that led to the ER treatment area.

"I don't see any Carol Jenkins in the registry, sir. So perhaps your mother-inlaw went to the next closest hospital, which is about twenty miles from here, in Clifton." The nurse raised her head and noticed Myra about to enter the double doors. She said to Pete, "Sir, your wife can't go in there. No visitors are allowed in there."

"I'm sorry, she has... um... emotional problems, neurotic obsessions. She feels compelled to check herself, to make sure her mother's not in there. I'll get her."

Pete started to go after his wife, but the nurse said to him, "Please stop sir, don't go in there, I'll get her." Myra pushed through the doors, and was followed in about ten seconds by the nurse. They both re-emerged shortly, the nurse leading a dazed Myra by the arm and escorting her back to Pete.

The nurse pulled Pete aside slightly and whispered to him, "I'm sorry about what she saw in there, sir. The little boy I spoke of. His body was covered but there was lots of blood around. Does she need treatment, sir? A sedative? It's possible that I can get a doctor to prescribe..."

"No, no she'll be fine. We've got to get going to that other hospital. Thanks."

Myra appeared to be almost in a trance now. Pete took her arm and quickly walked her out. He had to get her out of the ER before the parents of that boy arrived and the hysterics started. No telling how Myra would react to that scene. Glancing over at the cops, he saw that they were still talking to the young man in the hospital scrubs, and they apparently hadn't noticed the commotion at the nurse's desk.

When they reached the car, Pete gently stood Myra against the passenger door and said, "Myra? Are you okay?"

Without breaking her blank stare, she said in a dazed and tortured whisper: "Oh, my God, oh my God... I saw the other blue sneaker... on a table with his clothes...and so much blood...so much blood."

Myra went silent again which made Pete think that she might be slipping into some kind of mental shock.

He put his hands on his wife's shoulders and gently moved her compliant frame so he could open the passenger door. While she was standing and still facing him, he quickly reached behind her, opened the glove compartment, extracted the gun and slipped it into his jacket pocket, out of Myra's field of vision even though he saw that her eyes were glazed. He softly closed the compartment, and then gently eased her down into the seat. Pete buckled Myra in, shut her door, and then got himself situated in the driver's seat.

As long as she was quiet for now, he had something he needed to take care of immediately.

He took out his phone, tapped it for about twenty seconds, and then placed it

on the center console. After driving for a few minutes following the voice directions from the phone, he pulled into the parking lot of a do-it-yourself car wash. It was open and fully automated, with no attendant on duty. Pete pulled into one of the bays, inserted some cash in the slot, and then grabbed the pressure hose. He bent down and sprayed the undercarriage and the wheel wells of the car with the warm soapy water, taking about three minutes to do a thorough job. And then for good measure he also washed the entire surface of the car. Pete glanced at Myra now and then, the water rolling down the windshield distorting her pretty features, and making her hair appear to be waving in the wind. She seemed to Pete to be completely out of it. Her eyes were wide open but she showed no emotion at all.

Before Pete put the pressure hose back he quickly scoured the cement floor of the bay, so that anything that had come off the car would go down the sewer drain. Finally satisfied, he jumped back into the car and pulled out into the street.

"Myra, are you okay?" he asked again. "Myra?"

She said nothing and didn't move. Pete doubted she was taking in anything he said, but he continued to talk to her anyway.

"Okay, Myra, we're going to the cabin now, and we'll do our weekend vacation, just like we planned. And it'll be all right, Myra, I swear it will be, you'll see, everything will be fine."

Shit, he thought. I hope she comes out of this, but even if she does, how am I gonna be sure that she'll never, ever, in her entire life, say anything about this?

I'll be alone with her for three days at the cabin. I'll talk to her all weekend and then I'll have to make a judgement after those three days. I'll have to decide if she'll stay silent...and if I think she won't...

We'll be near a lake...a very large, very deep lake...

Myra, please don't make me do it, please...

They were almost out of town now and

"GEEZUZ!" Pete yelled, slamming on the brakes as he came to a strip mall.

There it was. The Hummer, parked right in front of ... the Veterinary Emergency Care Clinic of Central New York.

Tires squealing, Pete pulled into the parking lot. The Hummer was the only vehicle in front of the clinic. He parked the SUV in the space to the left of the Hummer and then gave his wife a terse order: "Myra, stay here, I need to check out this Hummer." She remained silent and motionless.

Pete saw that no one was in or near the Hummer even though the driver's side window was open. He examined all four of the Hummer's tires, glancing up now and then at the clinic door and the surrounding parking lot to make sure that no one could see him doing his inspection. Pete compared the tires to the pictures of the tire impression in the mud that he had taken with his cell phone. He saw that the tread pattern was a match, and one of the tires even had a cut in the tread that exactly matched the pictures.

He went back to his SUV, leaned in and said to his wife, "That's definitely it, Myra; the tires match the pictures I took. I'm going in to find out more, just wait here."

Pete walked quickly into the building, where an attractive young woman was sitting behind an enormous grey desk. She smiled and said, "Good evening, sir, how can I help you?"

"Hi, I think the guy who owns that green Hummer out there is a friend of mine. I was driving by and saw it parked and I was wondering if there was anything wrong with his dog. I gave him his dog as a pup. He's not answering his cell."

The woman glanced at her terminal and said, "The man driving that Hummer is named Ethan Davies. And he brought a small dog in here, but it wasn't his. He found it lying in the road, bleeding. Is Mister Davies your friend? Because he's back there in a treatment room, and his son is with him, the cutest little boy, crying over a dog that he never knew before tonight. You can also go back there if you wish."

"He found... a bleeding dog?"

"Yes, sir. But the dog was unfortunately too badly injured. We had to euthanize it. He and the boy were comforting the dog as it was put to sleep. Would you like to go back there with them, sir?"

"Actually, Mr. Davies sounds like a good man, but I don't know him. I thought there was only one green Hummer around here, but I guess I'm wrong. Sad to hear about the dog that got hit, but I'm relieved to know that it's not my friend's dog. Thanks."

Pete walked out with a smile of sheer relief on his face and a slight bounce in his step. He felt like giving himself a high five.

He got into the car and said in a cheery tone, "Myra, it was a dog I hit, I was right! Everything's going to be fine, thank God. We can forget all about this and have a relaxing weekend. That blue sneaker you saw in the ER—just a coincidence. Lots of little kids probably have blue sneakers like those!"

Myra didn't respond or even look at her husband, but Pete was too relieved to try and bring Myra out of her mental difficulties right now. He first wanted to leave this parking lot and this town, and get to the tranquility of the cabin. He felt as if a massive weight had been lifted from him, with the realization that he hadn't taken a child's life... And what the hell was I thinking before, how could I have even considered that I could hurt Myra, my own wife? My God, I must have been crazed, completely out of my mind! We'll work it all out. Somehow we'll work out our marital problems, I know we will. I'll get her to snap out of it, and we'll have the whole peaceful weekend to talk about everything.

As Pete turned his head to the left to back the car out of the parking space, Myra very deftly grabbed his phone from where he always kept it on the center console and quickly hid it beneath her jacket. As she looked up she caught a glimpse of the man heading back to his Hummer. He held the hand of an adorable little boy, about three years old, who had tears in his eyes. And the boy was wearing just one blue sneaker, his other foot covered by only a soiled sock.

Actually, Myra had seen a pair of *white* sneakers on the table by the other little boy in the ER, next to his blood-stained clothes.
Myra sat silently and wondered how long it would take for the cops to pull them over. Not too long, she guessed, since she'd given them the plate number of their SUV. She'd made the call when Pete was in the vet clinic. He would surely claim that they were never on the road where that poor little boy had died in a hit and run that no one had witnessed, but she was fairly sure that once they arrested Pete they would close the case and look no further, since Pete would probably be a perfect villain to these rural police—he's from out of town, a stock broker from the big city, and with a loaded gun in his pocket, no less.

Yes, she'd heard the unmistakable sound of the glove compartment opening and closing.

And Pete's story about hitting a dog? Well, she'd deny that they were ever on that road where they'd felt the bump. And if he went on and on about the little blue sneaker they'd picked up as proof, then they would brand him a liar for sure because, after wiping her fingerprints from it, she'd tossed it through the open window of the Hummer. It now rested near the toddler car seat she'd seen in there, on the floor next to the little boy's jacket. And the cops would certainly be able to tell that Pete had washed the car recently, by just examining it, and also by checking the security camera video from the car wash. But Pete would be amazed to hear that he'd missed a small spot. Right under the rear bumper, the police would find a smear of the dead child's blood, right where Myra had put it when Pete was in the vet clinic, using the piece of bloody gauze that she'd taken from the waste can by the boy's body.

So...Pete was wrong. He said that no good would come of telling the cops. But some good would *definitely* come of it. Involuntary manslaughter, leaving the scene of a crime, and destruction of evidence to cover up a crime. And the weapons charge, too, which was serious stuff. He had a license to carry a handgun in Connecticut, but not in New York. All those charges would get him out of her life for at least a few years.

That was the good that would come of it.

Myra turned her body away from Pete. She stared out the window for a few seconds and then brought her focus down to Pete's phone, where a few hidden taps erased the pictures of the tire impression forever.

Her gaze moved upward again. A steely cold rain began to patter the windshield as she heard the siren slowly increase in volume behind them.



INSIDE THE THRESHOLD

looming shadows of fear alone

burrow deep entomb womb breed

always waiting uninvited guests lurking unanswered phantasms fatal fantasies

unwanted unwanted

a two-part—undesirable—joining of un-penitent offspring's born of endless nocturnal meanders behind glass apertures plates of porcelain frozen dinners

decades cascade like Niagara seeking the sea

spawned—sprawling awake—across a cross spurned lying on owned sheets of Egyptian cotton

alone

—deborah guzzi



He watches her unfurl her living presence, peeling away the barrier between

them unfiltered by a lens. She is his to control through the secret outrage

of his transgressive curiosity; there is always the terror of uncertainty

in the attempt to connect with others in the naked light of reality.

Instead, he beats a gelid retreat to the safety of orbit at the

periphery and imagines her yielding to his desire, this time giving herself

to him freely, not the tortured song of a beautiful bird trapped in a cage

or the muffled screams that blossom from lips in an offering of a decadent

bouquet. A succession of forbidden, phantasmagoric images flash

through his mind, each etched into his brain with seeming finality, to be replayed

and savored until the strength of their echo wanes and his eyes again grow

restless to satisfy the craving of the hunt for other prey to haunt from afar.

—allan rozinski

REVELATIONS

by kristina r. mosley

Michael shut off the engine. "This is the last house for the day, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yes," his wife Brenda replied. "It's getting hot." She checked her makeup in the rearview mirror. *Everything looks fine*, she thought. *Not too little, not too much*. Then she reached up and smoothed her bleached blonde hair. She centered the small golden cross of her necklace so that it hung against her cream-colored blouse.

Her husband pulled a plastic comb from his shirt pocket and ran it through his brown hair, leaving teeth marks behind. "Okay, let's go." He slid the comb back into his pocket.

Brenda got two black Bibles out of the glove box. She then opened the passenger door and swung her legs out. "Don't forget to lock up the car."

"I won't," Michael sighed.

She got out of the black sedan and shut the door behind her. There was a click as the door locked. Michael stood beside the car, straightening his black tie and patting down his white, short-sleeved dress shirt. *I wish he'd at least wear a longsleeved shirt*, Brenda thought. *I know it's hot*, *but the short sleeves look too casual*. *This is important*. She looked at the black knee-length skirt and matching blazer she wore. *I portray the right image*.

A cartoonish frog mailbox greeted the couple as they walked away from their car. The white-hot July sun bleached out the bright greens and blues. Someone had crudely painted the name "R. Varner" on the side of the mailbox in deep red paint.

"Oh, I know who this is," Brenda said. "My grandma told me about her."

"What'd she say?"

"She had a bit of a...loose reputation when she was younger. Would go out with one man on Friday night and another on Saturday."

"I see."

Brenda's two-inch heels sank into the dry ground as she and her husband walked toward an old white trailer. The wind chimes hanging from the weathered gray roof were silent. As they walked, they dodged the lawn ornaments littering the yard. They wandered past birdbaths, frog statues, and iridescent gazing balls. A two-foot-tall wooden angel stood by the porch steps. It was blond, rosy-cheeked, and wore a red robe. Brenda thought it looked like a Christmas decoration, not something that should be out in the middle of summer.

The couple stepped onto the porch, their footsteps echoing in the still day. Michael raised his hand to knock on the glass storm door.

"Wait a minute," Brenda said, handing the bibles to her husband. "What?"

She reached up and straightened his tie.

After a few moments, he batted her hand way. "It's fine," he grumbled. "Let's just get this over with."

"Well, you don't sound very excited to spread the word of God."

"I'm sorry. I'm just hot and tired." Michael knocked on the door.

A few moments later, the wooden inner door opened. A short, stocky woman stood in the doorway. Her hair was dyed auburn. Her green eyes were heavily lined in black, and bright blue eyeshadow sat on the wrinkled lids. She wore bright red lipstick and too much blush. Heavy foundation sunk into the nooks and crannies of her face. "Can I help y'all?" she asked in a husky, cigarette-stained voice.

"Good afternoon," Brenda said, stepping in front of her husband. "My name is Brenda Foreman, and this is my husband, Michael."

"I'm Rose Varner," the old woman interrupted.

"Uh, yes. We're from the Church of God in Christ Holiness. We would like to talk to you about our Lord and Savior."

Rose tilted her head to the side, like she was listening to something. "Why the hell not? I ain't got nothin' else to do."

The Foremans followed the elderly woman into her trailer. Rose's pink and purple floral muumuu swayed as she limped on her cane. A blast of cold air hit Brenda in the face. *Thank the Lord for air conditioning*, she thought. She looked around the trailer. Old family photos hung on the dark wood-paneled walls. The living room was lined with shelves of whatnots, most of them angels and frogs.

"Please, sit down," Rose said, gesturing to a burgundy floral couch. "Y'all want somethin' to drink?"

"No, thank you," Brenda replied politely.

"That would be wonderful," Michael said. "May I get some water, please?" Rose nodded and hobbled to the kitchen.

Brenda elbowed her husband. "What are you doing?" she sneered.

"I'm thirsty."

"We don't know if she's trustworthy."

"Do you think she's going to poison me?"

"It's possible."

He rolled his eyes. "You're paranoid."

"We're persecuted."

"Honey, no one in this town is against us being Christians, okay?"

Brenda then rolled her eyes.

Rose came back and handed Michael a glass of ice water. He took a sip and set it on a coaster on the maple coffee table in front of him. Brenda watched her husband out of the corner of her eye to make sure he didn't keel over.

The old woman walked over to a burgundy recliner and sat down. She released the footrest and propped up her legs. "Sorry 'bout bein' so casual," she said. "I got bum legs. Worked at the old wallet factory for thirty years. Been on my feet too much in my life."

That's not the only body part you've spent too much time on, from what I've heard, Brenda thought.

"That's quite all right, ma'am," Michael replied. "We want you to be comfortable. Don't we, dear?" He turned to his wife.

"Yes, yes we do."

"Well, in that case . . ." Rose said, trailing off. There was a pack of cigarettes on the end table next to her. She removed one, stuck it in her mouth, and lit it. She took a drag, the fire glowing in the dimness of the trailer. "So, what did you want to talk about?" she asked, blowing the smoke out of the side of her mouth.

"I guess I can start by asking some questions to see what you believe."

"Okay." She took another drag.

Michael opened up his Bible and took out a folded piece of paper. He unfolded it and smoothed out the crease. "Okay, here's a question," he said. "Do you want to go to Heaven?"

Rose snorted, and smoke shot from her nose. "Of course I do. That's a dumb question, ain't it?"

Brenda grunted and took the list of questions away from her husband. "Here's a better question," she said, glaring at Michael. "Do you accept the Holy Bible as the word of God?"

"Yup."

Brenda smiled, thinking she would have a pretty easy job. "That's what we like to hear. I have another question."

"Shoot," Rose replied, extinguishing her cigarette in the green ceramic ashtray on the end table.

"Do you currently attend church services?"

"I haven't been in a church in twenty-five years," she bragged.

"Why not?"

"Never thought it was necessary."

"What about the commandment to remember the Sabbath, to keep it holy?" Michael asked.

"You can remember the Sabbath without going to church."

"But God likes it when we go to church," Brenda said like she was talking to a child.

"How do you know what God likes?" Rose asked, her voice free of sarcasm. "Does He talk to you?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"Hmm," the old woman muttered. "He talks to me, too."

"Well, God talks to all of His children, when they pray and ask for guidance." "I don't have to pray."

Michael and Brenda looked at each other for a few moments.

"What do you mean?" the man asked.

"God tells me things from time to time. Sometimes it's not important, but a lot of times it is."

"What has He told you recently?"

"Well, when y'all came to my door," Rose said, turning to Brenda, "God told me about you."

"He did?"

"From what He said, you were pretty busy in college. You went to that church school over in Rowe, right?"

"Y-Yes, ma'am." What is she talking about? Brenda wondered.

"You stepped out on poor Michael with one of your teachers. Got yourself in trouble. You couldn't sleep in the bed you made, so you went where no one knew you, had it taken care of."

Brenda's stomach sank. *How does she know that? I didn't tell anyone.* She didn't say anything.

"Is that true?" Michael asked.

"How dare you?" Brenda gasped. "You would really believe what this woman says?"

"Now, Brenda," Rose began, "God likes it when we tell the truth."

"Is this why we can't have children?" Michael asked. "You told me the doctor said there was something wrong with your . . . *lady parts*," he said, whispering the last two words.

"There is somethin' wrong with 'em," the old woman said. "Doctor didn't know what he was doin', and he messed her up."

"I can't believe you would do something like that."

Rose spoke again. "Don't be too upset with her. You had some fun in college, too."

"What's she talking about, Michael?" Brenda asked quietly.

"Should I tell her about Davey?"

"Who's Davey?" The wife turned to the husband.

"He was just a friend."

"He's still a friend," Rose said from her recliner.

"What?" the blonde woman shrieked. "If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination!"

"Thou shalt not kill!" Michael screamed back.

"I hope y'all rolled up your windows," Rose muttered. The trailer grew darker as clouds formed outside. The wind chimes outside clinked against each other. Thunder rumbled in the distance.

Brenda looked at Rose, shaking her head. "No, it's impossible. God's not speaking to you. Why would He?"

"Why's it so hard to believe, Brenda? God spoke to the prophets, spoke to Jesus, didn't He? He speaks to you, doesn't He?"

The younger woman was silent.

"Doesn't He?" Rose barked. Lightning flashed, followed by a crash of thunder. "Yes, ma'am."

"So, He's perfectly capable of speakin' to me. You don't believe it, though, because I ain't one of the precious little sheep, givin' ten percent too corrupted by power to remember God's word. You don't believe me because I don't sit in hard wooden pews for two hours Sunday mornin', singin' 'Holy, Holy, Holy', while thinkin' 'bout how I'm gonna stab my fellow man in the back come Sunday night. That's why you don't believe me."

Thunder boomed louder this time. Brenda saw the water in Michael's glass shake. Rain began to fall outside, quickly, heavily. The sound was deafening. The wind chimes rang out like alarm bells.

Rose glared at Brenda and Michael. "God's angry," she shouted above the rain. "He's angry with everyone who uses His name to lie, to hate, to steal, to kill. He's angry with those who claim to speak for Him."

Brenda's breath quickened. She could imagine the rain knocking down the roof, killing all of them. *Is Rose doing this? Or is she . . . right?* she wondered.

Lightning flashed next to the picture window. Thunder shook the trailer. Rose sat unfazed.

"We need to go," Brenda said. She jumped off the couch and ran to the door.

"Wait for me!" Michael yelled, following his wife. The couple rushed out into the rain, leaving the main door open. The storm door slammed shut behind them.

Rose shuffled to the doorway and poked her head out. The Foremans were already in their car. Michael started the engine, and the car screeched down the road.

"Have a blessed day!" Rose called after them.

THE LAST MAN ON EARTH

His head is on fire in a terrible fright. Smoke can be seen wafting out of his ears. The stink of desiccated arms, legs, breasts and bellies is everywhere.

The pith of his soul trembles what kind of chicanery have the politicos done to us?

He's surrounded by deafening silence, smothered dreams, and a tarnished mirror revealing the many faces of death.

His world is empty and unused as a saloon spittoon, in a landscape bare as a banker's bald head.

A wind blows hundred dollar bills through the leaves of barren trees. Gold Kruggerands bounce along deserted sidewalks and streets.

There's no live fish left in the sea, no corn standing in desolate fields, and not a drop of water to drink.

He tries an Ojibway's rain dance, grunting—whoha, heeho, hahhah to the beat of stone on stone.

He's so lonely, he forgets how to cry all he can do is bang his head against what's left of a Bank of America safe.

He used to think he was the loneliest man on earth. Now he knows it to be true.

All he wants to do is search for the love of a woman even a friend will do. He longs for the perfumed air of the past, and promises to love those who don't love back.

-milton p. ehrlich

The Thief

They intrude even into his kitchen, hunting.

Now they loot fruits, nuts, spices, herbs, honey-combs... Yet he tells them about a *Black Vasa's medicinal miracle.

They come again, strip the forest of the flora and fauna and construct resorts and duplexes. He's driven away like a mongoose. On the top of a bare hill, he hunches with an empty stomach-pot.

As he takes some rice from their sack, they collar him and beat him brutally, calling THIEF!

Media cook his corpse.

Remember he was an Adivasi, the original inhabitant, yet he'd to live muted in a desert within the forest.

*Black Vasa – a medicinal plant used in the treatment of arthritis, asthma etc.

—fabiyas mv

LOOK AWAY DIXILAND

Oh, I wish I was in the land of cotton! The calves' skin on the wing chair sings, stretching tautly over the batten down. *Down the hatches, sir!* Slurs the tongue-tied, covered button soaked in drying Gin and Tonic. Rope twine hung onto the coiled springs as Scarlett landed her corseted posterior onto the cushion.

It's a Wonderful Life, George, Scarlett slurs. The red leather-Queen Ann chair set off her ensemble. Her flaming red nails curled over the rolled leather and brass studs of the chair's arms. She reaches for the tall frosted glass on the mahogany side table, eyeing the lime. Her George often reminds her of Jimmy Steward but in today's heat, he seems more like Peck's Atticus.

Scarlett's cabbage rose sundress supports her poker-straight spine with fanned darts beneath her recently plumped breasts. The dress gathers at her waist and drapes her elegant knees. Having already had Mimosa's at brunch, she was tired and tipsy. The drink misses her mouth and another dollop mines the chair.

Ole times there are not forgotten. (The batten hums.) The golden-locks of an America's pin-up dream splay upon the headrest. Her heart beats to a drummer's rhythm. Her head lolls backward.

The batten chimes, Look away, look away, look away Dixieland.

The TV is playing one of her self-indulgent favorites *Cool Hand Luke* and as the pitter-patter of her heart diminishes, she mutters along ...

Only bastards and cream rise, George.

And since, she is neither; she heads south, a doleful beauty, dying in the arms of a dead calf.

—deborah guzzi

getting into heaven

Behind closed steel doors, I hear Milt Jackson playing *The nearness of you* on his vibraphone.

Heaven is sold out standing room only. Scalpers selling tickets approach me— *I tell them, my soul is not for sale.*

I plead, let me in, let me in! In the 50's I tithed 10% of my yearly income to SANE.

Nobody ever, ever, ever, had a bad word to say about me. I've spent my life helping others untangle their knots.

I've earned front row seats.

My best friend once confessed he saw God after he crashed his car. Moments before he died, we asked him for his impression of God, and, he whispered,

Well, first of all — she's black.

-milton p. ehrlich



—"cocoon feeders" by denny marshall

A Start

Tom counted eight things terribly wrong with his life—not counting the numerous small items like a cancelled dental insurance policy, non-payment, the need to replace the bald tires on his truck, no spare, out of shape, brown hair noticeably thinning, no new clothes in years, and an empty refrigerator. But the big things: fired from his job for missing too many days, girlfriend left him because he told her he was \$40,000 in debt, mother and father not talking to him after he got arrested for drug possession, the pending jail sentence for drug possession, non-payment of rent on his studio apartment, black-out spells, friends all left him because he couldn't afford the drugs anymore, and alone in the universe.

Yep, he smiled to himself, *I am pathetic*. Suicide was always an option, but he didn't like the squishiness of a bullet to the brain, and besides he hadn't given up on life yet. Just turned 40, saggy cheeks but still semi-handsome, and he could fake money at a bar. More women out there than he could count, and he could always start exercising.

Monica, she said her name was. She sat on a bar stool like she was a cake mix on a grocery shelf. For sale. Tom smiled. His teeth were crooked and they hurt sometimes, plus he had a bridge on the right side that was loose. Tonight, though, she wouldn't know.

"Monica's a nice name," he said to be saying something. Tom smiled. There was no way of getting around his old beat-up truck when she saw that, but in the bar he might have been driving a Cadillac.

"Monica Denise," she said. She hadn't smiled yet. A potato in a dark dress, greasy dirty-blonde hair, flat. But female.

"Tom Abernathy Jones. The Abernathy was my mother's family name. Tom A. Jones I go by.

by john flynn

You look tense. Something wrong?"

"Everything. You know."

"Yeah. I know."

He liked the discouraged voice. This was going to work out.

So that when she looked around his apartment two hours later Monica looked resigned. He had the furniture the apartment came with. Also there were a few pictures his parents gave him before they shut him off: the Eiffel Tower, Elvis, a high school football game but not at his high school.

"Want a beer?"

"Sure."

She didn't react to any of his touches. He took off the dress almost in one motion. Fat and skinny at the same time. Stomach folds, boney legs. Hell. They were naked in five minutes, and she just laid there on the carpet. She didn't even groan. Done in three minutes.

"Let's go to bed," he said.

"I got to get back to my car. Got to get up early for church."

"Sure."

After he had dropped her off, he felt good. This was going to be his last woman before his jail cell. At least he had something to remember, her spread boney thighs, the flat chest with the nipples, the smell.

Things are looking up, Tom thought, sitting the next morning on the sofa with a cup of coffee. *Life is good sometimes*. He'd forgotten to get her phone number or any other way of contacting Monica, but she was likely to be at that bar next Saturday or Saturday when he got out of prison. A start. That's all he needed—a start.



CONTACT

He touches what he thinks might be the boundary of himself for a moment before the next act begins. His performance always needs the catalyst of friction & the art of fiction, with enough glue to hold it together through the scene.

He loses his grip, groping blindly for contact, until the bellows of sweet paranoia stoke him like a raging fire that tempers the hard knife-edge of purpose, now at the ready to respond to suspicions of the presence of a threat around each corner & a plot behind every closed door.

His heart is full & seething, occupied with tracking the elusive movement of flitting, shadowy things that dart and disappear in the hidden recesses of his mind's dark terrain, the inner landscape seemingly bathed in the ominous glow cast by a slivery, watching moon.

—allan rozinski

NOTHING BUT SILENCE

Nothing but silence. Pale and naked. I am lying down on the dust of the desert, See the vultures block the sunshine, Waiting for the death knell to be tolled. I feel the soft corpus wraps around my body Like any ivy plant, The mesmerizing eyes gaze deeply into mine. Going deep down into my body, Snakes pierce me. I feel the pain and the pleasure of The warm pungent venom in my veins. Unable to move, I'm getting frozen My body shattered like a glass, Turned to dust. Wiped away by the wind. And there is still nothing But silence.

—yasmin hemmat

SOMEBODY SOMEWHERE

by allen kopp

I was standing at the window. Inside it was still winter but outside it was spring. The sky was blue, trees and flowers were budding, the sun was shining, and birds were singing. Miss Deloite, the woman with the delightful hanging mole on her upper lip, came up behind me. I heard her shoes squeaking on the floor and then smelled her particular sharp smell.

"You shouldn't be wandering the halls," she said.

I ignored her but as she walked away I turned and stuck out the tip of my tongue at her and she turned into a puff of blue smoke. You can't know how satisfying it is to turn an annoying woman into a puff of blue smoke.

I went back to the room that I had come to identify as my own and lay on my back on the bed and looked up at the ceiling. I knew there was something wrong with me but I couldn't remember what it was. I couldn't even remember what place I was in. Oh, well. If it mattered at one time, it didn't matter much anymore.

I heard somebody coming and picked up a magazine and opened it and pretended to be reading. I wanted to look busy so nobody would ask me questions or try to engage me in conversation.

It was Theo, all dressed in white as usual. If I saw him in any other color, I wouldn't recognize him.

"Where's Miss Deloite?" he asked. "She said she was coming in here to help you with your bath."

"I'm perfectly capable of taking a bath on my own without any female assistance," I said, not looking up from the page.

I should probably have told him I just turned her into a puff of smoke but I decided to let him figure it out on his own. He should feel lucky that I didn't do the same to him.

I crossed my ankles and wished I had a cigarette, and in came Louie from next door. He was wearing a lady's red kimono with colorful dragons. I didn't like Louie and I let him know it. "What makes you think you can just barge into my room any time you feel like it, Louie? I'm supposed to be taking a bath."

"I already took mine."

"I'm so happy for you."

"Do you have any candy?"

"If I did, I wouldn't give it to you."

"That's not very nice."

"Shouldn't you be having your nails done or something?"

"I'm going to tell Miss Deloite you were snotty to me," Louie said.

"You'll be telling it to a puff of blue smoke."

"What?"

Before Louie could annoy me any further, I raised my eyebrows and turned him into a little spider. I laughed as I watched him run on his touchingly small legs across the floor to the wall. He crawled up the wall to the ceiling and looked at me.

"You're a medical phenomenon," I said.

I was thinking about taking a nap, for lack of anything better to do, when Theo came back, bearing clean towels.

"Since Miss Deloite is temporarily not to be found," he said, "I'm going to help you with your bath."

"I already told you I don't need help with a bath," I said.

"Stand up now and take off your clothes, or I'll do it for you."

"I don't want to take off my clothes for you any more than I do for Miss Deloite."

"Do you want me to go get Stan and Sylvia?"

"Oh, please! Not Stan and Sylvia! I can't tell them apart. Oh, I remember now. Sylvia's the one with the mustache, isn't she?"

"Cut the comedy now. Stand up."

"Theo, I don't like your tone of voice!" I said. "It's not a polite way to speak to a man who isn't well."

He came at me with the intention of pulling me off the bed by my arm, but before he knew what was happening I raised my index finger at him and turned him into a blue jay.

Now, I had always thought the blue jay a most attractive bird, even though people said he was mean and liked to eat carrion.

Theo flapped his blue wings a couple of times and flew up to the ceiling and ate the tiny spider Louie in one gulp. Louie didn't even have time to try to get away.

"Good bird!" I said.

He flew around the room a couple of times, bumping painfully into the walls until I stood up and opened the window for him. He didn't have to be coaxed to fly out. Then he was away over the treetops.

"Be well!" I called to him.

I lay down again. I did not want to take a bath and would be just as obstinate about it as I needed to be. I still believed the decision to take a bath should be mine

alone. Crazy though I may be, I must have some rights left!

Before I had time to draw another breath, Nurse LaPeezy was upon me with my meds. I eyed the pills suspiciously.

"What if I don't want to take that stuff?" I said.

"Doctor's orders," she said.

"So you're saying I don't have a choice?"

"I could call Stan and Sylvia if you like."

"Oh, no! Not that!"

She handed me a cup of water and I pretended to take the pills. I put them in my mouth and swallowed but I held them under my tongue. When she bent over to pick something up off the floor, I spit them into my fist. The hand is quicker than the eye.

As Nurse LaPeezy was leaving I felt a strong dislike for her. I flicked the little finger on my right hand at her and she turned into a mouse. Realizing she was a mouse, she scurried across the floor the way mice do and disappeared into a conveniently placed mouse hole in the corner. I envied her because I knew she'd find her way to the kitchen where she'd have plenty to eat and find lots of other mice to keep her company. How sweet the life of a mouse must be! Much better than that of a nurse.

The next time somebody came in to help me take a bath, I was going to tell them I had already taken it while everybody was occupied elsewhere. I wanted them to know I had been taking a bath on my own since I was three years old and didn't need help from anybody.

I was almost asleep when a slight change in the air currents around the bed made me open my eyes. Dr. Felix had come in silently and was standing at the foot of the bed looking at me.

"Sorry to wake you," he said.

Dr. Felix wore glasses and looked like the movie actor Franchot Tone. His hands were folded in front of him. I looked at his hairy wrists and his expensive wrist watch so I wouldn't have to look at his face.

"If you don't mind, doctor," I said, "I don't really feel like talking to you today." "Anything wrong in particular?" he asked.

"No. It's just that I'm here and I don't know where here is."

"Here is where you need to be at the moment."

"I must have a home somewhere, even if I can't remember it. I want to go home."

"Everybody feels that way sometimes."

"That's comforting."

"I'm going to increase your antidepressant medication again."

"You doctors think drugs are the answer to everything, don't you?"

"You're spending far too much time alone. That's not good. I'm going to assign you to some group activities."

I groaned and closed my eyes. "Don't trouble yourself," I said. "I won't be here that long."

"Are you planning on going someplace?"

"Well, you never know," I said.

He chuckled in his knowing way and turned to go. As he started to put his hand on the door to open it, I blew out a little puff of air in his direction and turned him into a cockroach. He ran under the door and out into the hallway. One of the nurses would see him and scream and step on him and then take a Kleenex out of the pocket of her uniform and pick him up and throw him in the trash can. How fitting is that for Dr. Felix?

Before anybody else had a chance to come in and annoy me further, I dressed in some clothes I had been hiding in the bottom of the closet. It was a uniform the maintenance men wore that I had stolen one day when I was exploring in the basement. In the uniform and with the brown cap pulled low over my eyes, nobody would recognize me. Also hidden away in the closet I had some ninety dollars and a pack of cigarettes, which I stuffed into the pants of the uniform.

I took a good look at myself in the mirror over the sink. I looked as much like a maintenance man as the real one did. Cautiously I went out into the hallway. Everything was quiet and nothing out of the ordinary. I made my way down the stairs to the main entrance.

The receptionist at the front desk looked up from the magazine she was reading and then looked away. I knew she didn't know who I was. If she had known, she would have been screaming for help.

I walked out the door into the bright cool air and down the steps, wanting to run but not running because I didn't want to draw attention to myself. I followed the concrete walk to the driveway and along the edge of the driveway a quartermile or so to the main gate. I saw nobody and nobody saw me.

I turned right at the gate out of the place, which seemed to me a better choice than going left, and began walking briskly. I walked for many blocks and saw nothing that looked familiar. I might have been in a foreign country or on another planet, for all I knew. Still, it felt good to be free and on my own.

Checking my pocket to make sure the ninety dollars was still there, I remembered the cigarettes and how long it had been since I had one. I lit one up and as I walked I puffed out a cloud of smoke behind me.

I stopped at a bar that looked inviting and had a beer and a hamburger and after that I kept walking deep into the city. It was a big city but I didn't know what the name of it was and I didn't know if I had ever been there before. I saw many people but they seemed to not see me, which altogether suited me.

After what seemed like hours of walking, I felt tired but pleasantly so, and I felt good about the distance I had put between myself and the place I had left behind. When I came to a faded old hotel with a sign that said *Clean Rooms and Cheap*, I decided that getting a room was the most logical thing I could do.

The desk clerk signed me in without asking for identification or money in advance. He gave me a key to a room on the tenth floor and I went up in a smelly elevator that must have been a hundred years old.

The room was clean, as advertised, and pleasant. There were two windows, a

bed, a desk, a dresser with a large mirror, a chair, a closet, and a tiny bathroom. I liked the feeling of being up high. I opened the window a couple of inches to feel the air and to hear the traffic noises from the street which, at that distance, I found soothing. After checking the door to make sure it was locked, I went to bed and fell into a deep and restful sleep.

I spent two days and nights in the room, sleeping a lot during the day and walking around the city at night. Nobody ever approached me or bothered me or seemed to find my behavior in any way out of the ordinary. I couldn't remember ever feeling so free and unencumbered.

More than anything I wanted to go home, but I didn't know how that was ever going to be possible. I knew very little about myself, except for insignificant details like enjoying smoking and preferring tea instead of coffee. I could remember nothing of my past life. Where had I come from? Where was I going?

Did I come from a small town or a city like this one? Did I grow up in an apartment in the city or in a house in the wide-open spaces with a big yard and a view of the mountains? Wasn't it likely that somebody was waiting for me somewhere, wondering if I was alive or dead or if I would ever come home again? A mother? A wife? A lover? A son or daughter? Whoever he or she was, I could feel them and I knew they could feel me.

When the people from the hospital I had just left realized I was gone, I knew they would come looking for me. I had done some very bad things, including turning my doctor into a bug and a nurse into a mouse, which I have already told you about. They would lock me up now and I would never go free again.

On my third day in my little hotel room high up, I had the window open as high as it would go to let in the warm breezes. At any one time, there were as many as five pigeons on the ledge outside the window. They cooed and danced and seemed happy. When I got close to them, they weren't at all afraid of me. If I had had something to feed them, they would have eaten right out of my hand.

