

# miniMAG

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# The Tibetan Numerologists of Appalachia

Toni Kochensparger

“You know they punish the body,” Arthur’s mother said, picking the lettuce from the stalk for dinner. A cigarette hung from the left side of her mouth like a loose floorboard in an old barn. As always—as with every meal she ever prepared for the three of them—the ash fell, unnoticed, into the food, as she spoke.

“Just for existing,” she said. The cigarette wobbled like the board, after being accidentally stepped on.

“I used to tell your father we never should have let you go off to college,” Arthur’s grandmother said, scratching lottery tickets, their flakes mixing in with her own cigarette ash. She looked at Arthur: “When your mother was a girl, she was never this critical.

“You could try to enjoy everything a little,” she said to her daughter. The cigarette wobbled like a stern teacher’s yardstick.

Arthur’s math homework floated in the middle distance of his inability to focus, tangled with all the smoke in the air.

“I mean: why bother teaching Sex Ed at all, if they aren’t going to teach them about sex?” his mother asked.

“Well, I just think it’s a little inappropriate, that’s all,” his grandmother said.

“It’s how we make *people*, Mom.”

“And he’ll figure it out when he’s older,” his grandmother said.

“What? In *real time*?” his mother asked.

“That’s how Adam and Eve learned,” said Arthur’s grandmother. “Do you think *they* had Sex Ed?”

“Jesus, Mom. Okay: ignoring what a. The factual *qualities* of that hypothetical, Eve got all of humanity kicked out of Eden.” She turned to ash her cigarette in the tray, without looking. She missed and it went straight into the lettuce. “I mean, it wasn’t exactly a positive outcome.”

“Well, even if the Devil *did* show up, we wouldn’t be alive if it weren’t for the two of them,” Arthur’s grandmother said. “They’re the ones who got the ball rolling.”

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The white balls rolled, one-by-one, down the metal track toward their place in the line. The remaining balls rattled around the giant sphere in a frenzy. The man in the suit standing next to the contraption read the numbers, as they were revealed, which were then projected onto the screen.

The tickets in Arthur’s grandmother’s hand were crumpled and tossed into the wastebasket next to her easy chair, one-by-one, as she compared her numbers to the winning ones.

“Well, *one day*,” she said, crumpling the last of the tickets.

Arthur sat on the shag carpet and watched with his grandmother while contestants took turns spinning the wheel. His math problems sat before him, confounding, while his grandmother solved all the puzzles. She was especially talented at phrases and always complimented Vanna White’s figure, as if it were a fresh observation. Always, by the ten

o'clock news, she was asleep, in her chair. Always, Arthur changed the channel to cartoons, while she slept. He was too-old for cartoons, but watched them, anyway. After two or three, he woke his grandmother, gently, and helped her to bed.

Arthur's mother went out nine nights out of ten. She met with friends at the only bar on their side of town, the Stable Pony, whose neon sign showed a drunk horse, falling down, where they read each other's tarot cards and traded funny stories and gossip. She always got home after Arthur was in bed. Sometimes he heard two pairs of footsteps.

\*\*\*TO BE CONTINUED IN ISSUE 81\*\*\*



# No Thanks, Yallery Brown

Reverse Ransom

The first time I saw him was when I was twelve years old.

It was a couple of nights before Halloween, and the air was tinged with the smell of pumpkin spice and wet leaves. I was late walking home from school, and dusk was beginning to fall, painting the sky in shades of blood and amber.

Houses and windows were decorated with fake cobwebs and plastic decorations, and pumpkins lit by candleflame sat grinning at me from porch steps, their faces grotesque and hollow in the growing darkness.

I kept stopping on my way home to admire all the Halloween displays, growing increasingly more excited for the night of enchantment and disguise, when the dead intertwined with the living, and monsters and humans became one and the same. I was planning on going trick-or-treating around the neighborhood with some of my friends, like we did every year.

Dry leaves crunched under my boots as I skipped down the sidewalk, a chill wind tangling through my dark hair. The breeze steadily picked up, rustling through the trees and making their dark,

barren branches reach for me as I passed beneath them, scraping against the top of my head.

The streets were oddly quiet as I walked. I could hear nothing but the wailing wind and the rustling leaves and the distant caw of a crow as it took flight. Goosebumps spread along the back of my legs, which began to tremble in the cold.

I hurried my pace, wrapping my arms around my chest to ward off the chill. These dark autumn nights sure fell fast. The sun had disappeared behind the rows of terracotta rooftops, and the shadows gathered at the edges of the street. A heavy fog rolled down the street, hanging like a veil over the houses.

Behind me, I heard the soft whisper of footsteps. The sound cut through my thoughts, and I glanced back, but there was nobody there. Nothing but a distant echo, distorted by the mist.

I wasn't normally out this late. Not used to being chased by shadows and mist and echoing footfalls. I told myself I was being paranoid. Nobody was watching me. I was just a kid walking home from school, like I did every day. It wasn't my fault I'd been assigned to help clean up after classes had finished, taking me well past the last bell.

A dozen plastic doll heads hung from one of the trees outside a house, swinging in the wind with the creak of a rope. I rolled my eyes. Those kinds of decoration were too tacky for my taste, and they were far from scary.

A black bin bag full of trash toppled over as I walked past it. For a second, I thought I glimpsed something else; movement, a tiny shadow darting away behind the trashcans, but when I looked again, it was gone. Probably just a bird, scavenging for scraps.

I shook my head, telling myself to stop being so jumpy. I was almost home, anyway. Just a couple more streets to go, and I would be out of this bone-numbing mist.

I climbed to the top of the hill, where a dark, shrouded house sat up a long gravel drive. Like the rest of the street, it had been decked out for Halloween, fake cobwebs and bat-shaped banners fluttering in the wind. But that isn't what caught my attention.

Half a dozen faces grinned at me from the porch, their faces twisted and grotesque, flickering with lamplight.

Jack-o'-lanterns.

There was something even more uncanny and realistic about their faces, like they had been carved from human flesh.

I hurried past, but there were even more pumpkins ahead. One of

the houses had a pumpkin patch in their front lawn, tangled with long green vines. There was an assortment of large, round ones and tall skinny ones and ones with lumps and warts and strange dark bruises.

At any other time, I would have paused to admire the display, but with the fog and shadows thickening around me, I was reluctant to linger.

As I stepped past the pumpkins, something stirred, stepping out of the undergrowth.

At first I thought it was one of the pumpkins, coming to life, the shadows elongating around it. But this was no pumpkin. No larger than



a potato, with yellow-brown skin protruding with lumps and warts, it was a tiny man.

It hopped out from behind the pumpkins, dusting itself off with small, bony hands, and looked up at me.

The moment its small black eyes met mine, a scream tore from my throat and I stumbled back, almost tripping over the sidewalk and falling onto the road.

I caught my footing, releasing a short, sharp breath as my heart thundered in my chest.

What was it?

It started moving towards me—tottering forward on stick-thin legs—and with another panicked scream, I turned and ran down the

street, the wind streaming my hair out behind me.

The soft pat of footsteps echoed in the quiet between my own, and I knew without turning around that it was following me. It was laughing too. I could hear its wild, manic laughter whipping around me.

Reaching the end of the street, I threw a glance behind me to see the small yellow creature still chasing after me, darting between the decorations and ducking beneath overhanging branches, still cackling loudly.

I averted my eyes forward, and almost tripped over an empty can rolling around in the gutter, leaves crunching beneath the sharp heel of my boots.

The small, semi-detached house that I shared with my parents came into sight in front of me, and I put on another burst of speed, sweat beading my forehead despite the autumn chill in the air.

I grabbed the door handle with a trembling hand and threw open the door, half-stumbling inside. My mom was just coming down the stairs, and immediately saw the wild, panicked look on my face as I stood in the doorway, panting heavily.

"Socorro, what happened? Have you been running?"

I ignored her and turned around, gazing back out to the street.

The strange creature was gone. It had been right behind me, so I knew it couldn't have gone far.

"Corro, what's the matter?" my mom asked again, softening her voice.

It took me a moment to gather my thoughts enough to tell her what had happened. "It chased me all the way here," I told her, pointing down the street. "I've never seen anything like it before."

My father poked his head out of the kitchen at this point to listen, and I saw him share a concerned glance with my mom.

"Perhaps it was just one of the Halloween decorations. Some of those things look so realistic these days," my mom said, putting a gentle hand on my shoulder and closing the front door, shutting out the wind and the fog rolling up the drive.

"It wasn't a decoration," I told her, my tone insistent. "It was real."

"It's getting dark out there, and there's all sorts of stories going 'round this time of year. You probably just imagined it," my dad said, and I knew there was no point trying to argue. They wouldn't believe me, no matter what I said.

But I knew I hadn't imagined him. Whatever he was, he had been real, and he had chased me that night, for some reason or other.

Halloween came and went that year without another glimpse of

the strange creature, and I had almost forgotten about the entire experience, until October the following year, when I saw him again. I had been trick-or-treating with my friends when I saw him watching me from behind a gnarled tree-stump near the entrance to the park. I dragged one of my friends over to see if it had been real, but by then, he had already disappeared. Like a phantom.

For the next six years, I saw him every Halloween. Most of the time, it was nothing more than a glimpse out of the corner of my eye; a flicker of movement, a darting shadow, but I always knew it was him. The mysterious creature with the lumpy yellow body and bony hands.

So the years went by, until I started college.

It was the night of Halloween. I was staying late at the library to study with some of my friends when I overheard some students saying that agents from ICE were on campus, looking for undocumented immigrants. My family had moved to the US from Mexico when I was a child, and I knew I didn't have the documentation to prove it had been legal, so I was afraid that they might come looking for me.

We left the library just after ten o'clock that evening, when it was already dark out. The campus was lit with security lights and there were other students walking around, but something about the chill in the air made me feel uneasy, and I drew my jacket tighter around my body.

I said goodbye to my friends, since they lived in dorms on-campus, and started to walk home, keeping my arms huddled around me.

Every time someone glanced my way, I averted my eyes, worried they would be undercover immigration agents, but nobody approached me.

I was almost off campus when I saw them. There were two of them standing together, their jackets printed in big white letters with 'POLICE ICE'.

Fear struck me hard, my heart pounding in my chest as I looked for some way to get around them. If I got caught now, I didn't even want to think what might happen to me, or my family.

Swallowing back the lump in my throat, I turned around and started walking, quickening my pace. I heard one of them shuffle their feet, but I didn't dare to glance back in case I drew attention to myself.

As I rounded the corner, I stifled a short gasp. More ICE agents were hanging around one of the buildings, right where I was supposed to be heading.

My eyes darted across the campus, trying to remember the other

exits, but my mind was drawing a blank from panic.

*Calm down, Socorro. They might not stop you.*

It was a risk, walking straight past them, but it was dark and there were other students, so I figured I might be able to slip past them.

Taking in a deep breath, I pulled up the hood of my jacket, obscuring my face, and shoved my hands into my pockets, walking hunched, like I was trying to ward off the cold.

I kept my pace casual, but there was a feeling of urgency biting at my heel as I walked past the loitering ICE agents.

I didn't release my pent-up breath until I was safely past them, stepping off campus and onto the street.

Without stopping, I started walking towards the bus stop before remembering that the last bus had already gone. I shouldn't have stayed at the library so late.

With a sigh, I kept walking. It would take at least twenty minutes to get home, maybe longer if my route was congested by all the trick-or-treaters out on the streets tonight, celebrating Halloween.

After five minutes of walking, I realized I was being followed.

I stopped walking and bent down to pretend to tie my shoelace, throwing a quick glance behind me.