I sat on the bed, looking at myself in the round mirror on the dresser. Wait a minute. I don't have to go back to that place or any other place like it. I can do to myself what I did to the others.

I pointed at my reflection in the mirror and turned myself into a pigeon. I flapped my wings on the bed to try them out. From the bed I jumped to the floor and then to the window ledge. There were three pigeons already there to greet me. They knew I was somebody they had never seen before, so they were curious about where I had come from. After introductions were made, they were all eager to show me around the city. They were extraordinarily accepting of me, even though I was a stranger. How happy I was to be welcomed by them. How fortunate to have made such delightful friends so fast.

End

A petrified morning, A dehydrated bud, A strangulated smile, A skeleton of a tree, A pile of ashes, A fake flower, A shadow of the Sun, A dry cloud, A whimpering hope, A knotted mind, A frozen heart, An embalmed wound, A rancid wish, And oblivion.

—sindhu verma

BREAKING BAD

There's never a good time to arrange to break the bad news to someone they're strange; unfortunately, my dear, that time is now at hand ... I'll try to be gentle, though circumstances demand

that I be truthful, I cannot be anything less as your ardent lover . . . but I digress: I find your habit of filing your incisors charming, even so . . . in front of guests? I fear they deem it alarming.

To ward off the chill at the sight of your bone-white complexion that tends to evoke fright, perhaps a spray-tan foundation would be productive, though to me your appearance is always seductive.

You might think your onyx eyes draw longing looks and sighs —gasps of terror at the abyssal seen therein might suggest otherwise but worse still is when your orbs flash in a smoldering red blaze that stuns your victims before your thirst you assuage.

Ray-Bans would surely tone down the effect, prolong the party, and preserve our head count, I suspect; or at least allow our friends to live for yet another day, as it's said it can be disastrous to mix work and play.

—allan rozinski

CHUCKLING

The world and I are weary, chuckling sadly, teary.

The heavens are a mirror, the blank face of the steerer.

Our hours burn like paper, to innocence a rapier.

Though some look past the future, anticipating rapture,

the God of boll and weevil looks over good and evil.

The devil and his nation are Yahweh's own creation.

With irony did Terra bring forth the good name Sarah.

-marshall pipkin

THE BAD BOOK

by alan meyrowitz

During the summer of 1897, John noticed his wife had frequent problems with her memory.

Martha's decades of preparing their favorite recipes had her doing so without the need of a cookbook. Lately, though, the taste of most things seemed a bit off. Too much of one ingredient, not enough of another, took their toll.

Martha realized it herself, mostly at dinnertime. Often, he could see some apology was forming on her lips, but he raised a hand to stop it. On the verge of crying, she would leave the table.

Next to her cookbooks, there were two other books, oddly juxtaposed on the kitchen sideboard. One was the Good Book from which he would read out loud every Sunday morning. Living as they did, isolated in a cabin within the woods of the Tennessee back country, getting to a town and a church was not easy, especially as John and Martha got older. Staying at home more often, Martha in particular found comfort in the Biblical stories, and John was happy to read them to her.

The other volume, bound in black leather and heavily mildewed, had been passed down to Martha from her grandmother. John liked to call it the Bad Book, as its title was Dark Incantations. Calling it the Bad Book had seemed more a little joke of John's than an apt description. Martha insisted the spells were just for helpful things like encouraging a garden to grow or fixing a horse's limp.

Martha once told him, "My Momma had the book but gave it back to Granny after something went terribly wrong. Never said what that was. Granny gave the book to me when Momma wasn't looking. Told me to be sure I followed everything exactly."

Before they were married, John had asked Martha if he might incant a spell, but she told him that was impossible. She said a witch had to come from a certain bloodline. Still, he enjoyed browsing through the Bad Book's pages now and then. It was printed in English but used an unusual and beautiful typeface. Certainly not beautiful were the engravings scattered throughout the old tome. Some of the illustrations were of monstrosities with multiple heads and gaping mouths, fangs protruding. Others seemed even more the stuff of nightmares and were unsettling to look at. It had long ago become John's habit not to dwell on them.

Martha claimed not to understand them. She remembered Granny offered no explanations, had said to just focus on the spells. Martha, though, became more stubborn as she got older. John encouraged her to be sure to read carefully from the Bad Book, but she insisted on trusting her memory. She might leave out a word or two, or just paraphrase what needed to be said. Sometimes she would skip a step entirely.

One result, certainly not the worst result to ensue, was from Martha's attempt to have their chickens lay more eggs. One evening she did her incantation, but just after dawn she and John heard a terrible commotion from the chicken coop. Fearing a fox had intruded, John grabbed his shotgun and raced out. The scene inside the coop was horrendous. A larger than usual number of eggs had been laid. Most were already hatched, but what had emerged were aggressive spidery creatures that gave no hint of having mutated from chicks. The legs of the little monsters had a metallic sheen and were tipped with threatening points. The hens were screaming as they were covered by the swarm of those things clawing at them. Blood was everywhere. The roosters should have been defensive but huddled instead, cowering in the farthest corner of the coop.

John had no choice but to point his shotgun and fire, again and again, until all the creatures, hatched and unhatched, were dead. There was no way to avoid killing the hens, too. He retrieved a shovel that was stored nearby and used it to clear the mess.

Having heard the gunshots, Martha knew something was not right but she was afraid to ask about it. During dinner, John mentioned the need to buy more hens. Martha made no reply.

Months later, John awoke with a bad cold, as he tended to do with the change of seasons. By evening the congestion had moved into his chest. His cough that night wouldn't let him sleep.

Martha sat in a chair next to his side of the bed. She closed her eyes and tried to carefully recite the spell that had worked so many times before, when John or she had been ill. Toward the end of the long incantation, she stood up and began to pivot as she spoke the special words. She hesitated for a moment, trying to remember if a clockwise or counterclockwise turn was required. She chose counterclockwise.

She should have chosen clockwise.

Sitting back in the chair, there was some comfort in noticing John's cough had quieted. She fell asleep, only to be awakened an hour later by his screaming, "Martha, what have you done? What have you done?"

She suppressed her own scream by pressing her fisted right hand against her mouth. John lay on his stomach, but he was looking straight up at the ceiling, his head positioned wrongly on his neck by a half turn.

He repeated, "What have you done? What have you done?" and would not stop, as if it were a mantra that might correct his condition.

Martha rushed to the kitchen. She whispered as she went, "What have I done?" What have I done?" Grabbing her largest carving knife, she tried to slash her left wrist. She had a strong grip on the knife but she was trembling. Her attempt was too tentative and drew no blood. Frustrated and terrified, she managed the words, "Lord, help me."

With knife in hand she returned to John.

His palms against the mattress, he was beginning what might have seemed a normal push-up to raise himself, had the position of his head not been reversed.

Perhaps there was a spell in the Bad Book to undo what Martha had done, but that was not on her mind. She was focused on stabbing John in his back, which she did several times while trying not to look at his face.

He was soon dead.

She sat back in the chair, her breathing rapid and heavy. She waited a few minutes for her panic to subside, then wiped the knife on her nightgown.

She moved on to the leisurely—and this time effective—act of slashing her wrist.



GIFT

Unwrap your gift Event by event, Day by day, Enjoy these -A dense bloated cloud, A hungry writhing flame, A hedge of barbs, A labyrinth of glue. What will you do? Will you cower and shrivel? Will you lock in a shell? Will you falter and fail? I challenge you to fight. Show me your fangs. Can't you bite? I see you grapple. But here is more. Let me see -How steel thaws, How colour drains, How you wither and die. I was never your friend.

—sindhu verma

THE MOON

Apollo 11 reshapes thousands of thoughts and beliefs on the earth, sprawling on the lunar lap.

I wish I could collect those pre-Apollo eyes from the sand and show them the moon is not God. But they belong to the same species living in peace of ignorance today.

Fanaticism is a fireball. True belief illuminates like the moon. Prayer prevents the immoral anarchy.

Not a reflection of sunlight, it's nature's solace spreading over the wounds.

How differently it shines in science and literature! It's as veracious as a breccia that the moon is dusty, gritty and abrasive. But that hare is more beautiful than the rocky truth.

—fabiyas mv

BIBLE

Remember how I was? Like Plasticine in your hands, All my colors molten into clay For you to knead and play, To shape dumb dolls and pets And to roll frail spindly limbs, Which you would attach Onto the dumb torsos And then contort Never feeling any pain. And then, the moment came, When those limbs and joints gave way. And I who was cased in them Became water, flowed out.. But I froze before I hit the floor Not into ice cubes to chill your drink But into an icicle Suspended painfully in front of you.

-sindhu verma

BARBARIAN SOIREE

"Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes." —Luke: 12:37

I text my girlfriend: "Maybe the menus are carved in stone."

A sophisticate in the waiting area talks on his cell, and gapes at a meat slab on a rotating spit. A teenage boy with jeans tighter than a court jester's leggings detaches from his phone and snorts as a meat-bearer—they call these guys "gauchos"—passes him.

Here at the bar, the carvings in the crown molding have all the refinement of a shore of bludgeoned seals. And that wainscoting? With the decorative edges? What century am I in?

I go to MCA's website to check out the latest exhibit. The hostess whose lips look like she's rubbed them on a newly slaughtered calf interrupts me. "How do you like your Forzy? I just got the PM4."

Surprising. I thought she'd be communicating via oatmeal canisters and string, yet here she is with a Forzy one model ahead of mine. I cover my eyes and reach out. "I can't see. The light. It's bouncing off your face."

She laughs. It's okay: they pay her to flirt.

My girlfriend texts me back: "Growl 3x."

Surely the designer of this place would call the curving feature wall of faux stone "warm." I call it "worn." And the nubs that jut from the walls and ceiling make me think of a medieval torture chamber.

They give these places these sophisticated, foreign-sounding names, and they walk around with impaled meat. It's kind of like hanging a painting of a Nebraskan landscape in a contemporary art museum. You just don't do that.

I am a vegetarian and, unfortunately, I am here, at a downtown Chicago Brazilian steak house called Chama Noite—that's Portugese for "Night Flame" to celebrate Timmy's fortieth birthday.

Timmy and I are volunteer docents for the Chicago Architectural Guild.

by douglas j. ogurek

Most of those who go on our tours know of one architect: Frank Lloyd Wright, whose Prairie style continues to imprison the aesthetic judgment of the average Joe.

I spend over eight hours a day writing about design. You'd think I'd be somewhat of an authority on Chicago architecture, but you'd be surprised at how many accountants and housewives are also architectural critics eager to educate me.

Most of those on my tours come from the same type of communities about which I often write: the ones that try to recreate a past that never existed. And these tourists love to brag about their homes' antiquated styles: French Victorian, Georgian, English Tudor, and above all, Prairie. The word "humble" is often associated with the Prairie style, but in my experience, "humble" is to "Prairie style" as "chic" is to "Nebraska."

An agonizingly ornate gilded frame shackles the mirror behind the bar, and the wallpaper has an early American primitiveness.

Among the sophisticates at the bar are a woman interned with makeup, a pinstriped fat guy who must have discovered a time warp while bootlegging gin, and a guy with a huge belt and baggy pants—perhaps a stonemason, or a falconer—prepared to gorge themselves with filet mignon, ribs, and baconwrapped beef medallions until they can't walk.

I could be on my treadmill now, watching a film (something minus the explosions and special effects that these people no doubt require) on my 65-inch LED-LCD TV.

Timmy's in the toilet room, and none of the other docents are here yet. Ten of us were invited.

The guy in pinstripes drinks a beer—or maybe it's an "ale"—whose fonts look

like they've been lifted from an eighteenth century bear baiting poster.

The stonemason/falconer wears Converse All Stars. Hey Susie, let's head over to the soda shop. He has a Forzy. Red. How cultivated. PM2, I think. My company hasn't given me a PM5 yet. Probably because I'm a writer in a visual field. A picture is worth a thousand words? People who say that usually suck at writing. The other day, Hank, one of our nearly illiterate PM5 bearers, expounded on the brick and copper detailing of his Arts and Crafts-style train station while devouring a bacon double cheeseburger. At least the station wasn't Prairie style.

Timmy, with all the poise of a wooly mammoth, approaches from the other side of the bar. His stomach swells from a T-shirt he must have purchased at the gift shop. It says, "We shall have our meat!" He lifts three fingers from his Old Style to point at the crown molding. "Reminds me of Sullivan." He belches.

I often picture Sullivan staring into the toilet, drawing inspiration for his next ornate pattern. Perhaps Sullivan's buildings inspire one of my most popular tour questions: "There a bathroom round here?"

Timmy lugs around a Falstaffian frame, and has a disposition best described as provincial. Lumbering in somewhere in the middle in a slew of children, he was most likely born in a neighborhood with a name like Old Mill Towne or Country Valley Heights, where residents gather each year for a pig roast and potato sack races. As always, his engineer's cap flops on his bulbous head. Timmy has all the modernity of a typewriter.

Why am I here?

Timmy roars at me. "So, Sprouts, what do you feed your dog? Green beans?"

I imagine Timmy wearing a fur pelt and clutching a double-edged axe. "He'd like this place."

Timmy, with his Chicago Southland accent, the one that all those blue collar guys whose last names end in "ski" or "icz" have. "One time me and Hunter were walking and there was this rabbit, and boy, that son of a bitch Hunter? Boam. He took off like lightning. Nearly pulled my arm right out of the fuckin' socket." Timmy clacks two bottle caps to get the attention of the woman with enough makeup to cheer on the Nebraska Cornhuskers. "By the by, so what do you think about guys that are vegetarians?"

An I'll-be-the-little-woman-you-want-me-to-be blue fills her glass, which curves with a Beaux Arts naivety. "They're fine."

"Sprouts here's a vegetarian. He likes sprouts and napa lettuce and vegetables. He prays to the fruit and veggie goddess."

Ms. Nebraska giggles. I drink until my martini glass is as empty as her head. "It's napa cabbage."

Timmy circles his index finger as if dialing a rotary phone. "I'm not buying it, this whole vegetarian thing. Monkeys can't eat meat. They can't digest it, but we can. Our bodies can digest meat. Doesn't that tell you something, Sprouts?"

I dangle his beer. "I have the ability to drop this." I point at Ms. Nebraska. "I have the ability to poop in my hand and throw it at her."

She makes a face. It looks shiny enough to skate on.

I text my girlfriend: "Savages. Whole lot of em. Savages."

The text that went to all the docents said the gathering would be at Hypnobox. I figured I could put up with some of my companions' zeal for historic design if I could enjoy Hypnobox's exquisite lentil cubes and leeks. Then the plan devolved, to this torture chamber-cum-steak house. And where are they?

My girlfriend responds: "Chuga chuga clue clue."

Timmy has a full-time job at Sunny Peaks Railroad Museum. All day, he pilots a miniature steam train, driving kids around a track. You got trains in Shanghai going two hundred-and-fifty miles per hour, and Timmy likes steam engines.

Timmy wears his engineer's cap during his architecture tours. Sometimes, on the boat tour, as I point out the slender elegance of Legacy at Millennium Park, or the unassuming sophistication of 300 North LaSalle, Timmy's boat will float by and, to the delight of his group, he'll toot his train whistle.

First, he's on a boat. Second, this is Chicago, 2015.

As a prelude to his main course, Timmy tears at buffalo wings covered in glop. They're supplemented with celery, which is mere décor to Timmy.

Text time: "If I ever get stuck in the arctic, I hope T is with me."

Timmy throws down a wing. "By the by, how's Nu?" "Good."

"You should take him to the dog park. Lots of people."

"He's not really a people kind of dog."

"Aw, Sprouts, come on Sprouts. All dogs are people dogs. Man's best friend?" If nobody shows in ten minutes, I'll come up with an excuse to go.

"It's good to see that, Sprouts. People with their dogs like that?"

"Dog park people are a bit too Mary Poppins for me."

"Huh? But it's a good place. You can . . . it's a good place."

There's a painting behind the bar: fox hunters on a chocolate box countryside, if each morsel in that chocolate box is filled with cruelty and death.

I return to MCA's website. There's a Tate Bedford feature exhibit.

Still no sign of my cohorts. Howling and clapping at the other end of the bar. Football.

My girlfriend responds: "Protein. And FAT."

They're starting to gather in the waiting area. I'd use the word "herd," but I don't want to insult animals. Their attire matches that of the protagonists in the latest one-dimensional action films, while their palates lean toward those of cavemen. Soon they will discuss their political views while tearing into lamb shanks, or ponder the economy while gnawing on rib bones.

It was at a wedding in the urbane state of Nebraska that I decided to become a vegetarian. The reception was at a facility best described as "sparse," but not sparse in the way that contemporary architecture is praised; it stood in the middle of a fairground. Think "Footloose." The facility had cracked concrete floors and block walls. I dined on fried chicken and a salad of iceberg lettuce infused with carrot strips. The selection of dressing included Italian and ranch, in packets that many guests ripped open with their teeth.

The three at my table (folding, of course) were straight out of an 80s John Cougar Mellencamp video: a guy who wore a button-down jean shirt, and who held his fork (plastic) like a sword; his obedient wife who didn't look much older than the first of their bevy of children; and a bearded relic whose mouth displayed an ever-shifting abstraction of the evening's fare. When I was in the toilet room, this latter gentleman clomped up to the urinal next to mine, depressed one nostril, and then shot out a string of snot. He must have been an academic. A professor of agriculture, perhaps.

Their answers to my questions were eloquent. "How did you like the wedding?"

"Good."

"Do you all live around here?"

"Bout 20 miles westa North Platte."

"I'm from Chicago. Have any of you ever been to Chicago?"

"Nah."

On the way home, I was suffering the eternity of Route 20, when a Nebraskan cop pulled me over. He was in a car, as opposed to a tractor. I received a \$125 ticket for going ten over. Surely the Illinois plates and the "Meat Bad, Veggies Good" bumper sticker had nothing to do with it.

The barbarians down there watch a high-def flat screen, probably a few inches larger than mine. There's a commercial. A clichéd Old West street. Two cowboys walking away from each other. They turn, ready to fire. A gleaming pickup, the High Noon, stops them. Cut to the pickup bouncing along, reconciled cowboys thrusting out their hats. That TV with that commercial: it's like using a Napier bowl as a bed pan.

An older guy heaves a massive book onto the bar, then sits next to me. A white powder covers his hands. Like he just rubbed chalk all over them. Another professor. History.

Ms. Nebraska asks me why I'm a vegetarian. I pull up one of my slaughtered pig pictures on my PM3.

"Oh that's gross."

"Gross enough for you to stop eating meat?"

She squints.

I could be at the MCA now. Bedford's display is called "A Portal to the Present."

Chalky Hands' book says something about the Renaissance. How many trees, I wonder, had to get axed to forge that monster?

I text: "Help I'm growing suspenders!!"
The pin on Timmy's hat says, "Sonny Peaks Express—Official Engineer." He submerges the bottom of his beer bottle in his stomach. His mouth, smeared with wing sauce, hangs open as he stares at the idiots on the screen.

Last fall, I covered for Timmy on the day of the Chicago marathon. One of my co-docents told me that when Timmy was eight, his father collapsed while jogging in a forest preserve. Hours later, they found him, dead, his dog standing beside him.

I asked my colleague whether Timmy's father ever heard of a cell phone.

It seems that Timmy has retained some of his father's lack of foresight: he never brings a phone anywhere. I don't even know if he has one. So when people ask questions, he can't come up with answers. He asks if he can get back to them.

My girlfriend responds: "Corn and iceberg boy."

Timmy returns, stinking of smoke. "There's a 1985 Pontiac Firebird out there, Sprouts. Mint condition. Firebird. Now that's a car." Really? I thought it was a chariot. "I like the headlights." He dials his imaginary rotary phone. "All thin like that? The thing's in mint condition."

My brother lives by a McDonald's. Every Friday night in summer, people park their classic cars in the lot. Then they lift their hoods and, while fifties rock 'n' roll plays, they stand there with their hands in their pockets as tattooed and mustachioed aficionados examine the cars while digesting their milkshakes and burgers. Meat, milkshakes, and old cars. Aren't those the symbols on the Nebraska state flag?

"So yous never been to the dog park, huh?"

A gaucho speeds by. He's clutching a hunk of meat large enough to feed a shipload of war-weary Vikings. Chalky Hands licks his chalky finger, then turns a page of his tome.

The morning after that Nebraska wedding, I took a jog. I saw a farmer kill a cat. With a hoe.

Where are they?

Here's an e-mail from Hank. A masonry magazine is interested in an article on his Starner Prairie train station. Great. Another article in which I talk about how historic design—guess what style this station is—builds pride in residents, links a community to the glory of the rail age, and shit like that.

The Forzy PM5 is rectilinear, lightweight, unadorned. And Hank, the person who the powers-that-be have appointed to bear this piece of technological perfection, has thrived on creating structures that are curvy, bulky, and ornamental. It's like appointing a farmer who eats sausage and gravy-smothered biscuits every morning as a personal fitness trainer.

A guy in an intentionally faded T-shirt and a camouflage jacket talks to Ms. Nebraska. Perhaps he can regale her with his tales of adventure and courage in which he climbs trees, hides, and then blows away those vicious deer.

Bellowing and clapping from the other side of the bar. On the TV, a grown

man in tight clothes and a helmet dances while hoisting a ball made of dead cow. The bartender puts a stuffed dragon on a shelf. I'm surprised it's not real. It holds a chalkboard that says, "Franklin's Spring Ale/Bottles/\$1.50."

They cheer and several order. Chalky Hands even gets one. The light clutches a couple strands of hair that wick up in the middle of his head.

Text: "Should have brought my bifocals and wig."

Timmy leaves to make room for more ale.

"Say . . ." Chalky Hands holds his pen like a cop holding a flashlight. "Now that thingy, I imagine that's pretty nifty, huh?"

Yeah, Henry. It could hold ten thousand times the content of that monster you're lugging around. "Sure."

The bartender asks me if I'm interested in the "touchdown special."

Good sir, I thank ye kindly. Alas, I fear that imbibing that libation would leave me with a paunch much like those of the knaves that surround your bar. I hold up my hand and shake my head no.

The lights dim. Though I'm sure that the intent is to project intimacy, the reality is that it projects butchery.

Chalky Hands sticks his nose in his book, takes a big whiff. "Ahhh. The smell of books. You like the smell of books?"

It's actually how I choose my books. I walk into bookstores blindfolded, then get the books that smell best. "Eh."

He's the type of guy who sees a consummate work of contemporary architecture and says, "It's just a big box," or "It looks too expensive," and then rips into a hot dog.

"Look here." He rotates the monster. "No batteries."

I gesture around the bar. "Dark." I turn on my phone. "Bright."

"T'll be . . . I saw that one. Right over here." He recognizes the image of the new Hyde Park bank on my phone. Stainless steel. Concrete. Glass. Precise. "I see that Sullivan's influence in there. Sullivan. You know Sullivan?"

Will these Sullivan references ever stop? "Guy's been dead for like eighty years."

"Sure. But it's . . ." The chalky hands flatten, face each other, as if he's showing me the length of something. Then they shift to a height measurement. "Ah, what do you call that?"

"Composition?"

"Right, right. Composition. Some of Sullivan's stuff was like that, right? Funny how you see bits of history. How they just pop out sometimes?"

"It's well-composed."

"We learn from them, they learned from the folks before them. Everything's all kind of stacked." He takes out a phone, then places it on his book. The phone is a PM5.

The bartender sets a Franklin's Spring Ale before me. "Try it. On the house." But I need to grow a mustache and chop me some wood before I drink that. The bottle's label shows a figure on a path that winds to a rising sun. Maybe it's the snot rocket guy from Nebraska. I'll probably take it into the bathroom then dump it.

Chalky Hands takes a swig of his. "Say, that's familiar. You taste this? It tastes familiar."

The path on the bottle is silver and it reflects light. Maybe that's Timmy's father on the path. His final run. The path leads right up to that orange sun. A faded orange, like a robin. Those things used to wake me when I was a kid. You don't hear them in the city so much.

Perhaps there are robins at the dog park.

My girlfriend texts: "Warp back home soon?"

A gaucho passes with a meat-heaped spear. Chalky Hands reads by cell phone flashlight. I'm surprised it's not candlelight. Ms. Nebraska shows camouflage guy something on her phone.

This is Chicago, where one day all the steel and the concrete stomp on you and all the edges slash at you, and the next day, a man jumps into the river to save an old woman's dog.

Timmy returns, then dials his invisible rotary phone. "Hey Sprouts, I never seen Nu. You got a snapshot or something?"

I think about telling him the photos are still developing in the darkroom. Instead I show him Nu on my Forzy.

"Boy, he looks like a fun wild guy."

But Nu isn't wild. He's probably more discerning than Timmy.

Timmy, humming, pulls out his wallet, then shows me a picture of a mutt. "He's not this dark. He's a lot lighter." He scans the bar, points to the path on the bottle of Franklin's Spring Ale. "Here. A lot like this here."

"Nice."

Timmy takes off his hat. The hair above his ears makes his head look like an old-fashioned alarm clock. "Boy, last week? Hunter? I'll tell ya, last week . . ." His eyes redden and his voice quavers. "I had to have him put down. That's . . . I'll tell ya, you have him every day for twelve years . . ."

He sips his ale, and I try mine, and somewhere, a robin's chirp curves around a box of glass and steel.

I used to eat meat. And when Timmy's father went down, cell phones didn't exist.

I text my girlfriend: "I'll be here awhile."

The Parable of the Devil and the Mule

Well, the devil's in the alley, mule's in the stall Say anything you wanna, I have heard it all ~ Bob Dylan, "Mississippi"

The devil's 'round the backdoor hatching schemes, conflating how life is with how life seems.

The mule stands idle, staring absently, untouched by thoughts of will and destiny.

The devil probes and queries, quizzes, tests, devising for the seeker pointless quests.

The mule lies down in hot and humid hay and slaps its tail to wave the flies away.

The devil savors suffering—murder, rape—reveals in each sophisticate the ape.

The mule dreams dreams as empty as its day: it works, if forced, but does not curse or pray.

The devil prods conceptions of his God. The mule, a shitting engine, tills the sod.

-marshall pipkin



—"counter clockwise" by denny marshall

by tamara burross grisanti

ET

[short story

Andrew walks with the Sheriff and the rest of the search party through the thick woods in the rain. Each man carries a Coleman lantern and calls out Andrew's daughter's name.

"Chlöe!" they cry, tired and irritable, this being their third day searching for the missing toddler.

"What about that old well in the woods behind your house?" the Sheriff asks Andrew.

"Already searched it, in it, and all around it," Andrew says.

Meanwhile, at home, Lola wrings her hands and paces. She hasn't slept or eaten since the men started searching. She feels sick and dizzy from malnutrition, but the thought of food makes her queasy. She thinks about the last time she saw her daughter. Her little girl was smiling in the bathtub. Lola wonders about herself. Surely this is punishment for being an unfit mother. It's the search, the not knowing, that's driving her insane. She picks up her glass of vodka with a shaking hand and gulps.

She hears the front door open, male voices. She rushes out of the kitchen and into the foyer. The Sheriff and her husband stand just inside the door, shedding their wet layers.

"They're calling off the search," Andrew says.

Lola feels so many emotions at once that she collapses into Andrew's soaked arms. He holds her as she weeps.

FIFTEEN YEARS LATER

Lola is home alone, packing and getting ready to travel to Cefalù for a vacation. Andrew is working late to get ready for the time off. Lola hasn't been out of the states since the previous summer, when one of her friends got married at a castle in Ireland. She can't wait to be speaking Italian instead of English. *Only one more day before we leave*. Lola smiles to herself as she folds her bathing suits and places them in her suitcase.

Her cell phone rings and she answers it, expecting it to be Andrew calling to say he will be late for dinner again.

"Mom?" the voice on the other end rasps.

Lola's heartbeat races; a chill runs down her spine. She hasn't answered to that name in fifteen years. Some asshole prank caller.

"Who is this?" Lola demands.

"It's Chlöe, Mom. I found you! I finally found you!"

Before Lola can respond, the line goes dead. The voice, the voice of a teen who'd smoked for forty years, did not seem familiar. Lola puts her phone down. She's furious. Everyone in town knows that Lola and Andrew lost their daughter years ago. Why would anyone want to rub salt into that wound? *Fucking kids are brutal*.

Lola walks into Andrew's study to pick out novels for the trip. The TV comes on. An old home movie from 2003. Lola approaches the television and sees herself fifteen years younger, asking Andrew not to film her without makeup. A shot of little Chlöe about a month before she was gone from their life. Lola watches with mixed emotions, thinks of how Chlöe would be about to turn eighteen. *Dating. College applications. Drugs. No thank you!* Lola is glad she doesn't have to deal with all that. She turns the TV off. Much better to be childless and free to travel than shackled to an abnormally needy child who drains her parents like a starved vampire. No, Lola was never cut out for motherhood. She imagines fifteen years of child rearing and shudders. She thinks things turned out for the best after all.

She starts dinner—broiled haddock with asparagus and baked sweet potatoes—thinking about sunbathing topless at the beach in Cefalù, drinking from a coconut, the *pasta con sarde* she would order at that little seaside restaurant. They might even drive into the mountains of Isnello for hot *arancine* and gelato on brioche from the Pink Panther.

Andrew arrives home and the two sit to eat.

A knock at the door interrupts their dinner.

"Are you expecting someone?" Andrew puzzles.

"No. I'll get it," Lola says, dropping her napkin on the table. Lola walks to the front room and opens the door. There stands a teenager Lola doesn't immediately recognize. And then the awful understanding dawns on her—it's Chlöe. The resemblance is unmistakable—the same dimples, the same sea-blue eyes and sandy blonde hair. An impossibility in the flesh. Yet she feels the certainty of it.

Lola's heart knocks against her ribcage. She opens her mouth but her tongue is a cinder block.

Chlöe walks slowly into the house. Lola backs away, unable to process what is in her eyes.

"Who's there?" Andrew calls out.

"It's Chlöe, Dad!" Chlöe rasps. "I finally found you!"

Andrew screeches his chair back from the table and stands as Lola and Chlöe enter the kitchen. He pales and looks like he might faint as he beholds his long-lost daughter, mostly grown up. He looks at Lola, whose eyes are wide and incredulous.

"There's something I want you two to see," Chlöe says, running her hand along the kitchen knife on the counter.

The TV in the study blares to life again. Lola and Andrew follow Chlöe to the study as if in a dream, not really feeling their feet move.

On the screen, Lola is giving two-year-old Chlöe a bath. Chlöe splashes and giggles. Lola places both of her hands on Chlöe's head and forces her under water.

Chlöe thrashes, but Lola holds firm until Chlöe stops moving. Andrew steps in and lifts the dead toddler from the tub.

"Drop her in the old well in the woods and seal the top," Lola tells him onscreen, and he disappears out the door with Chlöe's lifeless body in a black garbage bag. The TV flickers off.

Lola and Andrew exchange a glance. Lola turns to Chlöe.

"We didn't film that," Lola says, her voice trembling. "How are you controlling the TV? How are you even here?"

"I know I wasn't a planned pregnancy," Chlöe rasps. "But I was your destiny." Andrew turns to regard Chlöe questioningly.

"And I still am," Chlöe says.

Chlöe raises the kitchen knife and stabs Lola in the chest three times. Lola gurgles, clutching at her wounds, and trips backward, sprawling on the carpet. Andrew lunges at Chlöe but his hands sweep right through her as if she is made of nothing. Andrew jumps back in horror.

Lola moans from the floor. Andrew watches helplessly, in shock, as his daughter continues to stab his wife, obviously dissatisfied with merely killing her. Andrew looks away as Chlöe finishes mutilating her mother's corpse.

Chlöe stands and drops the knife at Andrew's feet. The sound of police sirens cuts the silence and crescendos. The red and blue lights flash through the windows and across the walls.

"I can control the phones, too," Chlöe tells Andrew. "And one good thing about being a ghost—I don't have fingerprints."

Andrew looks down at the knife with a start, knowing that only his and his wife's fingerprints would be on it.

"I expect you'll get life for this," Chlöe says.

The police begin banging on the door.

Andrew watches as Chlöe's apparition vanishes.

The police burst in and freeze. Andrew is standing over his dead wife with a bloody knife at his feet. As he is cuffed and led to the back of the police cruiser, the cops don't seem to hear the raspy, echoing laugh—as if from the depths of a well—that will fill his ears for the rest of his imprisoned life.

[poetry]

Dark Star of My Desire

for A.D.

Dark star of my desire, You burn like crimson fire Within black caverns of my heart, Where lurk ghoul and vampire....

You light those haunted ways... Unstarred nights, sunless days... Where wander I, ever apart, A wraith in twilight haze....

—kyle opperman

OUT WITH BACCUS

Out with Bacchus, down with Baal, Ishtar's dead as night must fall. Isis and Osiris, too, All of them no longer true.

Amon, Zeus and Jupiter, Mother Earth—who heard of her? Ra Ra Rah—o what's the use? Even Jesus lookes like Zeus.

Jehovah, Elohim, Yahweh, All fo them have had their day. Deities aren't meant to stay. Our money's on the USA.

—james nicola



by allen kopp



The year was 1899. The old century was in its death spiral and a new century was about to be born. At this auspicious time of new beginning, I opened a business on Main Street in the town of Echo Bend.

I had worked as a teacher, editor at a small newspaper, and clerk in a department store, but I dreamed of a profession where I was in sole command. I hated having to be accountable to anybody for anything. I wanted to be accountable only to myself.

I went to a demonstration of photography in a college lecture hall and, after sitting through a lecture and a practical demonstration, I was certain portrait photography was something at which I could make a living. I bought a couple of books and studied them, front to back, with interest. I took my savings and bought a camera and all the necessary equipment. In Echo Bend, I rented commercial space in the heart of the business district. I engaged a carpenter to construct a wall so that the front part of the space would be public and the back part private. A professional sign painter painted my name across the window and underneath my name these words: *Portrait Photographer, By Appointment or By Chance*.

Photography had been around for a long time but to most people it was still a novelty. If you had the money to spend, it was all the rage to put on your glad rags and go and sit for your portrait. Then, no matter how poorly time treated you, no matter how ugly and corpulent you became, you would always have the photographic image of yourself to remind you of what you once looked like, when you were at your best. Your descendants would still have your photographic image in a quaint little frame decades after your death, and one day they would sit around and say to each other, "Now, just who was he?" or, "Didn't she die of diphtheria when she was only about twenty-three?"

Families wanted their portraits taken as a group and then separately. Some families had as many as eight or ten children. Mothers wanted their children to sit for a portrait every year, traditionally on their birthdays. Mantelpieces and chairside tables abounded with portraits in frames. People gave them to relatives as gifts at Christmas. Photography as a business was a modest gold mine for the right sort of fellow.

And then, of course, there was death photography. People wanted portraits of their deceased family members photographed in a coffin, a bed, sometimes sitting in a chair, oftentimes posed with the living members of the family or with the family dog. Some photographers painted eyes or rosy cheeks on the finished portraits, but I never employed that vulgar technique. I figured that once a person was dead, it was pointless to try to make him or her seem alive again.

While business was booming in town, I was willing, more often than not, to go out of town to take portraits of the deceased, since the deceased were by necessity bound to one spot. I could usually charge any amount for this service and people would pay it willingly because the resultant photo was a blessed remembrance of the departed loved one and money was--where the death sentiment was concerned—no object. This is not to say I cheated people; I charged them what I thought they could pay. If someone lived in a fine house with many rooms and beautiful furnishings, I had no qualms about charging top prices. If, however, they dressed in rags and lived in a falling-down shack, I did the work for practically nothing.

At this time I was still traveling by horse-drawn wagon. I had a specially made enclosed wagon to keep my equipment dry if it should happen to rain, and it rained most days at certain times of the year. Often I found myself slogging over unfamiliar country roads, looking for a place I wasn't sure existed. Sometimes it took me all day to get to where I needed to go and I would end up staying the night. I wasn't above bedding down inside my wagon if there was no other choice. I kept telling myself that next year, or maybe the year after, I'd hire an assistant to do the driving, carry the equipment and perform other trivial tasks. I might even train him to go on the out-of-town forays on his own.

Children died more often than adults. There was always a fever or an infection or pneumonia to carry them off. If you thought about it at all, you knew that a competent doctor might have fixed them up with a pill, a bottle of medicine, or just a word of advice, if only a doctor had been around when needed. I photographed dead babies in sateen-covered boxes in the family parlor surrounded by sprays of forget-me-nots; babies in their mother's arms with a brood of older children looking on; babies just ready to go into their graves with smiles on their faces and a toy animal in their arms; twin babies in one tiny coffin with their arms entwined. Once I photographed a baby and a little brown-and-white dog side by side in a wooden box ready to embark together on their journey through eternity.