My heart stuttered in my chest. It was one of the ICE agents. He wasn't looking at me, but at something on his phone. Maybe I was just being paranoid. Maybe he wasn't following me after all.

I stood back up and crossed the street, my heart pounding in my chest. I needed to find somewhere to hide.

I lifted my gaze and felt a shiver of relief. A church spire blotted the dusk, a few streets away. My parents had always told me that churches were sanctuaries; perhaps I would be safe there.

I hurried towards the church, stepping around children dressed in Halloween costumes, toting bags and buckets full of candy.

When I finally reached the church, I opened the doors noiselessly and slipped inside, shutting out the sound of the wind. It was quiet inside, and warm, the room lit with orange candlelight. I immediately felt at ease. I would be safe here.

I pulled down my hood and sat in one of the pews at the back of the room, taking a few deep breaths. It was almost eleven o'clock, and I felt drained. I wanted nothing more than to get home and soak in a hot bath. I had long since grown out of the tradition of trick-or-treating, but I could at least cozy up on the couch and watch a movie until I fell asleep and forget all about the ICE agents.

For the next hour, I sat in the quiet solitude of the church,

listening to the distant shouts and laughter of the trick-or-treaters, and the wailing cries of the wind. I was almost starting to doze, when I heard the soft shuffle of footsteps approaching me.

I snapped awake, glancing up with a start. An older woman was shuffling up the aisle, towards the doors. She must have been sitting in one of the pews at the front of the church, unseen. She caught my eye with a faint smile before leaving, the doors shutting firmly behind her.

Then I was alone.

I checked the time. It was almost midnight. Surely those ICE agents would have moved on by now. I bit my lip, hesitating. It was getting late. I couldn't stay here all night. At some point, I would have to leave and make my way back home.

Bolstering my resolve, I stood up with a stretch and made my way to the doors. I threw a curious glance behind me, but there really was nobody else here.

The heavy wooden door creaked as I pulled it open. While I had been inside the church, a heavy fog had settled over the night, mist swirling along the sidewalks like something alive.

I shivered against the chill, and closed the doors behind me, stepping back out into the night.

I had barely made it past the bushes at the front of the church when a figure stepped out of the shadows. It was the ICE agent who had been following me earlier.

"Socorro, I presume? You're under arrest for lacking a lawful immigration status," the agent said, retrieving a pair of handcuffs from his belt and grabbing me forcefully by the arm.

"B-but how did you know I was in there?" I blurted, my eyes going wide. I swear he hadn't been following me before; had he seen me go inside the church? Then why didn't he come in after me?

The agent sneered as he pulled my arms behind me. I tried to struggle, but he was older and bigger than me, and my attempts were futile. "A little friend helped me," he said, and before I could ask who he was talking about, the bushes rustled and a small figure jumped out.

My heart plummeted down to my stomach.

It was the potato-creature. He looked just the same as he had that night, six years ago, and every Halloween night since, with his small yellowish-brown body and bony hands, his black eyes glittering mischievously.

"Y-you," I gasped as he barked out a laugh.

"Yes, 'tis I," he said, his voice low and gravelly as he bowed.

The ICE agent turned to the little man and smirked. "Thanks for

your help."

To my surprise, the creature's face twisted into a portrait of rage, his eyes flashing red beneath the sallow moon. "I warned you to never, ever thank me!" he screeched, waving his hands frantically. "For I am Yallery Brown!"

I stuttered in surprise, and the ICE agent seemed to cower back, loosening his grip on my wrists, but not enough for me to pull free. Without warning, the creature—Yallery Brown—broke into a jig, bending his crooked little legs and swinging his arms side to side as he sang,

*"Wokk's tha will,  
tha'll nivver do well,  
Wokk's tha mowt,  
tha'll nivver gain owt,  
For harm an' mischance an' Yallery-Bro-wun,  
Tha's let out theesen from unner the sto-wun!"*

He finished his song and dance and twirled around into a bow, then hooked a gnarled finger towards the ICE agent. "I warned you, boy, and you didn't listen. Now you will be cursed with ill fortune 'til the day you die."

The ICE agent scoffed, but I could see the sliver of doubt in his eyes at Yallery's words.

Taking advantage of the agent's distraction, I went to pull myself free of his grasp, but he managed to tighten his hands around my wrist before I could manage to wrench myself away.

With a frustrated cry, I wrestled against him, twisting and writhing against his hold. He grunted in effort, his nails digging into my skin as he reached once more for his handcuffs, tugging them free from his belt.

Before he could snap them around my wrists, he let out a sharp cry and stumbled back, twisting over his ankle. He dropped the handcuffs and let go of my wrist, his knees buckling in pain.

I had no idea what had happened, but I yanked myself away and watched as he cradled his leg in his hands, wailing in pain.

Beside me, Yallery Brown laughed. "I made good on my word, didn't I?"

I nodded wordlessly, rubbing my wrists.

He turned his gaze to look up at me, his dark eyes still glistening.

"Well? Are you going to thank me?"

I shook my head fervently. "No thanks, Yallery Brown," I said, before turning away and running off down the street, Yallery's laughter following me on the wind.



# Missing Person

Alan Berger

He didn't want to go to the police but he did anyway.

“Hey, look who's here?” The cop at the front desk said to the other cop at the front desk.

“Let's let Irene take his statement”

They called on the inter-com for Officer Sanchez to come to the front desk, and when she got there they explained that they were helping homicide, and even thou this was her first week here, and still getting her panties wet, would she mind taking a statement?

“Not at all sir, thanks for the opportunity”, was her reply. All that was missing was a salute habit she had to break from her year in the Army except for police special occasions and this was not one of them. Not even close.

She was pretty and from a military family. She was the first one who

left the service to become a cop. All the rest stayed in forever and then some. They laughed when they saw out of shape cops. Donut dopes they called them.

Army girl Sanchez was just as pretty as cop Sanchez, and she was nice.

The guy she was going to marry who was with her and met her in the Army died in a mid-east engagement and was never found.

It was that, that made her quit. She could not forget what she had to forget staying in there.

This was going to her first statement solo experience even thou being watched, and taped, and listened to, especially by those two at the front desk, it was exciting, and she was excited.

Their coffee tasted a lot better and their donuts sweeter, watching Officer Sanchez play policeman.

Officer Irene Sanchez found that there was something touching about her subject, but, she wasn't sure she wanted to touch him, or him touch her, but oh of course she did. It has been a long season without any rain, Irene was thinking.



The subject told his side of his story.

That's where the word history comes from you know?

"I'm a vet. I don't get around much and a while ago I met a girl on the

inter-net. It was like we knew each other all our lives and we talked and talked for days and days and nights and nights and we met and had coffee and she was as wonderful there as she was in my ear all those times on the phone and we made plans to see each other again and she never showed up and her phone sounds funny and she isn't returning my calls or my E mails or anything and things just went too good to turn out this bad. I want to file a missing person report. She must be in danger!"

Officer Sanchez heard the boys laughing thru the door.

Is this your first missing person report? She asked.

No, it isn't, unfortunately. He reported back.

I see said Irene.

Would you like to go for coffee some time? she said to him.

Are you going to show up? He asked.

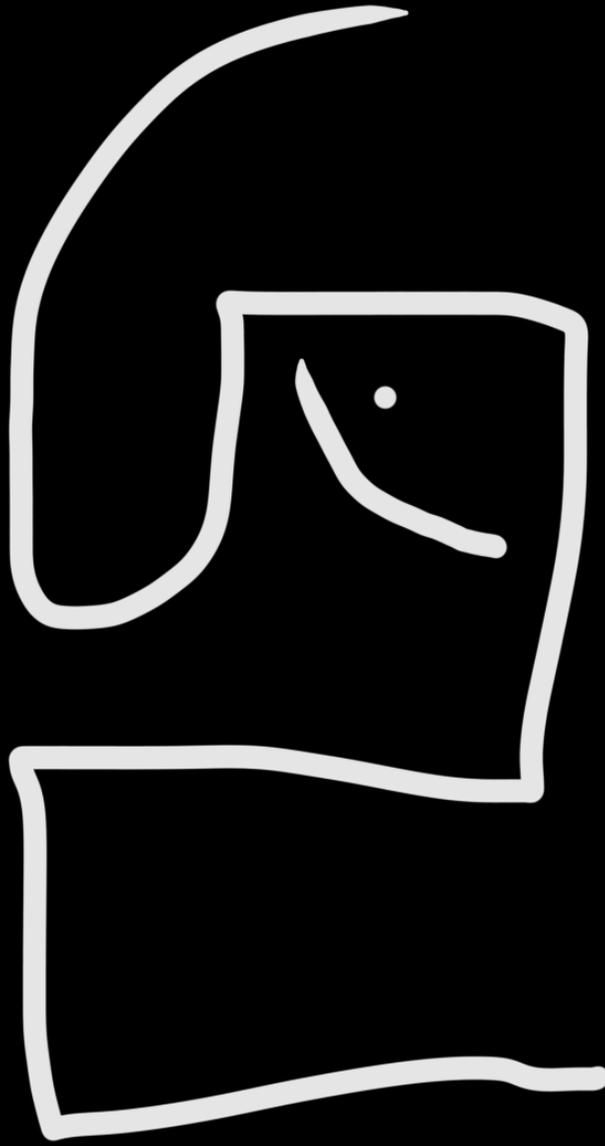
We can go right now. She said.

Can we take your police car and put on the siren? He asked.

Officer Sanchez laughed.

He said, I'm glad you're laughing because I was kidding. I may be nuts but I'm not crazy.

I know you're not, she said to him as they walked out of the station after crossing the front desk.



## Silent Squall

D. C. Nobes

Pelting rain  
hailstorm thumps  
upon the windows,  
bass drumming on the roof.

Then silence.  
Furious quiet.  
The squall passes  
and peace swamps the night  
abruptly  
suddenly  
sound ceases  
a sudden onslaught  
of calm  
an eye  
in a dark hearted night.

# A Review of Rick Bursky's *Let's Become a Ghost Story*

Willem Doherty

When I was in high school, I was required to memorize a poem for a classwide Poetry Out Loud competition, an initiative which claims to evangelize the beauty of spoken word but, in reality, teaches students that when they get nervous, it sounds like they are about to cry, and that perhaps they should never speak publicly again. I chose Charles Simic's *Past Lives Therapy*, a poem which moves so swiftly from image to image that you are left winded just trying to keep up. *Past Lives Therapy* is free verse, and relatively wordy, but every syllable cuts deep. Even my crackling, pubescent voice could not diminish it.

Rick Bursky, author of *Let's Become a Ghost Story* (BOA Editions, 2020), is clearly influenced by Simic. In 79 poems divided into four parts, he jumps from image to image, concept to concept, narrator to narrator, trying to establish himself as an imaginative equal to freeverse folks like Simic, Tate, and Young. He takes heavy, heavy, inspiration—it doesn't quite curdle into imitation, but it comes close. In "Come All Ye Faithful," for example, we get a character as idiosyncratic as any one of Tate's: "There was a time I was famous. My book, *The History / of Medieval Northern European Dentistry, /* was an

international bestseller in the dental history category” (One has to imagine that, in the dental history category, any sales qualify your book as a “bestseller”).