Then there were the older children—the tiny six-year-old girl whose father accidentally shot her through the heart while cleaning a gun; the boy, eight years old, who didn't get out of the way of the train fast enough; the girl, age ten, who died of heart failure when her mother locked her in a basement with rats to punish her. Most parents were good parents, though, and brokenhearted at the loss of a child. I provided them with the photographic remembrance that helped to ease their pain and made the child seem forever close and not so far away after all.

I was on my way back to town after one of these missions to photograph a tenyear-old boy who had fallen on a pitchfork when I saw a woman standing beside the road waving a handkerchief at me. I pulled up with impatience and stopped, ready to growl at her like an old bear.

"You're the photography man?" she asked.

"I am," I said. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm Mrs. Trenton Fairman. I live in that house over there." She pointed and I looked at a large brick house set back about two hundred feet from the road.

"I'm just coming off a case," I said. "I'm headed back to town."

"Well, you might come back in the morning, if you're agreeable."

"I don't think I can do that," I said. "Just what is it you need?"

She sighed and wiped tears from her cheeks. "Death has paid a call at my house."

"You want a photograph of the deceased?"

"Yes, but it's more than that."

"What, may I ask?"

"You look like a strong man," she said, "and quite young."

"Yes?"

"My husband, Trenton Fairman Senior, is lying in his coffin in the bay window between the parlor and the dining room. The sun shines on him most of the day. He hasn't been embalmed and it's been three days now."

"Why don't you go ahead and bury him?"

"Tomorrow, April twenty-third, would have been his fifty-seventh birthday. When he knew he was dying, he made me promise that I wouldn't have him buried until that day. He was very superstitious. He studied numerology and he believed that nothing would ever go right for him in the afterlife or for his kinfolk still living on the earth if he did not go into the ground on the day he was born."

"I don't think I've ever heard of that superstition," I said.

"So, if you could consent to take my dear husband's photograph before he goes at last into the ground on his birthday, I will make it worth your while."

"I couldn't do it for less than fifty dollars," I said, believing she would balk at the price and that would end the matter.

"All right, but we'll negotiate terms later on. You see, there's more to my request than I've stated."

"I haven't eaten since early this morning," I said.

"I believe we might deign to find something suitable in the house for you to eat, sir."

She instructed me to pull my wagon around to the side of the house where she was waiting for me. When she took me inside, there was the unmistakable stench of death.

"I know," she said. "He's starting to smell. Nature takes its course."

I took my handkerchief out of my pocket and held it over my mouth and nose. It was probably a good thing I hadn't eaten.

She instructed the housemaid, a large, ungainly girl named Myrtle, to fix me a sandwich but I said, "Never mind. A drink of water will do. Just show me where the deceased is and we'll get this thing over with."

He was lying in a very expensive mahogany casket, suffused with milky light from a bay window. Enormous potted ferns lay at the head and foot of the casket. Smaller containers of flowers were arranged on the floor along the front.

"He loved the sunlight," Mrs. Fairman said. "I just couldn't see blocking out the light with heavy curtains. It'll be the last earthly light that will ever shine on him."

"All right," I said. "I'll bring my equipment in from the wagon and we'll have this over in no time at all."

While I got the camera set up and everything ready to take the picture, Mrs. Fairman and the housemaid Myrtle hovered in the background watching my every move. I would have preferred that they go about their business, but they had never seen picture-taking before and were interested in how it worked.

I took two photographs of the deceased from different angles and then Mrs. Fairman wanted one with her standing next to the casket looking down into her husband's face. When I was finished, I said, "That'll be fifty dollars, ma'am, if you please. When your photographs are ready, I'll send you a postcard and you can pick them up in town at your convenience."

"I believe I mentioned there was something else," Mrs. Fairman said. "Yes?"

"My son, Trenton Fairman Junior, died a day and a half after his father. He is upstairs in his room, lying on his bed. He has been bathed and dressed for burial."

"You want a photograph of him, too?" I asked.

"Yes, I do and then..."

"Then what, ma'am?"

"Myrtle and I are here alone. We're not very strong. After you take Junior's picture, I would like to prevail upon you to pick him up and carry him downstairs and place him in the coffin with his father and then close the lid. The boys will be here early in the morning—on my husband's fifty-seventh birthday, I believe I mentioned—to perform the burial."

"How old is the boy?"

"He's fifteen years old, sir, and not very big. I think he could not weigh more than a hundred pounds. I'll pay you an extra twenty dollars to carry him downstairs and place him in the coffin beside his father and close the lid."

"Are you sure they'll both fit in the same coffin?"

"Oh, yes, sir! Comfortably, I think."

"So, that'll be fifty to photograph your husband, thirty to photograph your son, and twenty to carry the boy downstairs. That's a hundred all together."

"That seems fair, sir. I have the cash in the wall safe in my bedroom."

"All right, let's photograph the boy, then."

Mrs. Fairman took me up a broad carpeted staircase, up one flight and then up another. We went down a hallway to a closed door, Mrs. Fairman first, then me, and then silent Myrtle. Mrs. Fairman turned to look at me before she opened the door.

"Why does God punish us so?" she said.

She opened the door and I saw the boy, Trenton Fairman Junior, lying on his back on the bed. He was a fine-looking boy, nothing like his hatchet-faced father, dressed in a dark suit with knickers, gray stockings and expensive-looking, high-top leather shoes. He wore a high collar with a cravat, just as a grown man would, with a diamond stickpin.

"He looks to be asleep," I said.

Mrs. Fairman and Myrtle sobbed behind me.

"Maybe it would be best if you leave me to my work," I said.

They went out of the room and I went back downstairs to the parlor where the father lay and got my photographic equipment and carried it back up. I set up to take the picture and, as usual, I photographed the deceased from three different angles.

When I was finished, I carried my equipment back down, out the door, and loaded it into my wagon so I would be ready to leave as soon as Mrs. Fairman paid me the money she owed me.

Mrs. Fairman and Myrtle were waiting for me when I went back inside. Now it was time to carry the boy downstairs. The three of us went silently back up the stairs.

With Mrs. Fairman and Myrtle standing in the doorway, I approached the bed. Cautiously, I slipped my right arm under the boy's back and my left arm under his knees. As I hefted him off the bed, I got the surprise of my life. His body went rigid, he opened his eyes and looked at me and gasped for air as if he had been under water.

"He's not dead!" I said, laying him back down.

"Oh, oh, oh!" Mrs. Fairman said and Myrtle screamed.

"What made you think he was dead?" I said.

He continued to revive, moving his arms and legs, pulling at his clothes, as if he had suddenly become animated by the throwing of a switch. When I looked away from him over to Mrs. Fairman, I saw that she had collapsed on the floor. She convulsed violently and then stopped moving.

"Has she also been sick?" I asked Myrtle.

I approached the recumbent woman and took her hand in mine and began patting it because I didn't know what else to do. I administered these little slaps to her hands and face and after a while I could see she wasn't breathing. I put my ear to her chest and heard nothing.

"I'm afraid she's dead," I said. "The shock was too much for her."

Myrtle gasped and ran from the room. I heard her shoes clomping all the way down the stairs.

I turned to the boy, Trenton Fairman Junior, sitting on the bed, feet on the floor. "Are you all right?" I asked him.

"I don't know," he said. "Who are you?"

"I photograph the dead. Your mother asked me to come up here and take your picture."

"Why would she do that?"

"She believed you to be dead for the last day and half."

"Oh, yes. That's right."

"You know your father is dead, lying downstairs in the parlor?"

"Yes, we were going to have a funeral."

"I'm afraid your mother is dead, too."

He looked over at her lying on the floor and shook his head.

"Where is the nearest doctor?" I asked.

"I don't know. I'm not sure there is one."

"What about that girl? Myrtle? Does she live in the house with the family?"

"I don't know where she lives."

"She's the only one left."

"She's ignorant," he said.

"Would she be able find a doctor?"

"She wouldn't be able to find her bunghole with both hands."

"I'm going back to town now," I said. "I'll go to the sheriff and tell him what happened. Do you want to stay here or do you want to go with me?"

"I'll go."

"You don't want to stay here with your mother?"

"She wasn't my mother. She was only play-acting."

He asked me to wait while he changed his clothes and got a drink of water. I went outside and leaned against a tree in the front yard. In five minutes he came out of the house wearing a dress suit, carrying a small valise. He locked the door and we departed in my carriage.

It was late afternoon and the sky was threatening rain. I didn't like the way the day had turned out. On top of everything else, I hadn't collected the hundred dollars that was owed me and there would be no way to get it now.

For the first couple of miles, Trenton Fairman Junior said nothing, so after a while I turned to him to see how he was faring. With both of his parents dead, I expected him at least to need a reassuring adult to speak to.

"Do you have any family in town?" I asked.

"I don't think so," he said.

"You'll have to have somebody to stay with," I said.

"After the dead bodies are removed from my house, I can stay there. The house belongs to me now."

"I don't think they'll let you stay in that big house all by yourself without an adult present."

"Why not?"

"You're a minor."

"What does that mean?"

"You're underage. Still a child."

"I'll bet I'm more grown up than you."

"It's not a subject for argument. I'm just telling you the law won't let you live in the house alone until you're old enough."

"I'd like to see them try and stop me."

"Didn't your father have a lawyer who handled his estate?"

"Yes, I think so. A lawyer in town. I think his name was Henry something."

"Well, that's a start. There can't be that many lawyers in Echo Bend with Henry for a first name."

He was silent then. He looked straight ahead as if I wasn't even there.

"Your mother thought you were dead," I said. "How's that for irony?"

"She wasn't my mother, I told you. She was my stepmother."

"Well, whatever she was, she thought you were dead."

"I was dead."

"As you stated earlier. You were dead and then what happened? You just came back to life?"

"I don't have any explanation for it, but that's what happened. Not everything is explainable."

"What happened while you were dead? Do you remember anything?"

"I saw God. He spoke to me."

"What did he say?"

"I would expect you to ask a silly question like that."

"Don't you think anybody would want to know what God says when he speaks?"

"God is a compact man with thin lips and a small mustache, almost as if it had been drawn on. People think of him as being big and old and having a long white beard, but he isn't any of those things."

"I don't think I would have known him," I said.

"He wears a black dress suit with a gray cravat and a ruby stickpin. And a monocle in his right eye."

"Don't tell me God has an eye deficiency! Or is the monocle just more of an affectation?"

"Go ahead and make fun of me. I don't care."

"All right. What did God say to you?"

"He said the Saints are with him in heaven."

"Is that all?"

"He told me to await further instructions."

"What did He mean by that?"

"You tell me."

I sighed. I was starting to get bored with the conversation. "You must be hungry," I said for a change of subject.

"Why must I be hungry?" he asked.

"You were dead for a day and a half. Dead people don't eat."

"Yes, I suppose I'm hungry," he said. "I could eat."

"When we get to town, we'll get you a good dinner."

"In the morning I'll go see Henry what's-his-name and tell him my stepmother decided to die along with my father. He'll advise me what to do."

"You'll need a place to stay tonight," I said.

"I can manage."

"We'll get you a room in the hotel for tonight."

"I don't have any money. I know that she had money in the safe, my father's money, but she never told me the combination."

"I'll advance you the money."

"Forget it. I'll just walk around until morning. I've done it before."

"That doesn't seem the right thing to do," I said.

When we got back to town, I went straight to the sheriff's office, went inside and told him what had happened at the Fairman place, that there were two dead bodies there and nobody to tend to them. He asked me a dozen questions, where I might be reached for further questioning, and then he told me I could go. I went back out to my carriage and drove to the hotel. I stabled my horse and locked my wagon so nobody would become curious about what might be inside worth stealing. These trivial matters tended to, Trenton Fairman Junior and I went into the crowded hotel dining room and sat at a round table in the middle of the room. After we placed our order, I noticed the people in the restaurant looking at us and then I realized they were looking at him.

"You see the way they're looking at me?" he said.

"They're not used to seeing a young fellow all dressed up in a dress suit. Not in this town. You look like you just got here from someplace else."

"It isn't what I'm wearing."

"What is it then?"

"They know I've seen God and will see Him again."

"They don't know any such thing."

The food came, huge amounts of beefsteak, fried potatoes, carrots, and green beans. After we ate, the boy said he was tired and wanted to go to bed. I figured he must be upset at the strange turn of events his life had taken that day, but he seemed perfectly calm and unemotional.

After I paid for our meal, we went into the hotel, where I engaged a room for him for the night. I asked him if he was afraid to stay by himself in a strange hotel room and he laughed. "You can't be serious," he said. "I've always been by myself. Since the day I was born."

He had such a grownup way about him that I sometimes forgot I was dealing with a child.

He signed his name in the hotel register and the clerk handed him the key. Before he went upstairs to his room, I put my hand on his shoulder and told him I'd come by in the morning at eight-thirty to take him to his father's lawyer and for him to meet me in the lobby. He nodded and turned and went up the stairs.

When I got home, I took a hot bath and fell into bed and slept soundly until thunder woke me up at seven in the morning. I dressed and consumed a light breakfast and then I set out for the hotel. I was sitting in the lobby reading a newspaper at twenty minutes after eight. I expected Trenton Fairman Junior to come down the stairs at any moment.

At eight forty-five he still hadn't made an appearance and at nine o'clock I was still sitting there holding the newspaper in my foolish hands. At ten minutes after nine, I went over to the desk and asked the clerk if he could check on the boy in room three-twelve for me. He had been supposed to meet me and he never appeared.

The clerk checked his book and looked up at me and said, "A boy, you say?" "Yes, a boy," I said.

"A small boy?"

"No, a big boy. Almost an adult."

The clerk looked down and then looked back at me and sighed. "Room threetwelve has not been occupied for several days," he said.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir."

"I was with the boy last night. I engaged the room for him to spend the night in and he was supposed to meet me here, in the lobby, this morning at eight-thirty."

"Are you sure it was this hotel?" the clerk asked.

"Will you let me take the key and go up to room three-twelve and check for myself?"

"That would be against regulations, sir."

"Then open the door yourself to make sure the boy is all right."

The clerk went with me up to the third floor. We walked to the door of room three-twelve and he inserted the key into the lock and pushed the door open for me to enter. The bed was neatly made up. The window shades were drawn. It was clear the room had not been occupied the night before.

"He signed the register last night," I said to the clerk. "I was with him. His name, Trenton Fairman Junior, will be there if you only bother yourself to look."

We went back down to the lobby and the clerk checked the register from the night before. "No such name here," he said.

'Can I look?"

He turned the register around and I read over the four or five names from the night before. The name Trenton Fairman Junior was indeed not there.

So much for Trenton Fairman Junior. I had no explanation for why his name wasn't in the hotel register, but I figured he didn't need or want my help anymore and had gone to find his father's lawyer on his own.

I thanked the clerk and went back out into the rain. I went to my photography studio and opened for business. It was a slow morning, so I had a chance to process my plates from the day before—two shots from different angles of the boy who died of the pitchfork wound through the stomach, two of Trenton Fairman Senior lying in his coffin, and one of Mrs. Fairman standing next to her husband's coffin. They all turned out beautifully.

When I processed the plates I had taken of Trenton Fairman Junior lying dead on his bed, I saw only a dim outline of a bed and that's all. No Trenton Fairman Junior. Why would I have taken photographs of just a bed? I tried to recall the events of the day before to make some sense of what all had happened. I began to think I had experienced a kind of lapse while I was in the Fairman house. Had Trenton Fairman Junior even existed outside of my own mind? Was he a ghost? I couldn't be sure. Not all things—as had recently been pointed out to me—are explainable.

After that I didn't do any more work. I was beginning to feel tired and lightheaded so I closed the shop for the rest of the day and went home.

That night I was sick and sure I was dying. I ached in every joint and was having trouble swallowing. I couldn't keep anything on my stomach, not even a sip of water. I knew I had a fever.

When I was trying to think what might be the matter with me, the truth came to me as if spoken by a voice inside my head. I had failed to ask the reason for Trenton Fairman Senior's death. He had obviously died of something catching and I had caught it. I had spent two hours at least inside a house breathing in disease germs and death.

I didn't want to die alone and have my bloated body found only after the neighbors noticed the smell, so I checked myself into the nearest hospital. The doctor examined me briefly and put me in the isolation ward. I was sure I was going to die—if not that night, then very soon.

For two days and nights I passed in and out of consciousness. I was barely aware of anything but I knew there were other people moving at all hours around my bed. I didn't know who they were, or care. I only wanted them to go away and let me die in peace.

Hours passed, maybe days, but I had no real sense of time. The light at my window went from light to dark and back to light. I was aware of the sounds of rain and thunder, the perfect accompaniment, I thought, to dying.

Once when I woke up from one of my naps, Trenton Fairman Junior was standing at the foot of my bed, smiling at me.

"I wondered what happened to you!" I said. "I'm happy to know you made it all right."

Then I realized that somebody else was standing beside Trenton Fairman Junior. He was a compact man with thin lips and a small mustache that looked almost as if it had been drawn on. He had a Continental air about him, rather than an American one.

"Who are you?" I asked.

He smiled and said, "It's time for me to ask you a question."

"What is it?"

"Do you want to go or do you want to stay?"

"What? Go where?"

"I asked you if you want to go or if you want to stay?"

"I think I'd like to stay if it's all the same to you," I said.

I must have drifted off to sleep after that because when I came to myself again, Trenton Fairman Junior and the man with the monocle were gone.

I was several more days in the hospital and then they said I was well enough to go home. As I was getting dressed to leave, one of the nurses told me how lucky I was to be alive because I had come so close to dying.

"I saw God," I said. "He spoke to me."

"What did he say?"

"He asked me if I wanted to go or if I wanted to stay."

"What did you say?"

I thought it an unnecessary question, but I answered all the same.

"I said I wanted to stay."

"You're not usually given a choice, I believe," she said.

After a few days at home by myself I felt almost well again. On Sunday morning I rode out to the Fairman place, for what reason I don't know. It looked abandoned. Grass and weeds had grown up in the yard. The windows were shuttered. A large for-sale sign was placed so that people would see it coming from either direction on the road. Just being near the house made me start to feel ill again and I left.

In a month or so I moved to the city. I borrowed some money from a bank and set up a photography studio in a fashionable location (fashionable meaning populated with rich people). I did well and moved into expensive lodgings with maid service. I bought myself a motor car, something every man of means was doing. I paid back the money I borrowed and was as happy as I ever expected to be.

My photographic subjects now were all living. I wanted nothing more to do with death. My own would be coming for me soon enough.





[poetry]

a reminder

cardboard and fur for her stitched with ribbons; a polyester heart inside not even close to the blood in mine

yet she lures me forward, to take actions unholy, reminding her love is a simple thing when you pay attention to the reward and not the teaching

-mckinley henson

UNDER THE SINK

Under the sink, an intertwining stew, a roiling pitch-black subterranean mass of coffee grounds and earthworms, chaw, of water seepage, hair oil, bacon grease.

I pry the doors to seek some cleaning fluid —the sickly no-bugs yellow bulb reveals the Escheresque and Hellish river as red, as old blood red, red-hot decay, in whorls.

A tentacle of fat yet feeding worms, competes, compels, and churns onto the floor, the lead worm winds along my shin—who screams? —they storm my piss-hole like an old barn door.

Not often do we peer out through my eyes, preferring stygian pits of shame and lies.

-marshall pipkin

the crazies out there

by stephen greco

It was on a Thursday, as I was driving to work, that I got to thinking: *This is totally nuts*.

I mean just the act of driving on a two lane highway. I pass other cars going in the opposite direction, and we're separated by—what? Maybe seven or eight feet? Sometimes less? I'm doing forty and they're doing forty, which means a relative speed of eighty. Did you ever drive into a wall at eighty miles an hour? All it would take on their part is a little jerk of the wheel, and I'd be dead (so would they, but that's not the point). And they don't even have to *want* to do it—maybe it would be that they just didn't get enough sleep last night because they were up late watching baseball, so they would nod off at the wheel and BAM! It's all over.

Okay, some of them are probably completely trustworthy and responsible all the time. Maybe fifty-percent of them? But how many cars do I pass on my way to work? A thousand? Maybe more? And I do this *every day*? Why do I trust five hundred or more people *not* to kill me? Short answer is—I don't. Or I shouldn't. So I did the sensible thing and gave up driving.

Because there're a lot of crazies out there.

On Monday I started taking the bus to work. That lasted for two days.

It was something I saw in the bus driver's eyes, some flicker of a suicidal tendency. Why should I put my life in *his* hands? And yes, I'm sure the bus company has some fantastic bullet-proof screening procedure for hiring new drivers. They probably asked him six multiple choice questions, then made him pee in a cup and fart in a bag, and bing-bada-boom, he's a driver, and hey, now he's *fully qualified* to have the power of life and death over me and everybody else who steps foot into his enormous rolling coffin. How the hell do I know he's not gonna get bored one day and drive that thing off a tall cliff? Not likely to happen because I live in Kansas, but that's not the point. No way was I gonna ride the bus any more.

So then I started walking to work. That lasted one day, because I realized while I was walking by the side of the road that any loon driving by had the power to turn me into a greasy stain on their windshield. If anything, I was *more*

vulnerable without a metal shell around me. So scratch that idea off the list. That's when I had to quit my job because I decided that I just couldn't get to work safely.

Then depression set in because I wasn't sure how I was going to get by without a paycheck. I wandered into a pub for some brooding time, grabbed a seat at the bar and had a few beers. It was one of those trendy gastropubs with an open kitchen, so you could see the entire cook staff at work, and I noticed that everybody back there was carrying around a knife. Geez, they were no more than fifteen feet from me! Who's to say that at least *one* of them wasn't emotionally unstable enough to come charging out at me brandishing his weapon? From that distance they could even throw it at me. And I certainly shouldn't let them prepare food for me either, because a psychotic homicidal cook might make me...well, who knows? Maybe a nice dish of penne alla anthrax. So, no more eating out. I spat out the remainder of my drink and ran out of that place. Good decision.

Because there're a lot of crazies out there.

Much safer, I thought, to cook all my own food from now on. Then it hit me that I'm really no better off buying ingredients at a market because no one is guarding all that stuff on the shelves, so any nut job could contaminate anything. Damn!

That's when I went home to get started on my own vegetable garden. First thing I'd do is have some seeds delivered right to my door.

On second thought, *not* to my door. I blocked the driveway by running a heavy chain between two trees. No way was I gonna let a potentially certifiable delivery guy onto my property, because they all carry stabbing weapons, like ballpoint pens or car keys, and did you know that you can put someone's eye out with the arm on a pair of eyeglasses? Even if I made every one of them walk through a metal detector, a simple shoelace makes a perfect garrote for choking someone. Let them leave their packages at the end of the driveway.

So these days, even though I don't have a job, I keep pretty busy. During the day I tend my garden, and I use my harvest to make a flavorless but nutritious paste of water and pulverized sorghum, soybeans, and alfalfa, because those are all the homegrown ingredients I have. And I'm also digging my own well. It's taking a long time with just a shovel but when it's done I won't be ingesting any of the poisons or mind-control drugs that some wacko at the public utility is no doubt adding to the tap-water. At night I can't sleep because I know that's when all the *worst* maniacs come out, so I stand guard at the attic window with my shotgun and my night vision goggles, scanning my property for intruders while I suck my nutritional gruel through a long tube, and I wear an adult diaper too, so I don't have to interrupt my watch for any reason. I'm not sure how long I can keep this up, but I have to persevere...

Because, you know...there're a lot of crazies out there.



Religion 2: Not to Say

The disbelief is chronic. But that is not to say I don't enjoy a swig from time to time. So won't you pass around the tonic?

I doubt it'll do any good, though. I know it's "filling and tastes great" but that is not to say that it can sate the feeling that I should know

more than liquory bubbles that bloat the paunch and spike the sense with the faith I have abandoned ingornace, not to say, my troubles.

—james nicola

[poetry]

THE BROILER CHICKEN

Her comb is no longer red. It's meaningless to preen. She stands hunched as a deadpan mushroom. Only flesh matters in her man-made coop.

She cannot forage in freedom. She's not a living thing. There isn't any wax to seal the pain-pores. Bedding absorbs her vibrancy. A dust bath, she longs for.

No cluck. Nothing hatches. Her thoughts transform into coral tree thorns.

Reek of feces and death dominates. Yet her blind mates peck voraciously.

There's neither post-mortem nor FIR. This is a recurrent licensed murder.

—fabiyas mv

CYST

by david greske

Doctor Jerome Benzer was the third physician to examine the cyst on Shawn's head in the last week. Benzer, protective goggles covering his eyes and a disposable surgical mask over his mouth and nose, poked at the knob with a gloved hand. The growth yielded beneath his fingertips like potter's clay.

"Shawn, how long have you had this?"

"I really don't remember. It never really bothered me, so I didn't think about it much," Shawn said.

"Is it bothering you now?" The doctor pressed on the growth.

Shawn winched. Not out of pain, but surprise. "No, it's just grown so much in the last couple of months it's become a nuisance."

"Has it ever broken through the skin? Has there ever been any drainage?" Benzer grabbed a paper tape measure from a plastic bin attached to the wall. He stretched the tape across the cyst—4.2 cm. About the diameter of a golf ball.

"No drainage," the patient said. "But sometimes I feel it moving."

The doctor chuckled. "That's not possible. A cyst is nothing other than a closed pocket of cells containing liquid, pus, or other foreign material. The fact that you feel it moving is just your imagination."

The doctor flopped back in his chair, his thin body being dwarfed by the piece of furniture. He lowered the mask off his face and pushed the goggles to his forehead. "What I'm going to do is numb the area, open the cyst, and cut out the offending tissue. I'll cauterize the wound to stanch the bleeding and suture it closed. Twenty minutes tops and you'll be on your way home."

"Will it hurt?"

"Other than the initial prick of the injection, you won't feel a thing."

"All right. Let's do it."

"Before we begin, Shawn, I'm curious. Why did the other doctors you've seen refuse to treat you?"

"I don't know. They didn't say, but there was something in their eyes that told me they were afraid."

"Afraid? Of what?"

"I don't know, doc. Maybe they felt it move."

Doctor Benzer stood and pushed the small white button on the wall to page a nurse for assistance. While waiting for the nurse to arrive, he took a vial of Novocain from the cabinet and filled a syringe with the colorless liquid.

The nurse entered the exam room. Unlike the doctor, who wore street clothes instead of a blue smock, Nurse Kelly was dressed in the traditional white uniform. She carried a clipboard in her left hand—Shawn presumed it was his medical chart—and a surgical mask in the other. Nurse Kelly glanced at the clipboard a final time; satisfied, set it on the desk.

"Hello, Shawn," she said. "I see we're here for a little slice and dice this morning."

Shawn did not find the nurse's sense of humor amusing.

Nurse Kelly patted the paper-covered exam table. "Get your skinny butt over here and let's see what we've got."

Shawn moved from the chair to the exam table and hoisted himself onto the end. Nurse Kelly poked at the lump on Shawn's scalp. "Wow. That's a big one. You sure know how to grow 'em, Shawn."

"Nurse," the doctor said. "A little respect, please."

"Sorry doctor."

"Shawn," the doctor said, "I want you to lie on your left side."

While Shawn got in position, Nurse Kelly prepared the instruments used for the extraction—Scalpels, forceps, a pair of scissors, and a wicked-looking curved needled with a length of surgical thread hanging from the blunt end. Plus several other instruments that looked more like torture devices than tools used for medical procedures. Once the instruments were neatly laid out on the sterile blue cloth, the nurse wheeled the cart closer to the doctor.

"This is going to sting," the doctor said, touching the point of the hypo-needle alongside the cyst. "Don't hold your breath. Breathe through it and it'll be less painful. Ready, Shawn?"

"Ready."

The doctor pushed the plunger, pumping the syringe of Novocain into Shawn's scalp. The patient stiffened only after the initial injection. Two more squirts numbed the right side of Shawn's head.

Doctor Benzer took the scalpel and drew it across the lump. The flesh parted like an eyelid, revealing the orb beneath it. The doctor made a second incision around the base of the growth, and the skin rolled away.

Nurse Kelly's eyes grew large as eggs. She pulled the mask off her mouth and whispered, "Doctor, what is it?"

"I don't know, Kelly," the doctor said, staring at what had just popped out of his patient's head.

It wasn't a spider—it had too many legs—but the creature was spider-like. Its bulbous body, covered in fine white bristles, was the color of spoiled milk. A triangular growth of what appeared to be bone sprouted from one end and served as a head. There were no eyes, just a pair of oversized mandibles jetting from the jaws of the creature, snapping in the air. A barbed stinger, about a quarter inch long, pulsed on the rear of the abomination, a droplet of poison oozing from the end.

The spider-thing leaned forward, took a piece of Shawn's scalp between its pinchers, and yanked. It shoved the strip of flesh into its tiny mouth.

Feeling the tug on his scalp, Shawn asked, "How's everything going up there, doc?"

"Just fine," Benzer replied. He tried not to stutter as he watched the monster eat bits of his patient. "A few more minutes and we'll be all good."

The doctor noticed the crack between the floor and the door. Whatever this thing was, it couldn't be allowed to escape. He had no idea what kind of disease or infection this...this creature carried.

"We can't let it out of this room," he whispered.

"Doctor, are you sure everything's all right?" Shawn said. "There's an awful lot of whispering going on."

No, things are not all right. There's a monster sitting on your head. That's what the doctor wanted to say, but he said, "Everything is fine . . . Nurse, the door."

Nurse Kelly moved slowly around the exam table toward the linen closet in the corner. She opened the door, grabbed a handful of towels and scrubs from one of the shelves, and wedged them under the door, sealing Benzer, Shawn, and herself in the room with the creature.

Sensing movement, the spider-thing rose on a half-dozen of its rear legs, shrieked, and jumped from Shawn's head. It landed on the desk.

The doctor gasped.

Nurse Kelly screamed.

"What the hell is going on here?" Shawn bolted upright on the exam table. He touched the right side of his face. His fingers came away bloody. No surprise. A doctor had just sliced open his scalp. There was bound to be blood. But what was on the desk was the surprise.

The atrocity scuttled across the desk, knocking the clipboard to the floor, franticly looking for an escape route. It jumped to the floor. The tiny nails on the tips of its legs clicked on the tile as it scampered toward the nurse.

"Look out," Benzer said, but his warning came too late.

The creature stung the nurse's ankle. Immediately, her ankle swelled to twice its size.

Nurse Kelly shook her leg. Each jolt sent stinging pain through her wounded ankle.

The creature lost its grip and tumbled across the room. It smashed against the wall, righted itself, and darted toward the nurse again.

"Doctor," the nurse wailed, rubbing her injury. Hot to the touch, she feared infection. "The scalpel."

Doctor Benzer reached around Shawn and across the exam table and plucked a scalpel from the instrument cart. He threw it at the fiend.

The blade turned end-over-end, missed its mark, and stabbed the baseboard.

The monstrosity stopped, raised its head and—even though it was blind—turned in Benzer's direction. It screamed and sprang at the doctor.

Benzer stepped aside. The thing buzzed passed his ear and landed like a fly on the wall next to him. Benzer grabbed another scalpel, spun around, and stabbed it, pinning it to the wall like a bug in an insect collection. The creature wiggled to get free, but it was fixed firm to the plasterboard.

The immediate threat immobilized, Doctor Benzer turned to Nurse Kelly.

"I'm fine," the nurse said. She had managed to pull a roll of gauze from the cabinet and had bandaged her wound. "Take care of the patient."

Shawn still sat on the exam table. The gaping wound on his head had stopped bleeding, but the right side of his face was caked with dried blood. His hair was dark with gore and stuck to his forehead in sticky clumps. Shawn stared in disbelief at the thing impaled to the wall.

Doctor Benzer used an antiseptic wipe to clean Shawn's face. There was still a pink tinge to his skin, but at least when he left the clinic it wouldn't look like he was wounded in some kind of battle. Shawn's hair was another story. Benzer tried his best to wipe the drying blood from the strands. A good scrubbing with soap and water would be needed to complete the job. Before the Novocain wore off, the doctor closed the patient's head wound. It took longer than he anticipated. The creature had managed to eat quite a lot of the flesh around the perimeter of the opening.

When the doctor finished, Shawn asked, "What is that thing?"

"I have no idea," the doctor said.

"Whatever it was it stopped moving. I think it's dead now." A viscous black liquid ran down the wall and the spider-thing had turned the color of stone.

The doctor looked closely at it. "It certainly looks like it, but I think I'll leave it there a while longer just to be certain." He turned to Shawn. "Is there anything else I can help you with today?"

"Yes, doctor. Can you take a look at these?"

Shawn lifted his shirt. His chest was covered with cysts.

[poetry]

Love

Yes, give me your love. I am ready to embrace it. Pile on my heart that divine prize Scrape my hands with that precious jewel. Push me onto that bed of roses Of petals tinier than the thorns. Bind me with those silken threads While I am singed like the silkworm. Bask in that blinding sunshine While I burn and blaze like the Sun Before I go down exploding into my dusk Leaving you to stare at a loveless night.

—sindhu verma

[poetry]

Love Again

The fire had died, but punkish smoke still smoldered. All the windows pinned, no air crept in to fan or stoke the waning spark. Then with one stroke a knocking on my door. Who spoke my name? The creaky door opened and you, as if I had never sinned, stood flickering, glimmering, glowing, and grinned. Enflamed with the breath of a sudden wind, my inert inside, like ice thawing, woke. And a carbon world's turned diamond.

—james nicola

Atams

Atoms tumbling blindly in the void do blindly things they blindly have to do. Among those things is mimicking the Word and making momentary me and you.

An atom in a star collides with an atom in a star collided with, a molecule is forged and fiery death creates in time a baby drawing breath

—to cry. Each infant is a miracle, yet tossed into a world of crushing hurt, a convocation and a pinnacle, beset without, within, then back to dirt

and tumbling blindly on, no dusk, no dawn. We're never really here, already gone.

-marshall pipkin
Ascension

Wind's heartbeat is alive in these cherry bones, stems curled, flecked skin blue from the long absence of those glass gems salivating over cerebrum spider webs;

Modesty's wings are tethered to my own, ready for the ascension to a truer unknown

-mckinley henson

THE HEAD CHAIRMAN

by john koch

Setting: The lobby of an office building owned by the Corporation.

In walks Joe who is one of the salespeople for the Corporation. He has been out in the field and selling well these days. Joe is a very frank and open EXPRESSIVE and he sure does show it and very obviously, stopping along the way to have a highly animated chat with some of the other employees of Corporation as they make their way to the elevators.

Corporation Upper Management is pleased with Joe's sales performance and they are glad to have Joe, an EXPRESSIVE, working for Corporation. Head Chairman is pleased with Joe as well.

Next we see Mitzie. Her business card says that she holds the title of PR Manager and she is now sitting at her desk enjoying a delicious cup of coffee and smiling to herself. Mitzie is an AMIABLE and her surroundings reflect that with a row of cuddly stuffed animals on her windowsill and a number of crayon drawings made by her young niece pinned around her office. On her desk is a picture of her husband and another of her late parents walking on the beach and holding hands. Cartoon clippings from the newspaper, some given to her by her amiable friends in the Company are scotch-taped around her computer screen. Also the chairs in her office have gaily colored tapestries laid on top of the cushions.

Upper Management very much values AMIABLES when they play the right roles for Company, for AMIABLES are team players and can get things done. Not only do they make people feel relaxed but they make them feel at home and welcome and needless to say, Head Chairman is glad to have Mitzie on board.

Down the hall and away from the noise and bustle of the other departments is the office of Percy, the ANALYTICAL, working in Accounting. Percy looks quickly at the camera and frowns, then turns back to studying a spreadsheet full of facts and figures and is very slowly and deliberately trying to decide which business model would be most advantageous for Company. Upper Management has been pretty happy with some of Percy's conclusions, neatly presented in the conference room down the hall and Head Chairman wants to reward Percy for doing an outstanding job and for just being an ANALYTICAL with a good mind in general.

At last we come to meet the Head Chairman. But we can't see him yet. Not yet but we will. The Head Chairman is a DRIVER and he can be very blunt and dismissive when interacting with all of the underlings in the office--be they Amiables, Expressives or Analyticals. There used to be a few drivers working in Company but they were let go after clashing with Head Chairman. It is well known that DRIVERS, who are demanding and combative by nature, will not get along well with other DRIVERS, especially ones who will not back down, and it is rumored that Head Chairman had chewed the other drivers up and spit them out in secret meetings.

Mitzie, as an AMIABLE, gets along very well with Head Chairman though she has only spoken to him on the telephone. Mitzie is inclined to compliment Head Chairman for his leadership and intelligence and sometimes Mitzie slips: "Oh you poor thing. You poor thing" into the conference calls if Head Chairman describes how hard he had been working and how tired he feels.

But what's this? A very special Company meeting has been announced for the end of the year. The offices are, naturally, decorated for the Holidays which adds to the gaiety and all of the personnel are discussing the upcoming meeting, sometimes in excited and hushed tones. The excitement is because to date, none of the employees has ever met Head Chairman before although a number of the employees have talked with Head Chairman on the telephone. Just about every employee has met or at least seen the Upper Management. But no they have not, as I said before, seen the very special Head Chairman.