Highlights like medieval dentistry, though, are few and far between. Bursky lacks the consistency that carries the collections of Tate or Simic, where every poem features incredible imagery or laugh-out-loud lines. The unevenness stems from the fact that, as a poet, Bursky is—and there’s no kind way to say this—not particularly interested in how his poems sound, or in the economy of his own language. He is content to take the long way to an idea, and seems to value conversationality over eloquence. This is an interesting road to take as a poet; without careful attention to syntax, word choice, and all the other minute details which complicate a poem on the syllabic level, you are forced to rely on transcendent image-making powers. Every concept must be a knockout, because otherwise there would be nothing on the page to interest us. When you’ve forced yourself into a home run derby, a single doesn’t look very impressive.

The inconsistencies extend to tone and voice. Bursky’s first person narrators ping-pong between picaresque and annoying. Sometimes, their quirks of personality are endearing. Other times, the narrators’ tendency to billow out their thoughts into universe-filling ideas seems trite and egotistical. It’s difficult to take seriously somebody who ends a poem with ““I’m an acceptable substitute / for a god. It almost hurts” (Lothario and Dulcinea). It is clear that there are different first-person narrators in *Let’s Become a Ghost Story*, each a caricature in their own right, none a true representation of the author or his views. But, after becoming acquainted with Bursky’s work, you always hope that the narrator you’re currently reading isn’t Mr. Acceptable Substitute For a God. When he isn’t, it’s a pleasant surprise.

In many ways, Bursky’s narrators seem stuck in the past—they are not agile enough to create the images these poems require, because they keep looping back into the well-trodden memories that define them. They are obsessed with a series of formative romantic experiences, bound by the “years after the army and before college” (On Some Nights I Was Her Disciple, On Others She Was Mine). Most prevalent in Part One, these poems are cyclical; they concern different loves, but all lead to the same place. The long-legged president of the Naked Women’s Bowling League and the cool-girl bar dancer who lends money for work boots are nominally different, but really all the same: objects of the narrator’s desire who come into his life and, after

he has grafted onto them, peel away. The experience of reading these poems one after the other gives one a profound feeling of fatigue—one that is graciously alleviated in the back half of the work, as more variety comes into play.

There are great moments in all of these poems, even the tiring ones. In “The History of Falling Is the History of Us,” Bursky laments that “We were a spent shell casing ejected / from the sun’s chamber, an unexpected noun.” This is a beautiful sequence—he matches, for a moment, the speed of Simic. Indeed, one can characterize *Let’s Become a Ghost Story* as a struggle between Bursky’s surface level tendencies—clumsiness, a lack of care for the word-to-word resonance of his own lines, and a constant circling around the subject of lost loves—and his imperative, as a poet, to dig deeper and find the ideas that will lift his work beyond the milieu and into accomplishment. He elevates himself quite often; when he escapes the years before college and after the army, Bursky’s remembrances become profound and revealing. A set of three standouts in Part Two shows the good that can come when he applies himself. All three involve the narrator’s sister, and delve into the ghosts that surround the family dinner table. “My father found prison and came back years later. / My sister found the bottom of the ocean / and never returned” (*The Journeys*). This image-making is swift and striking—the juxtaposition between prison and the ocean brings all sorts of terrible implications to mind. This is expanded upon two poems later, in *Perfecting the Dog Paddle*.

*I sank, throat tightened, struggled, kicked my legs,  
continued the panicked descent until she grabbed  
my hair and pulled me, as older sisters do,  
to the surface. Try again, she said, pushing me  
under once more. “One day I won’t be here.”*

And it is in poems like *The Journeys* and *Perfecting the Dog Paddle* that we see Bursky’s lightning potential, the distilled creation that can be observed, though diluted, throughout *Let’s Become a Ghost Story*. If the project was a chapbook instead of a full volume, 13 poems instead of 79, these flashes could take center stage. As it stands now, we’re left hunting for them.

“Read your work out loud” is common advice, but I don’t think it goes far enough. Words whispered at a desk can feel insubstantial—there are no stakes involved. A better test, I think, is to imagine a teenager reciting your poems for a grade. Read it in that teenager’s

wavering voice. Do your words unlock something inside him? Will they affect him years later, when he is no longer a teenager, lying in some rented room on a be-floored mattress, staring up at a broken ceiling fan? This is a smell-test: it gives you a gut feeling. When I read the poets that obviously inspired Rick Bursky—Simic, Young, and Tate—I get that feeling.

But the poems in *Let's Become a Ghost Story* do not inspire: they are too wordy, or they don't say enough, or they are missing something inherent of and necessary to truly great poetry. And so, on the whole, we are left without a resonance. When I picture my teenage self—the awkward ball of nervousness and whiteheads and ennui—I cannot imagine him standing in front of his fellow acne-balls and letting the poem spill out of him. That, to me, speaks for itself.



# What Aria Found in the Swamp

J. Neira

Mornings were always quiet after a storm.

Dawn broke beneath a grey sky, dark clouds still coalescing on the horizon and casting a misty haze over the room.

Aria had been up most of the night, listening to the crack of thunder against the roof and dreaming of things hiding in the darkness. It was the third night in a row she'd woken from a nightmare, her skin slick with sweat and her mind scrambling to distinguish between dream and reality.

She sat up, still trying to grasp at the dream that was now slipping through her fingers like grains of sand and pushed away the cotton sheets that had turned damp from the draught creeping into the room. Rain continued to patter against the windows, but it was a light drizzle compared to last night's ferocious downpour and howling wind.

Taking a moment to catch her breath, Aria slipped out of bed, her bare feet curling against the cold wooden floor, and padded over to the window to pull aside the curtains. Hazy sunlight seeped into the room, illuminating the dust mites that stirred through the air.

She looked down at the land behind the house. The grass was

matted down and waterlogged from the rain, and the trees were windswept, their branches tangled together and trailing limply against the stone wall that circled the property. Just beyond the tree line was the swamp, hidden from sight, and she could only imagine what kind of foul-smelling sludge the storm had dredged up.

Leaving the curtains billowing behind her, Aria crossed the room, catching a glimpse of herself in the worn wooden mirror. There was an ashen hue about her, and heavy shadows clinging to the skin beneath her eyes, but what caught her attention the most was the strands of grey amongst her thick brown hair.