What does Head Chairman look like? One can only imagine. He can sometimes be brusque but is he that way in person? All want to please Head Chairman and they are pleased that he is pleased with them but still... What is he like?

Well . . . The end of the year meeting for Corporation is finally held in the basement auditorium and all are in attendance. Not one employee is absent because all want to finally behold Head Chairman and moreover express their gratitude. Besides, who knows if Head Chairman has decided to give out a special year-end bonus as a reward for outstanding performance by some or maybe even for all? In anticipation of the meeting the employees have all pitched in to buy a special plaque with the inscription:

"To Head Chairman: BEST BOSS OF THE YEAR, 2018. From your grateful employees."

Mitzie was to hand the plaque to Head Chairman. However, Head Chairman is late for the meeting so all sit in the Company auditorium waiting and the anticipation grows and grows until one of the Upper Management steps to the podium and calls for attention. The sound system echoes as he says:

"Ladies and Gentlemen, it gives me great pleasure to introduce our beloved Head Chairman."

There is applause, then silence as the large double doors at the side of the auditorium slowly open and in floats a gigantic, bloody alien brain with its slick spinal cord still attached and dangling. Two sinister eyes, attached to the brain from extended optic nerves, survey the room and the filthy, monstrous thing has large fangs and its jaws are snapping.

There is horrified screaming and a mad stampede for the exit doors but no way out because the doors have all been locked by Upper Management.

The giant brain devours all, except for Upper Management and Mitzie, who later hands the brain the honorary plaque. That afternoon, Mitzie is back at her desk and she places a series of want ads online for various administrative and sales positions available at Corporation. At the same time she is having a discussion with her speaker phone on and she is saying: "Oh you poor thing. You poor, poor thing."



MY LOVE'J A BOTTLE

My love's a bottle set so high one might forget it's there. I thought you did and thought I'd die then dreamt I didn't care,

for caring's when the chain around one's neck has been attached to another vessel: One is bound, and hopes the other's matched.

So often had I felt that string connecting us for years go taut, then tug, that I tossed the thing off me. But it appears

it caught a corner of my shelf which now and then will shake or throb a little, like myself. A horrible mistake—

For I have two potentials as a bottle: to be full; or, stowed so high, all air and glass, to teeter and then fall.

When it's still, I know you're near. Then when I start to sway, like so,I would that I were free again but would not have you go.

—james nicola

the bug poem

I have become one with the cabinet creatures, the toilet bowl drowned.

I wear an antenna headband, bloodsucker rouge, earthworm pumps. Mud is my best color.

I have daddy long legs and can live hacked, flipped on my back.

Wiggle, wiggle, squirm. I crawl in the night, bump into light. The zapper gets me buzzed.

I'm doing a spider web twist no fumigation can fix. The motel is empty,

but my bed is full. I can reproduce in dozens, do it with myself.

My own offspring fall from my mouth. I shed and get on with it.

-maureen mcelroy

The Beginning

Monsoon begins. The first shower evokes fragrant vibes. Washed wind cools me too. Dried soul sprouts again. Fresh shoots appear. Green grows wildly. Like life, love, wedding, flowers... Beginning is beatific with divine charms.

—fabiyas mv

THE LAST WORD

She steps out of a clothing store carrying a shopping bag. I turn and make believe I'm looking into the window of a store that sells really ugly shoes. I can't believe people actually buy crap like this and the prices ...

"Joe?"

I ignore her. "Joe." She's walking toward me. Shit. "Joe!"

From the way she spits my name I expect her to be aiming an AK-47 at my face. I want to run, but that would take more courage than merely accepting the situation.

"Kerri."

I try to smile.

She moves a couple steps closer and I do the same. We stare without saying a word. Should I reach out for a hug, offer my hand? What's the proper greeting when you meet a woman you've slept with, but never called afterward?

She breaks the silence.

"So, were you planning on just disappearing?"

Yes, but I have the good sense not to say that aloud. I say, "You look good, Kerri." She really does, too. It's only been a month, but I like her new haircut.

She tightens her lips. Her top lip quivers just a bit. I'm afraid she's going to cry. "I hate you, Joe Rigny." Her voice is strong. Good for her.

"I know."

by wayne scheer

"You humiliated me. I thought we had something, but you were just feeding me lines, weren't you?"

"I'm sorry." I take a breath. "I have no excuse."

She moves one step closer. "My plan, if I ever saw you again, was to slap you. One hard, noisy, Hollywood movie slap, and walk away without saying anything. I should still do it, you know."

"I'd deserve it."

She takes a couple of deep breaths and I brace myself for pain. I've never been slapped by a woman. But I never treated a woman or anyone as poorly as I treated Kerri. I don't even know why. I liked her. We had a couple of dates and a good time. A lot of what I said was true, but the truth is I just wanted to get her in bed. Afterward, I felt no reason to continue seeing her, so I stopped calling and I didn't answer her texts. So I deserve the slap that will make her feel better.

To my surprise, she relaxes and drops her shopping bag.

Instincts take over and I reach out to help her. She pulls back.

She loosens her lips enough to talk. "I'm not letting you off the hook just because you admit what an asshole you are and try to act like a gentleman."

I let myself smile just a bit. It feels good to relax with her. We never had what might be called a real relationship. Neither of us talked about the future or used the "L" word. I'm not that bad. But we had laughs. I miss that.

"Would you like to get some coffee and talk?" I point to a coffee shop across the street.

"No," she says, and walks away.



RETRIBUTION

Heard tell she upped and crawled right out her grave. Still wearing the white lace gown her mama made. Sweet baby-girl taken the night there was no moon. Hunting dogs found her just 'for noon. Said she was tossed in the creek while her mama and daddy were fast asleep. It was a jealous woman, no man of her own, hell bent on brining grief to a happy home. She choked the little baby and when she was dead the evil wench carried herself right back to bed. Had the nerve to stand at the baby's graveside, holding the mama's hand while the mama cried.

If he knew it was her hands that did the deed, he'd take her life like she did his seed. He watched his wife morn and wither away, her raven silk hair turned to straws of gray. She wailed most every night, asking for something to make things right. It was no dream that she went to Atata the priestess, who promised the dead were not as they seemed.

The mama danced 'til she worked up a sweat, tore off her clothes, twirling naked and wet. The daddy, he twitched and howled at the night, heard tell it was a hellish sight. Atata, her sunken eyes closed, opened her mouth out came the baby's cries. Followed by the voice of the bitch that took her young life. It was she who wanted to be the man's wife. Atata took the blood of a chicken, spilling it on the baby's grave. Then chanted some words in a rage. The baby-girl pushed the earth aside, crawling right up to the shack where the murderous bitch tried to hide.

Across the wooden floor, up onto the bed, the baby pulled the coverlet over the evil whore's head and laid her little body across her face. The wench struggled, but to no avail, then she was dead, and the coverlet fell. Now, folks have a notion of what happened that night, but the baby, the mama, and the daddy were long out of sight.

—aurora lewis

Night Flight

In this dark blue loss of control entitlement brings to a million other lives at any one time in separate skies like tired stars in the midnight hue witnesses to a demise I've gotten used to the fact that most of the good in me has died.

-michael seeger

WHERE ARE YOU NOW, CHARMING BILLY?

by wayne scheer

The first time I met Billy Seabolt was the night he ran into my church in Tewksbury, North Carolina, a community so small the post office and the dry cleaner shared the same shop. He was just an overgrown boy—all Adam's apple, and arms and legs, stringy blond hair and a shadow of a mustache.

"Father, Father! They're after me," he shouted. There was no need to ask who, because under his half-open, tattered jacket was a blinking construction lantern. Police sirens whined and lights flashed. I made him give me the lantern and I walked out to the front of the church as the entire police force of Tewksbury, both cars and all three officers, including Sheriff Hines, pulled up. Not knowing how to shut off the lantern, it looked like a surreal homage to disco.

"Hello, Wendell," I said to Sheriff Hines as he yanked at his pants. He was a big man but strangely proportioned, with a massive chest and mid-section. For a man that size, he had surprisingly short legs. Holding the lantern high in one hand, I joked, "I'm looking for an honest man."

Too annoyed to react to my comment, he asked, "Where's Billy, Father Mike?" Billy peeked out from behind the church doors with a silly grin on his face.

Sheriff Hines took the lantern, also trying without success to turn it off. Finally, in frustration, he forced open the back and pulled out the batteries like a small child ripping open a Christmas present.

"Boy," he called to Billy. "You're in a heap of trouble. Why'd you take this?"

Billy shrugged, looked at the floor, and raised his eyes slowly to meet the sheriff's. "It was dark outside."

I could see Wendell's belly shake as he tried valiantly to furrow his brow and hold back the laughter.

"Son," Wendell finally said shaking his head. "Why don't you just go on home?"

After that, it seemed Billy always came to me when he got himself into trouble. Once, he ran into the church looking harried and asking if he could use the rest room. I showed him where it was and he was in there when Sheriff Hines entered, removing his hat to display a full head of dark hair streaked with gray.

"Where's Billy at, Father?"

I wasn't sure if I should declare the church a sanctuary and protect Billy when we heard the toilet flush noisily and Billy came out wearing his customary grin.

Sheriff Hines sighed. "I reckon there's no need to search you now, boy. You have yourself a heart to heart with the good father here. Don't make me run you in."

After the sheriff left, Billy pulled out a small plastic bag of what I assumed was marijuana from his boot.

I looked down at my shoes, trying to come up with something wise to say. I showed Billy the way to the rectory and asked him to sit down. "We need to talk."

"But I ain't Catholic."

"That's all right," I said. "I'm Catholic enough for the two of us."

I asked about his family and he said it was just him, his father and his uncle. His mother had died giving birth to him. His Aunt Faye raised him, he said, but when she left Uncle Tyrus a few years back, he and his uncle moved in with his father. The two men drove a truck, hauling furniture all over the country, and were away a good bit of time.

"Do you go to school?"

"Nah. I never was too good at that stuff. I just stopped goin. When I turned sixteen they stopped comin round."

He was almost eighteen now, he said. I would have guessed he was a few years younger. "What do you do?"

"Oh, this and that. Sometimes I ride with my daddy when Uncle Tyrus is too drunk. Sometimes I paint houses with Dade Smith. Mostly, I just mess around, you know?"

"You have a girl friend?"

"Nah, I ain't too good with girls." He flashed his country smile and I saw a ten year-old boy in his face.

I hired Billy to do odd jobs around the church, figuring it was as good a way as any to keep him out of trouble. He was a good worker, but like a child, he desperately sought approval.

I tried visiting his father and uncle once. They were sitting on the porch of their run-down house off a dirt road just outside of town. The porch was piled with car parts, girly magazines and surprisingly new furniture. I guessed the furniture "fell off the truck," but they were too lazy to sell it. In a corner was a large color TV. The two men were watching the Braves game.

Each had a cooler of beer in front of him. I had to drink one from one cooler and one from the other. Anytime I tried to talk they shushed me and each handed

me a beer. After a while, I forgot what I wanted to talk to them about, drank, and watched the game. I slept on their porch that night. The next day, I tried talking to them about Billy.

"Billy's all right," his father said, ending discussion.

A few months after that, Billy told me Sally Lynn Lucas was having his child. When I registered surprise he smiled and said, "I guess she likes me."

I asked him what he planned to do.

"She said she'd marry me if I got her a diamond ring. But I ain't got that kind of money."

I said if she loved him, she'd understand. He looked at me like I was from Mars.

Soon after that, I heard Billy pulled a gun in a jewelry store in a nearby town. The gun went off as he took it out of his pocket and the bullet hit him in the foot, ricocheted off the floor, and grazed the leg of a customer.

I counseled Billy while he was awaiting trial but my order transferred me to another small church in Maine. I returned for his sentencing hearing, testifying on his behalf. Even Sheriff Hines pleaded for leniency.

When the judge pronounced a fifteen-year sentence, I saw the little boy smile disappear from Billy's face. Once behind bars, Billy never answered my letters or took my phone calls.

I often wondered what happened to Billy Seabolt, but time passed and I got involved in my new life. Trying to keep a Catholic church viable in Libertyville, Maine, is no easy task.

Not long ago, I looked up from my desk in back of the church and saw a figure opening and closing the heavy wooden front door. After watching him do that a few times, I called out, "What are you doing?"

"It's me, Father Mike. Billy Seabolt."

I took off my reading glasses and exchanged them for the far distance pair in my shirt pocket. "Well, I'll be damned." Adding, "Just a figure of speech, you know."

"I forgot how corny you could be, Father."

As we embraced, I noted how time had changed Billy. He was bigger now, fuller, but with deep lines extending downward from the corners of his mouth replacing the mischievous smile I remembered. Billy's eyes, too, weren't as clear and full of life as they used to be. They now looked like the eyes of a man who had seen too much.

"How are you?" I asked. "And what in blazes were you doing with the door?"

"Just opening and closing it. Since I been out, that's about my most favorite thing to do."

His voice hadn't changed a bit. He still sounded like the rambunctious teenager who used to run to my church whenever he got into trouble.

"How long have you been out? How'd you find me?" I was genuinely happy to see Billy again.

We sat in a pew and Billy told me he was released from prison six months earlier. At first, he returned home to Tewksbury, but his father had disappeared after his uncle died in a knife fight with a pimp up in Raleigh. "Nobody knew where my daddy went off to. They told me he just packed his truck and left town. We didn't talk since they locked me up anyways."

"I tried writing and calling you, but you never accepted my calls. Even the letters came back."

"I know. But I kept the return address. That's how I found you way up here in Maine. Man, couldn't you find some place warmer?"

"But why didn't you . . ."

"I couldn't talk, Father Mike. I figured the only way I could survive was by thinkin about nothing but getting by."

"It's been how long? Ten years?"

"Twelve. I should been paroled sooner but there was these guys inside who wouldn't let me be. I cut one of them with a toothbrush I sharpened."

I tried not to let my face register shock. As a kid, Billy was always in trouble. But there was something about him. Something innocent and energetic. Even trying to rob a jewelry store to get a diamond ring for his baby's mother and accidentally shooting himself in the foot had its charm. The fact is I always had a soft spot for Billy. I don't know if it was his naiveté or the fact that he came to me when he needed help. Whenever I thought what it might have been like having a son of my own, I thought of Billy.

"How are Sally Lynn and the child? I heard she had a boy."

"She got herself in a bad way, I hear. Drugs. They took the baby away from her and some folks say she died. Others say she just run off."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Billy. Have you seen your son?"

"Nah. They won't let me. He's been adopted and they say he's with a good family." Billy looked down at his dirty boots. "Probably a good thing. I wouldn't a made much of a daddy. Wouldn't know how."

We spoke a little more after that. We talked about Tewksbury and about Libertyville. I told him how hard it was being a Catholic priest in such small towns. And how lonely it felt sometimes.

"Don't y'all ever miss . . . you know?"

"All the time, Billy. All the time."

"I sure missed it," he said, his familiar grin returning like an old friend. "Never done it with no one but Sally Lynn, but I sure missed it." He was blushing and I could see the awkward adolescent still inside him. "I tried not thinking about it, but I couldn't help myself."

"I know, Billy," I told him. "Sometimes it's better to let yourself think about it and slowly allow your mind to think about other, more spiritual things."

That look I remembered from when he was a kid was back. The one where he wondered what planet I might be from.

He asked if I could help him find work and a place to live. He stayed in my office in the back of the church for a while and then he moved to his own place, a

small house in the woods. It was run down, but the owner said he could stay there free if he fixed it up.

Billy worked odd jobs, but when they found out he had been in prison for attempted robbery and for shooting a man, and that he knifed another man in jail, the people around him acted suspicious and afraid. He was soon encouraged to leave, although no one had any problems with his work. He did a good job repairing the house in the woods, but the nights were starting to get cold up there and Billy was still a Southern boy at heart.

I went to visit him one evening. He was drinking beer from a cooler he had next to his chair. "Too damn cold to do nothin but drink," he said, slurring his words. His eyes were red and his face looked tired and worn.

I offered him a job at the church and his old room back. "At least until the weather warms up."

"Nah. Thanks anyway, but I can't go backwards. I just gotta get by."

We watched the Red Sox on television. They were ahead 2-0 early in the game, but after a couple of errors they blew the lead and lost 4-2.

Less than a month after that, Herb Gossage, the owner of the house called to ask if I knew what happened to Billy. When I told him I didn't, he said he heard Billy just packed up his truck and drove off.

"I went back to the house to see what he stole," Herb said. "But he left the house in fine shape. Did good work, too, fixing the roof and painting the place. Even washed and folded the sheets and towels I left him. I'd like to pay him if you ever hear from him."

I assured him I'd pass the word on to Billy if I ever saw him again.

I've been thinking a lot about Billy lately, wondering what will happen to him. I tried making some phone calls to people I knew in Tewksbury, but they hadn't heard from him or his father.

"Good riddance to them," was what one former parishioner said, summing up most of the town's feelings about Billy and the whole Seabolt clan.

Wendell Hines, long retired, was one of the few people in town who remembered Billy fondly. "I would like to have helped that boy," he told me. "But I guess you can't save 'em all, huh Father?"

Sadly, I had to agree with him. "No, Wendell. You can't save them all."

After I hung up the phone, I locked the church and shuffled to my room in the rectory. I poured myself a scotch and sat in silence. Something I had been doing a lot lately. I knew I couldn't save them all, but if I couldn't save a boy I'd known since he was a child, who could I save? What good was I to anyone? I thought about the choices I had made in life, the loneliness I had accepted as my lot. I wondered what kind of father I would have made.

I downed the scotch that remained in the glass, stood up and washed the glass in the little sink in my room. I lay down on my bed and prayed for Billy.

Nocturn

Among darkness and dahlias moving through the yard our cat advances away Searching for its feral prey like lost words sought beyond the fluorescent streetlights faintly seen outside the windowed purview where words hide when needed most my dark thirst remaining unslaked. Where is my verse? The hour is getting late even hunting bats return again before daybreak.

-michael seeger

WORCESTERSHIRE

On the cook line Sprinkles on parsley and parmesan Half-moon of lemon tucked on the side. Sally's late with her rent *Homeless with three kids soon?* Man at the corner table nibbles insalata tricolore.

Hipsters near the window "Is this Wor-ces-tershire sauce organic?" Extra syllable flies over the kitchen din Sizzling clanging chopping Sweat stings Sally's eyes. Damn rent. No way to scrape it together.

Ceiling speakers pour out protection Thick, soft orchestral music A fortress against reality. *Reality always sneaks in and stabs me.* Chef's knife in the sink Sally's vision focuses.

Fingers squeeze the ebony handle Satisfying, hard, promises release. Cut through the music, talk, bullshit Those hipsters still complaining Sally just wants a life Like theirs. Rent paid. Food on the table.

Doesn't know how she got there Towering over the hipsters Knife raised reflects a motorcycle Rolling into the parking lot. Crunch of gravel scrapes Sally's ears She looks up, knife still raised.

Dave is his name Sally's new landlord, so young. Smug. *Smiling. Rich bastard is smiling?* Hipsters gasp. She walks to the door Friendly bells ring when Dave enters Each ching-a-ling fractures Sally's mind.

Smooth face. Glinting blade. Sally's hand on Dave's collar Steel plunges through plaid shirt Again, again, again, one stroke For each beat in the orchestral music Blood gushes out in the same tempo.

A cop at each elbow *No rent due now.* She cries in happiness Her kids will get a better home She won't miss the cook line Calls to the hipsters as she leaves: "No, dears, it's not organic."

—anne e. johnson

Inertia

You do not want to floss your teeth but you do it.

You do not want to wash you hair but you do it,

do not want to scrub your skin with soapy cloth, to touch your toes, walk the treadmill remotely clicking channels, stir the oatmeal into boiling water,

but you do it.

Between alarm and sleep everything you do is clipping branches into pieces small enough not to puncture plastic bags. You do not want to drag them to the curb but you do it. You do not want to look in morning mirror but you do it nakedly and call it god's image.

You do not want to seek the true nor prepare yourself for death.

You do not want to want what you do not want to want.

But you grow stronger every day strong enough to miss a day of flossing oatmeal, strong enough one day to whisper *en* of *no*,

by end of life as strong as one fist punching time and matter, hydraulic rat-a-tatting holes through abstract concrete,

so strong that in your dying pant you change your name to *habaňero*. Those passing by your waxen form recall you as a sharp but pleasant man who only looked behind to see where he was going.

-marc jampole

[short story]

Disaster Adjustor

by peter dichellis

130 THE LITERARY HATCHET

Jonathan squirmed. Parked on the highway shoulder, he gripped the steering wheel and listened to the emergency radio broadcast. Hundreds dead. Hundreds missing. Bodies in the streets. No electricity, no sanitation. Disease warnings, looters, dangerous animals. What else might I encounter here? Jonathan wondered. He'd know soon enough, he decided. He pledged to himself that he'd survive this place. No matter what. He switched off the radio. Like everyone else in the world, he'd heard the news many times already.

The hurricane had descended on the small city of Tribute, Florida, with pure and perfect fury. A category 5 killer, the storm released horror upon horror. Families that delayed evacuation from flooded low-lying areas drowned in their homes, after climbing in panic atop staircases, appliances, bookshelves, anything, only to watch the foaming water rise and rise, higher and higher, and then feel its cold violence choke and kill.

The lucky few who reached rooftops wept at seeing corpses float out of broken windows, where they bobbed in filthy floodwater until snagging on random detritus and bloating for hours in grim and patient silence.

Jonathan, a hundred miles inland from the devastated Florida city, watched a line of trucks ahead of him, their drivers anxious, engines quiet, loads ready. National Guard, Red Cross, corporate donors, and the U.S. government. Food, water, medicine, and blankets for the living. Body bags for the dead. The vehicles formed a mile-long convoy of last, desperate hope, waiting for the all-clear call from first responders in the city. And right behind the trucks, a phalanx of rental cars. The men and women inside these vehicles, Jonathan among them, wore outdoor gear stitched with the names and logos of major insurance companies.

At last, the truck drivers cranked their engines and rolled forward. Jonathan pulled onto the highway and followed them. As he drove, images from news coverage of the storm replayed in his memory. A column of fire blasting skyward from a ruptured gas line beneath a flooded sinkhole, spewing flames as if the water itself was burning. Homes, businesses, trees, and power poles torn apart, pieces lying in weather-beaten piles of waterlogged trash. An ambulance flipped on its side in a supermarket parking lot. Remnants of a demolished church resting peacefully while its bell somehow chimed in the now dying wind. "Insurance man. Here to help," Jonathan hollered into a storm-wrecked home. "Anybody in there?"

Insurance man. "Senior Emergency Claims Adjuster" his business cards read. Few people knew it, but insurance claims adjusters entered disaster areas early, where they assessed damages, gave small emergency advance payments, and made offers to settle claims.

Jonathan recalled his supervisor's instructions. "We're getting a goddamn hundred-year storm every goddamn year. Our payout forecasts won't handle more of this. So get some goddamn liability releases and get back to me on how much we're stuck with. And make sure it's as little as possible."

Hundred year storms every year. Nature fighting back, Jonathan thought. At war with our industrial spew. Battling for survival. Adjusting for us.

"Anybody home?" he called out.

Still no response. He took a deep breath and went inside. Mud, black water, ruined furniture. And a dead cat, floating alongside all manner of drenched debris, its eyes open, legs stiff, orange fur matted.

Jonathan wondered how hard the cat had fought to live. Not hard enough, he concluded. A bumping sound from a room down the hall jarred him from his thoughts. *Bump. Bump.*

"Anybody there?" he shouted. "Anybody hurt?"

Витр. Витр.

Jonathan waded toward the noise, soaking his boots. *Careful*, he told himself. *Dangerous things hide in floodwater*. *Wounded animals, broken floors, slick surfaces, exposed nails covered with infectious filth.*

And down the hall, between him and the bumping noise and just eight feet away before he saw it, the hurricane monster's latest challenge, a snake. A Florida cottonmouth, poisonous and agitated, displaced by the storm. The cottonmouth glided high in the water toward Jonathan. Six feet away now. It coiled, cocked its head upward, and opened its mouth, snowy white inside. The snake kept riding the water, venomous fangs set to strike. Only five feet away.

Jonathan remained still and silent. His safety briefing material had told him everything he needed to know about the primitive reptile in front of him. Don't slosh around. You cannot outmaneuver a cottonmouth, also known as a water moccasin, in water. Sloshing around will only make a cottonmouth feel threatened and, when threatened, it bites. Without prompt medical treatment, its bite would be fatal. And the chance of prompt medical treatment in this hurricane-ravaged hellhole was exactly zero. So stand still, leave the damn thing alone, and usually it will slither off. Usually.

The snake was just three feet away from Jonathan when suddenly it uncoiled and sped past him. Gone. He continued wading toward the noise. *Bump. Bump.*

Inside a bedroom, Jonathan found a small wood nightstand, floating. Stuck between the bed and the wall, the nightstand struck the wall in rhythm to the moving water. *Bump. Bump.* He lifted it onto the bed.

"Insurance man. Anybody here? Anybody hurt?"

No answer. Something across the room caught Jonathan's eye. Small, clear plastic bags. Several of them, partially submerged, near the closet. He pulled one from the water. A wet film covered the plastic. He held the bag close to his face, squinting, trying to see inside. Something white. A powder.

And then a man's voice behind him.

"Shotgun aimed at your spine. Don't move."

"Insurance man, here to help." Jonathan's voice sounded an octave higher.

"Hands up. Drop the baggie. Turn around." Midwest accent, maybe Chicago.

Jonathan complied. In the doorway an exhausted cop held a shotgun.

"Officer, thank God." Jonathan relaxed his hands.

"Hands up or I'll shoot." The cop shouldered his shotgun, aiming at Jonathan's midsection. "Drug dealers get special treatment in this part of the country."

"My name is Jonathan Mirle. I'm an insurance claims adjuster. My company insures this property, and I..."

"And you thought you'd take some dope and make some money. You're under arrest."

Half an hour later, Jonathan sat in the back of a speeding police cruiser, his hands cuffed behind him, seatbelt snug around him. The cop had made a quick cell phone call, thrown all the dope into the trunk, and put the shotgun there too. But the car wasn't headed toward the city, Jonathan knew. They were driving away from it, toward swamps and marshes. The handcuffs and seatbelt seemed to tighten and squeeze. Jonathan's breathing felt labored and grew loud.

"City streets are flooded," the cop said. "Calm down. There's no other way."

Jonathan took comfort in his company's policy of notifying local authorities if he missed his daily check-in. Standard emergency safety procedure. *Someone will phone this guy's boss within the hour. Calm down*.

They drove in silence now, the exhausted cop thinking too. He slurped a warm soda he'd pulled from the trunk. Caffeine and sugar. Wished it was alcohol.

No choice. Gotta kill this guy. Leave the body where nobody will find it. That's what the dopers want, and the dopers own me. He'd spent the last twenty-four hours retrieving their cocaine from safe houses around the city. He'd gotten it all. And now he'd kill the insurance guy. People disappeared in hurricanes all the time.

This wasn't the same guy who'd denied Annie's medical claims, of course. Different guy, different company, different type of insurance. Didn't matter. He'd made a deal with the dopers to get money for Annie's care. And now she was gone and they owned him. He remembered his wife's brave last days.

I miss you, Annie; I miss you so much.

Seemed like a long time ago, though it wasn't. He'd moved here to start over. New city, new police force, new life. But the dopers wouldn't let go.

"Florida?" they'd said. "Even better."

The car sped toward a puddle that spanned the road a few yards ahead. Hiding beneath the puddle's surface was a monster of a sinkhole. The front end of the car

dropped hard and deep. The car rocked a moment before settling at a forty-five degree angle, front end submerged, back end in the air, surrounded by water on all sides.

A few minutes later, Jonathan shuddered awake to a rancid smell. The cop was slumped in the front seat, unconscious, immersed in waist-deep water. Blood dripped from airbag cuts to his arms and face.

And outside the car window, inches from Jonathan's face, the source of the rancid smell. An eleven-foot-long alligator, snorting putrid breath through the slightly open window, sliming the glass with its snout.

Jonathan struggled against his seatbelt, yelled, and kicked the seatback, trying to wake the cop. The alligator, excited by Jonathan's movement and the cop's blood, made a guttural, hissing noise and pressed against the window.

The cop regained consciousness, rolled his shoulders, wiped his eyes.

"Alligator," Jonathan shouted. "Feeding time."

The gator hissed again, longer and louder this time, and pressed hard against the window. Feeding time.

The cop hit a toggle switch. The car's sirens shrieked and flashing red and blue lights lit up the dusk. The startled alligator scrambled away.

Still woozy, Jonathan watched the cop slide open the car's backseat security divider and stretch across the seatback. He unfastened Jonathan's seatbelt.

"Back door won't open from the inside," he told Jonathan. "Sit tight."

The cop pushed his own door open and climbed onto the car's roof. He reached down and used the outside door handle to unlatch the back door nearest Jonathan.

"Kick it open," the cop said.

Ten minutes later, after much slipping, falling, and wading, they both clambered onto the road. Still handcuffed behind his back, Jonathan was sopping wet from his collar to his boots. The cop was soaked from the waist down, his utility belt, holster, and trousers all dripping muddy water.

"Can you radio for help?" Jonathan asked.

"There is no help."

"How do we get back?"

The cop just stared.

Jonathan heaved a sigh and closed his eyes, resting and thinking. The cop had said the city streets were flooded. True, but most were passable. Jonathan had driven throughout the city earlier today and saw emergency relief trucks driving everywhere. And how did the cop know the plastic bag held dope? Jonathan could barely see into it up close, yet the cop was across the room. And now he'd wrecked his patrol car at the edge of a swamp, but wouldn't call for help? Nothing seemed right about the cop now, including how he'd simply thrown all the dope in the trunk. Didn't cops have legal procedures to follow? What the hell was happening?

Jonathan opened his eyes. The cop was grabbing at his automatic pistol, his

contorted face still bloody; his eyes were wide and unsettled. Jonathan panicked. *The crafty son of a bitch just didn't want to kill me in his car. Didn't want evidence in there*. He shivered, watching the cop finally release his gun from its holster.

"Alligator," the cop whispered.

And there it was again. Same eleven-footer. It had crawled in the night to within a dozen feet. Protecting its territory, hunting its feeding grounds. The gator stretched its bone-crushing jaws, eighty spiky teeth ready to rip. Its breath stank of dead fish.

The cop faced the gator in a two-handed shooting stance, aiming his pistol between the creature's merciless eyes. He squeezed the trigger.

Click. Click.

The drenched pistol was jammed with silt, useless. The cop's hands trembled.

From his safety briefing, Jonathan knew what he needed to know about alligators. Run directly away from them, in a straight line, never a zigzag. People trip and fall trying to zigzag. And an alligator's stubby legs can power a quick burst that cuts off a zigzag. But gators are lazy feeders and won't try to outrun you over a distance. So just run like hell in a straight line.

Decision time, Jonathan thought. Survival time.

"I'll run straight, you go zigzag," he told the cop.

The cop nodded. Midwesterner, new to Florida. Didn't know gators.

Jonathan sprinted away. The cop started his zigzag, and as he cut sideways, the alligator rushed him, clamping onto the cop's leg with a quick swipe. The fearsome jaws bit down and gripped like a vise, and the gator shook its massive head back and forth. When the cop tumbled to the ground, the frenzied 600-pound carnivore bit down harder and rolled over twice, twisting the screaming cop's crumpling body against the wet earth.

On the second rollover, the cop's leg made popping noises as bone, muscle, ligament and arteries all broke loose, the nearly severed limb now protruding from the cop's battered torso at a grotesque angle.

Classic alligator attack against large prey. Exactly as Jonathan's safety briefing had described.

Jonathan heard the cop screaming and turned to see arterial blood spurting high and dark in soft Florida moonlight. The cop slid into shock and the gator dragged him away.

Jonathan staggered toward the city. The sky was clear, the stars dazzled him, and the scent of Sweet bay trees filled the air. The handcuffs chafed his wrists.

How glorious, he thought, to be alive on a night like this.

AGift from England

This morning I woke with an aching head And a mind in turmoil with existence, Feeling as alone as such thoughts impled While my love was away a long distance.

"It may be a while before I return," She said to me yesterday when leaving, "Though it's certain, like you, my heart will yearn, So don't feel alone or go grieving.

Was there something she could bring back to me, Or send from her far off destination?" There's only one thing I lacked: that would be My love leaving without hesitation.

Though no distance could separate as yet My thoughts for you in this situation Your departure does not bode well, my pet, For this suicidal ideation.

My desire for you is still what compels I recall the smile and way you were dressed The sneaking suspicion of someone else With you has left me distraught and depressed.

You can send me promises in the mail Of your chaste loyalty and devotion, But notice that just before setting sail You were distant before crossing that ocean.

"I'm only wondering if you stand in need Of something that I haven't thought of; As my words," she said, "weren't meant to mislead Or leave you crying like a mourning dove."

Postcards came from England across the sea; But what they said wouldn't lift my sorrow: "I feel my heart's where it's destined to be, Don't fret with worry about tomorrow."

The pain in my heart and mind really hurt Though to her it did not seem to matter, Lost love reflected in words short and curt: Did she think it would make my world shatter?

Then I asked for something I'd not regret — Something worth more and made by Cadbury (She could send the head of her lover, yet) The chocolate would be more satisfactory).

-michael seeger

candlelight

Candlelight, the best light, with whisked wax and smoke, draws sculptures in the dark; arms red in passion, legs white from exhaustion, a charcoal canvas of shadows animated by the dust of night's bitter breath. The dripping scent emitted strips skin raw and drinks the moisture in the walls, a taste the throat rememberslike melted fabric coarse and plastic velvet, sinking down toward the stomach, only to stay there till dawn when the flame has long been extinguished.

-mckinley henson

You're Losing Me

to analgesics and the vacuum cleaner, telephone surveys, spinning fan blades, the land of cotton mumbles.

You're losing me to sidewalk cracks, a locked bathroom, forensic dialogue, static without electricity.

You're losing me to a hard, cold nothing, to the point after pain.

I feel the pressure on my breast, hear your "one, two, three, breathe ... "

You may break my ribcage, but you're losing me.

-maureen mcelroy



—"teardrops from above" by denny marshall

THE BLUFFS

The cold water flowed around Jack in the stream. His back leaned against a huge piece of crumbling shale, splitting the current into two riffles that played down his thighs. The same shale shot 100 feet up on both sides of the stream in dramatic, worn shards. On the shore his jeans and tee shirt sat piled on top of his boots. Outside of the cool wet noise of the stream, the day was hot, muggy, and sullen. Tiny flies swarmed above the stream in torrents of their own, swirling in grey masses, exploding apart, then reassembling. He took a deep breath and slid under the water, his hands grasping at the stone so as not to be swept away by the current. The power of the stream pulled at him with the desperate tug of a lost child.

Someday I will let go. The water can carry me through the rest of the bluffs, moving faster and faster. A mile. Past the oaks. Away from the rocks and spit me out of the mouth of the stream into the lake. The steelhead fisherman watching in puzzlement. From there, Niagara. Canada. The ocean.

He rose back to the surface, spitting water off his lips as it ran down his face. He pushed his hair back with a hand. He sighed and looked at the sun. The weather was still too hot to get out, but if he wanted to see Angela before her shift started, he had better go now. He flipped over, let the water buoy his body and legs up and pulled himself hand over hand over the slimy pebbles of the bed over to the bank. Caddis larvae and crayfish scuttled in his path. He crawled out, squeegeed the water from his body with his hands, and cursing at the difficulty of dry fabric on wet flesh as he pulled his clothes back on.

by michael dittman

He stepped in his boots and headed up the steep trail, panting a little, and then doglegged left onto a deer trail. It was the sort of trace that most people, day hikers, would have ignored. He followed it for a quarter mile or so where it went into a thick rhododendron copse. Here he had to bend double to get through, but he could hear the sound of the surf crashing into the pebble beach, and that noise only heightened the anticipation of his favorite private place. After 100 yards, he burst forth from the bushes and onto a small cliff overlooking a hidden beach 75 feet below. The blue tint of the water changed to green as it moved to the horizon and grew deeper. Before he met Angela, and sometimes even now, he would spend the night here with a small fire, listening to the rhythm of the water and the syncopation of the animals.

But today there was a different noise—a woman laughing. He stiffened. He had never seen another person here before. The beach was encircled by high cliffs. Someone might have been able to visit by taking a small boat and beaching it, but beyond that, even he, knowing the way, had to follow the rhododendron trail and then carefully, crouch-slide down the empty stream bed that twisted down the face of the bluff. But here they were—a young woman with long blonde unkempt hair, and a thin man with dark hair and a beard. They were dancing in the surf naked.

Jack watched for a few minutes. The two below played—splashed water on each other and laughed. They spouted water from their mouths and ducked each other under the Lake Erie surf. The woman's small breasts jiggled as she ran in the water and her hair whipped around, heavy with water. Rivulets ran down from the man's beard.

He turned and made his way out. *Why? How?* He had never taken anyone there—never even told anyone about it, and yet there those strangers were—acting like the place belonged to them, that they had a right to it. Walking in a daze, he ended up back in his truck and fired the engine. He was going to be late now, but all the expectation of seeing Angela had drained out of him anyway. At the road, just a few hundred feet from where he had parked, he saw it—a beat up Dodge van with New York plates. It had to belong to the couple.

He fell back away from her with a heave and she collapsed face-down on the bed. They laid there for a moment panting, and then she rolled out of bed and walked to the bathroom. He shifted himself and propped a pillow under his head. He unrolled the condom and then rerolled it into a tissue, leaned over the bed and tucked it into his jeans pocket. Her mother had never met him, didn't know anything about him, and that's the way Angela wanted it to stay. He was still thinking about the couple on the beach that he had seen an hour before.

"Do you ever think . . ?" he yelled at her through the bathroom door.

"What?"

"Do you ever . . ?"

"Hold on," she yelled back. Her voice was annoyed. The door swung open and she stood there naked. Her long dark hair fell like a mane around her shoulders. Her eyes sparked, her brow furrowed. Her belly was already starting to go a bit soft and the sunlight from the bathroom window highlighted the blonde down that played across the swell.

"What?"

"Do you ever think about what would happen if you got pregnant?"

Confusion swept across her face.

"What are you talking about?" she said, anger in her voice.

"I mean, would we get married or would you move in with me or . . ?"

The hills of her spine showed as she bent and tugged on her panties. She didn't answer him.

"You're too rough, Jack. I don't want to do this anymore."

"What do you mean?" he asked, slowly turning his head to her, still lost in his thoughts.

"I don't want to have sex with you anymore. You're too rough."

"You don't mean that," he said. "Come back to bed."

"No," she said. She grabbed for her bra on the floor, shimmied into the cups and reached behind her back to snap the hooks. "I have to go to work."

"Do you want to smoke before you go?" he asked.

"No. I don't want to get high anymore either. All of this. It's just . . ." She shook her head and pulled open her closet and grabbed her waitress uniform. "You need to get dressed. My mom will be home soon."

It was just over a year ago that he had sloped into the Perkins late at night. He was drunk and it was the only place open. At this time of night, the restaurant was filled with bored teens with nowhere to go and drunks trying to lay down a foundation of grease before heading home. Jack was a regular. He talked to the drunks at the counter and sold weed to the kids in the parking lot. That night, he grabbed a seat at the bar and had already ordered his coffee when he realized he knew the waitress. Four years ago, she had been at the outer orbit of the popular kids in high school. He had seen her in the halls and at football games. She walked through the halls with books clutched to her chest, tightly woven into her cluster of friends, who aside from hair color, all looked the same. A business of girls in a place made safe with dark eye makeup and short skirts. He had never talked to her, and was amazed to see her here. People like her left after graduation to go to nice colleges and never came back. He would see them on Christmas break, slumming it in the bars, loud-talking with one another, tearing the felt on the pool tables while the regulars gritted their teeth and waited until January. But here she was-in polyester with beads of sweat just below that perfect hair, now tied back into a pony tail.

He went back for three nights in a row and she was always there. Always the night shift, the worst shift. On night four, buoyed by a line of Oxy in the car beforehand, he asked for her phone number and was surprised when she passed it to him with his bill. They started dating after that. She was quieter than he remembered. Her laugh that had filled the school between classes was gone. He had never even seen the mother she lived with. She had never talked about college.

The next day he went back to the bluffs. It was hot already, even this early in the morning. Sweat dampened his tee shirt by the time he made it to the rhododendron tunnel. "Hells," the old timers who used to go hunting with his dad called them. He struggled through. The pointy ends of the leaves marked red traces across his forearms. The couple was still there.

They were lying on the beach. He settled in, made sure he was hidden, and watched them. They didn't move and, if they spoke, their voices were drowned by the surf. As he got up to leave, he saw a flash of yellow to his right where the dry stream allowed access from the top of the bluff to the beach. Someone (the two of them, obviously) had tied a long piece of cheap nylon rope from an old tree trunk and played it down the run to make the trip up and down the Cliffside easier.

A slow burn of anger seeped into him. *It's just not right*. The trip wasn't meant to be easy. The difficulty of the trek was part of why it mattered. He duck-walked back from the edge and made his way to the tree. Keeping low, he took out his pocket knife and, below the poorly tied knot, he sawed away at the rope. When he got three quarters of the way through, he stopped. He could see it. They would start up, and then the weight would rip the rest of the rope. They would have their fall and then they would know that this place belonged to someone else. It was not theirs to do with as they pleased. And they would leave.

He drove back to the trailer, stopping at the end of the drive. He pulled in next to the mailbox. No check. He knew it wouldn't be there. He had blown off his last disability check-in with the doctor. He was running out of money, he thought, absently looking at the thinness of his wallet sitting on the dashboard. He would have to see about getting some more weed tonight.

He swung through the screen door. The front door was wide open. And his mom was gone. She had been gone for two days now. He flopped down on the couch and guessed that she had probably found someone with a good supply of meth. He closed his eyes, calmed his breath, and imagined the bearded man's surprise when he started climbing up the rope, only to have everything fall down on top of him. Jack grinned and wished he could be there when it happened. The man would be hurt, but not too badly. He might cry a little, and the woman would be frightened. Then they would get the hint and pack up and move on. The beach would be his again. Maybe he would take Angela there after the two left. They could light a fire and make love on the beach—lie there like the bearded man and the blonde. Quiet. Angela would change her mind about him when she saw that he had saved the beach for them. When he drifted off to sleep, he was smiling.

When he woke it was dark, and bit of coolness seeped through the screen. He went to the kitchen and splashed cool rust-colored water on his face, feeling the spongy floorboards beneath him flex and move. He fished the keys out of his pocket and got back in the truck to go see Eric.

"Can I get a half ounce?"

"\$120."

"Yeah. About that. Can I get it on advance?"

Eric smirked at him.

"Are you serious? C'mon man. You know that's not how this works."

"I got about 30 Oxys I could trade for it."

"This isn't a swap meet dude. Hit the road."

"Please. I need the money."

"So do I man. Out."

Jack walked to the door and, as he turned the knob, Eric called after him with a smirk in his words.

"Seen your mom around?"

Jack drove around. There had been a white fly hatch last night, but today they were already dead. Their ghostly bodies coated the bridges and slipped beneath his tires. Their fishy, corrupt smell came through the windows and the vents. The smell and the heat made it hard to think, hard to figure out his next step. He stopped at The Falls and ordered some Mustang to go. The older lady behind the bar had never hesitated to serve him since he was 18, but they had a ritual. She looked at him hard.

"You 21?"
"Yeah," he said and laid the five on the bar.

"OK," she said and turned her back to open the cooler.

"Hey," said an old man down the bar. "Aren't you gonna check his ID?" The drunk had a big grin on his face and was drinking beer out of a plastic cup. The Falls didn't use glassware—it was too dangerous when tempers ran high.

The old lady whirled with surprising speed to get close to the old drunk's face. "I just asked him how old he was, didn't I?" She leaned across the bar to get in the man's face. Breath. Spit.

"Yeah, yeah . . . OK . . . I was just joking."

She turned back around, fished the quarts out of the cooler, dropped them into a plastic bag, and handed the package to Jack. She took the five and didn't bring any change back.

"Thanks." he said.

He drove through the dark and thought about the couple at the beach. As the alcohol slipped into his brain, he began to feel knots loosening. He would go there the next day. Change things around. Introduce himself. Be friendly. Maybe they would share a beer. Maybe they would ask him to come along with them, wherever they were headed. He would bring Angela with him. The four of them traveling around. Camping out at night around the fire, laughing and talking, taking care of each other. He felt a sense of relief. This was a solution that would work. When he pulled into the Eat n Park parking lot, it was past one, but the air was still thick and muggy.

Inside, he slid into one of the stools at the counter and waited until she came over.

"Hi."

"You're drunk," she said, leaning over, pretending to adjust the napkins under the counter. "You have to go. I don't want to get into trouble. I need this job."

"OK," he said. "But first I wanted to tell you . . ."

"C'mon," she said. Her eyes were a little wet.

"I wanted to tell you. I've got it all figured out."

She stood up and crossed her arms.

"You and me. We'll go with those people. And we'll be happy. We'll take care of each other. You and me . . . and them."

She swiveled her head at the kitchen pass-through behind her and then turned back to him.

"What people are you talking about?"

"You know. The beach people."

"OK," she said. "You need to leave now. I should have just been honest the other day. This. Us. This is not working. Please don't come here anymore."

Jack sat for a moment, his lips thickly parted. His eyes were looking down.

"But. We're going to go with them tomorrow."

"No, Jack. We're not. I'm not. Please, just go."

He looked at her for a long time. In the restaurant, people went on eating. No

one looked up or noticed. Then he muttered to himself and slid off the bench, his right knee giving a little from the booze. He made his way out to his truck, turned the key, re-opened his beer, and drove home.

He had a light sleep without dreams, lying on the couch. The heat and a headache convinced him to get up at 10:00. His mouth was dry, his heart pounded in his ears one minute and the next he was too tired to move. His stomach growled, almost doubling him over. But there was no food. He got dressed, grabbed his dad's old 30-06, a few shells, and then headed out to the beach.

He lay on his belly for a few minutes watching the two of them play in the surf. They were naked again, and he realized that for all the time he had seen them naked and the ache that the blonde's body created, he had never seen them touch each other—had never seen them make love.

With a sigh, he brought the rifle up to his shoulder and sighted her through the scope. He squeezed the trigger and the girl's kneecap blossomed red. She fell in the water; she was screaming when her head rose. The water around her turned pink. The man looked confused and terrified, and he tried to pull her up to her feet. She screamed louder and the bearded man realized that the pain was in her leg. He looped his arms under her shoulders and pulled her to the beach, his head swinging from side to side, his eyes rolling white, trying to find Jack. The girl's lower leg hung at an oblique angle.

Jack watched the two of them. The man was trying to figure out what to do, how to get the girl up the steep hill. He grabbed the rope and started pulling himself up the dry run. The rope snapped under his weight before he made it more than 10 feet up. The man tumbled down the rocks. He pulled himself up to sitting and, through the scope, Jack saw the jagged bit of bone emerging through the skin. The blood stained the sand around the bearded man. He clutched his leg and sobbed, silently, deep, ragged sobs, shaking his body but making no noise that Jack could hear. Behind the man, down the beach, the woman continued to scream—a high keening noise—but the bearded man had forgotten her now.

Now satiated, Jack took up the rifle ahead of his body and slithered out through the rhododendrons and back to his truck.

The End of the Rainbow

A quixotic man known for extreme measures, Engaged in what most thought a futile quest, Gaily attired, he boldly passed pleasures For what he sought —which could only be guessed.

Perhaps it was something found after death He seemed led by some shadowy advice "Enjoy the journey" was his shibboleth — He knew he wouldn't be passing through twice.

Or maybe it was the end of the rainbow— He searched for across mountains of the moon, Riding right through the Valley of Shadow To face down Death before it came too soon.

Some thought he finally found the treasure, Though it may have been some false bravado, For he seemed to have measure for measure What could only be found in El Dorado.

-michael seeger

MANSOURASAURUS

Paleontologists collect a lower jaw, a skull and ribs, cleaving belly of the Sahara Desert. They provide the fossils with flesh of fantasy. This is an artificial rebirth.

Mansourasaurus was not ferocious like a fanatic or a rapist. It lived with herbivorous mind and showed 'Might is not to fight.' With a natural armor of bony plates in skin, it traversed the war-free world. Mother never squirmed under its feet.

The remains remain with wisdom.

*Mansourasaurus – a giant dinosaur lived in the Sahara Desert.

—fabiyas mv

the man i fired Does he set the table noisily, clanking plates and flatware, working on his second beer? The man I fired. does he hide in blanket caves with boy and fabric pig, listen to Raffi wordlessly and contemplate the VISA bill? When he puts his boy to bed, does he lightly kiss his forehead while computing the future value of the college fund? Does he blend three mental streams in his recliner: a colorized version of a Bogart movie, his wife's plan to fix the house, his silent review of what will come next? When he takes his weekly bedroom pleasure does concealing what happened make him more tender than usual? While others sleep, does he sit by a window in darkness, listen to rattle of glass, rattle of locust, mumble the slogans which order his life: Oh, what a feeling! The dream of owning your own home. The wisdom of the marketplace. The pursuit of happiness. The Rights of Man.

The conservation of energy. To be or not ...

Planck's Constant.

-marc jampole

I CAN SEE CLEARLY NOW



by sherry chapman

In the 4th grade I started to pudge out. I don't know why, other than the fact that I ate a lot and my favorite exercise was running to the utility room to sneak snack cakes during the day. That must have been the year my father found this new discount bakery, and he'd perpetually come home with a big cardboard box of them. He grew up in the Depression, and he became an over-buyer when he had his own family. He was glad to see that box near empty at the end of the week. His kids weren't gonna go to bed with growling stomachs. "Eat all you want," was a phrase he repeated at least twice a day. And I took him at his word.

There were five kids in our family. I snuck those sweets because I had this middle sister who couldn't wait to tell if she had anything on any of us. Still, something told me I probably shouldn't be eating four or five of those a day.

A lot of things happened to me in the 4th grade. I won the class spelling bee. The word I won on was "glucose." I not only knew it from the snack cake labels but from my mother, who was a diabetic. She ignored her condition entirely, pills the doctor giving her sitting untouched in the kitchen cabinet. Didn't the doctor wonder why she never called in for a re-fill?

I wondered about those pills. "Ma, how come you don't take the pills the doctor gave you for your sugar die-beet-us?" For some reason, she pronounced it like that, and added the word "sugar." Everyone in the family pronounced it the way she did. We must have sounded like idiots to others outside the family.

"Oh, those!" she answered as she was mashing the potatoes for supper. "I'm fine! If I get sick, then I'll take them. Okay?"

"But this pamphlet in the drawer says if you don't, real bad stuff will happen to you!" I was almost crying with fear, recalling the last page of that booklet where the starring stick figure disappeared and a crude lump of earth with a cross on top pretty clearly summed things up.

She stopped mashing her potatoes. "Oh, it's all right, honey." She bent down to soothe me. I had a habit of waking up screaming in the middle of the night from a fear I'd get in my head, and she was the only one who would wake up and come to me. Even my sisters who slept in the same room would ignore me.

"Tell you what," she said, embracing me. "For *you* I'll start taking them tomorrow. Okay?" I nodded my head and felt relieved, and she went back to her mashing.

Fourth grade was also when I failed my eye test they used to give to every student in the school. I never minded taking their eye tests or their hearing tests, since they were not weight-related. High jumping, rope climbing, and 50-yard dashes were not my strong suit. In the coming years, my efforts in sports would bring crude remarks and nasty snickers even from the classmates who were way heavier than me.

My dad was one of those parents who did everything the same old way for years and years, no matter what was going on in the world, no matter how things had changed. He had this "eye guy" doctor he had used when my oldest brother was in grade school. Now my brother had graduated from high school. But, of course, we were going to this Dr. MacRae—no doubt about it.

The doctor was about 30 minutes from our house, which meant me and my dad driving the whole way with him smoking with the windows rolled up, risking me getting car sickness. Getting car sick near my dad was dangerous. If someone puked, HE puked.

So we do get to this Dr. MacRae's office with nobody puking. "He's a *real* nice guy," my father had told me beforehand. Yeah, well. That told me like nothing about him. We were in a residential neighborhood, and it turned out that his office was in his house. I thought, "Who does that anymore?" and my answer was "Just about nobody." Followed by, "This guy does it because he's 90 years old."

An ancient man wearing glasses himself examined my eyes and had me read eye charts and flipped different lenses for me to try. He took a long time between each step—he was that old. As expected, I did need glasses.

Oh boy! Now it was time to pick them out! Dr. MacRae opens up this old brown leather case, kind of like a briefcase, and I thought he was going to show me something interesting like, "Look here, Donna. There's Jack Benny's first pair of glasses!" Or something museum-like. But what he had in that briefcase were all the samples of frames you could choose from. For female children a total of two.

I had my heart set on a pair of brown-framed glasses. Everybody in my class who wore glasses had brown-framed ones. Surprisingly, one of those pairs was brown-framed. My heart leapt. The doctor asked me which frame I wanted. My father said, "I think she'll take this other pair here."

NOOOOOO! They were so *ugly*! And that doctor took forever getting them out and trying them on me, which was okay with me because I never wanted him to try them on me. I looked in the mirror for a second and became as disgusted as I thought I'd be. I said, "I *think* I'd like—" but my dad said we would take those ugly ones.

Why? If I make it to heaven someday, and if my dad is there, that will be one of the first questions I ask him. They were clear plastic frames, with cat eyes that had little silver leaves at the tips. Holy hell. Nobody that lived outside of a nursing home had glasses like that.

The doctor said they would be ready in two weeks. Two weeks to wait for those rotten things. That was okay. I hoped they never came in.

Those two weeks went by too fast for me. When the appointment time came, my oldest brother and my mother had to take me because my dad was working overtime. The doctor told me I only needed the "I Can See Clearly Now" glasses for reading. That's what he said. For reading or for watching TV. But I couldn't see what was written on the blackboard; that's why I went for glasses in the first place. I sensed something askew.

Well, I wore them out of the office since I was pretty sure I wouldn't run into anyone from my class. Things were good and clear and I made one comment, which was, "Oh! The trees are a lot clearer now!" For the rest of her life—I kid you not—my mother consistently said that I said, "Hey, I can see that tree now!" No matter how many times I tried to correct her, she still went on saying it.

Not long after I got home and my sister, Sharon, saw me in those glasses, she pinned the nickname of "Colonel Sanders" on me. They were like Colonel Sanders' glasses. I hadn't realized it before. Swell. A week or two later, she added the song that was playing on the KFC ads back then: "Oh, visit the Colonel, go ahead and do it! Visit the Colonel, go ahead today . . !" She kept it up for the *three years* I had them. And they never did me any good anyway since that doctor told me to only wear them for reading and TV. That gave me a good excuse to keep them off most of the time, but I'll admit that when we had a lot of stuff on the blackboard to copy down, I'd sort of slyly reach in my desk without making noise and get the glasses out so I could see.

Some years later, my sister Rose needed glasses. I don't know why she chose Dr. MacRae. I agreed to go with her. Mostly to see if he was still alive. I guess she actually had faith in my dad's testimonial of him being a good guy and a great doctor. Plus our dad was paying the bill for it.

I got to observe Dr. MacRae "at work," if he did realize he was working. He moved even slower now. And every time he leaned over to get a different lens for Rose to try, he would point his toe! God! What was that about? A balance thing maybe? No, I wasn't going to feel sorry for the old man. Okay. He was a nice man. But he was too old to be selling glasses to the public, and had I been taken to a different eye doctor I wouldn't have gotten Colonel Sanders' glasses because nobody else would have had those as a choice for little girls.

I sat quietly and just would not look at his toe or I'd start laughing. And if I started laughing, I probably wouldn't stop. Especially with Rose there. She made these noises when she tried to stop laughing that made me laugh more. No. Laughing was just out of the question. I laughed. Dr. McRae looked up at me sharply, and I covered it with a cough. Rose giggled, and she and I smiled at each other.

"Look, I don't appreciate being laughed at because I'm not 25 years old anymore," the doctor said. One of us should have apologized, but I wasn't even sure he really knew we were laughing at him.

Rose read several lines on the eye chart. She had a hard time seeing it. After a while, she'd just guess at the letters, finally coming out and saying, "Gosh, I don't know. B?" And every time Rose named a letter the doctor would say she was right. What a disaster! I began to pity Rose for the ugly frames he would offer her to choose from.

As we waited for Doctor MacRae to make the journey from the exam chair to the shelf where he kept his briefcase samples, he didn't make it that far. He said, "You do not need glasses, Rose."

"You're kiddin', ain't ya, doc?" Rose asked. "I failed getting my drivers' license renewed because they said I need glasses."

The doctor looked at her with an expression that was unreadable. "Oh, you can drive with no glasses. You can do anything. You don't need any glasses."

We felt funny—Well, I did and from the look on Rose's face it looked like she did. "Then why did the Secretary of State's office tell me I flunked the eye test?"

He shrugged carelessly as he was putting his equipment away. "Maybe their machine was broken."

I spoke up. "I was sitting right here, and I saw that she got most of the letters wrong on your charts."

He smiled. "Maybe you need glasses."

"No!" I said a little too loudly. "Uh, that's okay."

We managed to say goodbye to Dr. MacRae, though we had unanswered questions.

"I don't know, Rose. Your driving wasn't so hot getting here. You weren't staying in your lane. I think you need glasses."

"Yeah, yeah, Doctor. You're just mad because I'm not walking out of there looking like Colonel Sanders." That was true. "Tell you what. I'll drive extra slow on the way home. Okay?"

And she did drive extra slow—all the while she was turning in front of an 18-wheeler that took her side of the car with it.



Millville

The tannin smell of wet oak after my sleepover at your ranch. You showed me sudangrass you said contained cyanide, green blades sharp as the shards of flint we hoped were arrowheads. Sown at the edge of pasture, the boundary thick and tall, calves lost in it, their hide nicked until they learned their way.

Your family's pool like inverted sky, a mirage set against the parched foothills strewn with truck-sized boulders, monuments to Mount Lassen, the volcano we convinced ourselves will never again erupt.

—cathryn shea

not to heal

Neatly tucked beneath the carefree brow, The gleaming eyes and the sugared smile, Is a crimson wound that breathes and gnaws, Almost fresh, still deepening, still ramifying, That craves the warmth of that velvet touch, And the solace from that pristine glance; But stop yearning... For what you deem to be the cure Will hurt even more than the wound. Stop yearning... For it is saner to believe the wound is not to heal. Just don't place the finger there; Take a deep wistful breath and look askance.

—sindhu verma

DARLING

I love you with your cold transparent hands ashen eyes

hot breath of methane on my thighs.

I love the way the church bells gong in your whispers to me,

the heaves of your dusty chest, am1s crossed in sleep,

our names chiseled on the headboard.

I can smell the topsoil, pungent wreaths. Warm rain trickles down

and seeps through the ceiling. Taste it with me.

God, it turns me on lying with you in this small dark space.

Let's bump around the box!

Don't you know the rot of you makes feel alive?

-maureen mcelroy

incontestable proof

by kent rosenberger

The convention auditorium was already at standing room capacity when Professor Andrew Jacoby entered through one of the back doors. Checking his watch he realized the presentation was going to start at any minute. Weaving his way through the sea of great minds and hobnobbing colleagues, he followed a waving hand beckoning him across the room. Squeezing past men and women in work clothes and lab coats, he arrived at the chair reserved for him by Dr. Mandy Stowell. Or, more accurately, by Dr. Mandy Stowell's purse.

As he approached, Stowell dropped her tired arm and withdrew her handbag so Jacoby could sit. The smile she offered him quickly disappeared beneath a veil of frustration and exhaustion. "Geez, what a mob," she complained, unhitching the bindings in her hair, letting her omnipresent bun unravel and drape about her shoulders. "I don't know which is worse, the average size of the egos in this room or the amount of heat their endlessly chattering mouths generate." A trickle of sweat snaked its way down her nape, making her use the high back of her theater chair as a scratching post.

"Oh, come now, *doctor*," Jacoby remarked in snide undertones, "are you sure you're not sweating because of our little wager?"

"No. No." Stowell felt her denial sounded more like an attempt to convince herself than her co-worker, but at this point she did not care. "And I'm not going to debate the issue further, just in case you were looking for an argument to promote your own theories or shoot holes in mine. Only a few more minutes and we'll have our answer, one way or the other."

"Sure, sure." Jacoby shot her a devilish grin, foreshadowing his foregone victory. "Tell me, Mandy, what were the stakes again? Oh, right. The stakes were steaks, weren't they? Dinner on you, I believe you proposed. *Mm-mm*. I can taste that T-bone now. Did you ever notice how much better the flavor of food is when it's free?"

"The only thing you're going to be eating, professor, is crow, and all the steak sauce and ketchup in the world isn't going to make that meal more palatable." She allowed herself a sly sliver of a smile. He began to counter her again, but she placed a finger against her upturned lips and pointed to the stage.

People scurried to their seats or found a comfortable place to stand as an abrupt hush leveled the overstuffed room. A lone figure made his way to the podium, an undistinguished man of moderate size who appeared as though he were trying to take the clichéd scientist appearance to fashion statement proportions. He peered out at the crowd through square-lens glasses as thick as a phone book, the bridge of which was secured with several layers of masking tape. The plastic protector in his breast pocket overflowed with pens of every size and color, offsetting the impression of his otherwise professional stature. Penny loafers peeked out of his coat bottom, which concealed his none-too-long plaid pants and out-of-date corduroy vest. The only clue to the man's personality outside of his required overwear was the bowtie knotted around his neck, which stuck out like a distinguishing calling card of the trade.

Naturally, the populace of the room regarded him with the utmost respect.

"My fellow scientists," he began in his nervous way, fighting feedback and sweat beads simultaneously, "we stand on verge of a great venture for ourselves and all for mankind. A stepping stone toward a greater understanding of ourselves and our place in the universe. As you all well know, the *Cosmos* probe exited our galaxy some time ago. It was programmed to start taking photo images and relaying information back to us here on Earth when that phase of the mission was accomplished, and I am proud to announce that in just a short while we will begin receiving the transmissions of those first images."

A great cheer arose from the masses gathered, Jacoby and Stowell's voices among them. Indeed it was a time for celebration. Exactly what the celebration would be about remained in question, however. The excited professor and his doctor adversary shared a long, hard stare before the crowd simmered down.

"On the screen behind me," the man on stage gestured, "we will receive the live broadcast while we record. I remind you that these images and the information accompanying them have traveled thousands of light years on a tight beam directed to us, the first traces of which we should pick up here any moment. There are countless obstacles and interfering factors along the way, so I apologize in advance for any distortion or loss of communication we experience. Rest assured we will be monitoring and documenting absolutely everything we receive for the sake of research and review. It looks like we have a little bit of time before we begin, so while we are waiting, I am open to any questions you might have regarding this historic occasion."

A myriad of hands shot up but Jacoby and Stowell heard none of what was said as they regressed into their own conversation. "There's still time to chicken out, doctor. I'll understand."

"Not on your life, Professor. I'm in it for the long haul. I'm praying that once you see things the way I do you'll be man enough to have a change of heart."

"I just hope you, and all those others out there like you, are open enough to accept the consequences of whatever *Cosmos* might reveal."

The slick smiled returned to Stowell's lips for a brief visit. "I can't speak for everyone, you understand, but rest assured, I am. Not that I'll have to, mind you."

She had a knowing look in her eye as she spoke, the kind of reassurance Jacoby had seen before on the faces of people like horse race bookies, stage show magicians, amusement park thrill seekers, and even on fellow scientists just before the big payoff—whatever that might have been—was within reach. It was what he had come to refer to as the "sure thing" look. Stowell had it down, and he could tell there was no artificiality or doubt etched into it. She was confident. Confident beyond persuasion.

And how was he? He wasn't sure. He had no way of telling what expression his face was broadcasting to the others around him, other than that of sheer anticipation shared by everyone present. He feigned his best assertive "game face" and nodded ruefully. "Are you? Are you really?" was all he could think to say.

A couple more questions came and went as Jacoby and Stowell remained locked in silent gaze. Outward observers may have erroneously concluded there was romantic chemistry at work between the two of them, but in reality nothing could be further from the truth. It was a struggle for admiration, respect, the fulfillment and confirmation of hypothesis that kept the two of them focused on each other. Without breaking his stare, Jacoby suddenly found his hand flickering in the air.

"Yes," the man on stage pointed, "Professor Jacoby. You have a question?"

"Dr. Radcliffe, you mentioned we can expect to receive information regarding the placement of man in the universe. Could you elaborate on that subject, please?" It was an ambiguous query, vague and shapeless, just the way he wanted it. Of course, Jacoby knew there would be millions of bits of information regarding planets, stars, quasars, black holes, nebulae and the like. But stoking the fire between himself and Stowell on a human level was his intention. If she would not listen to reason from him, perhaps a swift kick in the pants by someone else's presentation of the facts would bring her to her senses.

"That's pretty broad, professor. Care to fine-tune it a bit?"

"Okay, fine. Let me state it another way." He was looking away from Stowell now, bringing himself to his feet to address Radcliffe in the most professional way he knew how. State your piece, he told himself, but make it impersonal and let the facts speak for themselves. "We have concluded after years of research and exploration that there is no life as we know it on any planet inside our solar system. Is it possible, however remote, that life, any type of life, could be discovered on another planet in our galaxy?"

Radcliffe nodded. "Well certainly, Andy. You know that."

But Jacoby was not through. He gave a dismissive wave. "I just want to have it stated for the record, Doctor. Isn't it a further possibility that any life form discovered could theoretically be better than man? By better I mean more advanced, more developed, more evolved."

"Of course."

"And other areas of study will be greatly improved, correct? Things like red shifts and blue shifts, the Big Bang, universe expansion, quantum theory, random theory and the like, right?"

"Certainly, certainly. But you know all this, Andy. Why bring up such basic inquiries here?"

Jacoby sat back down, his smarmy attitude splayed all over his face. "Oh, it's not for me, Doctor. It's for those present who still cling to unproven flights of fancy forged in myth rather than science. Those who might read something into the data other than the truth." His attention was locked on Stowell again, the angle of his gaze forcing several dozen more pairs of eyes upon her, rooting for an explanation.

Her expression read, "I can't believe you did this to me," but she said nothing as she rose. Jacoby did not want a debate. He wanted a sacrifice, and it looked like he was going to get it, even if it meant humiliating her into becoming one. Feeling like a sample slide under a microscope, Stowell cast her eyes about the hushed auditorium, literally standing her ground in the midst of stone-faced naysayers. In her heart she had always known it would come to this. She just never dreamed the circumstances would play out in front of a captive audience poised on the brink of self-substantiation. Clearing her throat and feeling her deodorant surrender, she addressed her fellow workers without the aid of electronic amplification. The room sat so quiet such implementations were unnecessary.

"First of all, let's clarify some terminology, *Professor*. There is a difference between 'truth' and 'fact.' 'Fact' is what we know is *real*. 'Truth' is what is *correct*. One is objective, the other subjective. One is not a substitute for the other. If you want to debate philosophy, you're in the wrong room." Polite laughter erupted, but not enough to interrupt her flow or break attention away from her. "Secondly, there is no such thing as 'randomness.' If you look at the structure of the universe, its planets and whatnot revolving around suns and stars, then look at the structure of an atom full of electrons zipping away about a nucleus, you realize there is a cohesive design to the world we live in, consistent from inner space through outer space. It's not some mysterious curiosity, some whimsical act of chance. It's planned, constructed and put into motion deliberately. You can't take the working components of a watch, light a firecracker under them and expect them to fall into precise working order. It may work in theory, but in reality, it's not practical. It's...insane."

Several coughs and scoffs meant to anonymously jeer her words were sputtered forth, but only served to fuel her position. She was the center of attention now. If this was what Jacoby wanted, she would see her statement to its conclusion, even if it meant screaming above heated protests of small-minded, self-important fools.

"How can such great minds and deep thinkers such as yourselves sit there and argue that discovering a pattern in the scattershot static of the universe will clinch the theory that intelligent life exists beyond the scope of our tiny world, yet seeing the complex composition of a single strand of DNA eludes you as an act of intellect? There are a hundred ways to make a human heart stop beating, but not one of you in this room, not one, can give me a concrete explanation as to why it starts. Or why it loves, or hates, or stands above all the other animals in the world. What can you possibly expect to find out there," she pointed angrily toward the blank screen onstage, "to satisfy your curiosity when you can't even understand everything that's up here?" Her hand moved to the side of her head, where it tapped twice. "The evidence is inside you, all around you, filling this very room, yet you close your eyes and look for a reason other than ..."

She suddenly broke off, realizing the house lights had extinguished, leaving her unadjusted eyes in quasi-darkness. Somewhere in the vicinity of the stage something resembling a movie projector image jumped onto the screen, swirling and twisting this way and that in a flurry of spectral configurations against a dark background that could only be the vast vacuum of space. Soundlessly comets streaked by at enormous speeds, pinpoints of light far in the distance sparkled like candles in the night, the great clock of the universe marked time in its own unique way.

About her, shouts of protest and rude noises were replaced with awe inspired cheers and coos as the parade of galactic debris, the likes of which no human eye had ever witnessed before, continued to bombard the screen.

Radcliffe had disappeared, evidently upstaged by the great drama of the cosmos as presented, ironically enough, by the *Cosmos*. As predicted, portions of the transmission beam met with deformation, causing several frames of photos to be lost, stretched, blurred or otherwise augmented, but the interference did not lessen the spectacle. Across the bottom of the screen a series of miniature charts, graphs, number sequences and symbols flashed vital information, all of which was recorded and filed up to the millisecond.

In the darkness applause began. One pair of hands grew to two, then four, then twelve, until the whole of the lecture hall resounded with rejoicing applause, whistles, whoops and cheers.

They had done it. Mankind had achieved a difficult yet attainable goal. The outer rim of space had been conquered in a tiny but effective way.

"Looks like you owe me a steak," Jacoby chided in whisper form.

Stowell did not acknowledge, sat wordlessly in her chair watching the universe unfold before her. A steak? Okay, fine. Minor victory for the other team. That did not mean she would compromise her principles. This was only the beginning, the tip of the asteroid, so to speak. In her heart she knew there was more to the configuration of the universe than was being relayed by the camera eye of an ancient probe. It would take more than photographs, more than a single victory, more than the meticulous exploration of the depths of space itself to undo the hardened hearts of men, and she knew it. There was no easy way to deconstruct and rebuild the complexity of humankind.

It would take nothing short of a miracle.

As stars swept further into the distance, each one shrinking to nothing more than a speck of solar sand in the great eddy of the galaxy, something else began to take shape. As theorized, the Milky Way contorted into a spiral formation as *Cosmos* continued to drift outside the borders of known space. More selfgratifying acts were expressed throughout the room as the dizzying array of celestial dust seemed to settle into arbitrary positions on the screen. *Cosmos*' camera tilted in a counter-clockwise direction, capturing the outer rim borders of the galaxy mankind called home, then focused until the haphazard pattern slid into crystal clarity.

Another silence, this one deeper than the previous ones, cast a spell across the ocean of observers, broken only twice by gasps of disbelief. The image onscreen froze, stood still as if making a magnanimous statement.

Mesmerized, Stowell stared in elated wonder. She found herself standing again, excusing herself into the aisle and drifting forward without the slightest notion she was doing so. Onscreen the image popped a couple of times, lost vertical hold like an old television set for about three seconds, the set pat, unmistakable in content.

Yes, a steak, thought Stowell. On you, Jacoby.

There was no reason to speak other than to state the obvious, but Stowell found it necessary to fulfill her secret promise and conclude the deliberation she had begun. This time she remained unchallenged. "Excuse me, everyone," she said, almost reluctantly, "but does anyone else think our galaxy looks like a giant fingerprint?"



when snowbirds pack to fly to florida

For Jupiter John & Eileen Fleck & Syracuse McGovern

There comes the bite of fright in the air. The light of morning in increments turns Colder thinner. The mist-mellow-fruitfulness Morphs. The trees are gone gray.

How awful. Depressives plug in their light boxes. Moneyed snowbirds pack to fly to Florida. But hold on. Some birds savor winter.

Nutty ones see it as a grace of season. A mystery that expands you out of you Swaddles you in ecosystem Immerses you in universe.

Cold comfort on a cold day, you say. And wry rightly so May you say no To such mystery.

But oh What you expanded-wintered-out-of you

May be!

-michael whelan

WHATEVUH

It's a word that shrugs its Shoulders throws the whole shebang Overboard yet doesn't actually abandon ship Tolerates a stupidity by dethroning it Knows what doesn't really matter And so it carries pins to prick Pompous balloons and When told they don't Serve wry bread Rolls its eyes And sighs

What-evuh

-michael whelan

Glenville Avenue on Halloween

The lamp posts light up neon flyers for a dozen missing cats in this yellow-taped litter box of a petless neighborhood.

Gold haired mannequins stare from a salon that sells houseplants and money orders.

A blind man strokes a young girl licking her fingers outside Boston Chicken.

A punked up crowd pours from an orange and black bar, walks across cars with taped-on parts.

Halloween headlines fly in a cold wind. An ice cream truck rolls by, pumps a haunted lullaby. Litte Frankensteins march behind in headphones.

They smear the jelly oozing from their sides. I stand at my rock shattered spider web window eating treats.

My witch hat slips over my eyes as I start to cackle.

No one will knock tonight.

-maureen mcelroy



—"thief's friend" by denny marshall

IT'S NOT MY FAULT SHE WASH'T DEAD

by allen kopp

It was eleven o'clock Saturday night. I had spent a strenuous day doing next to nothing, lying around my apartment reading Dostoevsky and was ready to go to sleep when the telephone rang. I was going to let it ring, but I figured it had to be Mr. Ludwig. Nobody else would call at that hour.