She stepped closer to the mirror, tugging absently at the discoloured hair, as though expecting it to fall out at her touch.

Grey hair wasn't exactly common at her age of twenty-three, and she wondered if it had something to do with the nightmares, and the stress she'd been feeling recently. It had to have been. Hair turned grey from stress, and she'd been feeling more stressed than usual for the past several months. She hoped she'd be able to save at least some of her natural brown hair.

Trying not to dwell on it, she slipped into the adjoining washroom and cleaned off the sweat she'd accumulated in the night, pulling her hair back into a long braid that trailed over her shoulder, interspersed with those strands of grey.

Once she was dressed—in her familiar soft cotton pants and blue tank top—she grabbed a piece of fruit from the bowl downstairs and headed out into the morning.

The rain had finally dispersed, but she could still hear the steady plink of water dripping from the gutters and splashing against the concrete outside the house.

Sinking her teeth into the soft flesh of the fruit, she lifted her face up to the sky and let herself enjoy the dewy scent of the morning. The grass was soft and squelchy as she headed out behind the back of the house, her shoes sodden with murky water by the time she reached the rear of the property. The wooden overhang at the back of the house had at least kept her logs dry, but it was starting to rot in several places, the roof becoming soft and brittle, ready to cave-in with one last battering. Hauling a dozen thick logs onto the raised porch, Aria grabbed her woodcutting axe and began to split them with swift, practiced movements. The rhythmic *thunk, thunk* of the axe hitting wood soothed her, and she worked until her forehead glistened with sweat, and there was a pleasant ache in her muscles.

Straightening her back, she wiped the perspiration from her brow

and began to stack the chopped logs back beneath the overhang, ready to use as fuel for tonight's fire.

Thick tangles of vines had started to creep along the brickwork of the house, and a cluster of weeds and nettles had forced their way up through the cracks in the concrete, their tall, wiry stems almost snagging at Aria's ankles as she trod past them.

She tried to use her axe to sever them at the roots, but the blade was too thick to reach, so she gave up. If she recalled correctly, she had some other tools stored in the shed behind the house which might work more effectively.

After a moment's hesitation, she decided to take her axe with her. From the rumours she'd heard in town, there had been a lot of people going missing recently, disappearing without a trace. It was enough to make anyone wary.

The storm had brought out the worms, and as Aria headed further away from her house, the more there seemed to be, their small pink bodies writhing amid the mud and wriggling along the path. Aria tried to step over as many as she could, but more than once she felt something squish and give way under the heel of her shoe.

Following the stone wall that bordered her property, something snagged her attention: a lamppost on the other side of the wall, where several sheets of paper were fluttering in the breeze. There were more than she remembered.

Leaning against the wall, she studied the posters that had been stapled to the post. The ink had started to run from the rain, but she could discern enough to know that someone else had gone missing. A hunter in his mid-thirties, never came home to his family. His poster sat among many of a similar nature. Hunters, fishers, woodcutters, foragers... all of them had vanished without a trace, all of them leaving behind families who were worried about them. Something was going on, but nobody knew what. The village was already small in number, and with all these disappearances, it was starting to feel more and more empty. Abandoned.

Aria raised her glance to the top of the new MISSING poster, when she caught sight of a man who had once tried to court her last year, before she'd told him she was aromantic. Though she had offered him her friendship and something else, he had felt repulsed and rejected her. But he didn't deserve to die, and seeing this made Aria feel sad for him. She averted her gaze from the poster.

Leaving the posters fluttering somberly behind her, she hefted her axe and headed towards her shed, half-hidden amongst the corpses of

trees. Several branches had broken off during the storm, and the roof of the outbuilding was littered with wet, soggy leaves. It would take a few days for the mess to clear up, but it could have been worse. At least there had been no structural damage to repair. Aria was handy with garden tools, but that was the extent of her skills when it came to being self-reliable.

The door to the shed was locked with a heavy padlock, the metal stained red with rust. She kept the key hidden beneath a rock nearby, since she was often forgetful about bringing the key with her whenever she left the house.

The storm had turned the soil into a thick sludge, and Aria grimaced as she kicked over a rock to find a clump of worms wriggling and squirming underneath, their slimy bodies slithering over each other. She quickly replaced the stone and tried another, until she saw a glint of silver among the dirt. As she crouched to retrieve the key, something else stole her attention.

A thick cluster of long, rubbery green strands threading through the undergrowth. They didn't look like weeds, or vines, and she didn't remember seeing them before either. There was something almost grotesque about the way they trailed limply along the ground, matted with soil and dirt. Curious, she reached down and touched one of them, her fingers curling around the strange, almost elastic texture. When she tugged on it, she felt resistance, but it felt far away, and when she followed the trail of strands with her eyes, she saw that they disappeared deeper into the trees. What were they, and where were they coming from? They were unlike anything she'd seen before.

Pocketing the key to the shed, she stood and stared into the forest. Beneath the thick canopy of leaves, it was dark among the trees. The rain had soaked into the ground and made the soil cloggy, and there was a smell of damp undergrowth and moss that wasn't entirely unpleasant. Shadows swelled between the boughs, and for a moment, all those missing people posters flashed across Aria's mind. She clenched the axe tighter in her hand, her palms growing sweaty.

Despite the prickle of warning at the back of her neck, she took a step forward, her shoes sinking into the ground.

An image flashed across her mind, unbidden. An image from a dream, buried somewhere in the dark recesses of her mind, showing a waterlogged forest, silent and unmoving. Was this the same forest from her dreams—the one that had haunted her nightmares?

She shook her head, loose strands of hair tickling her cheek as they escaped her braid. Surely she was overthinking things. All forests

looked the same. She saw this one every time she looked out of her window, so it wasn't unusual for it to crop up in her dreams sometimes too.

The moment she stepped fully beneath the canopy, it was like the world went quiet. Everything had a hushed, muted quality to it in the forest. There was no birdcall, no bugs chittering, nothing but the faint rustle of leaves, and the sodden squelch of her feet.

Aria's eyes scanned the shadows fervently, every glimpse of movement sending her heart spiking, but it was just the trees, their branches scraping together in the wind.

The strands trailed along beside her feet, barely visible in the gloom. She wondered briefly where they would lead her as she reached down and took hold of one, the texture slimy against her skin. She used it like a rope, following it through the densely packed trees.

The deeper she went into the forest, the stronger the smells grew. The musky scent of decaying leaves and rotten wood, and something else, something bitter and putrid that almost made Aria's eyes water. Was it the swamp? Was that where these strange green vines were leading her to?



Still holding onto the fibrous green vine, she felt something tug it forward, raking it across her palm.

Was something pulling on the other end?

With a start, she dropped the strand in disgust, and peered down at the clump of them. They crawled a few inches along the ground, then fell still again.

Were they... alive? Or was something else causing them to move?

Aria swallowed back the lump in her throat, casting a glance over her shoulder. The trees almost seemed to have closed in around her, and she couldn't see her house anymore. There was nothing but darkness all

around her, interspersed with rot and decay.

She decided to keep going.

It wasn't long before she heard the familiar gushing of water somewhere ahead. Finally, she reached the brook. It was nothing but a small stream of clear water running through the trees ahead of her, but it meant she was getting closer to the swamp.

The bog lay directly in front of her, waterlogged and choked with weeds. She thought she heard the deep, guttural croak of a toad somewhere among the undergrowth, and the chirp of bugs and insects scuttling through the scrub.

Some kind of hulking mass covered the swamp, covered in the same rubbery green strands that she had followed here.

It was moving. Shuddering and heaving. It gurgled and made popping sounds, wet and slimy.

Aria subconsciously raised her axe, gripping it with both hands as she took a step closer to the mass, her mind scrambling to understand what she was looking at.

Barely visible beneath the green strands, she traced the curve of a head, the slope of shoulders, the bulge of a stomach... it was a person. No, not a person, but something with the shape of one. The body of some kind of large, deformed creature. Behind it was what remained of a small stone house, nothing but half a structure and mounds of dust and debris. Pieces of old, rotten wood and fabric jutted out from the ruins.

Every part of her body was screaming for her to get out of there. Whatever this thing was, it wasn't natural. But she continued drawing closer, raking her eyes over the hulking body as she tried to make sense of it all.

Those twisting green strands that she had been following... she realized now that it was hair. It was draped over most of the creature's body, but between the strands, she caught the glimpse of a face. Something about it vaguely resembled a female, if such a thing could have a gender.

All that was visible was wrinkled grey skin that looked more akin to a prune that had dried in the sun, and large black lips that were puckered into a kiss. Further up were the eyes, hollow and deep-set, closed against the light. Even though its eyes were shut, Aria had the sense that the creature was aware of her standing there.

With another full-bodied shudder, the creature started to move, its limp green hair falling away to reveal more of its wrinkled grey face. It was making those strange sucking noises again, and Aria realized in

horror that it was eating something, its mouth puckering and clenching like it was tasting something delicious.

Repulsion and disgust battled against her desire to flee as Aria paused at the edge of the swamp, her shoes sinking into the waterlogged ground, pulling her deeper into the earth. How long had this thing been here, so close to her house? Had the storm brought it out of the swamp, dragged it up from the depth like some forbidden, arcane horror, or had it always been here, creeping in the shadows?

The creature gurgled again, and Aria watched in mounting dread as something red began to spill from its open mouth. Blood. The smell that followed was like nothing Aria had experienced before, something sickly sweet yet sour at the same time, like a corpse that had been rotting for too long in the ground.

Something else began to emerge from the creature's mouth then; something long and pale, covered in blood and saliva.

A human leg. It had been chewed on, the skin and muscle torn to shreds, exposing the white glint of bone beneath.

The leg fell out of the creature's mouth, landing amongst the undergrowth, and Aria couldn't hold back her nausea anymore. She turned and vomited onto the ground beside her, bile burning the inside of her cheeks. When she was finished, she wiped her mouth with the back of her wrist and turned to face the creature again. Brows furrowed, she raised her ax and with a mighty grunt, brought it down on the monster's face. "FUCKING DIE!"

The monster roared, a wet splashy sound that showered mucous all over Aria's face. It shifted and extended its small hand towards Aria, grabbing her ax out of her hand and snapping it. Its finger brushed her chest.

Aria screamed. She turned and ran, fists pumping back and forth. She didn't stop running until she was back home, covered in sweat and the monster's mucous. She ran to town and told the townsfolk to come with weapons to kill the monster. But the mob never found the monster. Not so much as even its hair that had lured Aria towards it was ever found by them, nor did Aria see it in her backyard when she dared to return.

It didn't matter now. It was over. At least, it should have been. But for Aria, her mind never moved on from that day.

For the next several weeks, her dreams were haunted by the creature. Memories of blood and darkness, of secrets hidden in the very depths of the swamp, plagued her mind. She began to dread the night, for it was in the shadows, with only the sickle moon for company, that

the events of that day resurfaced.

In the clutches of midnight, she would hear the drip of stagnant water, and the gurgling moan of something inhuman. She would smell the swamp as though it was right outside her window, hear the carrion flies buzzing around the rotten flesh of the creature she slayed.

She never went back to the swamp. She never went back to check if the creature had been real, or if it was really dead. Nobody else from the town went missing, but the mystery behind those disappearances were never truly resolved, the families never found their solace. Only Aria knew the truth, but it was a truth that nobody else would believe.

It was a truth that haunted her, to the very depth of her soul.