"Got a little job for you," the voice on the telephone said.

"Mr. Ludwig!" I said. "How happy I am to hear from you!"

"You alone?"

"Yes, I am. I was about to go to bed, though."

"I can always get somebody else if you're indisposed."

"Just kidding! I would never pass up the chance to do you a service!"

"A doctor had somebody die in his office. A woman. He wants her removed before morning."

"What did he do to her?"

"Never mind. The doctor has a problem and is paying us plenty to remove it for him."

"I'll wear my Boris Karloff disguise."

"I don't care what you wear. Just get the job done."

He gave me the address and I wrote it down on the inside of a match book.

"There's a dead-end alley that runs behind the doctor's building," he said.

"Pull in there. The doctor will be waiting for you."

"Sounds like a cakewalk."

"Put the deceased in your car and bring her to me."

"I won't exactly be taking her out for a night on the town."

"And make sure nobody sees you!"

I found the address easily enough. As expected, the doctor was waiting. Dressed all in white, he looked like a ghost.

"You the man Ludwig sent?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"Turn off those headlights!"

"No need to be so jittery," I said.

"Did anybody see you?"

"There's nobody around this time of night."

"Nobody but the police," he said.

He pulled the door back and pointed down. He had the woman in a body bag right inside the door.

"You sure she's dead?" I asked.

"I strangled her."

She was so light I thought she must only be a child. I was glad I didn't have to see her face. I put her in the trunk and turned to bid the doctor farewell.

"You have a wonderful evening now," I said.

"You were never here!" he said, slamming the door.

Mr. Ludwig lived twelve miles outside of town in a hundred-year-old house. He probably built it himself, he was so old. He was a doctor but I didn't know what kind. I didn't ask questions.

The road to Mr. Ludwig's house was hilly, curvy, and dark with that special kind of lonely darkness that exists only in the country. I hardly ever met any other cars out there and if I did I figured they were driven by lost souls who couldn't find their way.

I made sure I didn't exceed the speed limit—I couldn't afford to be stopped with a corpse in my trunk—and I got to Mr. Ludwig's place a little before one o'clock. The big iron gate opened for me as if by magic and I drove through, up to the big house and around to the back.

I stopped the car and got out. I stood there beside the car, looking up at the silent hulk of the house and listening to the crickets. In a couple of minutes Mr. Ludwig came out the door with one of his goons, a muscle boy named Kurt.

"Any problems?" Mr. Ludwig asked.

"No," I said.

"Nobody saw you turn in here?"

"Only a couple of owls."

"Well, bring her on inside then."

I opened the trunk and Kurt lifted the bundle like a sack of feathers and carried it inside. Mr. Ludwig motioned for me to follow him so we could sit down in his study and complete the transaction and, I hoped, call it a night.

"Would you like a drink?" he asked as I sat down on his expensive leather sofa. "No, thanks," I said. "It's late and I just want my money."

"Stay and have a drink with me," he said. "I hardly ever have a chance for intelligent conversation."

"What makes you think you'll get it from me?"

"I know you. How long have you been working for me now?"

"About a year, I guess."

"Just have one little drink to be friendly," he said.

"All right. Just one."

He poured some Scotch, which I hated, into a glass and handed it to me. He was a tall man, slightly stooped in the shoulders, wearing an expensive-looking robe of some soft material like cashmere. It made him look like an enormous brown bear.

"How has the world been treating you?" he asked.

I sighed, in no mood for small talk. "I can't complain," I said.

"You like working for me, don't you?"

"Sure."

"You like working at night."

"I guess so."

"Everything is more interesting at night, don't you agree?"

I would have agreed to anything that would bring the conversation to an end. "Yes, sir," I said.

"There are infinite possibilities lurking in the dark."

"If you say so."

"Of course, the kind of work we do has to be done at night."

"Uh-huh."

"I thought I'd give you a little extra this time for your trouble, since it was a spur-of-the-moment thing. Say six-fifty instead of the usual five hundred."

"Thanks," I said. "I appreciate that."

"Don't thank me. Thank Dr. Broyles. He'll be picking up the tab."

"I don't want to know his name."

"You met him when you picked up the girl?"

"Yeah," I said. "He was a very charming fellow."

"Did he say she bled to death, or what?"

"He said he strangled her."

Mr. Ludwig laughed so that his jowls quivered like jelly. "That's a good one!" he said. "An odd choice of words but, then, he's an odd character."

"He a friend of yours?" I asked.

"I've known him all of thirty years."

I looked over at the clock and cleared my throat. I was tired and had a headache. "Well, Mr. Ludwig," I said. "If you don't mind, sir, I'd like to get my money and go home now."

Kurt came into the room and Mr. Ludwig and I both turned and looked at him.

"What is it now?" Mr. Ludwig asked.

"I think you need to see this," Kurt said.

"What is it?"

"It's the girl in the bag."

Mr. Ludwig left with Kurt and in a couple of minutes he came back into the room. His jovial manner had vanished. The corners of his mouth turned down as if his face were made of dough.

"Anything the matter?" I asked.

"She's not dead," Mr. Ludwig said.

"What?"

"I said she isn't dead."

"What are you going to do now?" I asked.

"You'll have to kill her."

"What? I'll have to kill her?"

"Do you want her identifying you to the police?"

"She hasn't seen me."

He took a gun out of his desk and pushed it toward me.

"I'm not going to kill her," I said. "Get Kurt to do it. I think he'd enjoy killing a woman."

"Kurt's no killer."

"Neither am I."

"I thought you were courageous."

"Up to a point I am, but nobody said anything about killing a dame."

"You were hired to bring a dead body to me," he said. "You brought me a live one. It's not quite the same thing, is it? Your job isn't finished until you give me what I'm paying you for."

"Why should I do it? You're a doctor. Can't you just chloroform her or something?"

He smiled as if we were talking about pulling a kite out of a tree. "All you have to do is take the gun, point it at her head and pull the trigger. It's all so simple."

"I've never killed anybody before!" I said, and I hoped the logic of that statement would carry me through.

"Once you've done it, you'll see how easy it is."

"How about if I take her back to town and drop her off at the nearest hospital? An anonymous drop-off. No questions asked and none answered. She hasn't seen you or Kurt. She hasn't seen me. She hasn't seen any of us. She doesn't know where she is. She was in my trunk inside a bag all the way out here."

"When they see the state she's in, they'll call the police and the first thing she'll do is put the finger on Dr. Broyles. I must do what I can to protect my old friend."

"Maybe I can talk to her and make her promise not to say a word to anybody."

"My goodness, you are naïve, aren't you?" he laughed.

"Killing is not in my line," I said. "I'll bet you have half a dozen others on your payroll who specialize in that sort of thing."

"None of them are here, though. You are."

He stood up, walked around the desk and placed the gun in my hand.

"I don't want to shoot her," I said. "Maybe I'll hold a pillow over her face until she stops breathing."

He took a three-foot length of rope out of his desk and tossed it to me. "Use

whatever method you prefer. Just do it."

"And what will you do with her after I kill her?" I asked.

"You don't have to worry about that. I know how to make dead bodies disappear."

"Sounds delightful."

"You're a doer, not a thinker. Just do it and don't think so much about it."

"Yeah, I'm a doer," I said.

He held the door for me to go into the room where the girl was who was supposed to be dead but wasn't and closed the door behind me. There was just enough light in the room for me to see the light switch. I couldn't kill anybody that I couldn't see, so I turned on the light.

The body bag was empty and the girl was gone.

I opened the door again and said to Mr. Ludwig, sitting at his desk, "What's the gag? There's nobody there."

Mr. Ludwig came rushing into the room and when he saw the girl wasn't there he yelled for Kurt, who immediately appeared from another part of the house.

"She's gone, you idiot!" Mr. Ludwig said. "Why didn't you watch her?"

"She was here just a minute ago!" Kurt said.

"Find her!"

The two of them seemed to forget about me while they looked behind the curtains, in the closet, in the bathroom—any place a person might hide.

"Maybe she went upstairs," I said, pointing up the dark staircase with the gun. "Go check and see if she's upstairs!" Mr. Ludwig said to Kurt.

Mr. Ludwig was red in the face. I thought he might pop a blood vessel right before my eyes.

While Mr. Ludwig and Kurt were searching frantically for the girl, upstairs and down, I thought of the simple expedient of checking the back door.

The door was partly open and a rug in front of the door was kicked up, so I figured the girl had run out into the night. There was no place for her to run to out there, but at least she could get away.

I sat down on the sofa and took a deep breath, listening to the sounds of Mr. Ludwig and Kurt scrambling around upstairs. When Mr. Ludwig came down again, I smiled.

"She flew the coop!" I said.

"She what?"

"She ran out the back door."

"Don't just sit there, you idiot! Go find her!"

"It's not my job to find her," I said, "and I'd be careful who you're calling an idiot, if I were you."

He went straight to the phone and called "some people" to come out from town and comb the woods and the grounds surrounding the house to try to find her.

When he hung up the phone, he rubbed his forehead as if he was kneading

bread. "They'll be here as quick as they can," he said, "but in the meantime, I want you and Kurt to go outside and see if you can find her."

I was on the point of refusing when he handed me a flashlight and another one to Kurt and hustled us out of the house.

"You'd better not let her get away again!" he said threateningly as he slammed the door.

Kurt and I stood there in the dark at the back of the house, listening to the crickets. He was smoking a cigarette and didn't seem to be in any hurry.

"He's crazy, you know," he said.

"I suspected it," I said. "Why do you work for him?"

"He likes to have a well-built young man around."

"Are you saying Mr. Ludwig is queer?"

He shrugged. "Call it whatever you want."

"What do you get out of it?"

"He pays me plenty."

I looked up at the moonless sky. "It's too dark tonight to see anything."

"Yeah, I know, but we can go through the motions, can't we?"

"You look on that side of the house and I'll look on this side," I said.

There were twelve acres surrounding the house. The carefully tended lawn ended where the woods began. I figured the girl, if she had any sense at all, would hide herself in the woods until morning and then try to find somebody to help her.

I spent an hour or more going over the lawn with the flashlight. I saw a possum and a couple raccoons but that's all. I was about to go back inside and tell Mr. Ludwig it was hopeless when I heard a snap over to my left beyond the boundary of the lawn.

I shone my light where the sound came from. All I saw were trees and brush, but then a person materialized out of the dark.

"Don't shoot me!" a female voice said.

"Who's there?" I said.

She stood up then out of the brush, her hands in the air. She wasn't more than twenty years old. "Please don't shoot me!" she said.

"I'm not going to shoot you!" I said.

"What is this place?" she asked.

"It's the home of a mad scientist, twelve miles from town on a very lonely road."

"How did I get here?"

"Never mind that now. If you value your life, you'd better get away from this place as quick as you can. There are people coming out to look for you and they mean business."

"Can you help me?"

"No. I'm supposed to find you and take you to him."

"Take me to who?"

"It wouldn't help you if I told you his name."

"I'm so scared!" she said, starting to cry. "I don't remember anything that happened."

"Do you remember a doctor? Being in his office?"

"Oh, yeah. Him."

"He thought he strangled you. He thought you were dead."

"Oh, yeah." She touched her throat and winced.

"Parked behind the house is a black car," I said. "That's my car. After Kurt and I go back inside the house, go around to the side of the car away from the house and get in on the floor in the back seat. Close the door as quietly as you can. There's an old army blanket on the floor in the back that you can use to cover up with. I'll be going back to town as soon as I can get away from here and I'll drop you off and then I'm finished with this whole thing."

"Who's Kurt?"

"You don't want to know. If you want to go on living, just do as I say. And if they find you in my car, I had nothing to do with it."

"Okay."

I circled around the front and met up with Kurt on the other side of the house. "Any luck?" I asked.

"No. I didn't see anything."

"Me either."

"The boss is not going to like it," he said.

"Maybe his people will find her."

When we went back inside, Mr. Ludwig had settled himself down with a bottle of whiskey. He smiled when he saw us.

"Did you find her?" he asked.

"No," Kurt said. "She's nowhere around the house."

"Did you look everywhere?"

"As well as we could in the dark."

"She probably went out to the road and flagged down a car," I said. "Somebody to give her a ride to town."

"She'd better keep her big trap shut," Mr. Ludwig said, "or she won't live long." "If she has any sense at all, she'll know that," I said.

"With people like that, you can never be sure of anything."

"People like what?" I asked.

"She's a doper. A heroin addict. So is the doctor. He was giving her what she needed. Something went wrong, I imagine, and then he had to strangle her."

"Maybe she refused to pay him," Kurt said helpfully. "Drug dealers get awfully touchy about that."

"Shut up, Kurt!" Mr. Ludwig said. "Go on and go to bed now!"

After Kurt was gone and I was left alone with Mr. Ludwig, I asked him again for the money he owed me.

He looked at me sadly and shook his head. "I don't pay for sloppy work," he said.

I couldn't keep from laughing. "It's not my fault she wasn't dead. If there's any blame to be allocated, I think it belongs to the doctor."

"He won't see it that way. When he finds out she wasn't dead, he won't pay me and I can't pay you. That's the way the world of business works."

"I have no appreciation for the world of business," I said.

"You can go now," Mr. Ludwig said. "You'll be hearing from me soon. Good night."

"It's almost four o'clock. It's good morning now instead of good night."

When I went out to get in my car, Mr. Ludwig's people were out in full force looking for the girl. I was sure some of them weren't happy at being yanked out of bed in the middle of the night, but I knew they were being well paid for their efforts.

The girl didn't make a sound all the way back to town. I dropped her off at the hospital but wouldn't let her get out of the car until I gave her some advice.

"You don't know anything," I said. "You don't know how you got here. You don't know where you've been. You've been with some bad people, that's all. If you're thinking of getting revenge on that doctor, he'll kill you. If he doesn't, somebody else will."

"Uh-huh," she said.

"I'm not fooling, now. This is serious business. Do not say a word about anything that happened if you want to go on living."

"I got it."

She got out of the car and began walking across the parking lot toward the emergency-room door. Before going inside, she turned and gave me a little wave.

The sun was just starting to come up when I got home, but for me the day was ending instead of beginning. I had a hot shower, closed the curtains and fell into bed. Before I went to sleep, though, I took the phone off the hook. I figured I deserved that, at least.



FROM ONE FLASH OF ANGER

Father-the-god, I explode Krakatoan at the seam of pushing plates after years of suffocating hot frustrations, they phosphoresce and burst, release a blinding fall of finely-grained volcanic cinders, chains of pink descend from clouds, water breakers rise, pulse, swell and gutter over heirlooms and emotions, a downpour of mud, then rain of pumice inundates the innocents and innocence heaved from wobbling ground and drowned, a brief caesura, silence and darkness, then explosion after explosion. each a caustic sky of choking rock and grime, each one louder than the one before, the last a strident passion, monstrous wave of anger breaking land to bits of flesh and ash.

Followed by an age of ice and cold remorse, braised emotions wrapped in tephra, cloud and fearful memory, a time of flaming afterglows, of blue moons and green sunsets, white coronas circle dying sun, rafts of pumice grapple roots and skeletons.

After many fitful starts, a younger island surfaces near I-the-father's scarring, a new living thing seething fresh creations, different from yet of the parts of broken plates, first a coat of green appears, then salt grass and sugarcane, then spiders, beetles, fig trees, nightjars, casuarinas, rising from the sea, jostling skyward, one day to tower, perhaps one day to imitate my fulsome spewing.

-marc jampole

EDUCATION

Education grows into a market, where parents invest with avarice. They want a doctor or an engineer, not a man, in return.

Artistic sense and athletic spirit are asphyxiated. Teachers are accomplices.

Children smolder. They can't see Robert Frost's two roads. They learn theories, except that of living. Ashes of freedom and non-sprouting knowledge remain.

Bachelors of Frustration multiply in the competitive world.

There's a young soul too among the bats fluttering from a breadfruit tree.

Sadly, we repeat, 'It's sad.'

—fabiyas mv



178 THE LITERARY HATCHET

"Get down, Jake!"

Grandpa's shout echoed around the empty cemetery. Jake turned his head toward his Grandpa, smiled, and jumped gracelessly off the back of the bench he had scaled, tumbling face-first into a patch of dandelions. Jake bounced up almost instantaneously, giggling as he ran off in search of another obstacle. As Jake ran off toward a small retaining wall, Grandpa winced; he had noticed some nasty grass stains covering the knees of Jake's jeans. Jake's mom wouldn't let that go gently.

Grandpa watched as Jake pulled himself over the top of the retaining wall to the next level of the cemetery. Jake stood up and surveyed his surroundings. He looked disappointed. There was nothing to climb in this section. Nothing but gravestones, and Jake knew that climbing those was a no-no.

Grandpa climbed up to Jake's level, using a more traditional method (stairs), walked over to Jake, and ruffled Jake's hair with his hand.

"Whatcha see, buddy?" asked Grandpa. Jake was now standing very still, unusual for a boy of four. He was staring fixedly at something.

"Why is that stone black, Grandpa?" Jake asked, pointing at a stone about halfway down the row.

Grandpa could see the stone Jake was looking at. He was a little surprised; in all his walks through the cemetery, he had never noticed the stone Jake was pointing at now.

"I don't know, Jake. They make stones in all different colors."

"Can I go look at it?" asked Jake.

"Okay, but don't touch it or get too close, okay?" warned Grandpa.

"Okay," answered Jake, who was already racing down the row toward the stone. Grandpa followed, amused.

It was easy to see why Jake had been so enthralled by this particular stone; it stuck out like a sore thumb. It was a pure, glossy black, with gold-colored etchings. The stone reflected the sunlight with such ferocity that it almost appeared to be glowing. A strange effect, thought Grandpa, considering that the color black typically absorbs light.

"What does it say, Grandpa?" asked Jake.

Grandpa got a little closer and scanned the etchings. It quickly became obvious why he had never noticed the stone before; it was brand new. It hadn't occurred to him earlier that it could be a new stone, since almost all new burials were done in a different section of the cemetery. However, there were still a few unfilled plots scattered around. This must have been one of them.

"Grandpa?"

"What? Oh, sorry, bud . . . Grandpa was still reading. It's for a fireman named Joey." Except this wasn't entirely accurate; according to the dates on the stone, Joey had only been seven years old when he passed, and Grandpa didn't have the heart to say this to Jake. The epitaph revealed that young Joey had aspired to be a fireman when he grew up.

"Why are there toys here?" asked Joey. Grandpa glanced down. There was a shiny red fire truck, a small yellow dump truck plastered with stickers, several matchbox cars, stuffed animals, and assorted action figures.

"People leave them near the stones. Like little presents," said Grandpa. To his relief, Jake didn't ask any further follow-up questions. As Jake wandered off, Grandpa shook his head and reread the epitaph. The boy had been so young. Such a tragedy.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of giggling. He glanced at Jake, dismayed to find that he now had the toy fire truck in his hand. Jake was positively beaming.

"No, no, Jake . . . we have to leave these toys alone, they don't belong to us," said Grandpa.

"But he doesn't mind!" objected Jake. Grandpa suppressed a smile. The boy was clever for his age.

"Put it down, please. Don't make me ask again."

Jake gave Grandpa a defeated look and placed the fire truck back on the ground.

Grandpa looked at his watch and realized it was almost time for dinner. He gave the shiny black stone a final look and said, "C'mon, Jake; time to go home." Jake predictably refused. Grandpa shrugged and started walking toward his daughter Sarah's house, knowing full well that Jake would follow once he realized Grandpa was really leaving. Sure enough, Jake was right on his heels by the time he reached the gate.

In the days and weeks to come, Grandpa often found himself drawn to Joey's grave during his afternoon walks. He wondered what had happened to the boy. One afternoon, he found out.

As he paused in front of Joey's grave yet again, a voice startled him.

"Did you know him?"

Grandpa turned from Joey's grave and found a younger man standing behind him, staring at him through thick glasses. The man was wearing jeans and a grey sweater, and was carrying a small teddy bear.

"Excuse me?" asked Grandpa.

"Did you know him?" repeated the stranger.

"Oh, no, I didn't," said Grandpa.

"Awful thing, such a young kid," said the stranger.

"You knew him?" asked Grandpa.

"Yeah. Joey was close with my kids. They used to play together. I told my daughter I'd leave this for him," said the man, holding up the teddy bear and smiling sadly.

"What happened to him?" asked Grandpa.

"Fell down the stairs. Broke his neck," said the stranger.

"That's terrible," said Grandpa softly.
"Yeah."

The two stood there awkwardly for a few seconds. Finally, Grandpa said, "Well, I'd better get moving. Have a pleasant day."

"You too," said the stranger.

Grandpa turned and headed for the gate. Broken neck. He thought about how many times Jake had come tearing down the stairs, how easy it would be for him to trip and fall in just the wrong way. It was a scary thought.

Grandpa wandered back to his daughter's house and entered through the kitchen. The smell of simmering tomato sauce made his stomach growl. He took off his shoes and headed into the family room, where Jake was sitting on the floor with an Etch A Sketch. Grandpa sat down in his favorite recliner and put up his feet. Before he knew it, Jake was climbing all over him. Grandpa winced as knees and elbows dug into his thighs and stomach. Finally, Jake found a comfortable spot and stopped squirming. Grandpa watched with interest as Jake worked the knobs.

"What are you drawing?" asked Grandpa. It looked like a group of stick figures standing next to an amorphous blob.

"I'm drawing Joey," said Jake.

Apparently Joey was still in Jake's thoughts too. The blob was probably a fire truck, then. Grandpa could almost see it.

"That's very nice, Jake. Which one is Joey?"

"This one," replied Jake, pointing at the rightmost fireman. This also happened to be the shortest fireman of the group.

"Why did you make Joey so short?" asked Grandpa.

"Because he's a little kid," answered Jake.

Grandpa started a bit at this revelation. I didn't tell Jake that Joey was a child.

"What makes you think Joey was a kid?" asked Grandpa.

"He just is," replied Jake.

Grandpa didn't push the issue. The kid was bright; maybe he'd simply drawn his own conclusion due to the presence of the toys near Joey's grave. That was probably all this was.

"Jake, come wash up for dinner!" The call from Jake's mother distracted Grandpa from his thoughts. Jake put down the Etch A Sketch and ran off to wash his hands.

As Grandpa followed, he was struck by a sudden urge to pick up the Etch A Sketch and erase the picture. He resisted, but the thought nagged him throughout dinner.

Grandpa stopped by to visit on a rainy Sunday afternoon a few weeks later.

"Hi Dad," said Sarah, kissing Grandpa on the cheek.

"Grandpa!" shouted Jake from down the hall.

Grandpa strolled down the hall to Jake's bedroom and peeked in. Jake was hard at work at his desk with some crayons and paper. Grandpa walked over and

looked over Jake's shoulder. No firemen or fire trucks this time. Instead there was something that looked like an orange train and some sort of green monster.

"What's that?" asked Grandpa.

"That's the bad man," replied Jake.

"That green monster is a man?" asked Grandpa.

"That's not a monster! He's wearing green overalls!" said Jake, exasperated.

"Oh, I see now," Grandpa lied. "What's in the train?"

"Train?" asked Jake, confused.

"Yeah. Isn't that orange thing a train?"

"No, Grandpa, that's a truck!" said Jake.

"But what is this?" asked Grandpa, pointing to a part of the truck that was somewhat detached. Grandpa had assumed it was a train car.

"That's the railer," said Jake.

"What's a railer?" asked Grandpa.

"The truck pulls that behind it. To carry stuff," said Jake, struggling to find the right words.

"Oh, a trailer?" said Grandpa.

"Yeah, a railer," agreed Jake.

"Okay, I'm catching up now kiddo! So what's in the trailer?" asked Grandpa, returning to his original question.

"Lawnmowers," said Jake.

Grandpa chuckled. He hadn't expected that answer.

"So it's a 'bad man' with lawnmowers?" asked Grandpa with a grin. Jake just shrugged and continued drawing.

"Why is he bad, anyway? What did he do? Did he steal the lawnmowers?" "He hurted Joey," responded Jake.

Grandpa sat down on Jake's bed, considering his response.

"Jake . . . Joey had a bad accident, that's all. He fell down and hurt himself."

"He didn't fall, Grandpa. The bad man throwed him," said Jake.

"Why do you think that?" asked Grandpa. His throat was feeling very dry.

"Joey telled me," said Jake.

"Joey told you?"

"Uh huh. He told me the bad man got mad and throwed him down the stairs," confirmed Jake.

Had he mentioned the part about the stairs? Grandpa couldn't remember. He didn't know what else to say, so he simply patted Jake's head and walked away, feeling slightly nauseated.

There were a few more exchanges like this. Jake's drawings and comments became more and more disturbing. In retrospect, Grandpa wished he'd paid more attention to all of these little signals that Jake had been sending. Maybe he should have spoken to Sarah about it. But in his heart, Grandpa understood that nothing could have prepared him or Sarah for what happened next. The phone woke Grandpa around 2:00 am. He picked it up on the fifth ring and muttered something incoherent.

"Dad, Jake's gone! I can't find him anywhere!"

Jake's mother was hysterical; it took Grandpa almost a minute to let her know he was on his way. When he arrived a few minutes later, all the lights were on in the house. Jake's mother was sitting at the kitchen table looking utterly spent. Grandpa sat down next to Sarah and gently took her hands. He waited until she was looking at him before he spoke.

"Did you check with the neighbors?" asked Grandpa.

"No one has seen him," Sarah croaked.

"Does he ever sleepwalk?" asked Grandpa.

"I don't think so. No."

"Did you look outside?"

"I looked everywhere, Dad. Do you really think I'd call you in the middle of the night if I wasn't sure he was gone?" Sarah responded, her voice quavering with emotion.

"Okay, sweetheart, okay," said Grandpa. He thought for a moment then said, "I'm going to take another look around. Okay?" Jake's mother nodded glumly.

The first place he checked was Jake's bedroom. Jake's window was closed and locked; he hadn't gone out that way. Nothing appeared to be out of place. Grandpa walked over to Jake's drawing table and picked up a few piles of construction paper that were stacked on the edge. He flipped through drawing after drawing, noting a definite pattern and theme.

There was a picture of the bad man atop a riding mower. A picture of Joey fighting a fire. A picture featuring both Joey and the bad man, Joey pushing a toy mower, the bad man doing the same with a real mower. Grandpa sifted through several more pictures before arriving at one that really made his skin crawl: Joey, cowering at the bottom of a set of stairs, shielding himself with a toy fire-truck as the bad man walked down the stairs. Grandpa didn't bother looking through the rest of the drawings. He looked around the room one last time then walked out. After a quick sweep of the remaining rooms and basement, he returned to the kitchen.

"I'm going to take another look outside, sweetheart. In the meantime, go ahead and call the police. Better safe than sorry," said Grandpa. Sarah nodded. She was barely holding herself together. He grabbed a flashlight off the wall and walked out through the front door. After he closed it behind him, he twisted the doorknob. Locked. Grandpa had a feeling that Jake had probably slipped out this way too.

Grandpa walked around the perimeter of the house, looking in every kidsized nook and cranny. There was no sign of him. Grandpa walked over to the swing set, which had an elevated playhouse; Jake was not in there, either. Grandpa squatted down to look underneath the playhouse; this area contained a sandbox. No Jake, but there was something here that caught Grandpa's eye. Bending closer, Grandpa could see that Jake had drawn stick-figure images in the sand, probably with a stick. He'd bet good money that these were also pictures of Joey.

Grandpa sat down on a swing to think. The kid was absolutely obsessed with this Joey story. Could it have something to do with his disappearance?

"Dad?"

Grandpa started. He'd been lost in his thoughts. He glanced up, finally noticing Sarah standing just outside the back door.

"Have you called the cops yet?" he asked.

"Yes. They'll be here any minute."

"Okay, good. I want to check one more thing. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Sarah watched miserably as her father got to his feet and headed off to the cemetery.

It only took him a few minutes to reach the outer gate, and another few minutes to reach Joey's grave. It looked much different in the dark. Less radiant, more menacing. Grandpa pointed the flashlight toward the ground, and knew immediately that Jake had been here: The fire truck was gone. Grandpa felt some hope at this; maybe Jake was still nearby.

"Jake!" yelled Grandpa, shining the light around the cemetery. He waited a few seconds, but heard no response.

What to do now? It had been a no-brainer to check Joey's gravesite, but Grandpa had no idea where to look next. He looked all around the grave, hoping to find anything that could help him, any clue—and then he found it. A small set of footprints in the dewy grass led off in the opposite direction, toward the far side of the cemetery.

Grandpa took off at a slow trot, keeping the tracks within the flashlight beam and trying not to trip on anything. This proved to be fairly easy work, as the tracks led in a relatively straight line between two rows of gravestones. The tracks led to the end of the rows, and beyond, toward a line of trees that bordered the cemetery.

Grandpa's sense of panic increased with each step closer to the tree line. This patch of woods was rather narrow; there wasn't much area to get lost in, which was good. However, he was much more worried about what lay just beyond the woods.

Jake was headed straight toward I-95, one of the busiest highways in the country.

Jake climbed up an embankment and onto the shoulder of the highway, clutching the fire truck under his arm. He was tired and scared, and the bottoms of his pajama pants were wet from the dew, but he was very determined. He watched the southbound cars flying by; there was still a fair amount of traffic, even at this late hour. He waited patiently until he didn't see any more headlights approaching; then he ran as fast as he could to the median.

He waited again and watched for headlights coming from the other direction. The northbound lane was nearly empty compared to the southbound lane; it was nearly a minute before a car finally approached. Jake knew it wasn't the right one because the engine was too quiet. He crouched down and let it pass.

After maybe five minutes, he saw another set of headlights in the distance and heard an obnoxiously noisy muffler. This was it, then. Jake started crying a little; Joey had told him that this would be the last time they would see each other. But there was no time for tears. Jake wiped his eyes and walked to the edge of the road. He set the fire truck on the ground in front of him, then gently pushed it out into the road.

Grandpa reached the edge of the woods. He'd hoped that maybe Jake had veered off rather than proceeding straight into the trees, but unfortunately Jake's tracks disappeared where the grass ended. Grandpa entered the woods, looking carefully for signs of Jake's passage. He could just make out a general pattern where the underbrush might have been disturbed, so he set off in that direction. He had only taken a few steps when he heard the nauseating sounds of screeching tires and shattering glass. With dread in his heart, Grandpa hurried toward the highway.

Jake watched as the fire truck rolled across the northbound lane, veered to the right, and came to a stop just short of the dotted line, facing south toward the oncoming vehicle. Once he was sure it was in a good place, he turned around, crossed the median, looked quickly for cars, darted back across the southbound lane, slid down the embankment, and ran into the woods. He covered his ears, just as Joey had instructed. He hadn't gone very far when he heard the crash. He kept on walking. Tears were flowing freely now.

He wanted to go home.

He took a few more steps and then froze. Even with his ears covered, he could hear limbs snapping, brush crunching, leaves rustling. Footsteps. Grunting.

He wasn't alone.

Jake looked up to see a dark form crashing through the underbrush. Jake panicked. He wanted to run away, but his legs wouldn't move. The shape stumbled, and as it righted itself, the shape resolved into Grandpa. Jake squeaked out a little sob of relief.

"Jake!"

Grandpa picked Jake up and embraced him in a bear hug.

"Are you okay? What are you DOING out here?" asked Grandpa, who was himself shedding tears of relief.

"I was helping Joey," said Jake.

"Are you hurt?" asked Grandpa.

"No," said Jake.

Grandpa put Jake down and ran the flashlight over him. When he was convinced that Jake was fine, Grandpa asked, "Jake, did you hear the loud crash?" Jake nodded yes.

"Grandpa has to go find out if anyone is hurt. We're going to go on the road, so

you need to hold my hand. Don't run off. Understand?"

Jake nodded again.

Grandpa took Jake's hand and they headed for the road. They climbed the embankment, and Grandpa looked around. It didn't take him long to locate the wreckage; someone had veered off the northbound lane and crashed head-on into a tree. As they crossed the median and approached the wreckage, Grandpa's heart sank; he could see that the vehicle was in awful shape. He didn't think anybody could have survived such a crash. He squatted down and looked Jake in the eye, then said, "Jake, Grandpa is going to carry you the rest of the way. I want you to put your head on my chest and keep your eyes closed. Okay?" Jake nodded, and Grandpa picked him up.

As they got a little closer, Grandpa could see that the vehicle was a truck, and that the driver had been thrown partially through the windshield. He aimed his flashlight at the truck; it was orange. The remains of a trailer were upside down next to the truck. Ruined lawn mowing equipment was scattered all around the wreckage.

Grandpa's skin broke out in gooseflesh.

Grandpa walked forward to check on the driver. A man in green overalls was lying on an accordion of steel and glass, with some of the latter sticking out of his neck.

"You're the bad man," whispered Grandpa. Jake started to turn his head, but Grandpa pressed it firmly back against his chest.

The bad man's eyes flicked at Grandpa's voice but didn't immediately focus on Grandpa's face. He seemed to be staring at something off in the distance. The man's breathing had grown very shallow. A bubble of blood was expanding and contracting from one of his nostrils with each breath. Then the man's eyes locked on Grandpa's, and for a brief moment the man seemed completely lucid. He smiled and began to speak conversationally, as if he and Grandpa had been chatting for some time: "That kid . . . Joey . . . he was driving the fire truck. Ran me right off the road. Can you believe that shit?" Then the blood bubble popped and the man went still.

Grandpa didn't bother to call 911. He turned his back on the bad man and walked away, being careful to keep Jake's eyes shielded from the carnage. He paused only to pick up the toy fire truck that was sitting unscathed in the middle of the northbound lane.

Once they were safely off the road, Grandpa set Jake on the ground, took his hand, and let him walk. They headed home without a word. When they reached the cemetery, Grandpa handed the fire truck to Jake.

"Where's Joey now?"

"He's gone."

Jake placed the fire truck on the ground near Joey's grave. Grandpa knelt down and took Jake by the shoulders.

"Jake, your mom was very worried about you. She called the police. They'll be

waiting for us when we get back. They're going to ask where you went. You can tell them you went to see Joey. That's the truth. They don't need to know about the business on the highway. Neither does your mom. Understand?"

"Yes, Grandpa. Joey telled me the same thing."

Grandpa nodded. He stood and took Jake's hand. Together, they turned and started walking. Grandpa clicked off his flashlight; the police lights flickering in Sarah's driveway were illumination enough.



JUSTICE

by joao cerqueira

I knocked three times without any answer. Then I opened the door and walked into the room. He was hanging by the neck two feet off the ground. I threw myself against his body, grabbed him by the legs, and tried to heave him down while screaming for help. Rachel came running up the stairs and when she saw her son hanging from the ceiling's beam. She froze—horror contorting her face.

"Help me! Help me!" I yelled.

She started moaning and spouting nonsense but, after she gained composure, she helped me get the rope off William's neck. Then I laid him on the floor and started to shake him.

"William! William, wake up!" I cried. "Call an ambulance!"

Rachel seemed to wake from a stupor and dialed 911 on her cell phone while I tried giving him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

When she was able to give the operator our home address, Rachel fell on her knees beside William's body, hugged him, and burst into a terrible fit of screaming. Both of us knew the ambulance was no longer necessary.

Two days later, I threw his ashes to the wind.

William was a good boy. He liked helping others and was friendly to everyone. He loved animals. As he was slim and wore glasses, he had never had an interest in sports or games requiring muscles. He preferred entertaining himself on his computer and reading. William knew the capital cities of all the countries of the world; he used to say that the universe was expanding and he wanted me to buy an electric car to stop emitting pollutants. Once when we took him to a forest—I can still remember the smell of the pine trees—and he began classifying the butterflies. Rachel used to say that William had superpowers. Perhaps this was why he didn't have many friends. He was, however, a happy boy, satisfied with his small world. When I questioned him about his friendships, he replied that, yes, he had friends in many countries and corresponded with them every day in chat rooms. His answer was so sincere that, seeing his innocent smile and his shining eyes behind his glasses, I felt proud of his individuality.

Why did he kill himself at fourteen?

After the funeral, I searched his room like a hunting dog sniffing a burrow. Inside, however, the intended prey was nowhere to be found—not a note, not a letter, or even a diary to explain his act. The poster of Stephen Hawking on the wall seemed to be telling me that it was easier to unravel the mysteries of the universe than to know the secrets of our children.

Two weeks had passed when I went to William's school to speak with the principal. It was an old building with a garden. As I got closer to the front gate, I felt a pain in my chest and couldn't move any farther. For a short while, I let myself stay on the curb that separated the street from the school as though I were a child paralyzed by fear. And when a group of boys about William's age walked past me, I had to make a tremendous effort not to cry. It took me a while to recompose myself but I finally managed to go inside.

The meeting had been scheduled for nine o'clock in the morning and, despite my having arrived ten minutes in advance, the principal was already waiting for me in her office. Hardly after a school clerk announced my arrival, she got up and came to meet me. She was a middle-aged woman with golden hair and a face that appeared stretched by facelifts. She was very well dressed and perfumed.

"Mr. Smith, I want to extend my heartfelt condolences. I'm so sorry for what happened to William. We are all shocked by this tragedy. Please sit down."

I noticed a picture of her three children on her desk and I convinced myself that as a mother, she could better understand my pain. I felt less anguished and, despite the lump in my throat, I was able to speak in an almost normal tone of voice.

"I came here to try to find an explanation for what happened. Maybe my son had problems that he didn't tell us at home. Did any teachers notice anything strange in his behavior?"

The principal shook her head no, an empathetic look on her face.

"No, William was always a model student. Never missed classes, did his homework, lent his class notes to his classmates. He was a little quiet, yes, but all of the teachers liked him very much."

"I know, but lately his grades had been dropping."

"It's true, but this happens to all the students. It's quite normal at that age."

"He wasn't doing drugs, was he?"

"Of course not, there's none of that at this school."

"Maybe he was fighting with a girlfriend?"

The principal smiled in a way that did not please me.

"William didn't have any girlfriends that I know of. But don't get me wrong; he was a likable boy. Just very reserved and I think he had not yet begun to take an interest in girls."

"So, he had no problems at school? Nothing that could have led to what he did?"

"As I've said . . ."

"Perhaps a teacher knows something. Did you talk to them?"

The principal joined her hands, intertwining her fingers.

"Unfortunately, I cannot help you. God's ways are mysterious and beyond our understanding. But I am sure that William is now in a better place than this one."

I stared at her without saying anything and she looked down. We stayed like this for a few seconds, in silence, until she cleared her throat and spoke again.

"Well, as you may know, I have a very busy schedule." She got up from her chair.

When I was out of the school, someone touched my arm. I turned around to see a girl I had met before. At the beginning of the school year, she had been to our house to borrow some books from my son.

"It's Arthur's fault," she said. "It was because of him that William killed himself."

"What?" I was so disturbed that I grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. "What? What are you saying?"

The girl broke free, but didn't run away.

"Everyone knows that. Arthur had been hitting William and stealing his money for months. Bullying. William made a complaint to the principal but she didn't care and after that Arthur caught him, threw him to the ground, put his foot on his chest, and peed on him. Even the girls started making fun of him because of that. William was desperate and he told me he couldn't take it anymore."

I bolted toward the school, whisked past the school yard, entered the building pushing off whoever stepped in front of me until I reached the principal's office. She was already meeting with someone else but I barged in anyway and started screaming at her.

"Who's Arthur?" I demanded. "He was the one who killed my son! And you, you hypocrite, you're also responsible for his death!"

The woman turned pale and couldn't say anything. The girl she was attending to ran away. I grabbed the photo of her children and held it right in front of her face.

"What if it was one of them? What if it was one of them?"

If the security guards hadn't come, I don't know what would have happened.

When I returned home, Rachel was still in bed. The doctor gave her a note to dismiss her from work at the bookstore but the tranquilizers made her so lethargic that she would only get up to go to the bathroom. She was lying with one arm off the mattress and had her head tilted to the same side. Her hair looked like the bristles of a broom. I walked around the bed and found her with eyes open the dead look of a fish out of water. Seeing her in that state made me wonder if I should tell her what I had learned. How would I explain to her that William's superpowers didn't help him at all at school?

I sat beside her and caressed her cheek. She remained inert and mute, as if I weren't there. Still, feeling guilty, I began telling her what that bastard Arthur had done to William. I spoke looking at the wall, strangely calm, without expecting any reaction from her. When I finished, I felt as empty as she seemed to be. There was no pain, nor hate, nor anything else inside me. And then I heard a sort of groan. I turned my head and saw that she was moving: she raised her arm, straightened her head, bent her knees, turned her waist and sat down beside me. Her face now had an expression of astonishment. Her voice came out shaky.

"Start again," she said.

This time I looked at her and told her everything that had happened that day: the meeting with the principal, her denial of responsibility, the unexpected encounter with William's classmate and the accusation she made against this Arthur, and finally, my violent return to the principal's office. But only part of the story interested her.

Her usual tone of voice had returned.

"Who's that guy? What's his full name? Where does he live?"

I looked at her astounded, not knowing if I should feel happy or worried about her mood swing.

"I don't know anything else about him, but I'll demand that justice be done."

She grabbed my arm with a strength I didn't know she had. Her eyes were no longer dead-fish-like, but were like those of a snake gloating at its prey. Her voice came out sharp as a hiss.

"Yes, there will be justice! I will kill him!"

The next day around noon I went back to the school. However, there was a security guard at the entrance gate who wouldn't let me in.

"Are you Mr. William Smith? The principal asked me to hand you this letter." I opened it.

Dear Mr. Smith,

Given the new data that recently came up, the Board decided to open an inquiry on the alleged inappropriate behavior of student Arthur Hail.

Once the inquiry is completed, you will be contacted by post. The Board

There was a scribble at the end of the letter and nothing else. Resigned, I went back to the bank where I worked and spent the afternoon thinking about how Rachel would react to this.

In the evening, I returned home. When I opened the door, I found Rachel dressed in her usual outfit, waiting for me.

"I also went to the school," she said. "Our son's murderer was expelled. They didn't tell me anything else, but I'll get him."

In the months that followed, not only did Rachel fail to catch anyone, but she also returned to her previous state of depression. Gradually, the flower that seemed to have gained back her liveliness—a strange plastic liveliness, but nevertheless a liveliness—began to wither again. She stopped talking, hardly ate, and fell back on the bed. She neglected her hygiene and began to smell. Sometimes she stood up and, creeping like a ghost, went into William's bedroom and started trying to put it in order—the room was very neat and tidy—as if she were waiting for him to return. I was unable to keep her from doing so, and only when she would start talking to him just like he was there, entertained at his desk with his computer, I would take her gently by the arm and put her back to bed.

This martyrdom lasted for six months until Rachel managed to have a near normal life again at the expense of intensive medication. But she was no longer the woman I had known and loved. This was a strange creature, more dead than alive, with whom it was no longer possible to live. And I think she felt something similar toward me—some kind of repulsion. We each reminded the other of William's absence—I saw it on her face, she saw it on mine—and we both blamed ourselves for not having prevented the tragedy.

We got divorced.

In the years that followed, I tried to move on. I didn't remarry, nor could I have a relationship with another woman. More importantly, I found a way to deal with the death of my son. If I couldn't bring him back to life, at least I would do something so that other teenagers wouldn't find themselves in that same situation. I created a support group for victims of bullying and violence in schools. I put an ad in the newspaper and in less than a month we were already holding weekend sessions that drew a diverse crowd of parents, students, teachers, psychologists, priests, and social workers.

In the first session I was practically the only one talking, telling my tragic experience. But soon after there were other parents, and even students, anxious to give their testimonies. Many people cried in front of strangers. At the end of these catharses, they found the strength to face the trauma. And so I realized I was not alone, that there were dozens of teenage suicides that were the result of bullying and that hundreds of others were at risk of death because of the indifference of school administrators or because of parents' inability to notice warning signs. I am convinced that I have saved many students from the grip of these monsters that terrorize schools. Perhaps I have even prevented the death of some desperate teenagers.

It was in one of those sessions that I met Helen, a single mother whose son, Roy, had been the victim of school violence. A gang had beaten him up and left him unconscious. As a result of the injuries he suffered to the head, Roy developed learning disabilities and was forced to transfer to a special school. The attackers had been expelled from the school, but nothing else happened to them. The way she had faced her tragedy impressed me, even though her son hadn't had the same fate as mine. She appeared to have overcome the trauma and had even forgiven the aggressors—I admired her for it, although I didn't totally agree with her arguments. "They were also victims of violence and that is why they've turned into violent teenagers," she once said during one of these sessions. This sociological explanation of violence was not yet accepted by all parents. Many counteracted that this excused the attackers of their wrongdoing, and even worse, this placed them at the same level as the victims. The topic generated intense discussions. "They know the difference between good and evil. Evil exists by itself. It does not require justification," one mother said. Her daughter had committed suicide.

And then one day when I arrived home, I found a letter in the mailbox. It was an envelope with no return address and a printed sticker with my address. But when I opened it, I recognized Rachel's handwriting. It had been three years since the divorce and we hadn't contacted each other since.

Dear William,

This letter was sent to you by my attorney at my request, which means that when you read this I'll be dead. Three months ago I was diagnosed with liver cancer. After I knew I was doomed, I began writing to you. I think it was then that I began to have doubts about what I had done. I thought that acting as God was not only a morally acceptable deed, but also an obligation. But now, facing death, I understand that no human being is prepared to assume such responsibility. And, as such, I need to share this burden with you, or better put, to leave it in your hands.

As you must have realized already, this has to do with our son.

Believe me when I tell you that I've tried everything to overcome my loss. I had therapy sessions, I went back to church, and I traveled the world. But wherever I went, William was always with me—William and the criminal who killed him that Arthur Hail. The psychologist tried to convince me to accept what happened and the priest tried to persuade me to forgive. But how can one accept the death of a son and on top of that forgive the one responsible for it? If we cannot replace God, then do not ask us to be omnipotent. I'm just a human being and I'm weak, as you know. I do not have the power to forgive, I cannot turn the other cheek, and I do not want to redeem mankind. And then I realized that the answer was different and that I was right from the beginning. I had to kill Arthur. I had to kill him to finally find peace.

I hired a detective to find him and I learned that he (now nineteen years old) had become a delinquent with no permanent home. He was dealing drugs, participating in robberies, and had already been arrested for assault. By killing him, I would be doing justice for William and I would be providing a service to the community. I began following him, finding out his routines, trying to find a moment when I could kill him (I thought about running him over and driving away). But the only thing I discovered was that I didn't have the courage to do so (my weakness overcomes me always).

Until one day, I had the opportunity to do justice. I read an article in the newspaper about a man who had been beaten to death near a public garden around midnight. The police suspected that it had been a reckoning between drug dealers, but they hadn't arrested anyone yet. Then I came up with this idea: What if I could incriminate that bastard Arthur? I started thinking of how I could convince the police to arrest him and, inspired by the detective novels that I had enjoyed reading before, I came up with the following plan: I would tell the police that I was passing by in my car at the time of the incident and that I saw someone lying on the ground being kicked by a man; then I would give them an exact description of Arthur: white, about twenty years old, tall and strong, shaved hair, dressed in blue jeans and an army-like jacket (he was always dressed like that).

And so I did: I went to the police station, I told them I had seen a report of the crime in the newspaper and I gave my testimony. They took note of my statement, asked me some questions to which I was able to give credible answers and told me that I would soon be contacted. Three days later, they called me to ask that I go try to identify some of the suspects detained so far. When I got there, they took me to those rooms with mirrors that prevent detainees from seeing who would identify them and, among four other outcasts of the same age, there was Arthur.

"Look carefully; do not rush yourself," they told me. I pretended to watch all of their faces and a few seconds later, I pointed my finger at Arthur. They asked me several times if I was absolutely sure and I confirmed that I had no doubt that this man, second from the left, was the one I had seen kicking the head of a person lying on the sidewalk that night.

Police later gathered the testimony of some junkies who stated that Arthur and the victim knew each other and had even fought over the territory where drugs were being sold. And there it was—the motive for the crime. This was nothing new, since these vendettas between drug dealers were common, but served to strengthen the accusation against Arthur.

As he failed to produce an alibi, an indictment of manslaughter followed, then a trial with an appointed defense attorney who had barely studied the case. Finally he was condemned to thirty years in prison.

As I've told you, until recently I was convinced I had done justice. I was convinced that this guy had to pay for the death of our son. But now, I am no longer sure of what I did. I leave it in your hands—the decision about the fate of the man who was responsible for William's death.

Whether you like it or not, you must act as God. And I'm sure you'll know how to write straight on crooked lines.

Rachel

My hands were shaking when I finished reading the letter. Suddenly William was again hanging by the neck. I felt a pain in my chest and had to sit on the couch. The first emotion that came over me was hatred toward Rachel, for having stolen the peace that I had worked so hard to achieve. Then an angel and a demon fought inside my head: the angel telling me to go to the police to report the falsification of evidence and the devil countering that justice had been done.

"It is immoral to let a man in jail for a crime he did not commit," argued the angel.

"And is it fair to leave a scoundrel like Arthur unpunished?" replied the devil. The fight ended in a draw, but the battle's site was almost destroyed.

The only person who could help me was Helen. I asked her to come to my house; I sat on the couch and told her everything. Afterwards, although I expected her to tell me to exonerate Arthur, I asked the inevitable question.

"What would you do in my place?"

Her expression was grim and she clenched her jaw. Her voice came out in a whisper.

"I don't know," she said.

"You don't know? But you've been saying in our sessions that one should understand the aggressors and try to forgive them. You even argued with some parents about that."

"Yes, but . . ."

"Weren't you being honest?"

"I was being honest, or better, I was trying to be honest, trying to do what I thought was best for me and for those who listened to me. Hate destroys us. But the truth is that sometimes, when I see my son's apathy and I remember how he used to be, the will to revenge him is very strong. And now you tell me this and I feel again an anger inside me."

She sounded more upset than I was. Unintentionally, I had awakened her demons.

"Are you telling me I should leave him incarcerated? That's what I should do?"

It took her a while to answer. She placed her hand on her forehead, pulled her hair back, inhaled deeply and, finally, looked me in the eyes.

"If the guys who beat Roy up were in the same situation as Arthur, I would talk to them in prison."

Her answer left me dumbfounded and I raised my voice.

"Talk to them?" I cried. "For what?"

Then she placed a hand over mine.

"After talking to them, I would know which decision was the correct one. And I think that you too will know if you visit Arthur."

That night, I couldn't sleep. The dilemma between exonerating Arthur and leaving him in jail could be solved with a trip to the jail. Helen was right: after talking to him, I would know what decision I would make. And then, as Rachel put the weight of acting as God on my shoulders, I turned to religion to justify myself. I would not be responsible for the fate of that miserable boy, but he would be himself. If his words condemned him, I could wash my hands after the verdict. I am not a man of faith, but I have to admit that Christianity can provide a great help to free oneself from guilt.

I informed myself about the prison's visitation times and the next morning, with the letter in my pocket, I got into my electric car and drove to the prison.

The day was sunny and there were no clouds in the sky. The freeway was a silver road. I felt as if I were in a spaceship, headed to an unknown planet. In the solitude of the journey, however, my doubts began to torment me again. And then I found myself doing exactly what I had criticized Rachel for so many times. I started to talk to William.

"Your mom wants me to act like God. Despite not even being sure if he exists, I have to write straight on crooked lines. How? Help me William! Guide my hand with your superpowers."

It was 11 am when I arrived at my destination. It was a very secluded place next to a mountain—a lone fortress surrounded by barbwire. It felt like nothing, not even dreams, could escape from that place. The worst kinds of criminals were in this facility and many stories were told about the abuses the weaker prisoners endured here. For a small instant, I almost felt pity for Arthur.

The guard, who guided me to the visitation area, told me that only his sister used to come see him. He must have been surprised when he was told that a man wanted to talk to him and he sat down at the table that was appointed to us with an idiotic look on his face. It was obvious that he had absolutely no clue of who I was.

"Who are you? What do you want from me?" he asked.

I studied him attentively. He still had his head shaved, brown eyes that didn't stop blinking, a crooked nose and thick lips. He had raised his chin to intimidate me, but it was clear he was scared. In that school of criminals, he was just a frightened boy.

"I came to talk to you because I was told that you knew my son in high school. William, do you remember him?"

He frowned.

"How the hell should I know who William is? I knew so many people in high school."

I could tell he was speaking the truth. The name didn't ring any bells to him, probably because he hadn't thought of William's death even for a second.

"William killed himself three years ago, don't you remember that?"

He must have felt some kind of threat because he became more cautious.

"Yeah . . . I remember something about that . . . but why did you come here to talk to me about it? I don't have anything to do with that."

Every single one of my muscles contracted in that instant and I almost betrayed myself.

"No," I said with great effort, "of course not . . . it was a tragedy with no explanation. I'm here because I'm collecting opinions about my son from his old schoolmates and friends. This is very important for me, you know? It's a way to keep his memory alive."

He seemed satisfied with the answer but looked down.

"I've told you already, I hardly knew him, there isn't much I could tell you about him."

"Make an effort! Try to remember something."

He moved on the chair and the metal made the cement screech.

"What do you want me to tell you?"

"What you thought of him," I said.

He closed his eyes and bit his lips. A vein throbbed on this neck.

"All right. How much will you pay me?"

It was my turn to raise my chin and eye him challengingly.

"I won't pay you anything," I said. "Be honest at least once in your life."

He punched the table.

"Really?" he yelled. "Do you really want to know what I thought about your son?"

"Of course."

"Then pay attention. William was an asshole, the biggest asshole I've ever met. He was full of himself, thought he was smarter than everyone else and I'm pretty sure he was gay. So I beat him every day. I stuck his head into the toilet and once I even pissed on him. Did he kill himself? Whatever, nobody cares. Look, next time make a proper son, if you even still can."

And then he got up and left.

When I left the prison house, I walked around the neighborhood. The sun was high up in the clear sky and a breeze was blowing. There was a bird chirping somewhere close by and the insects buzzed in the air. Lilac flowers jutted out of the grass here and there. With my back to the prison, I started to see an unexpected beauty in that place. I inhaled deeply and caught an aroma of pine. I felt at peace.

Then William guided my hand.

I brought it to my coat pocket, took out Rachel's letter and tore it up several times. The pieces of paper fluttered like butterflies. Under the sunlight they sparkled, slowly disappearing in the plain.



a nip of salt, a red chili, and some mustard

Misfortunes mushrooming from malevolent glares are beliefs, as common water hyacinth.

Eying me drooping in dejection, grandma takes a nip of salt, a red chili and some mustard, locks her palm, rotates her fist over my pate thrice, then throws the ingredients of charm into the embers in our hearth. I refresh, fooling myself.

A scarecrow hanging in front of building construction is another Patriot system against eye-missiles. Defense is diverse.

Evil eyes thrive from rhizomes of envy. They have been on the earth since the inception of thought.

—fabiyas mv

[poetry]

HE PLANS-GOD LAUGHS

He marries a platonic playmate,

but, she's no hot-patootie, just a rose without a scent. Pointing to her pelvis, she admits sometimes she can sense something vaguely down there.

He's my hiking buddy. No longer in love with his wife, he never stops whining about longing to have an affair. His bumbling efforts to seduce women never get him anywhere,

until on one of our hikes we meet 2 lovely gals on a trail.

He charms our new friends with a litany of jokes and songs he learned as a red-diaper baby. He regales them with tales of his father's adventures in the Spanish Civil war, singing, *Avanti-popolo, revolutionary, Bandiera Rossa, trionfera!*

They giggle with delight as he roasts a succulent meal for them—marinated shish kabob with egg cream sodas and chocolate-covered halvah for desert.

Before the fun is over, they invite him into their tent for a night of menage a trois—his dream come true. He comes and goes at the same time, leaving this world with a smile on his face.

-milton p. ehrlich

[short story]

Most People

by rick mcquiston



200 THE LITERARY HATCHET

Most people are good, but some are not. As I sit in a booth in a corner of the café I can't help but let my gaze wander to my surroundings. It's instinctual, almost as if I have no idea I'm doing it. But others see. They notice the young man sitting alone near the front door, a cooling cup of coffee on the table before him and wearing an expression of unbridled fear on an otherwise blank face. They can sense that I sense something, or someone, who should not be here, and I don't mean in the café. No, I mean should not be here as in not on Earth.

My cup of coffee jiggles on the worn formica of my table. My hands surround it, occasionally nudging it this way or that, causing it to spill some of its contents. But I don't notice. My attention is focused solely on the other people in the café. I stare at each one in turn, trying to gauge their behavior to see if anything is unusual, alarming, or inhuman.

An elderly man looks back at me. His diminutive stature is accented by the poor health that undoubtedly afflicts him. I gaze deep into his rheumy eyes and see, amongst the pain, that he is nevertheless human.

I look away from him and study a young couple seated near the hallway leading to the bathrooms. The woman, a pretty girl with short-cropped black hair and a porcelain-like complexion, is snuggled up next to her spouse, or boyfriend, or date, or whatever the case may be. The man returns her affection in kind, wrapping his large arm around her and whispering sweet nothings in her ear.

Periodically, they look over at me.

I can see from the love they no doubt share for one another that they are indeed human.

And then my head turns toward a middle-aged woman seated not more than two booths over from me. Her bright red hair trails down past her shoulders, framing her bored expression like a poorly-lit portrait. She picks at a dish of food, and after a few minutes pass, notices me watching her. Her look of boredom slides into one of annoyance, and then anger. Her eyes widen and her mouth tightens as she cuts me down with her glare.

I look away, confident that she too is human.

Next I see a woman having a chat with someone I presume to be her daughter. They smile and giggle with each other over cups of coffee, and momentarily pause to glance over at me before resuming their conversation.

I know they are human. I can feel it in my bones. There is a bond between a parent and child that is unmistakable, and I could see it with them.

"Would you like another cup of coffee?"

Startled, I look up into the smile of the pretty waitress. A lock of silky blond hair falls over one of her eyes, making her look like a modern version of Veronica Lake. If I weren't preoccupied with the task at hand I would ask her out.

Maybe.

I nod my head and she promptly pours more coffee into my cup, not stopping until it touches the rim. She then flashes me another smile and saunters away, disappearing into the kitchen area.

My attention swings back to the other people in the café. I know that one of them is not human—but which one? They all seem normal enough.

I feel something wet on my hand and look down at my coffee. The waitress over-filled the cup so much that a slight movement of my hand caused some of the hot liquid to spill over the rim. Thin plumes of steam drift upward from the cup and into my eyes, causing me to wince.

Then something unusual catches my attention—the coffee is not hot at all. In fact, it is rather cool, cold even, despite the steam coming from the cup. I stare at my hand and then back at the coffee, trying to find a connection between the two.

Suddenly I cannot move. My entire body is frozen in my seat, and no matter how hard I try, I cannot move anything except my eyes, which I blink furiously to attract attention to my plight.

But no one notices. The mother and daughter, the old man, the young couple, the redheaded woman, they all just continue on with their business, oblivious to the unnatural malady that has afflicted me.

"Oh my, are you all right?"

I manage to divert my eyes over toward the source of the words and see the waitress standing behind the front counter. She's wearing the same smile she wore when she refilled my coffee, but there's something else there. I can't quite put my finger on it but it's there, a mocking aspect to her expression that, if I could move, would cause me to bolt to my feet and run as far away from her as I could.

And worse still is the cook standing behind the waitress. He's a burly man, possibly late 20s, and sports an ornate tattoo spread across his neck. It's of a scantily-clad, buxom woman and flexes with each movement he makes.

I watch in horror as the tattoo turns its head toward me.

The cook raises a hairy arm and taps the waitress on the shoulder. No, taps would be the wrong word. He connects with her shoulder, like he was transferring something into her. The waitress and cook melt together then, their bodies fusing into one another. All the while their expressions don't change, making what I'm seeing even more terrifying. I struggle with my own body as I try desperately to move, or at least shout a warning to the other people in the café, but can't. I look down at my coffee then, mostly because I cannot bear to watch the pulsating mass behind the counter anymore, and see that the liquid in the cup has coagulated into a syrupy black goo. I watch as it roils like a tiny tempest and forms pseudopods that thrash at their surroundings as if trying to escape from the cup.

I hear others around me then, and try to turn my head but can only move my eyes, which to my frustration doesn't allow me to see who the voices belong to.

My confusion turns to outright terror when they step in front of me. I see the other people in the café (the young couple, the mother and daughter, the old man, the redheaded woman) standing next to my booth, vile expressions of hunger etched on their seemingly human faces. They simultaneously reach forward and lay a hand on the back of my head. I can feel their ice-cold fingers snake through my hair to get a better grip. Then I watch as the swirling muck in my cup comes closer and closer to my face. I'm being pushed down, face-first, into the mess, and I sense hunger in its depths.

The waitress and cook are by now a single, gelatinous creature. It slithers up behind the others. There is still a hint of the waitresses' pretty face smeared in the filth, but the visage of the cook is nowhere to be seen.

The thing blurts out some type of command (it sounds like a thousand mosquitoes buzzing in an enclosed space) and the others dutifully step back, temporarily giving me a reprieve from whatever unimaginable fate awaits me.

The waitress-cook thing raises an arm, although tentacle would be a better description, and swings it behind its bulk, procuring a large cooking pot, and slides it in front of my face, nudging the coffee cup aside. I can't help but look down into the pot and see gallons of the coffee stuff glaring back at me. Then I look up again into the residual face of the waitress and notice she is smiling.

Most people are good, but some are not.

And some are not people at all.

[poetry]

HAIL MARY

Sheet lightning illuminated the palm tree in the front yard battling the sky with serpent heads and swords. Wind scourged the oaks until they dropped leaves and branches like they were giving up all possessions to a thief.

From within our power-less house, the rosary, Hail Mary full of grace a chanted monotone to hail stones beating the roof. The Lord is with thee...

Clasped in a chain around our mother's legs squeezing her veins, blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. (For our family, five times, the nurses exclaimed, "It's a girl.")

We don't know all the words to prayers that are not Hail Mary's so the chant breaks up and then resumes.

We kept cutting off the blood in our mom's calves, the rosary over and over. *Hail Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now, certainly now, and at the hour of our death*, maybe the death of our parents and we'd be orphans locked up in foster homes. Save us, Hail Mary!

We sang, a flat waterfall of voices.

I thought I saw Angel Gabriel soar above the pasture, wings flashing. "Hello! Here!" He waves with a wobbly arm and crashes into the neighbor's chimney, teetering and blurring into the slant night.

Grace is a funny color that streaks through the curtains, white like Mary's veil.

We pictured next morning trees uprooted, fences exploded, limp squirrels clutching their last acorn. We feared our father drowned in a tidal wave, smashed near the bait and tackle shops where he'd been selling fishing rods and lures.

The flood waters recede with the tide when the sun comes out as usual. Father returns in his pickup truck. Immigrant workers clear fallen trees. Chainsaws and chippers fill the air with their shattering roar. The squirrels wake up and run away.

-cathryn shea

NOBODY Knows Anything

by eugene hosey

My unemployment was running out fast. I was job-hunting, driving down a highway—a stack of resumes on the passenger's seat. I was willing to try everything except for grocery stores, restaurants, and fast-food joints.

After passing Oakland cemetery, I considered the long red-brick building ahead of me to my right. In the front lawn was a brick wall that spelled Curtis Funeral Home in white cursive letters on a black panel. Getting a job at a funeral home seemed ridiculous, but an inquiry couldn't hurt. Surely they have administrative duties I'm qualified for, such as record-keeping and financials.

The parking lot was empty. I got out of the car with a resume in my hand and opened the big wood door of Curtis Funeral Home. A bell rang. The entry was a large rectangular room with couches and chairs upholstered in floral fabrics. End tables gleamed in reddish brown finish. White lamps and Asian vases were placed all around. The floor was marbleized in pale salmon, the walls white and decorated with gold-framed landscape paintings.

I noticed how cool and odorless it was when I heard the bump of a door opening, followed by easy-going footsteps. A man in a blue suit appeared from around the corner of a hallway that I guessed led to private quarters. The man approached me with a welcoming smile. He appeared to be in his 60s. His hair was thin and combed across a balding crown. His complexion was rough and reddish, as if he had suffered a case of severe acne in youth. He had one facial feature that struck me as odd yet somehow befitting a mortician—his mouth was nearly lipless, like a straight horizontal cut.

As we shook hands, he said, "Hello. I'm Fred Chandler. What can I do for you?" he said.

"I'm Jim Felton. I'm looking for a job." I handed him my resume. "I worked a year in data entry in Montgomery. I also did some bookkeeping. I can do anything administrative. It was a good company, but the owner decided to retire. I'm not a mortician, but I thought maybe you could use my kind of skills."

Mr. Chandler scanned my resume and said, "What kind of company was it?"

"A financial research company," I said.

"Uh-huh," he said. He folded the resume and stuck it inside his jacket as if it were of no significant interest.

Well, that's it. He's going to say he has no such position available but that he'll file my resume. Then he'll make a pleasant goodbye and perhaps extend his hand again.

Instead his small hazel eyes gazed into mine with an affable interest. He didn't move. He didn't say goodbye. To my surprise, he seemed like he wanted to talk.

Fred Chandler said, "Are you from Montgomery or . . ?"

"No. I'm from here. I commuted to Montgomery."

"Let's see now—Montgomery is 50- or 60-miles away, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said. "I got used to the drive. The radio helped a lot. And I liked the job."

"That's the most important thing-liking the job. More important than the

money if it pays enough to live on," he said. "I like this job, and I like this town. My wife and I moved here from Fayette. Are you familiar with Fayette?"

"No, sir."

"That's where I was born. It's in the northern part of the state just a few miles south of Tennessee. I was at a funeral home there when the position here opened up. I don't own Curtis Funeral Home. The owner's name is Jefferson Curtis. He owns four funeral homes. Three of them are in north Alabama in two counties. He opened this one down here three years ago and asked me to manage it. Curtis is a good man. He provided us a nice house to live in. You meet a lot of people in this line of work, and I must say the people in this town are friendly, down-toearth folks."

I was stunned when he said, "I'm glad you came in today. I need another man. I have one now. But I like to keep two. I know from experience you need at least a total of three men for a town this size, which has stayed right at 12,000 for many years. It is 12,000, right?"

"Yes," I said. "I think it's been about that for at least my whole life."

"Uh-huh. You are 21, aren't you?"

"I'm 20. I'll be 21 the 21st of this month," I said.

"I'm sure that's close enough," he said. "The apprenticeship laws vary by state. The way it works in Alabama—you start as an assistant manager and apprentice for the first year. Then you go to school to get your license. You'd be employed by Curtis while you're in school; we'd work out a schedule so you could work and take classes both. The man I have now is named Luther Lightsey. He's been with me half a year. You would work with Luther a lot. Both of you would pick up bodies. Both of you would assist me with the embalming. All three of us would work together directing funerals. My wife comes and answers the phone when we're busy on a funeral. There are two things only I do, even though I'm sure you're qualified for both. I meet with the families for funeral arrangements, and my hands only are in the bookkeeping. I don't want anybody's hands but mine in the finances—it's too easy to get it screwed up with all of us in it."

Mr. Chandler made a "come with me" gesture and said, "Let me show you around."

Am I being hired as an apprentice mortician so quickly, so casually—without even being asked if I want to be an apprentice mortician?

When I stopped here today the only idea in my head was an administrative job. Yet what seemed to be happening made personal sense. I had a fascination for the morbid. For fun I watched horror movies and read horror novels. I had always wanted to watch an autopsy—or at least an embalming. Still I had never considered a career in the funeral business.

From the front room a wide entry opened to a hallway that had two visitation parlors, one on each side. They were carpeted in beige and furnished just like the front room. Each parlor had a folding partition that could turn one parlor into two. Mr. Chandler said, "As you can see we don't have any business now. This is our chance to get in the deep cleaning. We do all the cleaning and yard work ourselves. Half the time we're janitors, but nothing is more important than keeping everything as clean as possible—except for treating families and guests politely. Right now Luther is doing some yard work. Let me show you around to the chapel. I would say half the funerals are conducted in here. I can remember when funerals had long processions and involved a lot of travel. The trend has been to streamline."

We entered the chapel and Mr. Chandler flicked on the lights. The stage had the usual podium at the center and an organ off to the side. Colorful stained glass covered the whole exterior wall; shafts of sunlight slanted through it.

Mr. Chandler said, "That's some beautiful stained glass."

"It is."

"I can't remember the name of the artist. Somebody Curtis found. It's about Genesis, as I understand it."

I said, "I recognize the garden, the flood, Cain and Abel, the tower of Babel . . . "

"I can only admire that kind of talent. That's one of those things you look at without the slightest idea of how anybody could do it. Curtis is proud to have it. It cost a pretty penny. He could have done without it, but this was one of the superior touches to compete with the other funeral home here. And this is superior artwork, if you ask me."

"I agree."

"There are 30 pews on each side of the aisle," he said. "And those crystal chandeliers cost a pretty penny. He wanted this place to be fancier than the competition. But it hasn't done as much business as he thought it would. Not yet anyway."

"The other funeral home has been here for decades," I said. "I would think this place needs more time to build a reputation no matter how nice it is."

"That's exactly what I tell Curtis," Mr. Chandler said. "Let's take a look at the embalming room. We call it the operating room." He chuckled. "I guess 'operating room' sounds more polite, I don't know."

We left the chapel and went down a short hall parallel to the back of the building. We opened an "Employees Only" door and entered a shorter hall. There were several doors in here. Mr. Chandler pulled one of them open and turned on the lights. It was bright and immaculate. There were two white ceramic embalming tables. A counter and cabinets ran the length of one wall. There were several sinks, metal instruments and machines, tubing, and round glass containers. We were in here for only a few seconds.

"Let me show you a little more," Mr. Chandler said.

We went through another door, and we were inside a huge garage. There were two grey hearses, a white van, and two other cars I assumed belonged to Mr. Chandler and this Mr. Lightsey he had mentioned. Against two walls, metal shelving held packaged materials and plastic-covered caskets. We walked across the concrete and entered a small ordinary door next to a Coke machine. This was obviously private quarters for the employees. He said, "This is our sitting room and there's a bedroom and bathroom around the corner. One of us has to stay every night. For each of us it would be every third night."

There was a couch and two chairs, a television, a sink, and a coffee maker. It felt comfortable and lived-in.

There was a door on each side of a short hall leading from the private quarters. To the left was a showroom fairly packed with caskets. We didn't walk through it. He said, "The casket inventory includes everything from cloth-covered pine boxes to models that cost a fortune." Across from the casket showroom was Mr. Chandler's office. The door was open, and I could see that a conference room with a round table was attached to his office—where he met with families about the arrangements, no doubt.

Then we were back to the big front room where we started, and I realized he was escorting me out now, having circled the inside of the building. Suddenly he stopped and gave me an assured look of approval. He said, "I'd like to hire you. But the boss has to sign off on it. I'll call him today, but he stays pretty busy, so it might take another day, but as soon as I get his permission I'll give you a call. Your phone number is on your resume, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"I'll be in touch as soon as I can," he said.

"Thank you very much," I said. "I mean I can't thank you enough."

"Hey. Why don't you go talk to Luther before you leave and ask him what it's like working for me. You'll find him outside somewhere." He gave me the brightest, proudest smile yet.

"All right."

Luther was in the back yard trimming shrubbery. He appeared to be older than Mr. Chandler, but he was a taller, big-boned figure that conveyed physical strength. He saw me coming and pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his forehead. When I was close enough to speak, I noticed his face was hard and expressionless—without the slightest pretention or expectation—hard to read. I introduced myself and told him that Mr. Chandler might hire me and wanted me to get his thoughts on what it was like working for Chandler.

"I'm Luther Lightsey," he said. "I can honestly say I don't have a complaint about Mr. Chandler. Now he's a real professional and well known in this business. He's done this all his life. And he's not hard to work for. He ain't too particular. He's fair. He don't push too hard but he'll teach you a lot. Have you worked in this business before?"

"No I haven't," I said.

"This is my first job in the funeral business too," he said.

"I hope I get hired," I said.

"Good luck."

I nodded and went to my car, my thoughts unsettled. I drove back to my little

two-room apartment, scarcely able to believe what appeared to be happening. Me—an apprentice mortician? The result of the easiest job interview I could ever have imagined! But I don't have the job yet; Jefferson Curtis might have a problem with my age; these men are old; you never know; can it be this easy to get a job?

That very evening before dark Mr. Chandler called me. He said, "I just talked to Curtis. Can you start Monday at eight in the morning?"

"Yes sir."

"All right," he said. "There are a few house rules I need to tell you. We have to wear blue suits and black or brown shoes. Another thing—I noticed your hair is longer than Curtis likes. If I were you I'd get a haircut this weekend—trimmed above the ears and off the collar."

"No problem," I said.

"All right. I'll see you Monday," he said. "Good night, Mr. Felton."

On my first morning at Curtis Funeral Home, Mr. Chandler was beaming. "Nice haircut and nice suit, Mr. Felton," he said. "This is a good day for you to start. We embalmed a body last night. The family viewing is at eleven. In a minute we need to dress the body and get it in the casket—it's a 90-year-old man."

"I'm ready."

"A simple funeral," Chandler said. "In our chapel, and burial next door at Oakland."

For a few minutes nobody said anything. We all three smoked and drank cup after cup of coffee.

Finally Luther Lightsey put his cup in the sink and said to Mr. Chandler, "Well, are you ready to go dress this man?"

"Might as well," Mr. Chandler said.

I felt a twinge of anxiety. I had seen plenty of corpses in caskets, but I had never touched one.