# Why you should get enough sleep

Chloe Rose

Stress seems to be an un-shakable part of who I am. I am so completely and utterly jealous of people who can be easy-going in all scenarios, and this piece isn't meant to torture anyone who reads it, but should hopefully be more a criticism of the external factors that cause people to fall victim to stress, than a piece to sway you into that manner of thinking. In order to do this, I'm going to take you through an average morning of my life, recounting the stress I unnecessarily caused myself, and hopefully this excruciatingly honest recollection of personal thoughts will be enough to make my point.

Somehow, I can't stop making things into a big deal. I've grappled with the question of worrying about whether I'm a selfish, delusional, or just ultimately very dumb person, but all I know is that I shouldn't be this stressed. I'll begin in the evening, a nontraditional commencement that should begin to showcase the complications I award myself, as my stress of "the day" begins even before the said "day."

Almost every evening recently, I have backed myself into a corner trying to find the right balance of taking care of myself, and getting what I need to done. But then I completely lose any ability to focus on one task. For example, just now, as I attempted to begin to read my work that is due tomorrow as it is currently 11:23 pm, a thought popped up in my brain that I should write this instead because it's an assignment that was due before. Even as I'm writing this I can't help but want to stray from the task at hand. I have a strong urge to completely delete what I have so far and begin a new topic, but no. Before I completely shift gears (which I don't think is a strong enough metaphor for what my brain does, it's more like it rips the gearshift out and chucks it through the car window), I want to tell you what goes through my head on a normal daily basis, when I don't get enough sleep, due to this unproductive evening routine.

I aim to wake up in the morning usually around 7:45, usually having fallen asleep around 1:30am on good nights, and around 3:00am on bad nights. Without proper sleep I begin a journey of wasting my time, preoccupied by my stressors. Is my outfit ugly? Is my outfit too fancy? Have I worn this outfit too many times? Why didn't I do my laundry last night? If I wear my best pants so often, isn't it going to suck when I wear uglier pants? This line of self-interrogation lasts usually until I realize the time constraint I've placed on myself.

Then I have to do my hair, a process which usually begins around 8:20am, even though I'm meant to leave around 8:35am. I ask myself, should I straighten my hair again? Am I damaging my hair by straightening it so much? Well, I use heat protectant, but what if it's not effective enough, this bottle says it stands *up* to 450 degrees, but my flat iron is on the 450 degree setting, is it up to *and* including 450 degrees or will my hair instantaneously burst into flames because it's over by one degree? Should I even be straightening my hair? My family says they love it because it reminds them of my relatives with curly hair, and they say I'm lucky I got it, but it's such a pain. Should I feel bad for thinking my hair is a pain? Shouldn't I appreciate this? What is it making that sizzling sound? I make my exit, stuffing my makeup into whatever bag I picked for the day. Did I turn off the straightener? Did I unplug it? What if it's still too hot and someone gets hurt? What if someone turns the sink on and the hot flat iron falls in and someone gets electrocuted?

Somewhere around this time, I usually manage to mobile order my coffee from Starbucks, but I wonder, should I leave a tip? They never used to have that option, but should I do it now that they've made it easier to tip? Should I be making a decision about tipping when it's my parents' money? Don't Starbucks workers deserve a tip? Am I spending too much money on coffee? I like it way better than Peets, but it feels overpriced, and this isn't my money? How will I get through the day without my caffeine though? Will there be someone I know in Starbucks? When is that Barista with my same name going to come back, I love that we have that little joke together, I wonder if she's a college student who went back to school? Does this woman who is handing out the mobile orders hate me? I think she does, did she just give me a look? When is my drink going to be ready? Am I a jerk for thinking that? They're obviously trying very hard. I hope these adults aren't judging me, I feel like some adults really hate teenagers.

Then I get back in the car and take a look in the mirror. My face looks fine today, maybe a little tired. Wait. What if this mirror is messed up and I actually look worse in real life? I don't think anyone would tell me? I hope my friends would tell me if I was looking worse than I thought I was, do I need to be humbled? Should I ask my friends if I'm uglier than I look in the mirror or will they think I'm crazy? I wonder what's on the radio? I think I would really enjoy this morning if I wasn't running late, am I not appreciative enough? I wish I could have class outside it's so pretty.

I truly believe that a big part of this unnecessary stressful train of thought, is derived from sleep deprivation. My mind gets foggy, my decision making is worse, I can't process ideas as well, and the line between what is rational to worry about versus, being completely not worth my time is muddled. In this phase where I'm lacking sleep, my head gets clouded worrying about all the people I interact with, and how I can do the best I can in every single aspect of my day. Ultimately, this results in impulsive stressful moments which don't allow me to put my best foot forward, because I feel like I have to deal with the problem at hand as quickly as possible so I can address the next one. However, what I've come to find, is that if I just let what I think of as a "problem" sit, instead of trying to deal with it in some way, I save so much energy, and am able to use my energy for things that matter to me, like my classes, my activities, my friends, and my family.

My parents frequently say the phrase to me: “Put it in your stand-up routine.” A saying meant to deal with the absurdity of whatever situation we are dealing with, and categorize it as a failure. Being able to acknowledge the hilariously cruel reality of whatever happens to you as a kind of destiny, makes it feel so much better. Admitting that that event happened and you are submitting to whatever outcome occurs feels much more gratifying than having that moment completely turn around for you, and give you what you wanted in the first place. I think I would love being a stand-up comedian, a career that within itself is often labeled as a failure, because reminiscing on every single embarrassing or disappointing moment in my life, and making it into something enjoyable seems like a very beautiful way to rethink life. Not to think of a failure as a step in a larger plan, but just as something that is so easily accessible, by being miserable by definition, that it brings people together.

I guess what I’m trying to say is that, whether it be getting enough sleep, taking enough time for yourself, or just living your life in a way that makes you feel the best, it’s the right decision to make. To understand that a failure or a success could come at any moment should be a reason to be free of stress, not to cultivate it, as the best kind of happiness and satisfaction can come at any time.



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