The three of us went to the operating room. An old man's body was on the embalming table covered with a sheet up to the neck. The head was elevated by a concave block under the back of the neck. Mr. Chandler pulled off the sheet and said, "Luther, I'll let you and Jim do this." He turned toward the door and said, "Jim, you just stick with Luther today." Then he walked out.

Luther said, "Now, I'm not your boss. We're just working together."

"I understand."

Then he proceeded to show me how I could lift or hold various parts of the body as he pulled on the clothes. The embalmed skin had a leathery texture. While I buttoned the shirt and put on the necktie, Luther put on socks and shoes. I said, "I didn't think they ever wore shoes."

"Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't," Luther said. "We put on whatever they give us."

The casket was already in the room, open and placed on trucks. I got the legs and Luther got the back and in went the corpse. The hands were already side-by-

side on the stomach; Luther made a small aesthetic adjustment to them so that one hand overlaid the edge of the other. We closed both the lower and upper lids and rolled the casket into one of the viewing rooms. We lifted and lowered the casket to the bier and opened the upper lid. Luther turned on the overhead lights, dimmed them, and switched on the table lamps. We closed the two doors of the room when we left it. Now it was waiting and ready for the family. Luther explained that Mr. Chandler would greet and accompany the family for their private viewing, while Luther and I would greet people at the door and bring in flowers throughout the day. He showed me where the florists delivered in the garage. He said, "We move the flowers to the chapel for the funeral; finally we put 'em in the flower truck and race to the grave and get as many out as we can before Mr. Chandler pulls up in the hearse. He wants 'em all out before the family gets there, but sometimes there's just too many. We do the best we can."

After handling the dead man that first day I was never again uneasy about a corpse, because I realized what it actually was. It was a mannequin, a doll completely devoid of life, humanity, and spirit. The difference between life and death in a body was not some creepy ambiguity but an absolute.

I remember the second funeral, because that was the first time I saw an embalming and it was also the first time I spent the night at the funeral home. A young man about my age who worked in a paper mill had fallen head-first into some kind of grinding machine. An ambulance delivered the body to us one evening. The man head's was intact but too mangled to even consider any kind of cosmetic repair for viewing. Mr. Chandler wrapped the head in several layers of plastic and stapled it securely. Then he got on with the embalming, explaining that preserving the remains, regardless of their condition, was standard procedure. He said he would never bury a body unembalmed unless the family insisted otherwise. To this day, he said, no one had ever objected to embalming. "Frankly most of them are afraid to know what goes on in here."

He took a scalpel to the left side of the neck and made a short incision. Then with his bare fingers he reached in and felt around. "I don't wear gloves because it's more about feeling than seeing. What I'm looking for is the carotid artery. That's where the embalming fluid goes." He had the artery in his fingers in a matter of seconds; he wedged it above the incision with a flat metal instrument and made a tiny cut in it. He inserted a long needle attached to a tube that fed from a big glass container of pink embalming fluid. On the other side of the neck he made another incision, telling me that now he was looking for a vein that would drain the blood. He attached a tube from the vein to an instrument that drew the blood, which ran along a little trench in the table and down a hole into a toilet. He switched on the embalming machine. I could see the body perk up as the fluid filled the vessels. At last the draining blood turned into pink fluid, and the body was embalmed. Mr. Chandler withdrew the tubes and sutured the incisions. He took a long metal stick with a sharp point, punctured the belly button, pressed a switch, and began stabbing inside the abdominal cavity. "This is an aspirator. It pulls out gases and stomach contents and other good stuff and shoots in some embalming fluid."

I never did learn as much as I wanted about preparing a body. I always washed the body down. I shaved the men. Sometimes he let me use the aspirator. I made some incisions and stapled and wired some gums together. But he never let me pierce the vessels or suture anything. And he never trusted me or Luther to apply the makeup. I could see that the makeup required the most experience and skill there were many shades to choose from for both a wet under-layer and a dry outer one. The face was what the family saw and it had to look as natural as possible.

The first night they left me in charge of the building they stopped short at the door, exchanged a curious smile, and looked at me. Luther said, "Now you will hear things. But you'll get used to it." Mr. Chandler chuckled his usual "huh, huh, huh" low laugh and said, "It's true. I've heard all kinds of things at every funeral home I've worked at. But nothing has ever hurt me."

I was very tired and went to bed around ten o'clock, leaving the television on with the volume up, hoping that it would drown out a strange noise. Still something strange woke me. A harsh whisper of a man's voice said, "Jim!" directly and loudly in my ear. I got up and saw it was midnight. I sat in a chair in front of the television and lit a cigarette. I heard a knock from the public area. Then the knocking came more loudly, vigorously, plainly—nothing hazy about it. *Someone is banging on the front door.* I didn't doubt it. *Why don't they ring the bell*? I had to answer it. The knocking continued as I entered the front room; it stopped as I was several steps away from the door. The door was flanked by long narrow windows. I looked through both and saw no one. I turned the lock, slid the bolt, and pushed it open. A car passed on the highway. The night was silent, the air damp and cool. My eardrums throbbed. I re-locked the door. A chill dropped through me as I returned to private quarters. I called a friend that I knew kept late hours and chatted for a while. I sat on edge the rest of the night. I felt grateful when they arrived at eight a.m.

Luther got his coffee and smiled at me. He said, "Well, did you hear anything last night, Jim?" It was so unusual to see a smile on Luther's face that I actually considered a nonsensical theory that he had crept up to the door last night to scare me. I said, "No. I didn't hear a thing." This was my day off. I could do some reading and fall asleep at home.

The funeral home was definitely haunted. Luther and I exchanged notes on the subject while drinking coffee in the sitting room. We both heard particular things regularly. He heard crashes in the garage; he said he always turned on the lights and investigated, thinking a casket had fallen from that metal shelf but never once had found anything out of place. His creepiest story was about the sounds of children running around and giggling in the lobby or the visitation rooms. I clearly heard footsteps approaching from the front and sometimes shuffling against the wall near the casket room door. Sometimes this shuffling would fall back and forth from one wall to the other; it put me in mind of certain drunks I had seen making their way through a narrow space. What unnerved me the most

was the low murmuring of a crowd along with an occasional sob. Yet in time I got used to it.

Business was always slow; therefore, for the most part the job was easy. Sometimes Mr. Chandler was aware that for his assistant managers it could get too easy while he had a pile of bookkeeping and letter-writing on his desk. He would walk in while Luther and I were talking and he'd put his hands on the back of a chair and lean forward, saying, "Somewhere along the way we need to give the garage floor a good scrubbing. We've neglected that." Or, "Somewhere along the way we need to go through the chapel with a dust rag and the vacuum cleaner." I can remember just a few scoldings. One time he told me I had moved much too slowly in getting a casket out of the hearse and directing the pallbearers, that I had been here long enough to perform better and he didn't want to see me lagging behind again. He added that my poor performance had been noticed by several attendees. This was followed by a prompt order to go thoroughly clean the public restrooms. After I was finished with my punishment and sitting in our quarters, he walked in and sat down. I could tell he was feeling a bit contrite. "Just remember," he said, "if you stay in this business as long as I have you'll find out that being a manager is about nothing but being the one to take all the ass-eatings. You might as well learn it now. You and Luther have no idea about the shit I take off Curtis." He was silent in thought for a minute and then he said, "I am hoping I can retire in just a few years if I make it that long."

The worst reprimand was directed at Luther and me both at the same time. Chandler walked in, put his foot on the couch, rested his arm on his knee, and said, "I've got something to tell you both. A family called me today and told me that last week they stopped by to see me and they were told I was gone and they should come back later. And they were very upset about it, because I had told them I was always available at a moment's notice, which I am. That's what the beepers are for. Any time a family member, a customer, comes to see me about anything and I'm not here—use the goddamn beeper and I'll be on a phone in a matter of seconds. We don't turn anybody away; we politely invite them in. You tell them I'll be here momentarily. Now, I don't know which one of you it was or if it was both of you. But if it ever happens again you might as well get your riding britches on." Then he stalked back to his office. The strange thing was that neither of us could remember such an incident.

Luther was the first person who confirmed for me that old adage about not judging a book by its cover. His appearance fit the blue-collar, overalls stereotype. In fact, he told me he had once been a farmer and then went into details of what it was like to farm, harvest, and sell. He never spoke of an intellectual subject until one day he saw me reading a Flannery O'Connor collection. He said, "I see you like Flannery O'Connor. So do I. I've lived in the world she writes about. My daughter is an English teacher, and she gives me books to read. I've got a lot out of most of them. I read a lot on my off days." Then we discussed several O'Connor stories.

Sometimes Mr. Chandler joined our talks, all three of us always chain-

smoking and drinking coffee. Mr. Chandler's gripes and jokes both were mostly about preachers. "I've learned to just about hate preachers. Nine times out of ten a preacher will worm his way into the family and persuade them to take his advice on their funeral arrangements. He'll especially take a widow's arm and she'll listen. We'll go in the casket room, and he'll tell her not to buy an expensive casket. Why, hell, that's bread and butter as far as Curtis is concerned, and I don't know how many times he's asked me why I can't exert more influence when it comes to a family choosing a casket. It's the goddamn preachers." He laughed. "I remember back years ago I knew this preacher who said the same thing every time a person died in a car accident. He'd shake his head and say, 'Oh, they were drunk.' I got tired of that. One time I saw him after he had been in an accident himself, and he had a broken leg. I couldn't resist it. I said, 'Well, preacher, were you drunk?'" He laughed heartily. "He didn't say a word but his face turned red as a beet."

I said, "What about people you've worked with? Any strange cases in that department?"

He said, "I've been lucky for the most part. But I'll never forget this asshole named George something. Every time we had a body covered with a sheet, the first thing he'd do is pull back that sheet to look at the genitals. I finally got tired of that and I said, 'I don't know what your problem is but I wish you'd stop that. If you want to see a naked man, stand in front of a long mirror naked. If you want to see a naked woman, get your wife to stand around naked.' And would you believe this? One time we had a gunshot victim. The bullet hole was in the head. This bastard was running his mouth as usual—and when he finished his cigarette he put it out in the bullet hole."

"My God," I said. "He was unfit for this kind of work."

"Exactly," Mr. Chandler said. "He was unfit. A dead body deserves respect."

Had we stayed busy I might have hated the funeral business. I did manage to get faster and more efficient in general. But several chores almost got the better of me-like putting up a Curtis Funeral Home tent in a cemetery during a rainstorm without any help, or another time without help picking up a 300-pound body from a morgue. But usually Luther and I were able to help each other. The three times we had two funerals on the same day, Mr. Curtis sent us some help. I remember certain bodies—the old woman who had solidified in a fetal position and could not be straightened, the blue still-born baby whose father insisted on an open casket. But the body that meant the most to me was that of a girl I had gone to school with and admired from afar. Her name was Gloria, and she was beautiful; she had black ringlets of hair, a high forehead, large eyes, sensual lips, and a wonderful shape. She had been murdered by a knife in the back. The gossip was that the crime was about a drug deal. And there she was on the embalming table on my night to stay; tomorrow we would put her in her casket for viewing. I sat in our quarters remembering times I had made eye contact with her in the school hallways and hadn't been sure how to interpret her look-and how I had failed to ever ask her out, assuming she was beyond me.

I decided to go take a look at her. I pulled the sheet off and considered that her form was beautiful indeed, even in death. Looking at her nude body, dead though it was, I felt a tingle of desire. I thought about touching her. Then I thought better and pulled the sheet back up to her neck. I imagined her opening her eyes and saying, "You should have asked me out while I was alive." Her funeral turned out to be huge, filling the biggest Methodist church in town.

I worked at Curtis Funeral Home for exactly one year—April 1980 to April 1981. I had decided against going to school for a mortuary license. I was leaning toward going to college for an English degree; I was already looking at college brochures. When my employment as an apprentice mortician came to an end it came abruptly and incredulously.

One morning Mr. Chandler came in late. He said he didn't feel well but he was sure it was nothing serious. Luther and I exchanged looks, and I said, "He looks pale and stressed." Luther said he had never seen him look that way before. He went to his office for a minute and came right back to the sitting room. He got his coffee and lit a cigarette; he sat on the couch and stared at the floor, as if Luther and I were not there. I thought he had a worry on his mind.

Luther said, "Mr. Chandler, if you're sick why don't you go home and rest? Both of us will be here all day and Jim will be here tonight. We'll call you if anything comes up."

"No, no," he said firmly. "I don't need to do that. Don't worry about it. If I'm not better tomorrow I'll go see a doctor."

We sat around quietly until noon. Mr. Chandler went home for lunch, while Luther and I decided to skip lunch. While Mr. Chandler was gone, we got a phone call to pick up a body at the local hospital.

Luther said, "Why don't I pick this one up by myself—it's just down the road. And you can hold down the fort."

"That's fine with me," I said.

Luther actually got back with the body before Mr. Chandler returned. We rolled the body to the operating room and put the paper work in the office. We were undressing the body when we heard Mr. Chandler's car in the garage. I went out to tell him we had some business. He slammed his car door and smiled. "Well that's good news!" he said. I noticed immediately he looked much better. I told him so, and he said, "I guess I just needed to eat."

He got to work embalming right away. The body was that of a middle-aged woman with salt-and-pepper hair. As he was making up the face, he said, "You know this is a fine-looking lady. I'll bet she was a great beauty in her youth." He asked our opinion on his makeup job, which he never did, and of course we both said she looked great. He chuckled and said, "I think so too. She can eat crackers in my bed anytime she wants." I thought this was an odd thing for him to say, but then I remembered wanting to touch the dead girl from my school days, and it vaguely worried me.

Luther and I vacuumed and dusted both visitation rooms and checked to
make sure the public restrooms were clean and equipped with soap, paper towels, and toilet paper. Then we sat around and talked a bit while Mr. Chandler spent an hour in his office.

Luther said, "I think I'm ready to talk to Chandler about taking classes for my mortuary license. You've been here a year now. Do you mind if I ask you what your plans are?"

I said, "No, I don't mind. I don't think I'm gonna stay in this business for the long haul. I want to go to college but . . ."

He said, "If you don't mind me giving you advice, I'll tell you what I think. You being as young as you are—you choose exactly what is in your heart to do. You'll regret it someday if you don't."

"That's just as I'm thinking," I said.

"Well you're smart."

I went home at four thirty and ate a sandwich for dinner. I picked out a book to read, stopped by a store for a snack to eat later, and returned to the funeral home. Luther and Mr. Chandler both left at five. I couldn't stay focused on my book; I found a movie to watch. It was a bad movie, but it was too early for me to feel sleepy. I looked at the clock; it was nine. I felt very uneasy and restless. It was nervous tension. I remembered I had a bottle of three or four nerve pills in the glove compartment of my car. I took one and I felt better in a few minutes; finally I felt drowsy and went to bed.

The ringing phone woke me. I answered. I heard some static but no one was there. I hung it up. The wall clock was right above the phone. It was three-thirty. A loud racket startled me, and I jumped. I could hear the garage door opening. I stood very still, listening. Then I heard a car drive in; the door opened and closed. Footsteps, a cough—Mr. Chandler's cough. Then the garage door rattled back down. More footsteps to the door leading to the operating room. Then silence. I sat down and lit a cigarette. *I've never heard those noises before.* All that sounded exactly like Mr. Chandler coming in—but at three-thirty in the morning? *It can't be, can it*? Suddenly I realized I had to look.

I opened the door to the garage. The lights were on, and Mr. Chandler's creamcolored Cadillac was parked there. I assumed something I couldn't imagine was going on. I walked across the garage, entered the hallway, and opened the door of the operating room.

What I saw was indeed unimaginable. Yet there it was, and not for a second did I doubt my sanity. Mr. Chandler was humping the lady corpse he had embalmed today, his pants pulled down to his ankles, his face red and smiling. I caught a glint in his eyes that gave me the impression that he *wanted* me to see this. I walked out and as I went I heard him call out, "Give me a minute, Mr. Felton!"

I stood in the sitting room, trying to think. What would make sense for me to do? Did I need to make a phone call? Did I need a weapon? Should I leave? Or did I need to talk to him?

I was surprised how quickly Mr. Chandler walked in. He stood there and looked at me, smiled, and said, "Don't be so shocked, Mr. Felton. You've thought

about doing what I just did yourself. And ordinary folks do much worse. Come to my office. I need to give you a check."

"A check?"

"Uh-huh."

He was pulling open the top drawer of his desk when I went to the door. I said, "You don't have ethics."

"Sure I do," he said. "But a dead woman is just a doll, a mannequin. Isn't that so? Does it hurt anyone for me to get my rocks off on an inanimate object?"

He made a face—a mockery of innocence.

I said, "Necrophilia."

He said, "Oh, bullshit." He opened a checkbook and started writing.

"Do you expect me to forget about this? To keep your secret?"

He chuckled. "I don't expect you to forget about it. But what you don't know yet is that it doesn't matter whether you keep it a secret or not."

"Why did you do this tonight?"

"For the fun of it, Mr. Felton."

"Why did you want me to know?"

"For the fun of it, Mr. Felton."

He smiled like he often did, but there was an ugly gleam in it I had never seen. I said, "I don't know you, Mr. Chandler."

"Let me tell you something," he said. "Nobody knows anybody. Nobody is known by anybody. It's all make-believe. The truth hides."

Then he handed me a check for \$2,000.

He said, "That's your last paycheck plus some severance. This check has nothing to do with what has happened tonight. Curtis told me a few days ago that he had to let you go because of a DUI you got when you were 18. Not that he couldn't overlook it—everybody makes mistakes and I assured him you weren't drinking on the job. The problem is that he can't insure you for driving the vehicles with this DUI. It'll be a few more years before it comes off your record."

I folded the check and put it in my right pants pocket. I said, "So this works out. I'm paid off and I'm gone. What you do won't matter to me. We're strangers."

"Like I said, we were strangers anyway," he said, turning off the office light and shutting the door.

I walked out ahead of him and stood away from him in the sitting room as he opened the door to the garage. He said, "I'm gone. Good luck, Mr. Felton." And he left.

I just stood there in a daze. *What's to stop me from abandoning the place right now?* Should I call Luther? It was a few minutes till four.

Then I realized I had yet to hear Chandler pull up the garage door and crank his car. If he wasn't leaving, what else might he be up to? There was nothing in the sitting room that would serve as a weapon. The best place to find a weapon would be the garage. *He's waiting behind the door, hoping I'll enter the garage; he'll hit me over the head with something.* I made a sudden decision to leave the building through the front door. I started walking, and as I entered the front room I heard keys in the front door. It opened and a short, middle-aged man with reddish hair stepped in. I didn't recognize him immediately for I had met him only once when he came to talk with Mr. Chandler. This was Jefferson Curtis, the owner.

He said, "Jim. Hello."

I stared with my mouth open.

Mr. Curtis said, "Jim, I need to talk to you. You haven't heard about Fred yet, have you?"

"Fred. You mean Mr. Chandler? News?"

"Yes," he said. "Well, we've lost a good man. He died of a heart attack last night about eleven o'clock. I've already had his body taken back to Fayette, where he and his wife are from. His funeral and burial will be there. Two men from one of my other funeral homes are on their way to take charge here. I hope Luther Lightsey chooses to stay. But there's something else I have to tell you. I have to let you go. Fred was probably going to tell you today. He had only good things to say about you, and I hate to fire you. But it's about my insurance on employees who drive the vehicles and a DUI in your record. The insurance won't cover you." He reached inside his jacket and took out a folded check and handed it to me. It was made out for \$2,000. I put it inside my jacket pocket.

"Thank you," I said. "I understand. You say Mr. Chandler died about eleven o'clock and his body is already in Fayette?"

"Yes," he said. "This is a sorrowful day. His wife said he didn't even know he had a heart problem. Jim, I wish you the best of luck. I will certainly give you a good reference if you ever need it."

He extended his hand, and we shook.

I told him I would like to go to the sitting room and take some time to absorb all this. He smiled and said that would be fine. "I'll be in the office making some phone calls," he said.

The first thing I did was look in the garage to see, of course, that Mr. Chandler's car was not there and had not been there at any time this morning. The question was whether I had met Mr. Chandler's ghost or a ghost masquerading as Mr. Chandler. How could I ever know? I felt in my right pants pocket; the check from the ghost was not there.

I sat down. I'll sit here until I stop shaking. I was overwhelmed by a feeling of horrible confusion. I could hear Jefferson Curtis' low voice coming from the office. Who or what was he truly? I wondered. He could be a ghost too for all I know. His voice might go silent any second and I'll find no sign he was ever here. Perhaps Mr. Chandler is alive and will walk in at eight am. I can't be sure of anything right now.



[poetry]

AVIHS I I VISHNU

Mornings || they disperse || beyond || the corn Fields, || separately. ||Sunday She || throws

Her partner's computer || (midnight) Into the garage.|| George ||who In many || a city || upgraded || his software

Upgraded || hers. They will || stop over || an island Separately.|| Your son

Hated || all || mushrooms George mentions – do you recall || yourself? To a single mind, || their spirits || evaporate

-yuan changming

[poetry]

TURING TEST

There is-- no solution -- to this --Problem of --the other mind Harbored-- in my bedmate's --body:

After --35 years --of marriage Or communication --inside out--Are --you a cyborg human, --or

Am I a --human cyborg? --Perhaps We --are both dreaming in a --virtual world --Like a lost digital --artifact?

—yuan changming

[advertisement]

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.

Available NOW through createspace.com/6941280

FOR WHOLESALE INQUIRIES, PLEASE WRITE TO: PearTree Press, P.O. Box 9585 Fall River, MA 02720 peartreepress@mac.com

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.

Available **NOW** through amazon.com / \$18.96

[advertisement]

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.

Available NOW through createspace.com/5562219

FOR WHOLESALE INQUIRIES, PLEASE WRITE TO: PearTree Press, P.O. Box 9585 Fall River, MA 02720 peartreepress@mac.com

Get the latest news at bythenakedpeartree.com

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."

Available **NOW** through createspace.com/45404853 \$10.00

FOR WHOLESALE INQUIRIES, PLEASE WRITE TO: PearTree Press, P.O. Box 9585 Fall River, MA 02720 peartreepress@mac.com

Get the latest news at thisonceonlyworld.com

[advertisement]

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.

Available NOW through createspace.com/4876021

FOR WHOLESALE INQUIRIES, PLEASE WRITE TO: PearTree Press, P.O. Box 9585 Fall River, MA 02720 peartreepress@mac.com lizz

Get the latest news at lizziebordenresurrections.com

[advertisement]

Lizzie Borden: The Girl with the Pansy Pin

a novel by Michael Thomas Brimbau



Lizzie Borden and her sister Emma lived a life of privilege and entitlement, with wealth and social status far greater than their neighbors. But it was not enough. In time, Lizzie and Emma grew restless, aching for a more opulent life—to reside on the Hill in a big house amongst their peers and Fall River's finest families.

But Father's riches were window dressing, dangling just beyond their reach—quarantined by a frugal patriarch who was unable or unwilling to change his scrimping ways. Andrew Jackson Borden had no intention of moving to the Hill and abandoning the home he had purchased for his second wife, or spending the money he had worked so hard for all his life. Now he

was planning to give it all away—to his wife, their stepmother.

In time, discord in the family began to ferment and fester—and there were signs that things were not as they should be.

On a sultry August morning, in the naked light of day, someone entered 92 Second Street and brutally hacked and murdered Andrew and Abby Borden. Soon the finger of guilt pointed to Lizzie. But she loved her father. He meant everything to her. The gold ring she had lovingly given him and that he always wore said as much. She would never have harmed him. Or would she?

The Girl with the Pansy Pin tells the gripping story of a desirable and vivacious young Victorian woman desperately longing for adventure and a lavish life. Instead, she was condemned to waste away in a stale, modest existence, in a father's foregone reality, with little chance of ever discovering love, happiness, or fulfillment. Now they have charged poor Lizzie with double murder.

Available NOW through createspace.com/4343650 \$22.95

FOR WHOLESALE INQUIRIES, PLEASE WRITE TO: PearTree Press, P.O. Box 9585 Fall River, MA 02720 peartreepress@mac.com

Get the latest news at girlwiththepansypin.com

Fall River Revisited

by Stefani Koorey and the Fall River History Club

Founded in 1803, Fall River changed its name the following year to Troy, after a resident visiting Troy, New York, enjoyed the city. In 1834, the name was officially changed back to Fall River.

The city's motto, "We'll Try," originates from the determination of its residents to rebuild the city following a devastating fire in 1843. The fire resulted in 20 acres in the center of the village



being destroyed, including $19\overline{6}$ buildings, and 1,334 people were displaced from their homes.

Once the capital of cotton textile manufacturing in the United States, by 1910, Fall River boasted 43 corporations, 222 mills, and 3.8 million spindles, producing two miles of cloth every minute of every working day in the year. The workforce was comprised of immigrants from Ireland, England, Scotland, Canada, the Azores, and, to a lesser extent, Poland, Italy, Greece, Russia, and Lebanon.

Available *NOW* \$22.00

The Sadness I Take to Sea and Other Poems

by Michael Thomas Brimbau

Putting pen to paper and allowing its ball tip to bleed and spill out is a good thing, and helps with the venting as well as needed healing. After all is said and done, following all the missteps and failings, to move on and search for lost love all over again is not only essential but the absolute specimen of a yearning and healthy soul—and the fundamental spirit conveyed in *The Sadness I Take to Sea.*

Available *NOW* through createspace.com/4833228. \$12.95





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.

Available *NOW* through createspace.com/3354462. \$14.00

FOR WHOLESALE INQUIRIES, PLEASE WRITE TO: PearTree Press P.O. Box 9585 Fall River, MA 02720 peartreepress@mac.com

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!

Available *NOW* through createspace.com/3441135. \$14.95

FOR WHOLESALE INQUIRIES, PLEASE WRITE TO: PearTree Press P.O. Box 9585 Fall River, MA 02720 peartreepress@mac.com



Get the latest news at LizzieBordenGirlDetective.com

Contributors

Tamara Burross Grisanti's

poetry and fiction have appeared in *New World Writing, Chicago Literati, Eunoia Review, Former Cactus*, and *Corvus Review*. She is the editor-in-chief of *Coffin Bell Journal* and associate editor of *ELJ* (Elm Leaves Journal).

Jay Caselberg is a writer living in Germany.

Yuan Changming edits *Poetry Pacific* with Allen Qing Yuan and hosts Happy Yangsheng in Vancouver; credits include ten Pushcart nominations, Best of the Best Canadian Poetry (2008-17), BestNewPoemsOnline and 1,429 others worldwide.

Peter DiChellis concocts sinister tales for anthologies, ezines, and magazines. Peter is a member of the Short Mystery Fiction Society and an Active (published author) member of the Mystery Writers of America, Private Eye Writers of America, and International Thriller Writers. For more about Peter's stories, Google his site Murder and Fries or his Amazon author page. Peter also blogs about short mystery and crime fiction at: A short walk down a dark street. Joao Cerqueira is an awardwinning author of 8 books. His works are published in The Adirondack Review, Ragazine, Berfrois, Cleaver Magazine, Bright Lights Film, Modern Times Magazine, Toad Suck Review, Foliate Oak Literary Magazine, Hypertext Magazine, Danse Macabre, Rapid River Magazine, Contemporary Literary Review India. Open Pen Magazine. Queen Mob's Tea House. The Liberator Magazine, Narrator International. The Transnational. BoldType Magazine, Saturday Night Reader, All Right Magazine, South Asia Mail.

Sherry Chapman is a prolific writer living in Michigan.Her humor has previoulsy appeared in *The Hatchet: A Journal of Lizzie Borden and Victorian Studies*. Her passions include her family and the historical subjects General Custer and Lizzie Borden.

Michael Dittman is a creative writing professor working and writing near Pittsburgh, PA. His fiction mostly focuses on dark tales of Northern Appalachia—the territory that surrounds him and his students.

Milton P. Ehrlich is is an 87-year old psychologist and a veteran of the Korean War. He has published many of his poems in periodicals such as *Descant, Toronto Quarterly, Wisconsin Review, Mobius, The Chiron Review, Blue Collar Review, "Antigonish Review," Naugatauk River Review, Red Wheelbarrow, Christian Science Monitor, Huffington Post and the New York Times.*

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.

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.

Yasmin Hemmat is from Iran and is an M.A student of English literature.

Stephen Greco is a scientist, engineer, artist, and writer living in Connecticut. His fiction has appeared recently in *Suspense Magazine*. John Flynn was born in the textile mill company town of Bemis, TN. His jobs have included newspaper reporter, magazine editor and university teacher. He has five degrees and is both a Fulbright Senior Scholar and a Fulbright Senior Specialist with a recent grant in Indonesia. His literary publications total more than two hundred. He currently lives in Nashville, TN, where he is director of the Musicians Reunion, an annual blues festival now in its 35th year.

David Greske is the author of five novels; all in the horror genre. *Blood River*, his fourth novel was produced as a feature film by Christopher Forbes. The film is available to rent or own on Amazon Video. Over 30 of the author's short stories have been published in several print and online publications, several of them in *The Literary Hatchet*. A member of the Horror Writers Association, the author lives with his partner of 32 years and is currently working on his next novel, *Whistlestop*.

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

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. Marc Jampole wrote *Music from* Words (Bellday Books, 2007) and *Cubist States of Mind/Not the Cruelest Month* (Poet's Haven Press, 2017). His poetry has appeared in *Evansville Review*, *Mississippi Review*, *Cortland Review*, *Recours au Poème*, *Vallum, Slant, Cutthroat, China Grove* and many other journals and anthologies.

Anne E. Johnson is a Brooklynbased writer of all sorts of things. About a hundred of her short stories, mostly in the science fiction and fantasy genres, have been published in a variety of magazines and anthologies. Her poetry has appeared in several collections. She is also a music journalist.

Kyle Opperman was previously published in *The Crimson Tome*, 2015, and by Hippocampus Press, Centipede Press, Wildside Press, PS Publishing, *Hinnom Magazine*, and others. His debut poetry collection, *The Crimson Tome*, was published by Hippocampus Press in late 2015. His work also appeared on Ellen Datlow's full recommended list for Year's Best Horror Vol. 8 and 9. Kyle is an Active Member of the HWA and a member of the SFPA.

Henry Simpson is the author of several novels, two short story collections, book reviews, and occasional pieces in literary journals. His most recent novel is *Golden Girl*. He studied engineering and holds graduate degrees in English and Psychology. Ashley Dioses is from southern California. She is a writer of dark fantasy, horror, and weird poetry. Her debut poetry collection, *Diary* of a Sorceress, came out last year from Hippocampus Press. Her poetry has appeared in *Weird Fiction Review, Weirdbook Magazine, Skelo*, and elsewhere.

Maureen McElroy was born and raised in Boston. She has an MFA in Poetry from Emerson College. She taught English and Latin at Boston Latin Academy before opening a Real Estate Company in Jamaica Plain, MA. Her work has appeared in Seventeen Magazine, Fickle Muses, Bohemian Pupil Press, Anything That Moves, The Beacon Street Review, Mothers Always Write, among others. She lives in Milton, MA.

Michael Whelan is the author of the poetry collection *After God*. He is the winner of Leitrim Guardian's 2012 Literary Awards and his work has appeared in *The Best American Poetry Blog, The Washington Post, The Boston Globe, The Los Angeles Times, The Galway Review, Little Patuxent Review* and many other journals.

Alan Meyrowitz retired in 2005 after a career in computer research. His writing has appeared in Alcyone, Dark Dossier, Eclectica, Esthetic Apostle, Existere, Front Range Review, Inwood Indiana, Jitter, The Literary Hatchet, The Nassau Review, Poetry Quarterly, Shark Reef, Shroud, Spirit's Tincture, and others. **McKinley Henson** a 22-yearold with too many thoughts and inspirations. He admires poetry for its limitless styles and formatting. He is best described as an indecisive paradox. No. Perhaps 'a ghost' would be a more fitting term. His work has only appeared in *The Literary Hatchet*.

John Koch is relatively new to submitting his short stories for publication. Three short pieces have been published by *Longshot Island* and *Spadina Literary Review*.

Allan Rozinski is a writer of speculative poetry and fiction whose poems have recently been published in Bete Noire, The Literary Hatchet, the poetry anthology Untimely Frost, and the anthology Death's Garden. His poem "In the Labyrinth"—published in Eternal Haunted Summer, Winter Solstice 2017—was nominated for the 2018 Rhysling Award in the long form and is included in The 2018 Rhysling Anthology. He can be found on Facebook and Twitter. **Rick McQuiston** is a horror fanatic who has over 400 publications to his credit. He has written five novels (three published), and has read at various schools and libraries in Michigan.

Wayne Scheer has been nominated for four Pushcart Prizes and a Best of the Net. He's published hundred of stories, poems and essays in print and online, including *Revealing Moments*, a collection of flash stories, available at issuu.com/ pearnoir/docs/revealing_moments. A short film has also been produced based on his short story, "Zen and the Art of House Painting." Wayne lives in Atlanta with his wife.

Ronald Schulte is a software engineer and author of speculative fiction and poetry living in upstate New York with his wife, son, and twin daughters. His work has previously appeared or is forthcoming in *Bewildering Stories, Theme of Absence*, and *Fiction on the Web.*

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.

Michael Seeger lives with his lovely wife, Catherine, and still-precocious 16 year-old daughter, Jenetta, in a house owned by a magnificent Maine Coon (Jill) and two high-spirited Chihauhuas (Coco and Blue). He is an educator (like his wife) residing in the Coachella Valley near Palm Springs, California. Prior to his life as a middle school English instructor, Michael worked as a technical writer for a baseball card company and served as a Marine infantry officer during Desert Storm. Michael considers poetry a passion and writing generally a way of life. Some of his poems have appeared recently either published or included in print anthologies like the *Lummox Press, Better Than Starbucks, and The Literary Hatchet* and as Finalists in several Goodreads contests.

Cathryn Shea's recent

chapbooks are "My Heart is a Salt Mirror Like Salar de Uyuni" (Rinky Dink Press, 2018) and "It's Raining Lullabies" (Dancing Girl Press, 2017). Her poetry was nominated for Best of the Net 2017 and appears in Tar River, Permafrost, and Tinderbox. See www.cathrynshea.com and @ cathy_shea.

Sindhu Verma works as a wireless communications engineer in a multinational semiconductor company. She has a keen interest in technology, literature and fashion. Her poems have appeared in Acumen, Reading Hour, EveryDay Poems, Yellow Chair Review, Wax poetry Art, and The Rain Party & Disaster Society among others.

Eugene Hosey holds an MFA from Georgia State University. He has written articles, film and book reviews for *The Hatchet: A Journal of Lizzie Borden & Victorian Studies.* Also he has done editorial work for research documents, books, and personal journals. But he is primarily a short story writer, a regular contributor to *The Literary Hatchet*, and a fiction editor.

Douglas J. Ogurek's fiction. though banned on Mars, appears in over 40 Earth publications, including The Literary Hatchet. Ogurek founded the literary subgenre known as unsplatterpunk, which uses splatterpunk conventions (e.g., extreme violence, gore, taboo subject matter) to deliver a Christian message. He lives on Earth with the woman whose husband he is. They are owned by a pit bull named Phlegmpus Bilesnot. Ogurek also reviews films at Theaker's Quarterly Fiction. douglasjogurek.weebly.com.

Kent Rosenberger is the author of over thirty e-books available for review at Amazon.com/ kindle and Barnesandnoble.com, including novels, poetry, and short story collections. His work has previously been published in such magazines as 365 Tomorrows. The Absent Willow Review. Aphelion, Big Pulp, Bumples, Danse Macabre, Deadman's Tome, Death Throes, Digital Dragon, Flash Shot, The Horror Zine, Morpheus Tales, Orion's Child, Resident Aliens, Schlock!, Title Goes Here, and Weird Year. He is the winner of the 2011 Title Goes Here short story contest.

Kristina R. Mosley lives in Conway, Arkansas with her husband and two step-cats. Her work has been featured in numerous publications, including *Disturbed Digest, Devolution Z, Coming Around Again,* and *Theme of Absence.* She can be found on Twitter @elstupacabra.

Allen Kopp lives in St. Louis, Missouri, USA. He has had over a hundred short stories published in such diverse publications as *The Penmen Review, Skive Magazine, Short Story America, The Literary Hatchet, The Scarlet Leaf Review, The Dirty Pool, The Bone Parade,* and many others.

James B. Nicola's poems have appeared stateside in the Antioch, Southwest and Atlanta Reviews, Rattle, Tar River, Poetry East, and in many journals in Europe and Canada. He is the featured poet in the current issue of Westward Quarterly, having once received the same honor from New Formalist. A Yale graduate, he won a Dana Literary Award, a Willow Review award, a People's Choice award (from Storyteller), and four Pushcart nominations—from Shot Glass Journal, Parody, and twice from Trinacria—for which he feels both stunned and grateful. His nonfiction book Playing the Audience won a Choice award. His poetry collections are Manhattan Plaza (2014), Stage to Page: Poems from the Theater (2016), Wind in the Cave (2017), and Out of Nothing: Poems of Art and Artists (2018).





Collect all issues in print **today**!









\$14.00